



Enhancing Critical Thinking and Student Engagement through Collaborative and Problem-Based Learning in Saudi EFL Higher Education

Wael Ali Holbah

Department of English, Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Saudi EFL higher education increasingly emphasizes learner-centered pedagogies that support communication, critical thinking, and active participation in line with Saudi Vision 2030. Among these approaches, Collaborative Learning (CL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) have gained attention for their potential to enhance language learning through interaction, teamwork, and authentic problem-solving. This study investigates the role of CL and PBL in improving critical thinking, communication skills, and student engagement in Saudi EFL classrooms. Adopting a qualitative and analytical research design, data were collected from twelve EFL teachers working in a Saudi public university through a semi-structured questionnaire comprising open-ended questions. The primary data were supplemented by a review of relevant literature and empirical studies on learner-centered EFL pedagogy. The findings indicate that CL and PBL promote learner motivation, confidence, classroom participation, communicative competence, and critical thinking development. However, challenges such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and learner dependence on traditional teaching methods continue to affect implementation. The study concludes that integrating CL and PBL into EFL curricula, teacher training, and assessment practices can foster more interactive and effective learning environments. The findings provide practical insights for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to strengthen learner-centered EFL education in Saudi higher education.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning; Critical Thinking; EFL Learning; Problem-Based Learning; Student Engagement

1. Introduction

English language proficiency has become an essential requirement for academic success, professional advancement, and global communication in the twenty-first century. In Saudi

Arabia, English plays a significant role in higher education, scientific research, international collaboration, and workforce development. The growing importance of English language competence has been further reinforced by Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasizes educational reform, innovation, critical thinking, lifelong learning, and the development of a highly skilled workforce capable of competing in a knowledge-based global economy. Consequently, Saudi universities are increasingly encouraged to adopt learner-centered pedagogical approaches that promote communication, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving skills among students.

Despite these educational reforms, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in many Saudi universities continues to rely largely on traditional teacher-centered approaches. Such methods prioritize knowledge transmission and often position learners as passive recipients of information rather than active participants in the learning process. Although lecture-based instruction may facilitate content delivery, it frequently limits authentic communication, classroom interaction, collaborative learning, and critical inquiry. Research suggests that excessive dependence on traditional instructional practices may negatively affect learner motivation, communicative competence, classroom participation, and higher-order thinking skills (Holbah & Sharma, 2021; Sharma, 2022). These limitations have encouraged educators to explore more interactive and learner-centered teaching approaches.

Among the most influential learner-centered approaches are Collaborative Learning (CL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL). Collaborative Learning emphasizes group interaction, peer support, shared responsibility, and collective knowledge construction. Through collaborative activities, learners negotiate meaning, exchange ideas, solve problems, and develop both linguistic and interpersonal competencies. Previous studies have demonstrated that collaborative learning enhances student engagement, confidence, communication skills, writing development, and academic achievement (Sendi & Alhums, 2023; Al-Malki et al., 2025; George & Sharma, 2026). Furthermore, collaborative environments provide meaningful opportunities for learners to use English in authentic communicative situations.

Similarly, Problem-Based Learning encourages students to investigate real-world problems, engage in inquiry and discussion, evaluate evidence, and propose solutions. Rather than relying on memorization, learners actively construct knowledge through exploration and reflection. Research has shown that PBL contributes significantly to critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, learner autonomy, and academic achievement (Almulla & Al-Rahmi, 2023; Gumartifa et al., 2023; Assefa et al., 2026). In language classrooms, problem-based activities provide authentic contexts for communication while simultaneously promoting cognitive development.

The development of critical thinking has become a major objective of contemporary higher education. Critical thinking enables learners to analyze information, evaluate arguments, solve problems, and make informed decisions. These skills are increasingly regarded as essential for academic and professional success. However, critical thinking remains insufficiently developed in many EFL classrooms due to examination-oriented learning, traditional teaching practices, and limited opportunities for active engagement (Allehyani, 2025; Ismael et al., 2026). Learner-centered approaches such as CL and PBL offer practical means of fostering analytical reasoning, reflective thinking, and intellectual independence while supporting language acquisition.

Student engagement is another important factor influencing language learning outcomes. Engagement encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning activities. Highly engaged learners demonstrate greater motivation, participation, persistence, and academic achievement. Recent studies indicate that collaborative activities, active learning strategies, and technology-enhanced instruction positively influence student engagement and educational outcomes (Alyami et al., 2023; Al-Qahtani & Alkhashil, 2026; Shehata, 2026).

Consequently, enhancing learner engagement has become a priority within Saudi higher education.

Despite increasing recognition of learner-centered pedagogy, many Saudi EFL classrooms continue to depend on traditional instructional methods that limit communication, participation, and critical thinking development. Although previous studies have examined Collaborative Learning and Problem-Based Learning independently, limited research has explored their combined contribution to critical thinking, communication skills, and learner engagement in Saudi EFL higher education. Addressing this gap is important for understanding how learner-centered approaches can support educational transformation and improve language learning outcomes.

Accordingly, the study pursues three objectives: (1) to examine the role of Collaborative Learning in enhancing student engagement in Saudi EFL classrooms; (2) to analyze the impact of Problem-Based Learning on the development of critical thinking skills among EFL learners; and (3) to explore how CL and PBL contribute to communication skills, classroom interaction, and learner participation in Saudi higher education contexts.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does collaborative learning enhance student engagement in Saudi EFL classrooms?
2. What role does problem-based learning play in developing critical thinking skills?
3. How do CL and PBL influence communication and learner participation in Saudi EFL contexts?

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing body of research on learner-centered pedagogy in Saudi EFL higher education. The findings provide useful insights for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to improve language instruction and align educational practices with the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030. The study also contributes to ongoing discussions concerning critical thinking, communication competence, and student engagement in higher education. The research focuses on Collaborative Learning and Problem-Based Learning within Saudi higher education EFL contexts and adopts a qualitative and analytical approach. Primary data were collected from twelve EFL teachers representing diverse national backgrounds through a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions. These data were supplemented by the review and interpretation of relevant scholarly literature and empirical studies. Although the study offers valuable insights into teachers' perceptions and experiences, its findings are limited to a relatively small sample from a single Saudi public university and therefore should not be generalized to all Saudi higher education contexts.

After setting up the background, problem statement, objectives, significance, and scope of the study, the following section reviews the theoretical and empirical literature related to collaborative learning, problem-based learning, critical thinking, student engagement, and learner-centered approaches in EFL education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

This study is grounded in Social Constructivism, Experiential Learning Theory, and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which collectively support learner-centered language education. Social Constructivism, particularly Vygotsky's theory of social interaction and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), posits that learning occurs through

collaboration, scaffolding, and interaction with peers and more knowledgeable individuals. Through cooperative activities and guided participation, learners construct knowledge, develop language competence, and strengthen higher-order thinking skills (Alyami et al., 2023; Sendi & Alhumsi, 2023).

Experiential Learning Theory further emphasizes learning through experience, reflection, and application. This perspective aligns closely with Problem-Based Learning (PBL), where students engage with authentic problems, reflect on possible solutions, and apply newly acquired knowledge in meaningful contexts. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) complements these theories by emphasizing authentic communication, interaction, and communicative competence rather than rote memorization of linguistic structures. Both Collaborative Learning (CL) and PBL embody CLT principles by encouraging learners to negotiate meaning, solve problems, and communicate effectively in real-life situations.

The conceptual framework of this study integrates Social Constructivism and Experiential Learning Theory to explain how Collaborative Learning and Problem-Based Learning contribute to communication, critical thinking, student engagement, language development, and ultimately the educational goals of Saudi Vision 2030. Bloom's Taxonomy further informs the development of higher-order thinking skills within this framework.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework showing how Social Constructivism and Experiential Learning Theory support Collaborative Learning and Problem-Based Learning, which collectively enhance communication, critical thinking, student engagement, language development, and the educational objectives of Saudi Vision 2030.

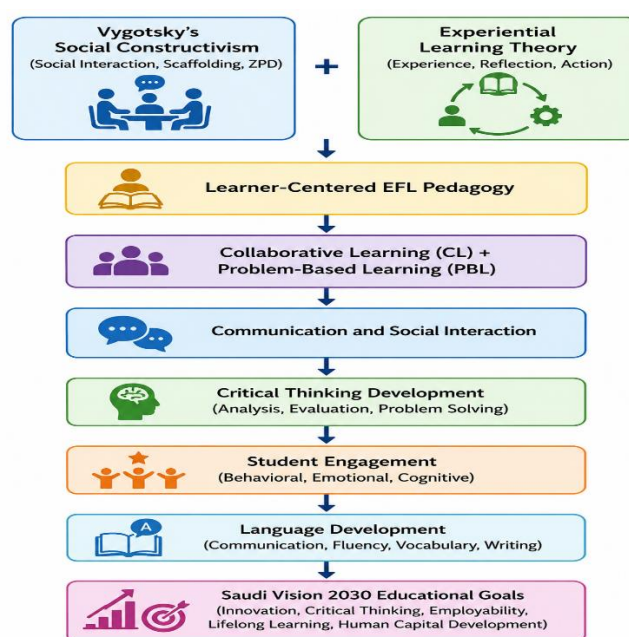


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking Collaborative Learning, Problem-Based Learning, Critical Thinking, and Student Engagement in Saudi EFL Higher Education

2.2 Collaborative Learning in EFL Education

Collaborative Learning is a learner-centered instructional approach in which students work together to achieve shared learning objectives through interaction, cooperation, and collective responsibility. Unlike traditional teacher-centered instruction, CL positions learners as active participants in knowledge construction. Core features of collaborative learning include positive

interdependence, peer interaction, individual accountability, and cooperative problem-solving. A major advantage of CL is its ability to facilitate meaningful communication and peer learning. Through discussions, group projects, peer feedback, and collaborative writing, learners engage in authentic language use while developing social and cognitive competencies. Such activities encourage learners to negotiate meaning, express viewpoints, resolve misunderstandings, and reflect on their learning processes.

Empirical evidence consistently supports the effectiveness of CL in EFL contexts. Sendi and Alhumsi (2023) found that collaborative learning improved student participation and academic performance in blended learning environments. Al-Malki et al. (2025) reported that the Think-Pair-Share strategy enhanced writing performance, learner confidence, and classroom engagement among Saudi EFL learners. Wafiroh et al. (2024) demonstrated that Virtual Literature Circles improved critical reading skills and collaborative competencies, while George and Sharma (2026) showed that online collaborative writing significantly enhanced ESL learners' writing development, communication skills, and engagement. Collectively, these studies indicate that collaborative learning promotes language development, confidence, interaction, and active participation in EFL classrooms.

2.3 Problem-Based Learning in Language Education

Problem-Based Learning is an instructional approach that engages learners in solving authentic and complex problems through inquiry, discussion, reflection, and collaborative decision-making. Unlike traditional teaching methods that emphasize content transmission, PBL encourages learners to actively construct knowledge while applying language skills in realistic situations. Key principles of PBL include learner autonomy, real-world relevance, critical inquiry, collaboration, and reflective thinking. Students analyze problems, formulate hypotheses, gather information, evaluate alternatives, and justify solutions. These processes foster deeper understanding, knowledge retention, and independent learning.

Table 1. Comparison of Traditional Learning and Collaborative Learning/Problem-Based Learning in Saudi EFL Classrooms

Aspect	Traditional Learning	CL/PBL Learning
Teacher Role	Knowledge transmitter	Facilitator, guide, and mentor
Student Role	Passive recipient	Active participant and knowledge constructor
Learning Focus	Content memorization	Problem-solving, communication, and application
Classroom Interaction	Limited teacher-student interaction	Extensive peer collaboration and discussion
Critical Thinking	Limited opportunities	Analysis, evaluation, and reflection
Communication Skills	Restricted language use	Frequent authentic communication
Learning Environment	Teacher-controlled	Interactive and learner-centered
Assessment	Examination-focused	Process- and performance-based
Student Engagement	Moderate or passive	High and active

Within language education, PBL creates meaningful opportunities for learners to use English in authentic communicative contexts. Students engage in discussions, conduct research, prepare presentations, and collaborate to solve problems while simultaneously developing

linguistic and cognitive abilities. Almulla and Al-Rahmi (2023) found that problem-solving skills and critical thinking significantly influence sustainable learning performance. Gumartifa et al. (2023) reported positive teacher perceptions regarding the effectiveness of PBL compared with traditional instruction. Similarly, Assefa et al. (2026) concluded through a meta-analysis that PBL significantly improves English language skills, while Yamin and Aulia (2026) demonstrated its effectiveness in strengthening critical writing abilities. These studies confirm that PBL promotes critical thinking, learner autonomy, communication competence, and academic achievement.

2.4 Critical Thinking in EFL Learning

Critical thinking is increasingly recognized as a fundamental goal of higher education and language learning. It involves the ability to analyze information, evaluate evidence, interpret arguments, solve problems, and make reasoned judgments. In EFL contexts, critical thinking enables learners to move beyond memorization and engage actively with language, ideas, and real-world issues.

The relationship between language learning and critical thinking is particularly important because language functions as a medium through which learners analyze, discuss, question, and construct knowledge. Consequently, contemporary language pedagogy increasingly integrates critical thinking into instructional practices. Allehyani (2025) emphasizes the importance of instructional strategies in cultivating critical thinking among EFL learners. Kumar et al. (2023) found that self- and peer-assessment significantly improved self-regulated learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Likewise, Al-Qahtani and Alkhashil (2026) reported that active learning strategies enhance reflective thinking and intellectual engagement among university students.

Despite its importance, critical thinking remains challenging to develop in many EFL classrooms. Ismael et al. (2026) observed that traditional teaching practices, examination-oriented learning, limited learner autonomy, and insufficient inquiry-based activities often hinder critical thinking development. These challenges underscore the need for learner-centered pedagogies such as CL and PBL that encourage analysis, reflection, and intellectual engagement.

2.5 Student Engagement in Higher Education

Student engagement refers to learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in educational activities. Behavioral engagement includes participation and task completion, emotional engagement reflects interest and motivation, and cognitive engagement involves critical thinking, effort, and self-regulation. Research consistently identifies engagement as a strong predictor of academic achievement, retention, and learning success. Sharma (2024) further emphasizes that learner motivation and active classroom participation are critical factors influencing successful English language acquisition and sustained academic engagement.

In Saudi EFL classrooms, several factors influence student engagement. Traditional lecture-based instruction, limited interaction opportunities, fear of making mistakes, and teacher-centered practices may reduce learner participation and motivation (Holbah & Sharma, 2021). Conversely, collaborative activities, active learning strategies, technology integration, and learner-centered pedagogies have been shown to enhance engagement and learning outcomes.

Alyami et al. (2023) demonstrated that collaborative learning environments improve knowledge development and learning experiences among Saudi university students. Hamad and Al-Harrasi (2026) found that activity-based learning enhances creativity, innovation, and

soft skills, while Shehata (2026) reported strong relationships among engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. These findings indicate that learner-centered instructional approaches can significantly improve student participation, motivation, and educational outcomes.

2.6 Research Gap

The existing literature provides substantial evidence supporting the effectiveness of Collaborative Learning and Problem-Based Learning in enhancing language proficiency, communication skills, learner autonomy, critical thinking, and student engagement. However, most previous studies have examined these approaches independently or within specific instructional contexts. Limited research has explored their combined contribution to communication competence, critical thinking development, and learner engagement within Saudi EFL higher education.

Furthermore, despite ongoing educational reforms associated with Saudi Vision 2030, many university EFL classrooms continue to rely on teacher-centered instructional practices. There remains a need for comprehensive investigations that synthesize current knowledge regarding learner-centered pedagogies and their contribution to educational transformation in Saudi higher education.

Unlike previous studies that have examined Collaborative Learning and Problem-Based Learning separately, the present study provides an integrated analysis of how these approaches collectively contribute to critical thinking, communication skills, and student engagement in Saudi EFL higher education. By situating these pedagogical approaches within the broader educational objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, the study offers a contemporary perspective on learner-centered language education and provides practical implications for curriculum development, teacher training, and educational policy.

The next section outlines the research methodology employed to examine the role of collaborative and problem-based learning in enhancing critical thinking and student engagement in Saudi EFL higher education.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design to examine the role of Collaborative Learning (CL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing critical thinking, communication skills, and student engagement in Saudi EFL higher education. A qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring learner-centered pedagogical practices and understanding teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding their implementation. The study combines primary qualitative data with insights from relevant scholarly literature to identify key themes, trends, and pedagogical implications related to CL and PBL in EFL contexts. For this study, CL was operationalized as structured pair or small-group work involving a shared language-learning goal, peer interaction, distributed responsibility, and a joint product or response. Examples reported or discussed by participants included think-pair-share, collaborative paragraph writing, peer review, group debates, and jointly prepared presentations. PBL was operationalized as inquiry around an authentic or plausible problem that required students to identify what they needed to know, examine information, discuss alternatives, justify a solution in English, and reflect on the result. Illustrative tasks included proposing a campus solution to excessive plastic use, preparing advice for an international

student facing a communication problem, and evaluating alternative responses to a workplace or community case.

3.2 Participants and Sources of Data

Purposive sampling was employed to select twelve EFL teachers working in different colleges of a Saudi public university. The participants represented diverse national backgrounds, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Yemen, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia. Eight participants were male and four were female. All participants possessed experience in English language teaching and familiarity with learner-centered instructional approaches. Although the sample size is relatively small, qualitative research prioritizes depth of insight over statistical generalization. Their diverse professional and cultural backgrounds provided valuable perspectives on the implementation of CL and PBL in Saudi higher education. In addition to the primary qualitative data, relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and empirical studies were consulted to support the interpretation of findings and situate the study within the broader literature on EFL pedagogy.

Table 2 presents the demographic profile and coding scheme of the twelve EFL teachers who participated in the study. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants were assigned identification codes (R1–R12), which are used when reporting teacher responses in the analysis and discussion section.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Code	Nationality	Gender
R1	India	Male
R2	India	Female
R3	Pakistan	Male
R4	Pakistan	Female
R5	Bangladesh	Male
R6	Bangladesh	Female
R7	Yemen	Male
R8	Yemen	Male
R9	Sudan	Male
R10	Sudan	Male
R11	Saudi Arabia	Female
R12	Saudi Arabia	Male

No formal, sequential saturation log was maintained during data collection; therefore, the study does not claim definitive data saturation. Recurrence across the twelve accounts provided adequate coverage for the exploratory analysis, but the absence of a documented stopping rule is acknowledged as a methodological limitation. Future studies should analyze interviews concurrently with recruitment and record the point at which additional cases cease to produce new codes or meanings.

3.3 Data Collection Method

Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire comprising seven open-ended questions designed to explore teachers' experiences with Collaborative Learning and Problem-

Based Learning in EFL classrooms. The questionnaire focused on classroom implementation, student engagement, critical thinking development, communication skills, learner autonomy, implementation challenges, and pedagogical recommendations. Participants were invited to provide detailed responses based on their teaching experiences. The use of open-ended questions enabled the collection of rich descriptive data regarding the effectiveness and challenges of learner-centered instructional practices. To maintain participant confidentiality, teacher responses were anonymized and coded as R1–R12 during data analysis and reporting.

Participants were invited to describe concrete classroom experiences and examples rather than provide only general opinions. Responses were anonymized as R1-R12. The seven questions were:

1. How do you use Collaborative Learning in your EFL classes? Please describe one specific activity or task.
2. How do collaborative activities influence students' participation, motivation, confidence, or engagement?
3. How do you use Problem-Based Learning in your EFL classes? Please describe one authentic problem or case.
4. In what ways does PBL influence students' analysis, evaluation, decision-making, or justification of ideas?
5. How do CL and PBL affect students' English communication skills and responsibility for learning?
6. What difficulties have you encountered while implementing CL or PBL, including divergent or unsuccessful cases?
7. What support, training, curriculum changes, assessment practices, or policies would improve their implementation?

3.4 Analytical Framework

The written responses were analyzed through a reflexive thematic procedure. First, all responses were read repeatedly for familiarization. Second, meaningful segments were assigned concise initial codes, such as increased participation, reduced anxiety, peer feedback, evidence-based justification, unequal contribution, time pressure, and preference for direct instruction. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. Fourth, candidate themes were checked against the coded extracts and the complete dataset, with attention to contradictory or less-positive cases. Fifth, themes were defined and named in relation to the research questions. Finally, representative quotations were selected and linked to participant identifiers and analytic codes. The interpretation was informed by Social Constructivism, Experiential Learning Theory, and Communicative Language Teaching without forcing all responses into predetermined categories.

Coding was completed manually using a response-by-question matrix and a codebook; no qualitative data-analysis software was used. A second independent coder and a numerical inter-coder reliability coefficient were not available. Trustworthiness was instead supported through an audit trail containing the question-to-objective map, anonymized response matrix, successive codebook versions, theme-development notes, and a record of quotations selected for reporting. This procedural transparency does not replace independent coding, and the single-researcher interpretation remains a limitation.

Theme prevalence was summarized only when the manuscript supported a defensible count. The terms all or unanimous denote 12 of 12 participants; most and several were retained as qualitative descriptors where a verified participant-level count was unavailable. Frequencies

are used to show pattern distribution, not statistical significance. Divergent cases were examined to avoid presenting CL and PBL as uniformly successful.

Theme	Prevalence supported by manuscript	Interpretive qualification
Engagement through CL	12/12	Benefits depended on roles, accountability, and monitoring
Critical thinking through PBL	12/12	Opportunities did not ensure deep reasoning without scaffolding
Language use through CL/PBL	12/12	Perceived improvement; proficiency was not independently tested
Implementation constraints	Recurring; exact count unavailable	Large classes, time, mixed proficiency, resistance, unequal contribution

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were treated confidentially and used solely for academic purposes. Proper citation and referencing practices were followed to acknowledge previous scholarship and maintain academic integrity. Care was taken to ensure objectivity, accuracy, and transparency in data analysis and interpretation, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

The following section presents the analysis and discussion of the findings concerning the contribution of Collaborative Learning and Problem-Based Learning to student engagement, critical thinking development, communication skills, and learner-centered EFL education in Saudi higher education.

Table 3: Major Themes Emerging from Teacher Responses

Theme	Teacher Perspective
Student Engagement	CL increases participation and reduces anxiety
Critical Thinking	PBL promotes analysis, evaluation, and decision-making
Language Development	More opportunities for authentic communication
Learner Autonomy	Students assume greater responsibility for learning
Challenges	Large classes, time constraints, uneven participation
Recommendations	Teacher training, curriculum reform, technology integration, and alternative assessment

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Collaborative Learning and Student Engagement

The responses of the twelve EFL teachers indicate that Collaborative Learning (CL) significantly enhances student engagement and participation in Saudi EFL classrooms. All participants reported that students become more active when involved in pair work, group discussions, collaborative writing, and problem-solving activities. A teacher from India (R1) observed that "students who rarely participate in traditional lectures become more confident

when working in small groups." Similarly, a Saudi participant noted that collaborative activities encourage learners to share ideas and communicate more freely in English.

A concrete CL task involved groups jointly drafting a formal email: students assigned roles as idea generator, language checker, organizer, and presenter; compared alternative openings and requests; produced one group version; and then used peer feedback to revise it. Teachers nevertheless described divergent cases in which dominant students controlled the task while quieter or lower-proficiency members contributed little. Thus, positive engagement depended on explicit roles, manageable group size, individual accountability, and teacher monitoring rather than group work alone.

Teachers further emphasized that CL promotes peer interaction, teamwork, and learner responsibility. A participant from Pakistan remarked that "students learn not only from the teacher but also from each other through discussion and feedback." Another teacher from Yemen stated that "group activities encourage weaker students to participate because they receive support from their peers before speaking in front of the whole class." Likewise, a Sudanese participant commented that "collaborative tasks help students exchange ideas, negotiate meaning, and build confidence in using English."

This observation was echoed by another participant who noted that collaborative learning "makes students more engaged, more willing to participate, and more interactive in class. Even quieter students contribute more because the setting feels less intimidating" (R6). Similarly, another teacher observed that collaborative activities create "a more interactive and student-centred learning space" (R4) where students communicate, share ideas, and support one another while relying less on the teacher.

These observations align with the findings of Sendi and Alhumsi (2023), Al-Malki et al. (2025), and Alyami et al. (2023), who reported increased engagement, confidence, and classroom participation through collaborative learning. Several respondents also highlighted the role of CL in reducing anxiety. A teacher from Bangladesh stated that learners feel less afraid of making mistakes when communicating within small groups. This finding supports Holbah and Sharma (2021) and Sharma (2022), who identified learner-centered environments as important for improving confidence and participation among Saudi EFL learners.

4.2 Problem-Based Learning and Critical Thinking

All twelve teachers (12/12) associated PBL with analysis, evaluation, decision-making, or justified problem solving. R1 stated that learners must "analyze information, discuss options, and justify their choices instead of relying on the teacher" [code: evidence-based justification]. A typical task asked groups to address excessive plastic use on campus: learners identified the problem, gathered English-language information, compared feasible interventions, prepared a reasoned proposal, and defended it during questions. The task operationalized PBL through an authentic problem, learner inquiry, collaborative deliberation, an English-language product, and reflection.

The pattern was not uniform. Some teachers reported that students accustomed to direct instruction requested the 'correct answer,' divided the task mechanically, or relied on a more proficient peer (codes: dependence on teacher; unequal contribution). These negative cases qualify the dominant finding: PBL created opportunities for critical thinking, but the quality of reasoning depended on scaffolding, access to appropriate sources, role allocation, and assessment of both process and product.

Teachers also observed improvements in learner autonomy and independent thinking. According to a Sudanese participant, students involved in problem-solving tasks demonstrate

greater responsibility for their own learning and become more willing to explore information independently. A teacher from Saudi Arabia remarked that "students become more curious and willing to search for information when they are asked to solve authentic problems." Similarly, a participant from Pakistan noted that "PBL encourages learners to evaluate different viewpoints before reaching conclusions, which strengthens their critical thinking skills."

One participant explained that problem-based learning requires students to "analyze information, discuss options, and justify their choices instead of relying on the teacher," (R1) making them more reflective and capable of explaining the reasoning behind their decisions. Another teacher emphasized that PBL encourages learners to "analyze information, evaluate different perspectives, make decisions, and justify their solutions using evidence," (R7) thereby strengthening higher-order thinking skills.

These observations support the findings of Almulla and Al-Rahmi (2023), Gumartifa et al. (2023), Assefa et al. (2026), and Yamin and Aulia (2026), who reported positive relationships between PBL, critical thinking, and academic performance. Participants further emphasized that authentic problems encourage meaningful language use. Students must discuss issues, evaluate evidence, negotiate ideas, and present solutions in English, thereby integrating language learning with critical thinking development. This observation is consistent with Kumar et al. (2023), Allehyani (2025), and Ismael et al. (2026).

4.3 Impact on Language Development

The participating teachers unanimously reported that both CL and PBL positively influence language development. According to the respondents, learners receive more opportunities to practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing through interaction and collaborative tasks. A Saudi teacher noted that "students speak more English during group activities than during traditional lectures."

Several participants also observed improvements in vocabulary acquisition and fluency. Learners encounter new language while discussing problems, conducting research, and presenting ideas. A participant from India stated that students remember vocabulary more effectively when they use it in authentic communicative situations rather than memorizing isolated words.

A participant further noted that collaborative and problem-based activities improve fluency and confidence because students "speak more, take more risks, and use English more naturally" (R1) while focusing on solving problems rather than producing perfect answers. Similarly, another respondent reported that repeated participation in discussions, presentations, and problem-solving tasks helps learners move beyond memorizing rules and use English in genuine communication, resulting in improved fluency and communicative competence (R2). Teachers additionally highlighted the value of collaborative writing and peer feedback. According to a participant from Pakistan, students develop writing skills more effectively when they review and revise each other's work. These findings support previous studies by George and Sharma (2026), Wafiroh et al. (2024), Sendi and Alhumsy (2023), and Assefa et al. (2026), which reported improvements in communication skills, writing development, and language proficiency through collaborative and problem-based learning.

4.4 Challenges in Implementing CL and PBL

Despite recognizing their benefits, participants identified several challenges associated with implementing CL and PBL. The most frequently reported concerns included large class sizes, limited instructional time, varying learner proficiency levels, and insufficient teacher training. A teacher from Bangladesh noted that managing collaborative activities becomes difficult

when classes contain a large number of students. Similarly, a Saudi participant indicated that completing problem-based tasks often requires more time than conventional teaching methods.

A participant from India further observed that "some students initially resist collaborative and problem-based activities because they are accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and expect direct answers from the teacher." This finding highlights the need for gradual learner orientation and institutional support when introducing learner-centered pedagogies. Another participant highlighted that unequal participation remains a recurring challenge, as stronger students may dominate discussions while weaker learners remain passive. Limited English proficiency, large class sizes, and pressure to complete the syllabus were also reported as barriers to effective implementation. "Time limitations and syllabus coverage often make it difficult to conduct extended collaborative activities" (R9). These findings support observations reported by Gumartifa et al. (2023), Holbah and Sharma (2021), Hamad and Al-Harrasi (2026), Kumar et al. (2023), and Ismael et al. (2026).

4.5 Implications for Saudi EFL Higher Education

The findings suggest that CL and PBL can play an important role in supporting learner-centered education in Saudi universities. Teachers recommended integrating collaborative projects, problem-solving tasks, presentations, debates, and technology-supported activities into EFL curricula. Participants also emphasized the importance of continuous professional development, alternative assessment methods, and institutional support for learner-centered pedagogy. Participants consistently recommended professional development programs, flexible classroom arrangements, technology-supported learning environments, and assessment systems that evaluate communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills alongside language proficiency.

Hence, both teacher responses and existing literature indicate that Collaborative Learning and Problem-Based Learning contribute significantly to student engagement, critical thinking, communication skills, and language development. Their effective implementation can support the educational objectives of Saudi Vision 2030 and strengthen the quality of EFL instruction in Saudi higher education.

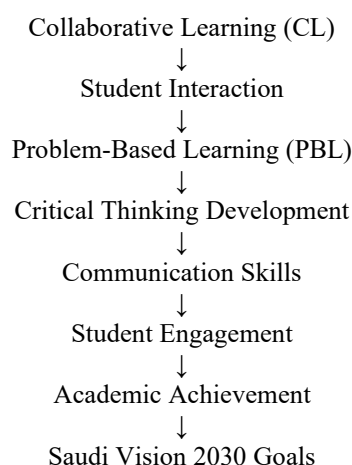


Figure 2: Proposed Learner-Centered EFL Framework for Saudi Higher Education

5. Limitations of the Study

The study is limited by a small, purposively selected sample of twelve EFL teachers from one Saudi public university. Institutional culture, curriculum, class profiles, and local

implementation conditions may differ elsewhere; consequently, the findings are transferable only through careful comparison with similarly situated contexts and are not statistically generalizable. The exclusive reliance on teachers' self-reports excludes direct student perspectives, classroom observations, learning artifacts, and objective measures of language proficiency or critical thinking. Social desirability may have produced overly favorable descriptions of CL and PBL, while the theory-informed, single-researcher analysis may have introduced confirmation bias. The lack of a formal saturation log, independent coding, a reliability coefficient, and verified participant-level frequencies for every subtheme further limits methodological certainty. Future multi-institutional studies should triangulate teacher and student interviews with observations, task artifacts, and outcome measures; document saturation prospectively; and use independent coding or peer debriefing.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and the perceptions of participating EFL teachers, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen English language instruction in Saudi higher education through the effective integration of Collaborative Learning (CL) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL).

First, Saudi universities should systematically incorporate collaborative and problem-based activities into EFL curricula. Group discussions, collaborative writing, debates, case studies, presentations, role-plays, and project-based tasks can create meaningful opportunities for communication, critical thinking, and authentic language use while encouraging active learner participation.

Second, continuous teacher professional development is essential for the successful implementation of learner-centered pedagogy. Universities should organize regular training programs focusing on collaborative learning strategies, problem-based instruction, classroom facilitation, group management, technology integration, and alternative assessment practices. Such initiatives can enhance teachers' confidence and effectiveness in implementing innovative instructional approaches.

Third, educational institutions should promote technology-supported learning environments. Learning Management Systems (LMS), collaborative writing platforms, virtual discussion forums, artificial intelligence applications, and online project-based activities can enhance communication, collaboration, learner engagement, and digital literacy. Abdelhalim et al. (2025) further demonstrate the growing educational value of AI-supported tools in facilitating language learning, translation practice, and learner autonomy in EFL contexts.

Fourth, assessment practices should be redesigned to evaluate not only language proficiency but also critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Project-based assessment, portfolios, presentations, reflective journals, peer assessment, and self-assessment can provide a more comprehensive evaluation of student learning.

Fifth, universities should provide learners with adequate orientation and support during the transition from traditional teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered approaches. Gradual implementation of CL and PBL can help students develop confidence, autonomy, and responsibility for their own learning.

Finally, institutional and policy support is necessary to ensure the sustainable implementation of learner-centered pedagogies. Curriculum frameworks, faculty development initiatives, and quality assurance mechanisms should encourage the adoption of CL and PBL in alignment with the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, particularly those related to innovation, critical thinking, lifelong learning, and workforce readiness.

These recommendations provide a practical framework for enhancing learner engagement, communication skills, critical thinking, and language proficiency among Saudi EFL learners while supporting the broader goals of educational transformation in higher education.

7. Conclusion

This study examined twelve EFL teachers' perceptions of how CL and PBL support critical thinking, communication, and engagement in Saudi higher education. Participants consistently described greater participation, more authentic language use, and stronger opportunities for analysis and justified decision-making. These findings indicate perceived pedagogical value, not causal effects or measured learning gains.

The study further reveals that CL and PBL play an important role in developing critical thinking and communication skills. Through collaborative discussions, inquiry-based activities, and real-world problem-solving tasks, learners develop the ability to analyze information, evaluate evidence, make informed decisions, and communicate ideas effectively. These approaches simultaneously support language development by improving speaking, writing, vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and overall communicative competence.

The findings underscore the growing importance of learner-centered pedagogy in Saudi higher education, particularly within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030. As universities seek to develop critical thinkers, effective communicators, and lifelong learners, collaborative and problem-based learning offer practical alternatives to traditional instructional approaches. Their successful implementation, however, requires curriculum reform, teacher preparedness, supportive assessment practices, technology integration, and institutional commitment.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on learner-centered EFL pedagogy by examining teachers' perceptions of Collaborative Learning and Problem-Based Learning in Saudi higher education and interpreting these findings in light of contemporary literature. It demonstrates that these pedagogical approaches not only enhance language proficiency but also foster learner autonomy, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and sustained engagement. The findings provide useful insights for teachers, curriculum designers, researchers, and policymakers seeking to improve the quality of English language education in Saudi universities.

Therefore, we conclude that Collaborative Learning and Problem-Based Learning represent effective learner-centered pedagogical approaches for enhancing student engagement, critical thinking, communication skills, and language development in Saudi EFL higher education. The perceptions of participating teachers indicate that these approaches create more interactive, meaningful, and intellectually stimulating learning environments than traditional teacher-centered methods. Their successful integration into EFL curricula can support the educational goals of Saudi Vision 2030 and contribute to the development of confident, critical, and communicatively competent graduates prepared for academic, professional, and global challenges.

Acknowledgment

The author sincerely thanks all the participants for their valuable time, cooperation, and contribution to this research.

References

- Abdelhalim, S. M., Alsahil, A. A., & Alsuhaibani, Z. A. (2025). Artificial intelligence tools and literary translation: A comparative investigation of ChatGPT and Google Translate from novice and advanced EFL student translators' perspectives. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2508031>
- Allehyani, F. (2025). Cultivating critical thinking in EFL learning: Strategies, outcomes, and contextual considerations. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, 7(4), 974–988. <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i4.8968>
- Al-Malki, E. A. A., Gulnaz, F., Hagggar, A. I. B., & Alharbi, W. (2025). Investigating the impact of think-pair-share on Saudi EFL learners' descriptive writing: A study of perceptions, experiences, and confidence. *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(2), 935–951. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i2.1716>
- Almulla, M. A., & Al-Rahmi, W. M. (2023). Integrated social cognitive theory with learning input factors: The effects of problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills on learning performance sustainability. *Sustainability*, 15(5), Article 3978. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15053978>
- Al-Qahtani, A. S. A., & Alkhashil, M. A. (2026). Enhancing reflective thinking through active learning: A study on eighth-level undergraduate students in the history program. *Cogent Education*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2592364>
- Alyami, A., Pileggi, S. F., & Hawryszkiewicz, I. (2023). Knowledge development, technology and quality of experience in collaborative learning: A perspective from Saudi Arabia universities. *Quality & Quantity*, 57(4), 3085–3104. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-022-01476-9>
- Assefa, A., Bachore, M. M., & Daniel, T. (2026). The effectiveness of problem-based learning in enhancing learners' English language skills: Meta-analysis and systematic review. *Journal of Problem Based Learning in Higher Education*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.54337/ojs.jpblhe.v14i1.10569>
- George, R., & Sharma, V. K. (2026). Effects of online collaborative writing on ESL learners' writing development: A mixed-methods study. *Arab World English Journal*, 17(1), 292–307. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol17no1.18>
- Gumartifa, A., Syahri, I., Siroj, R. A., Nurrahmi, M., & Yusof, N. (2023). Perception of teachers regarding problem-based learning and traditional method in the classroom learning innovation process. *Indonesian Journal on Learning and Advanced Education*, 5(2), 151–166. <https://doi.org/10.23917/ijolae.v5i2.20714>
- Hamad, F., & Al-Harrasi, N. H. (2026). Efficacy of activity-based learning in improving students' soft skills, creativity and innovation: Information studies students' perception. *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GKMC-07-2024-0431>
- Holbah, W.A., & Sharma, V. K. (2021). Listening to Saudi EFL learners' voices: Demotivating factors affecting learning. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 11(12), 1717–1723. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1112.26>
- Ismael, I., Li, S., Luo, X., Ali, N. (2026). Why critical thinking rarely surfaces in EFL classrooms: Insights from Egyptian higher education and implications for ESP. *Frontiers in Education*, 11, Article 1808262. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2026.1808262>
- Kumar, T., Soozandehfar, S. M. A., Hashemifardnia, A., et al. (2023). Self vs. peer assessment activities in EFL-speaking classes: Impacts on students' self-regulated learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. *Language Testing in Asia*, 13, Article 36. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-023-00251-3>
- Sharma, V. K. (2022). Letting the struggling Saudi EFL readers take lead: How teachers transform English language instruction. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 13(3), 533–540. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1303.09>

- Sharma, V. K. (2024). Understanding the Dynamics of Motivation: Exploring Key Influencers on English Language Acquisition in Pakistani Students. *S3R Academia*, 1(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.70682/s3r.2024.02>
- Sendi, K. K., & Alhumsi, M. H. (2023). Teaching research methodology to undergraduate students using collaborative learning approach in a blended learning environment at Saudi Electronic University. *World Journal of English Language*, 13(7), 171–185. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n7p171>
- Shehata, L.H.A. (2026). Motivation, Classroom Engagement, and Academic Achievement in Saudi EFL Classrooms: A Mixed-Methods Mediation Analysis. *S3R Academia*, 3(1), 12–24. <https://doi.org/10.70682/s3r.2026.02>
- Wafiroh, L. H., Retnaningdyah, P., & Munir, A. (2024). EFL students' critical reading and collaborative learning skills via virtual literature circle (VLC) within a critical reading class. *Applied Research on English Language*, 13(3), 65–90. <https://doi.org/10.22108/are.2024.141405.2286>
- Yamin, M., & Aulia, V. (2026). To what extent can problem-based learning drive students' critical writing skills? *Voices of English Language Education Society*, 9(3), 595–610. <https://doi.org/10.29408/veles.v9i3.32645>