

# Challenges of Collaborative Tasks Use in Teaching Complex Structures: Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions in Focus

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### **Abstract**

Complex structures constitute a significant aspect of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning which requires different methods and strategies including collaborative tasks. This study aimed to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions regarding challenges using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures. To this end, a qualitative thematic analysis design was used. The participants consisted of 65 female high school English language teachers who were recruited through purposive sampling from among Iranian high school teachers who were members of virtual groups in WhatsApp and Telegram. This research incorporated a semi-structured interview with three open-ended questions to collect the data. For data analysis, the transcribed interview data were exposed to manual thematic analysis via open, axial, and selective coding. According to the findings, the following challenges of using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures were extracted based on their priority from EFL teachers' perspective: ambiguity of the teacher's role in collaborative tasks, difficulty of collaborative tasks implementation in low-proficiency groups, challenge of designing appropriate tasks for complex structures, difficulty of learner control with collaborative tasks, teachers' unfamiliarity with collaborative tasks, lack of appropriate teaching materials, lack of organizational support, use of native language by learners, large classes, and lack of involvement of some students. The findings have some implications for EFL teachers, learners, and policymakers.

**Keywords:** Collaborative tasks, Complex structures, English grammar, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)

### INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized era, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning has been turned into a must in human life. In fact, living in a global village is associated with some complexities coping with at least some of which require EFL learning. English grammar is an inseparable part of EFL learning. As a main dimension of the English language, English grammar becomes

English grammar is the main concern of language teachers since it can be the backbone of other language skills in the Iranian context. The question of how learners achieve grammar can be one of the most critical and controversial issues in EFL research. Moreover, recent research has addressed the need for effective grammar instruction in foreign language contexts where the exposure to the language being learned is formal and limited to the classroom.

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English grammar is a multi-layered phenomenon that consists of many structures including complex structures. Complex structures constitute a significant aspect of EFLlearning. The unique structure of complex structures creates major challenges for EFL learners in learning English grammar. It leads EFL learners either to skip these patterns or avoid using them in language production of speaking and writing skills. One such challenge is fossilization, wherein EFL learners' production patterns become fixed or stabilized at a certain developmental stage which might impede further progress in language acquisition. Fossilization may occur due to limited exposure to comprehensible input, insufficient practice opportunities, or ineffective feedback mechanisms. Additionally, learners may struggle with transfer difficulties when attempting to integrate complex structures from the target language into their spoken or written discourse.

L1 interference, or the influence of learners' first language on their second language production, can result in errors and inaccuracies in the use of complex syntactic structures. Learners must navigate between the linguistic features of their native language and those of the target language, which may pose challenges in achieving native-like proficiency in complex sentence production. Furthermore, contextual factors such as instructional methodology, curriculum design, and language learning environments influence learners' opportunities for practicing and mastering complex structures. Communicative language teaching approaches that emphasize meaningful interaction, task-based activities, and opportunities for language output encourage learners to experiment with and produce complex linguistic forms in authentic communicative contexts. Conversely, traditional grammar-focused instruction that prioritizes rote memorization and rule-based learning may hinder learners' ability to internalize and use complex structures in meaningful communication.

In sum, despite the significance of complex structures in language proficiency development, they are challenging and problematic aspects of EFL learning for learners. That is, they are sources of learning complexity for EFL learners. In other words, learning complex structures in

the English language is a complex process influenced by learners' proficiency level, cognitive abilities, language input, and instructional practices. Despite its significance for language proficiency development, learners encounter various challenges in acquiring and using complex linguistic forms effectively. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates principles of input enhancement, task-based instruction, and meaningful interaction to provide learners with opportunities for meaningful practice and mastery of complex structures in the target language. In the context of Iran, mastering complex structures is one major difficulty for many students (Farhangi & Pourmohammadi, 2018). Differences between the structures of complex structures in Persian and English potentially contribute to the difficulty of learning them for Iranian English learners. This is why several researchers (e.g., Farhangi & Pourmohammadi, 2018; Kourang Beheshti & Sadeghi, 2019; Pakseresht Mogharab et al., 2014) have provided different methods to improve Iranian students' learning complex structures.

To mitigate EFL learning difficulties, different strategies have been put forth. Kasprowicz et al. (2019) have stated that there is a need for teaching effective grammar pedagogy in foreign language contexts in which exposure to the language being learned is unavailable. In this regard, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) proposes different ideas that enable learners to practice task-oriented activities including a focus on form (FonF) while producing output in communicative tasks (Long, 2015). TBLT addresses the learners' awareness of grammatical competence and represents it in their communication. Pre-task provides the learners with background information on grammatical patterns (Ellis, 2003). The tasks help them to practice grammatical structures and the post-task stage provides the learners with ample student-student or teacher-student, and peer feedback. An effective strategy within TBLT is collaborative learning which is an instructional approach wherein students work collaboratively in small groups to reach common learning goals (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). It acts through active engagement, communication, and mutual relations

among students to generate a sense of group responsiveness and accountability for learning achievements (Forslund Frykedal & Hammar Chiriac, 2018).

### **Collaborative Tasks**

Collaborative tasks can be defined as a context of input-output exchanges in which learners may send and receive information to check and test their linguistic hypotheses and arrive at the solution to their linguistic problems (Vygotsky, 1978). Collaborative tasks are rooted in sociocultural theory (SCT) that addresses the learners who share their knowledge to get help or give help from one another and fill the gap in their information. Collaboration can take place between peers as one may be more knowledgeable than the others (peer/pair collaboration) or between teachers and learners or teacher-learner collaboration (Chalak & Tahmasebi, 2022). In sum, collaborative tasks in EFL classes can contribute to learning complex structures by providing opportunities for negotiation of meaning, support, and engagement in authentic communication contexts (Hojeij & Baroudi, 2018). Accordingly, teaching complex structures to EFL learners has attracted the attention of several researchers in Iranian (e.g., Abadikhah & Shahriyarpour, 2012; Azadnia et al., 2019; Marefat & Abdollahnejad, 2014; Nosratzadegan et al., 2016; Safari & Mohaghegh Montazeri, 2017; Seifoori & Fattahi, 2014) and foreign studies (Arya et al., 2011; Douglas & Miller, 2016; Long, 2018).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of Iran, for instance, Marefat and Abdollahnejad (2014) addressed the challenges Persian speaking EFL learners have to encounter when learning complex structures. Nosratzadegan et al. (2016) examined the effects of L2 instruction on learning complex structures and showed significant improvements in learning complex structures among EFL learners. Safari and Mohaghegh Montazeri (2017) addressed the influence of reducing the lexical and grammatical complexity of texts on the reading comprehension of EFL learners. It was concluded that lexical-grammatical simplification has a significant effect on EFL learners' reading

comprehension. Azadnia et al. (2019) aimed to compare the level of grammatical complexity in texts written by Iranian TEFL university students and those written by English native students. According to the results, dissertations written by English students were richer concerning the use of indices of syntactic complexity, in comparison with those written by Iranian writers.

Collaborative learning has also been the topic of some recent studies. Shirazifard et al (2022) have studied the impact of collaborative dialogues as in-class tasks on EFL learners' speaking and concluded that collaborative tasks make a connection between output and internalization of language learning. Javanbakhty (2021) conducted a study to investigate the impact of collaborative summary writing on vocabulary recall and retention among Iranian EFL learners. The results emphasized the efficacy of collaborative summary writing as a teaching approach to enhance vocabulary learning outcomes in real-world classroom settings (Mohammadi et al, 2024). Abel and Bäuml (2020) investigated the intricate dynamics between social interactions and memory consolidation through a novel recognition-based collaboration task. The findings shed light on the intricate interplay between social interactions and memory processes, highlighting how collaborative contexts can both enhance memory consolidation and facilitate the spread of misinformation within group settings. Cooke et al. (2019) investigated the impact of collaborative exams featuring open-ended questions on the retention of course material. While this study revealed relatively modest effects compared to studies employing multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank formats, it still suggests that collaborative exams can contribute to enhancing content retention.

The reviewed studies show that although collaborative tasksand complex structureshave been dealt with from different angles, no previous research in the context of Iran, to the best knowledge of the researcher, has addressed the challenges of using collaborative tasks (i.e., co-practice task writer, corrective feedback providers, and evaluators) in teaching complex structures. To fill this gap, this study aimed to investigate EFL teachers' views regarding



challenges in the use of collaborative tasks (co-practice task writer, corrective feedback providers, and evaluators) in teaching complex structures. To this end, the following research question was addressed:

**RQ1.** What are EFL teachers' perceptions regarding challenges in the use of co-practice task writer as a collaborative task in teaching complex structures?

**RQ2.** What are EFL teachers' perceptions regarding challenges in the use of corrective feedback providers as a collaborative task in teaching complex structures?

**RQ3.** What are EFL teachers' perceptions regarding challenges in the use of evaluators task as a collaborative task in teaching complex structures?

### **METHOD**

In line with the objective of this study, a qualitative thematic analysis design was used to explore Iranian EFL teachers' viewson the challenges of using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures. The participants consisted of 65 female high school English teachers who were selected through purposive sampling from Iranian high school teachers who were members of virtual groups in WhatsApp and Telegram. The criterion for their selection was familiarity with TBLT in general and collaborative tasks in particular. They were in the range of 30-52 in terms of age (mean=31.28, SD=1.17). They had from 6 to 20 years of teaching experience. The sample size was determined according to the principle of data saturation. It is the point where no new finding is obtained through collecting more data (Creswell, 2020). To observe research ethics, the participants were made aware of the study objectives. Moreover, their data anonymity and confidentiality were promised.

This research incorporated a semi-structured interview to collect the data. This interview comprised three open-ended questions and was conducted in English without any time limitations. Additionally, for enhanced convenience, the interviews took place using the WhatsApp and Telegram applications. The researcher in-

dividually conducted all interviews, and transcriptions were done verbatim for subsequent analysis. To enhance the dependability and credibility of the interview data, the researcher employed low-inference descriptors and member checks. Low-inference descriptors involved presenting direct quotations from the interviewees to ensure the transparency and authenticity of their statements. Member checks, on the other hand, entailed verifying interpretations with the interviewees to confirm the accurate representation of their statements. A pilot interview was conducted under the same conditions as the main phase of the study, involving 5 teachers with demographic characteristics similar to those participating in the main phase. This pilot phase aimed to identify and rectify any potential issues or ambiguities in the interview questions, ensuring the clarity and effectiveness of the interview process.

For the purpose of data analysis, the transcribed interview data were exposed to manual thematic analysis via open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding refers to infringing the data into key terms, phrases, and sentences which are called units of analysis to categorize similar concepts into categories based on their thematic content. Axial coding refers to identifying the relationships between the categories and their sub-categories. Selective coding refers to identifying a core category from the identified categories (Ary et al., 2010). To establish intra-coder reliability of the thematic analysis findings, the researcher re-analyzed the interview data after one month. Through the Spearman correlation test, the intra-coder reliability index was calculated as .80.

### **RESULTS**

To answer the research question What are EFL teachers' views regarding challenges in the use of collaborative tasks (co-practice task writer, corrective feedback providers, and evaluators) in teaching complex structures? several themes were extracted from the interview data. In what follows, each theme is presented along with some excerpts from the interviewees' perceptions. They are hierarchically presented based on their priority that EFL teachersstate regarding

the use of collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures via TBLT method.

# Ambiguity of teacher's role in collaborative tasks

This theme revolves around the lack of clarity of the role of teachers when using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures. This is evident in the following quotations:

In the words of participant 3 (P3): The role of teachers is not explicitly determined in collaborative tasks. This causes difficulties for teachers in implementing collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures.

According to P 14: The biggest problem of the use of collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures is that teachers' position is not well clarified. It is really vague to teachers.

According to P17: No specific role is defined for teachers in collaborative tasks. Teachers do not really know how to act when teaching complex structures. this makes using collaborative tasks complex for teachers.

# Difficulty of collaborative task implementation in low-proficiency groups

According to this theme, low-proficiency learners are not good receivers of collaborative tasks for teaching complex structures. The following quotations show this:

As put by P19: The language proficiency of some learners is very limited. This leads to a lack of cooperation on their part in operationalizing collaborative tasks when teaching complex structures.

According to P4: The main concern is learners' low proficiency level. This makes implementing collaborative tasks more difficult for teachers who seek to teach complex structures.

According to P10: Collaborative tasks cannot be well implemented with learners whose English proficiency is low. Implementing such tasks requires a good level of English proficiency.

# The Challenge of designing appropriate tasks for complex structures

The meaning behind this theme is that it is too difficult to design collaborative tasks appropriate for teaching complex structures. This is documented by the following quotations:

According to P13: One thing that is very dissatisfying in using collaborative tasks is designing appropriate tasks to teach complex structures. I myself cannot find appropriate tasks.

As perceived by P1: Collaborative tasks do not lend themselves well to teaching complex structures. You know complex structures need explicit instruction which cannot be incorporated in collaborative tasks.

As stated by P5: It is not easy to develop suitable collaborative tasks for teaching complex structures. I mean complex structures by nature cannot be taught well based on collaborative tasks.

# Difficulty of learner control with collaborative tasks

Based on this theme, controlling learners is difficult when using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures. The following themes act as evidence of this:

P20 stated that: Students' learning and performance cannot be easily controlled by collaborative tasks. It seems that collaborative tasks are not appropriate for controlling students.

As mentioned by P1: The inapplicability of collaborative tasks in control of students' learning is the main challenge of using them in teaching complex structures. Even if it is possible to use collaborative tasks for teaching and assessment purposes, learners cannot be controlled with them.

According to P13: A challenge of using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures is that learners cannot be controlled when being involved in tasks.

# Teachers' unfamiliarity with collaborative tasks

This theme means that what makes using collaborative tasks challenging in teaching complex structures is that teachers are not familiar with collaborative tasks. This can be vividly seen in the following quotations:

According to P14: Many teachers are not familiar with collaborative tasks and how to implement them in their classes. Thus, they cannot benefit from the potential of collaborative tasks to teach complex structures.

As mentioned by P8: A big problem existing in the way of collaborative tasks is teachers' unfamiliarity with these tasks. This is why they still follow traditional teaching methods in line with the transmission view of teaching.

As mentioned by P11: Teachers' unfamiliarity with collaborative tasks is a problem in using these tasks for teaching complex structures. They do not know how to use collaborative tasks.

### Lack of appropriate teaching materials

According to this theme, there are no appropriate teaching materials for using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures. This challenge is evident in the following quotations:

As put by P2: Teachers have no appropriate teaching materials to use for collaborative tasks when teaching complex structures. Without appropriate materials, using collaborative tasks is challenging.

According to P18: Teaching materials are of importance in using any type of task. Unfortunately, available materials are not very appropriate for usage in collaborative tasks. This is a challenge for using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures.

As stated by P3: The scarcity of teaching materials complicates using collaborative tasks to teach complex structures. This challenge is seriously effective in the use of collaborative tasks.

## Lack of organizational support

According to this theme, using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures is challenged by a lack of organizational support. Organizations do not give teachers the necessary support to use collaborative tasks. The following quotations show this:

According to P9: To use collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures, teachers need the support of organizations. They should provide teachers with the necessary facilities and tools.

As put by P4: Without the support of organizations, implementing collaborative tasks is difficult, if not impossible. Collaborative tasks cannot be implemented just by teachers' wills and wants. There should be organizational support and help.

As stated by P2: Organizations should help teachers in using collaborative tasks to teach complex structures. Extra time, energy, and facilities are needed for the use of collaborative tasks which cannot be afforded without the support of organizations.

### Use of native language by learners

This theme indicates that a challenge in using collaborative tasks to teach complex structures is that some learners use their native language when collaborative tasks are used. The following quotations confirm this:

According to P20: A big problem in using collaborative tasks is that when collaborative tasks are being operationalized, some students feel free to use their native language.

According to P1: What is considered a challenge in conducting collaborative tasks to teach complex structures is learners' use of their mother tongue. It seems that they do not take collaborative tasks seriously and do not look at them as instructional strategies.

As stated by P18: Learners repeatedly shift to Persian when collaborative tasks are used is a main disadvantage of using collaborative tasks. In the middle of task implementation, students switch to Persian. It is a negative point.

#### Large classes

This theme conveys the meaning that crowded classes act as a challenge in using collaborative tasks for the aim of teaching complex structures. In Iran, there are a large number of students in each class and this challenges the use of collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures. The following quotations show this:

According to P17: Collaborative tasks are appropriate for small classes. In conditions like our country wherein there exist large classes, using collaborative tasks to teach complex structures is challenging.

According to P3: Large classes cannot be handled in using collaborative tasks. Requirements of collaborative tasks are not consistent with large classes.

As mentioned by P7: Collaborative tasks cannot be successfully implemented in big and crowded classes as you know. Distraction of the mind of the teacher which occurs in large classes prevents the successful implementation of collaborative tasks to teach complex structures.

### Lack of involvement of some students

According to this theme, collaborative tasks provide such conditions that some students are not involved in tasks. In other words, in using collaborative tasks, some learners do not participate. The following quotations support this:

According to P9: We see that some students do not take part in tasks and the load of tasks is just on the shoulders of some students. This is a problem of using these tasks for complex structures.

According to P14: The lack of cooperation of some students makes using collaborative tasks challenging. Just some stronger students take the responsibility of doing tasks. Accordingly, some students remain passive when complex structures are taught.

As perceived by P10: The lack of some students' involvement is the challenge of using collaborative tasks. In fact, in collaborative

tasks, some learners take a free ride. It is a negative point of teaching complex structures with collaborative tasks.

#### DISCUSSION

To answer the research question What are EFL teachers' views regarding challenges in the use of collaborative tasks (co-practice task writer, corrective feedback providers, and evaluators) in teaching complex structures? The interview data was thematically analyzed and the following challenges of using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures were extracted: The ambiguity of teacher's role in collaborative tasks, difficulty of collaborative tasks implementation in low-proficiency groups, the challenge of designing appropriate tasks for complex structures, difficulty of learner control with collaborative tasks, teachers' unfamiliarity with collaborative tasks, lack of appropriate teaching materials, lack of organizational support, use of native language by learners, large classes, and lack of involvement of some students.

The ambiguity of teacher's role in collaborative tasks is in line with Jasim's (2011) study wherein it was argued that the role of teachers is vague in collaborative tasks. That teachers believed that the role of teachers is ambiguous in collaborative tasks can be attributed to the fact that there is no clear instruction in the existing literature on how teachers should take a stance in collaborative tasks. Moreover, it can be due to the overshadowing of the interaction-like nature of collaborative tasks over the instruction-like taste of them.

The difficulty of collaborative task implementation in low-proficiency groups is consistent with Jones' (2020) study which referred to the finding that collaborative tasks cannot be effectively used with those students whose language knowledge level is low. To interpret this finding, since collaborative tasks need a relatively acceptable English communication ability for EFL learners, its effectiveness is reduced when the English proficiency of learners is low. In addition, because usually low-proficiency groups do not participate in class activities, teachers conceive that collaborative tasks do not serve as useful strategies for this group of learners.



'The challenges of designing appropriate tasks for complex structures' theme is congruent with the study by Xiongyong and Samuel (2011) which corroborated that task design and planning is a problematic aspect of collaborative tasks. To justify this finding, because complex structures are, by nature, too complex to be taught clearly and effectively, consequently, teachers do not know how to plan specific tasks to teach such a complex aspect of English grammar to EFL learners. Besides, the high frequency of different types of complex structures in terms of form, function, and meaning adds to the difficulty of teachers in planning appropriate collaborative tasks for complex structures.

The difficulty of learner control with collaborative tasks resonates with the study by Hadi (2013) in which the researcher admitted that collaborative tasks do not leave much room for class control. Hadi (2013) argued that the interactive nature of collaborative tasks is associated with a loss of class control. To account for this finding, generally, in different forms of group activities, control of class and learners is more or less lost. Furthermore, since the class structure deviates from its traditional and old teacher-fronted structure when using collaborative tasks, learners cannot be meticulously controlled.

Teachers' unfamiliarity with collaborative tasks is supported by the Jasim's (2011) study wherein it was found that teachers' knowledge of collaborative tasks is low. Teachers' unfamiliarity with collaborative tasks can be attributed to different reasons. Firstly, it can be due to the fact that TBLT is currently a missing link in EFL teacher education in Iran. Secondly, different teacher professional development courses which are held are devoid of any instruction on collaborative tasks. Thirdly, teachers do not self-study collaborative tasks in their free time.

The lack of appropriate teaching materials is supported by Pohan et al. (2016) since they also showed that teachers do not have access to appropriate materials which can be used in implementing collaborative tasks. As a justification for this finding, as implied in the above discussions, collaborative tasks are so dynamic in nature that do not lend themselves well to different

types of instructional materials. That is, the dynamic nature of collaborative tasks makes it too difficult for curriculum planners to develop appropriate teaching materials for their implementation.

The lack of organizational support is consistent with the study by Liu et al. (2018) which confirmed the same theme about collaborative tasks. To interpret this finding, because collaborative tasks have not yet found their way into EFL curricula formally in the context of Iran, educational organizations are not well-briefed to support the use of them by EFL teachers. Furthermore, because the policy of most educational centers is textbook-based teaching, they have no good reason to support teachers in using collaborative tasks.

The use of native language by learners is unique to the present study with no empirical support in the previous studies. To justify this finding, group work, inevitably, suffer from a disorderly nature which lets students do things which are banned in teacher-fronted traditional teaching methods. This is why some students shift to Farsi in collaborative tasks. Also, since the English proficiency of some learners isdeeply involved in collaborative tasks, they have no way but to resort to their native language to cope with their role in these tasks.

'Large classes' theme is also uniquely extracted in this study for which there was no empirical counterpart in the literature. To interpret this, when the number of students in each class is high, consequently, the number of groups which are formed is increased. This makes handling the class and group roles and assignments challenging for teachers.

Similar to two previous themes, 'lack of involvement of some students' is also unique to this study. To explain this finding, when several students are assigned a common task, it is quite expected that the involvement degree of all the members is not equal. Some students are more active than others. They carry the load of duty of weak students as an unwritten rule. Additionally, because the group product of collaborative tasks is more emphasized than individual roles and participation, some unmotivated or low-proficiency groups seize the opportunity not to participate in tasks.

#### **CONCLUSION**

According to the findings, it can be concluded that using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures is associated with some challenges which make it difficult to use collaborative tasks to teach complex structures. The challenges are related to different issues from students to teachers, organizations, teaching tasks and materials, and contextual factors. As a result, it is worth noting that theteacher's role is not clear in collaborative tasks, low-proficiency learners are not good receivers of collaborative tasks, designing appropriate tasks for complex structures is challenging, and learners cannot be fully controlled with collaborative tasks. What is more, some teachers are not familiar with collaborative tasks, there are not many appropriate teaching materials to be used in collaborative tasks, organizations do not support teachers in using collaborative tasks, and some learners shift to their native language in collaborative tasks. Furthermore, large classes challenge using collaborative tasks, and some students take a free ride in collaborative tasks.

It can also be concluded that collaborative tasks should not be regarded as purely positive tasks with no negative aspects. But they are intermingled with both challenges and advantages which should be kept in mind when being implemented in EFL classes. The challenges identified in the present study do not rule out the merits and pros of collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures. collaborative tasks have several advantages which are beyond the scope of this paper. However, teachers should be aware of these challenges when using them in teaching complex structures. Potentially, awareness of such challenges can add to the quality of implementing collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures which are themselves among the challenges of EFL grammar for learners.

The findings have some implications for different groups of stakeholders including EFL teachers, learners, and policy makers. EFL teachers can devise effective strategies to cope with the challenges of using collaborative tasks in teaching complex structures. For instance, they can use different resources to add to their

own familiarity with collaborative tasks. Learners can do their best to remove the challenges related to themselves in using collaborative tasks by being more involved in tasks, using the English language instead of their mother tongue, etc. Policymakers can pave the ground for the use of collaborative tasks through adopting appropriate policies wherein organizational support, required facilities, teaching materials, and such issues are observed.

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