

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

EFL undergraduates must have a solid and sound foundation of reading comprehension skills in order to proceed through their university academic life. In our fast changing world, having a good command of reading comprehension skills has become an urgent necessity for EFL students in order to be able to have enhanced opportunities and options for shaping their academic and professional futures. English language competence in general and reading competence in particular open workforce doors to students and enable them to get productive bright future. The percentages of TOEFL scores achieved by EFL learners in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are shockingly below those of many of the world's nations. One of the most challenging tasks educators must face is to determine the teaching methodology that is most successful for their students (Tsay & Brady, 2010).

Most Saudi EFL college lecturers and instructors are challenged with the critical decision of selecting an effective teaching methodology with the hope of developing, improving and increasing their students' academic achievement. Understanding how students interact with each other is a neglected aspect of instruction. Cooperative learning strategies outline specific techniques that relate to student-student interaction. The way in which teachers structure student-student interaction impacts the way they learn. The process of grouping students using cooperative learning techniques has evolved over the past 50 years (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000).

Classroom teachers and instructors are the best experts to adjudicate what are the most appropriate strategies that will assist second (or Foreign) language learners to acquire the target language (Hinkel, 2013) effectively. Over time, educationalists have employed numerous teaching methods in their continual effort to make the teaching and learning experience as inspiring as possible. Educators in present-day classrooms seek to adopt various teaching techniques to satisfy the pedagogical needs of their learners (Sadker & M. Sadker, 2013). An example of one such teaching technique being utilized by these teachers has been identified as cooperative learning, which is used to assist students of diverse skill levels and backgrounds to work together in groups to achieve aims and objectives, solve problems, and complete tasks (Kagan & Kagan, 2009).

Cooperative learning techniques have become the accepted and often preferred instructional practice at all levels of education (Johnson et al., 2000). Throughout the past century, many theorists asserted that cooperative learning is an effective pedagogy that leads to student achievement (Slavin, 2010). Theorist Slavin (2010) stated, "Cooperative learning has established itself as a practical alternative to traditional teaching, and has proven its effectiveness in hundreds of studies throughout the world" (p. 10). Theorists Johnson and Johnson were the leading researchers of the century who studied the effects of cooperative learning on student learning. Johnson and Johnson believed that there were five components of cooperative learning that consisted of individual accountability, positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, group processing, and interpersonal and small group skills (Torchia, 2012). Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy that allows students to work together in small groups in order to accomplish a common learning objective or task (Spuler, 1993).

Cooperative learning is comprised of different activities that assist students in using their experiences, knowledge, and beliefs as they embark on their learning experiences. Collins, Jiao, and Onwuegbuzie (2009) agreed that students instructed through the cooperative learning method are inclined to achieve better results than students utilizing traditional learning strategies. Research on cooperative learning started in the late 1800s when researchers in the United States, England, and Germany carried out a series of tests on the factors connected with competitive performances (Pederson & Digby, 1995). Cooperative learning was first used in social studies, science, and mathematics as part of educational programs (Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014). Other researchers in the field of language teaching and learning adopted cooperative learning once it was proven effective in educational research.

Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) indicated that Johnson, Johnson and Stane used cooperative learning as a theory-based approach that has been proved highly effective in enhancing students' learning and improving social relations compared to other non-cooperative instructional methods. They suggested that cooperative learning should be implemented in educational practice. Furthermore, they believed that cooperative learning allows students to be actively engaged in the lesson and helps them improve academically. Additionally, Schul (2011) stated that cooperative learning is one of the most extensively researched topics within the field of education, with numerous studies examining cooperative learning strategies across various academic areas, age groups, aptitude levels, and ethnic experiences. An example of a cooperative learning strategy is the learning together method. Learning together is a technique in which students in a class are placed into teams or smaller groups, and then return to the whole group to share their understanding of the topic or subject matter that was researched or discussed in the smaller groups.

This structure is used to create interdependence and the equalization of various positions. Each learner on the team becomes an expert on one subject by working with participants from other teams assigned to a group studying a specific topic. This technique allows teachers to divide students into groups. Each group member works on the given topic, and team members in other groups will work on different aspects of a topic simultaneously. That is to say, the subject matter is divided into smaller portions, and the students work on those portions separately. When the work period is over, group members present their findings to the entire class. Cooperative learning was alleged to be related to constant improvement in student achievement while providing rewards to mixed groups based on the collective knowledge of their participants (Chan, 2014).

Johnson and Johnson (2009) focused their inquiry on cooperative learning, which highlighted students working together as well as students working alone in order to identify cooperative learning's impact on student achievement. Cooperative learning is a prominent teaching practice in countries such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). As a result of its success and utility, cooperative learning is being utilized in colleges and universities, as well as at professional development conferences. However, due to lack of empirical studies that would directly examine the effects of cooperative learning strategy of learning together on Saudi EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension outcomes, it is not clear whether using learning together instruction improves the acquisition of Saudi EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension skills. Therefore, the current research study examines the effectiveness of using learning together instruction in improving reading comprehension skills among Saudi EFL undergraduates.

## **1.1. Context of the Study**

### **1.1.1. The Higher Education Context in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Since education is considered the main source for preparing the future generations that are regarded the nation's real valuable wealth, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia pays great attention and puts great emphasis and significance on it (Al-Mousa, 2010, p.7). As a theocracy, the Saudi Arabian state is viewed as fully responsible for higher education and indeed all education. One of the consequences is that tertiary "education in Saudi Arabia is free for all students," (Alankary, 1998, p. 4) and in some rare cases, even for expatriates' family members. The government also assists students who are studying at private colleges by subsidizing half of their tuition fees. In contrast to many universities internationally, free on-campus accommodation is provided to all students who come from remote areas, and as a further motivation to undertake tertiary studies, the government awards all students a small monthly allowance. The Saudi "moral tradition" (Elyas and Picard, 2010) has resulted in the strict gender segregation of all campuses within the tertiary/higher education system in Saudi Arabia, in common with the school system after junior primary level.

Equally, as noted in a previous study (Elyas, 2011), Islamic studies and Arabic are compulsory for university students and all curricula are infused with religious and moral content. Educational policy related to general education, university education and even the teaching of English is likewise infused with the sacred (Elyas, 2011). According to Elyas, (2011), Westernized notions of education have increasingly impacted the Saudi Arabian education system from the 1950s when increasing oil discovery and oil revenues resulted in the education of locals to take up oil jobs, and as part of the responsibilities of the welfare state to provide free education.

According to the Ministry of Higher Education (2010a) the Higher education in Saudi Arabia began in 1957, when the Ministry of Higher Education was established and opened the first university, Riyadh University, which is currently called King Saud University. According to Alyamani, King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU) opened during 1967-1968, was called Jeddah National University, and has precedence in offering the first opportunity for Saudi girls to participate in higher education (Alyamani as cited in Ziyadah, 2012). A total of eight government universities, 18 state teacher colleges for men, and 74 women colleges were established by 2000, and the number of universities continued to grow. In 2002, the Saudi government agreed to open the first two private universities. Then, during the next year, the Saudi government approved a list of rules to govern private universities. By the end of the 2010, there were 21 government universities, and the government approved seven additional private universities and 20 private colleges (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010a). In 2011, three additional state universities were opened.

According to the Ministry of Higher Education (2010b), the number of students who are being accepted in Saudi universities is growing, despite the fact that many Saudi students choose to study abroad and others do not complete their higher education and choose to get a job or apply to the military. In the academic year 2009-2010, the number of students accepted to study in Saudi universities was 200,000. With this increase in the number of universities, the government of Saudi Arabia increased the Ministry of Higher Education's budget to ensure these universities have "continuous support and interest in higher education shown through the establishment of several university campuses complete with a high standard of educational facilities, infrastructure, laboratories, support complexes and vital services" (Al-Ankary as cited in Alebaikan, 2010, p.20).

The educational system in Saudi Arabia is different from that in other countries all over the world. The Saudi educational system is principally based on the strict gender-segregation at all educational stages, elementary, intermediate, secondary, and higher education. There are separate schools and colleges for girls and boys. A female instructor cannot teach a boy's section even if she is the only professor available in her academic field. In the women's colleges in Saudi universities, a male instructor uses television-based instruction to teach women if there are no female instructors available. A male instructor actually teaches in an empty room. His female students watch him on closed-circuit television, and they are able to communicate with him using a microphone, while a female class monitor controls the room.

Alternatively, a male professor teaching men can be viewed from the men's room. The women are not permitted to see the men; women are only permitted to view the professor teaching. In some rare cases when there are no female professors and television-based instruction is not possible or available, such as in anatomy courses in medical schools, male professors have to have all of their students in anatomy labs regardless of the students' gender.

As Kirdar (2002, p. 415) states, "many Arab university graduates were unable to find adequate jobs because they were not properly educated". The descriptions of the "proper" education that Saudi Arabian students "lack" appear firmly rooted in neoliberalist discourses, with theorists like Rugh (2002, p. 415) decrying the fact that pedagogy in most Arab schools and universities is typically based more on rote learning than it is on critical thinking, problem solving skills, analysis of information, cooperative learning and learning how to learn.

### **1.1.2. The Status of English in the Educational System of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia which was established as a kingdom in 1932 has seen ‘unprecedented growth in the fields of economy, health, science and technology in recent years (Rahman, 2011). Arabic is the official language of Saudi Arabia and apart from some colleges it is the medium of instruction up to the university level. The field of education is also growing rapidly in the country and with the growth of education teaching of English also taken a new shape. In fact, the status of the English language in the Saudi educational system is quite well known. “Policy-makers, stakeholders, and other decision-making bodies in Saudi Arabia view the English language as an important tool for the development of the country in terms of both international relations and scientific-technological advancement.

In Saudi Arabia, English has the official status as the primary foreign language and the country continues to show considerable interest in English language programs” (Al-Seghayer, 2014, p.143). Indeed, English is the only foreign language taught in Saudi Arabian public schools and it is often used as the medium of instruction in both private and public universities. In short, English is considered a prestigious skill both in and out of school (Al-Kubaidi, 2014, p. 83) and, as such, there is an ever-growing demand for it in the kingdom (Al-Haq & Smadi, 1996, p. 308). The Saudi students have realized recently that English is no longer a language to pass in the examination, but an important subject for higher education, international communication and business and trade. They consider the value of English as highly practical; opportunistic and prestige. As a result, a tremendous growth of students’ enrollment has been taken place in various English language colleges and institutes all over the Kingdom.

English is taught as a foreign language, earlier a little importance was given in teaching and learning of English in the Saudi education system. It was introduced as a compulsory subject from class seven, but hardly the students had given any emphasis in acquiring the efficiency in English, instead they considered it as a language to pass in the examination. Unlike the past, the status of English in the Kingdom is completely different now. Due to the global demand and being the language of science and technology, business and commerce, the importance of English language grew rapidly. It is considered now one of the major subjects in the education system of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it is implemented as a compulsory subject from class six to the university level. Recently the Ministry of Education has introduced it at class four to achieve more fruitful result.

The Ministry of Education ([www.mkgedu.sa](http://www.mkgedu.sa)) has stated the general aims and objectives of teaching English in Saudi Arabia as the following:

1. To enable student to acquire basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).
2. To develop student's awareness of the importance of English as a means of international communication.
3. To develop student's positive attitudes towards learning English.
4. To enable student to acquire the necessary linguistic competence required in various life situations.
5. To enable student to acquire the necessary linguistic competence required in different professions.
6. To develop student's awareness about the cultural, economic, religion and social issues of his/her society and prepare him/her to participate in their solutions.

7. To develop the linguistic competence that enables student, in future, to present and explain Islamic concept and issues, and to participate in spreading Islam.
8. To enable student linguistically to benefit from English speaking nations, that would enhance the concepts of international co-operation that would develop understanding and respect of cultural differences between nations.
9. To provide student with the linguistic basis that would enable him/her to participate in transferring other nations' scientific and technological advances that can enhance the progress of his/her nation.

With these national goals in mind, English programs in Saudi universities began to develop in earnest during the last few decades, starting with King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals which was the first in 1964. Since then, more and more English programs have begun to sprout up throughout the kingdom. Typically, only the best and the brightest high school students are accepted at government universities in Saudi Arabia since higher education is tuition-free and only a limited number of places are available. For example, King Saud University in Riyadh does not accept “students that scored less than 92 percent in their entrance examinations” and at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, “students with less than 95 percent pass marks are also frequently turned away” (Naffee, 2013).

This leaves community colleges and the private sector with the challenge of educating high school graduates with less impressive results. However, EFL instructors at both private and public universities in Saudi Arabia have noted that they are instantly struck by a remarkable gap between expectations based on stringent admission requirements and the actual English proficiency of their students which they first encounter in the classroom.

This gap might be explained by the language learning environment that many Arab students experience in high school, namely: “teacher-centered rather than learner-centered activities; students’ aptitude, initial preparedness and motivation; compartmentalization vs. whole language approach; emphasis on rote learning; [and limited] exposure to English” outside the classroom (Fareh, 2010, pp. 3602-3603). There has been no research study to date which seeks substantive answers to the probing questions raised here, this study was conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017.

### **1.1.3. The EFL Teaching Context in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Moody (2009) stated that English in Saudi Arabia should be considered both a second and a foreign language, as it “is used to some extent in institutional or national communication, a feature of the outer circle, it is taught as a foreign language” (p. 99). Teaching English in Saudi Arabia began around 1925 (Al-Ahaydib, 1986, pp. 1-2) and, according to Liton (2012, p. 130), since that time the main aim of English teaching in Saudi Arabia has been to master this international language and use it to communicate with English-speaking communities. The Saudi EFL teaching context has characteristics important for understanding it: teacher-centered instruction and traditional language-teaching methods. Fareh’s (2010) study investigated the challenges of teaching English in the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia. The findings demonstrated the issue of using teacher-centered activities as the predominant type of classroom activity across the region. Fareh explained that teachers speak most of the time, even more than students, and do not encourage learners to speak during class. Fareh (2010) claimed that Saudi EFL teachers do not facilitate learners’ self-discovery because of their tendency to speak too much during the class.

Interestingly, Al-Seghayer (2007) indicated that the Saudi teaching style centers on teachers as the core of the learning process while neglecting learners, which explains the trend towards lecturing most of the time. The second key feature of Saudi EFL teaching is reliance on outdated methods. Al-Seghayer (2007) emphasized that Saudi teachers follow traditional methods of language teaching: audio-lingual and grammar-translation. Such methodological choices mean that teachers will use explicit instruction, teaching discrete skills, overlooking oral fluency, and memorization of grammatical rules. Fareh (2010) argued that EFL teachers still believe the fallacy that skills are best taught in separation.

Thirdly, Saudi EFL teachers concentrate chiefly on promoting certain individual skills specifically grammar without integrating all skills in one teaching/learning discourse. Multiple researchers (Fareh, 2010; Liton, 2012; Khan, 2011) indicated that most Saudi EFL teachers still believe in the grammar-translation method and consider grammar as the most crucial aspect of the language to master. Fareh (2010) argued that many EFL teachers in the Arab world teach grammar independent of reading and writing. They reduce learners' communicative competence by failing to contextualize input in the sense of encouraging the synergistic development of skills together.

Al-Hazmi (2003, pp. 342-344) believed that some EFL teachers cannot meet the increasing demand for more communicative activities in the EFL classroom because they lack sufficient linguistic knowledge, appropriate teaching methods, and language proficiency. With increasing awareness regarding the importance of the English language and how to facilitate its acquisition, EFL teaching practices in Saudi Arabia are beginning to change.

Al Seghayer (2012) and Liton (2012) indicated that EFL teachers are now interested in the English language because it serves multiple functions with an eminent position within the Saudi society. Liton (2012, pp. 142-146) conducted an experiment to investigate teachers' and learners' perceptions about English. The participants were 94 Saudi teachers and 380 Saudi students asked to answer a questionnaire. The findings demonstrated both teachers and learners recognized the need for improvement in the EFL teaching system. An overwhelming portion of the participants indicated an urgent need for a strong and friendly relationship between learners and teachers, instead of the traditional distance between teachers and students (Liton, 2012, p. 143). While the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has spent and is continuing to spend large amounts on English language education, results have not been as good as expected, which begs the question: what are the barriers to student learning? It has been found that these barriers include linguistic barriers, learning styles motivation and attitude.

Khan (2011) identified several learning barriers as important factors in the Saudi context: "linguistic barrier, motivation of the students and teachers, dedication and commitment, teachers' role and characteristics preparedness, teaching strategies, training and professional development," with motivation being the most important (p. 243). Syed (2003) agreed and added other factors such as "reliance on rote learning and memorization and dependence on high stakes testing" (p. 337). In addition to student and teacher barriers to learning, Moody (2009) identified issues with the materials, stating that most textbooks used in the Gulf "are actually intended for ESL students in the inner circle English speech communities who are integrative motivated either as visiting foreign students or as recently arrived residents who need English to function in their new societies" (p. 99).

As a result of the profound mismatch between students' linguistic needs and what the textbooks offer, students are likely to be less interested in the subject matter. With researchers reporting that "pedagogy in most Arab schools and universities is typically based more on rote learning than it is on critical thinking" or communicative language teaching (CLT), we begin to get the picture of a demotivating environment for English students in the Gulf (Rugh, 2002, p. 398). Though the teaching of English as a Foreign Language is now commonly accepted, many debates emerge from time to time as to how it ought to be taught. There has been considerable international criticism of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia teaching methods and curriculum in general. For example, the World Bank study suggested that the Saudi education system did not impart higher-order cognitive skills such as flexibility, problem solving, and judgment needed by workers (World Bank, 2002, p. 12).

A Harvard study of Arab higher education also found that "widespread practices of rote learning and memorization exercises are incapable of developing capacities in students for problem solving and application of theory to practical concepts" (Cassidy and Miller, 2002). Within the Arab world heated discussions which have largely gone unnoticed in the west (Rugh, 2002) have raged, with many concerned that traditional Arab educational culture with its emphasis on rote learning and teacher-based pedagogy is not supportive of the current economic development in the region. English in particular is seen as a vehicle for economic development, as it is used as the lingua franca in large multi-national oil and gas companies. In Saudi Arabia, in particular, with increased Saudiazation (affirmative action for Saudi nationals) and companies setting strict communicative competency standards (Aldred and Lees, 2004) for oil and gas workers, increasing pressure has been placed on educational institutions to provide nationals with a different type of English program.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is accelerating day by day in the field of English language education, but the level of achievement in learning English as a foreign language is far below. According to Alshumaimeri (2003) “Teachers have pointed out that students leave the secondary stage without the ability to carry out a short conversation.” After learning English for many years, the students have achieved little in terms of language proficiency, and making a large number of students and teachers waste of time and energy.

Additionally, Al-Hazmi (2003, p.341) argued that “the English [current] program is inadequate for the preparation of EFL teachers in the Kingdom,” and he has called for a systematic approach to pre and in-service education for EFL teachers, especially with regards to English pedagogy. However, the difficulty is to implement a radically different English pedagogy in a context where the other subjects are still taught according to traditional methods and there is a content rather than pedagogical emphasis in teacher training in general (Elyas, 2008a, b). Moreover, Ahmad (2014) discussed problems in the Saudi EFL teaching environment and suggested that some teachers still focus on the development of grammar, for instance, neglecting the integration of other language skills.

University instructors and undergraduate students’ acknowledging and understanding of these drawbacks in EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia can be considered as a starting point for initiating change and promoting adoption of new strategies to improve EFL teaching practices. Instructors’ and students’ attitudes and perceptions about the growing need for development in teaching practices can be expected to accelerate the adoption of new innovations such as cooperative learning because of a willingness to look for clear improvements in the EFL teaching system.

Fortunately, cooperative learning is deliberately designed for teachers in different settings to allow them to adapt to their particular context. Despite all the efforts made by the various Saudi bodies in order to overcome these drawbacks and barriers, the situation of teaching English in Saudi Arabia has always been in a constant state of flux. The teaching of English as a foreign language has been enormously changed in the last few decades. Presently, English language teaching methodologies have focused on the importance of giving learners opportunities to communicate (Ellis, 2008). Instructors should think of new methodologies for classroom interaction, and these methods will have to depend on techniques which will enable the students to enjoy their English language classes. As a result, students will be motivated towards learning English and develop some up-to-date learning techniques.

The present study is an attempt to demonstrate the ways in which adoption and adaptation of learning together strategy can be achieved and be effective in teaching EFL reading in order to develop undergraduate EFL students' reading comprehension and their attitudes toward using learning together. Having generally looked at some of the characteristics of EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia, including students and their teachers, and some of the barriers to learning, like the teaching methods and mismatch between students' linguistic needs and what the textbooks offer, it is time to consider specifically studies related to the EFL reading teaching context in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

#### **1.1.4. The EFL Reading Teaching Context in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Reading is perceived as a complex act of communication in which a number of textual, contextual, and reader-based variables interact to produce comprehension

(Roe, Smith, & Burns, 2005). As indicated by Martin et al. (2008) the reading process consists of five components; phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. While all five components are important, the ability to comprehend read material is the end goal and purpose for reading. In Saudi EFL higher education context, reading comprehension is a challenging skill for both lecturers and students. According to the Saudi-TOEFL Network ([www.Saudi-TOEFL.net](http://www.Saudi-TOEFL.net)), the average TOEFL result for students who speak Arabic is 66 out of 120.

This is one of the lowest average TOEFL scores of all native languages in the world (TOEFL report, 2012). For native Arabic speakers, the average score varies from one section to another; it is 13 on the Reading Section of the TOEFL, 17 on the Listening Section, 19 on the Speaking Section, and 17 on the Writing Section. This shows clearly that the reading section is the weakest of all sections. The Saudi context is not an exception of the above-mentioned painful truth about Arab EFL learners' average TOEFL results. The average TOEFL result in Saudi Arabia is, sadly, 57 out of 120. This is currently the second lowest in the entire Middle East. The lowest average belongs to Qatar, 51.

These results are below most African countries, and they are two of the lowest average TOEFL scores in the world. While the average Saudi score on the Reading Section of the TOEFL is 10, it is 15 on the Listening Section of the TOEFL, 18 on the Speaking Section of the TOEFL and 15 on the Writing Section of the TOEFL. These scores are out of 30 points each ([www.Saudi-TOEFL.net](http://www.Saudi-TOEFL.net)). Saudi EFL learners' steadily unsatisfactory obtained TOEFL test scores in particular in reading section indicated the instructors' urgent requirement to investigate their EFL reading comprehension teaching methods which they used to apply to their EFL university classroom.

Traditional lecturing in the undergraduate EFL reading comprehension classroom accompanied with assigned activities from the reading comprehension text, the teaching method that has been utilized by most lecturers, has not become efficient so far as it neither satisfies all students' needs nor copes with their different learning styles (Jang, 2007; Saulnier, Landry, Longenecker, & Wagner, 2008). Debate over the most effective instructional strategy to be used in EFL reading comprehension education is a hard challenge nowadays encountering the educators in higher education.

Traditional EFL reading courses are typically taught in large classes by lecturer-centered instruction, which mainly involves text explanation, vocabulary illustration, grammar instruction, and intensive drills on language forms (Jin & Cortazzi, 2004). These traditional methods emphasize linguistic accuracy and rote learning. Teachers serve as the sole providers of language knowledge, and students are treated as passive recipients of teaching, rather than active learners, and exhibit limited autonomy (Ning, 2011). These methods have caused students to feel dull and disinterested in EFL classes (Gomleksiz, 2007).

Typically it was noted by the researcher that in Qassim University undergraduate EFL classrooms a lecturer-centered method seems to be used at most levels. In such classrooms, the lecturer is stereotypically realized as the main source of knowledge with students passively sitting, listening attentively, keeping quiet, taking notes, asking very few or no questions at all. Based on the researcher's experience in teaching reading comprehension at the third-level EFL students of Qassim University, the researcher observed the main problems on the students' reading comprehension achievement may be that, the use of an inappropriate traditional lecturing method.

Hence, the impact may be directly lacking on the student's achievement in reading comprehension achievement. This has made it necessary for EFL educators to incorporate new methods of instruction in the Saudi EFL education context. One of the effective teaching methods that has been confirmed useful to learners from a broad range of different academic abilities and assisted develop, improve and raise academic achievement in reading comprehension is a cooperative learning strategy called Learning Together. Learning Together has been commonly identified and defined as a cooperative learning strategy that allows a heterogeneous group of students, assigned specific roles, to achieve a common goal (Johnson & Johnson, 2002).

Cooperative learning strategies like Learning Together, if applied properly, could assist individual students improve their higher order thinking skills, acquire oral communication skills, and support a deeper understanding of content material (Berry, 2003; Jang, 2007; P. E. King & Behnke, 2005; Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Berkeley, 2007; Topping, 2005). In this study, Learning Together strategy which is part of cooperative learning model was used. Learning Together (LT) strategy was developed by Johnson and Johnson in 1989 (Johnson et al. 1998).

In this strategy, firstly the aims are set, clarified and indicated and then designing the specific groups required for achieving these aims. Students study together on subjects or work sheets in 2 or 6 members per a group. Group members decide how they study and what to do in accordance with group subjects and assignment with altogether. Ultimately, they put out a joint study. Students are rewarded according to achievements in the group and individual studies (Açıkgöz, 2011; Johnson et al. 1994). When employing Learning Together strategy in the undergraduates EFL reading comprehension classroom for this research study, EFL undergraduate students were assumed to be active participants.

They were given active tasks and assigned duties and roles during their reading comprehension instruction, with the lecturer holding each participant student accountable for the achievement of a group assigned goal. Given the importance of cooperative learning strategy of Learning Together in facilitating reading comprehension for EFL learners and the poor performance of Saudi students on standardized tests, it could be said that this topic has not been given appropriate attention in the Saudi EFL teaching context.

Thus, based on this and on the researcher's observation as an English as a Foreign Language lecturer, there is a general tendency among English language lecturers to consider teaching reading comprehension a complex task. Taking this into consideration, this study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of using learning together instruction in improving reading comprehension among EFL undergraduates in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

## 1.2. Theoretical Framework

Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) stated:

The power of cooperative learning lies in the interrelationship among its theory, research, and practice. Theory is to practice what the soil is to plants. If the soil is appropriate and the conditions are right, the plant will grow and flourish. If the theory is valid and the conditions for effective implementation are identified, practical procedures develop and continuously improve. Without an appropriate theory, practice becomes static and stagnant. Some of the greatest theorists of the 20th century have focused on cooperation. (p. 3)

The theoretical framework for this research study included cognitive developmental theory, constructivist learning theory, and social interdependence theory. The origin of cooperative learning was founded on Dewey's (1938) constructivist theory, which highlighted education as a learning technique used in

assisting students to work cooperatively in the classroom. Constructivist learning theory focuses on the learner as the center of the educational field. The three theories are discussed as follows:

### **1.2.1. The Cognitive Developmental Theory**

Tran (2013) stated that the cognitive-developmental theory consists of students working together to improve their intellectual growth and their academic achievement. The cognitive developmental theory views cooperative learning environments as an essential component of intellectual development; Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky were cognitive learning theorists who believed that cooperative learning with advanced peers produced cognitive development (Johnson et al., 1998). Jean Piaget was a constructivist supporter in the mid 1950's who believed the connection of prior and new knowledge should be linked to classroom communication with others in order to increase achievement (Pope, 2016).

Constructivism served as an underlying theme of the cognitive learning theory that sparked education reform movements and promoted cooperative learning to enhance student achievement (Pope, 2016). Additionally, Pettitt (2008) stated that a constructivist class consists of lecture from a teacher, free response problems, cooperative learning, and real world applications problems. Tran (2013) stated, "Vygotsky stresses the importance of cooperative activities and argues that the development of children is promoted by cooperative activities" (p. 106). Vygotsky believed that cooperative learning, understanding information, and problem solving are essential for constructing knowledge (Johnson et al., 1998). In cooperative learning, students must work together to build their knowledge. Information is not given to students in a typical lecture led classroom; instead, students are actively

involved in finding the knowledge, sharing information, and developing societal skills (Johnson & Johnson, 2014).

Working with peers to achieve learning goals is a principal component of the cooperative learning model, and it has been shown that when peers work together to achieve a common goal, the student “produces higher achievement and greater productivity (than) working competitively or individualistically” (Johnson & Johnson, 2014, p. 843). When students participate in cooperative learning, students are working together instead of against each other, so they then are working in compliance for the “mutual benefit of a common cause” (Spooner, 2015, p. 37).

This makes cooperative learning more effective than competitive groupings and learning. In this way, using scaffolding, students move from not able to solve problems to solving problems with help, and into the zone of proximal development (Clapper, 2015). This specific research study may potentially advance or extend the cognitive developmental theory because it aimed to answer how using learning together strategy affects EFL undergraduates’ reading comprehension learning outcomes.

### **1.2.2. Constructivist Learning Theory**

The constructionist theory claimed that knowledge is constructed through interaction with the environment and relationships (both with adults and peers) rather than social or traditional educational means (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). So, students do not learn from only the teacher’s words, but instead from educational experiences set up in the classroom (Spooner, 2015). Olusegun (2015) stated that constructivism was in direct opposition of traditional learning, or lecture, and students and teachers were in a continuous and active process of leaning. Thus, meaning or learning comes

from students' construction of the environment, classroom, and interaction among peers. Teachers guide students to learning, and group members help each other reach their learning targets (Fernandez-Rio, 2016).

Leadership, resourcefulness, and problem-solving skills are all different attributes found in cooperative learning (Kagan, 2013). When students individually and cooperatively work together, then knowledge is constructed (Spooner, 2015). Constructivist theory supports the idea that individual differences can be addressed through the use of diverse teaching styles, and that the use of alternative teaching approaches can positively impact the teaching process. Barrett and Long (2012) declared that the most important theme in the academic framework of the constructivist theory is a rigorous procedure in which learners create new concepts or theories founded upon their own understanding. Jha (2012) stipulated that constructivist theory accentuates the importance of learners' dependence on cognitive structures. During cooperative learning, students are allowed to choose and transform information, construct theory, and make decisions to enhance learning.

Cooperative learning and constructivist theories emphasize the degree of interactivity that needs to take place among students, which must, in turn, be reflected in the lesson. Cooperative learning supports the social constructivist theory of social contact because it encourages learners to converse and cooperate with one another to develop their levels of comprehension, intellect, and critical thinking. These are all elements required for internalizing information. In support of cooperative learning, Lin (2006) argued that human beings acquire knowledge best when they work together with others and can actively process personally significant information. Loyens, Rikers, and Schmidt (2008) stated that constructivist learning theory refers to the technique of knowledge construction that empowers individuals to learn

information by changing and molding their intellectual concepts to attain new knowledge. Loyens et al. (2008) went on to explain that constructivism has four major distinguishing features: knowledge construction, cooperative learning, metacognition, and meaningful learning.

The first feature, knowledge creation, describes the process by which the learners relate to experiences to create their knowledge. The second feature, cooperative learning, is an essential module in constructivism; learners' interactions can augment the learning process. Learners can discuss, share, and internalize experiences within small groups. The third feature, metacognition, denotes the process of obtaining new knowledge through self-regulated learning. Finally, the fourth feature, meaningful learning, includes students' acquaintance with real-life circumstances that prepare them for life outside the classroom walls and the solidification of their knowledge (Loyens et al., 2008).

The origin of cooperative learning was founded on Dewey's (1938) premise that education is a vehicle for educating students to live cooperatively. Constructivist learning theory focuses on the learner as the center of the educational field. Constructivist theory supports teaching that allows individual differences to be addressed using different teaching styles. Barrett and Long (2012) declared that the most important theme in the academic framework of the constructivist theory is a rigorous procedure in which students construct new concepts or theories founded upon their own previous understanding.

This means that the essential framework or outline of the constructivist concept is an active process that allows students to create new ways of thinking based on what they already know about the topic under review. Constructivist theory stresses that individuals differ in their quest for knowledge and thought progressions,

causing diverse learners to draw unique conclusions when faced with similar problems. In constructivism, each student possesses prior knowledge and skills that can be utilized to create new ideas and use newly created knowledge to decipher problems (Ültanir, 2012). Existing constructivist methods reflect foundational theories that are categorized by cooperation, active learning, problem-solving, learner-centered settings, and knowledge construction (Richey et al., 2011). All of these characteristics can affect cooperative learning strategies.

#### **1.2.2.1. Cooperative Learning and Constructivist Theory**

Jha (2012) stipulated that constructivist's theory accentuates the importance of learners' dependence on cognitive structures. During cooperative learning, students are allowed to choose and transform information, construct theory, and make decisions to enhance learning (Kagan, 2013). Cooperative learning and constructivist theory emphasize the value of interactivity when planning and executing lesson plans. The constructivist theory states that the wide range of situations under which students are instructed provides numerous, satisfactory choices for meticulous learning.

Carlson and Wiedl (2013) substantiated that teachers should be guided by the reality that it is not instruction on its own that permits learning to take place. Instead, it is an attempt by the learner to augment knowledge based on what is already known. Wiggins and McTighe (2007) argued that educators need to tap into the student knowledge bank and use previous experience to introduce new concepts and ideas. Furthermore, Salkind (2014) noted that constructivist educators believe learners are intrinsically motivated. Yildirim and Kasapoglu (2015) suggested that when teachers use the constructivist method of teaching, students have a high level of retention specifically because they are self-motivated.

Nie and Lau (2010) indicated that constructivism, as a theoretical framework, is appropriate for learning settings, such as cooperative learning classrooms. Rather than focusing on direct instruction, teachers can use the constructivist, student-centered environment to highlight knowledge building and cooperation (Lakkala, Ilomaki, & Kosonen, 2010). Nie and Lau (2010) stated that constructivist; learner-centered environments emphasize knowledge construction and teamwork. In classrooms where cooperative learning is utilized, the theoretical framework of constructivism is embedded in the learning process.

In the current research study the social aspects of the cooperative learning strategy of learning together and the active learning relate to the constructionist theory. This research study will also advance the theory by first observing the constructionist view of education, because the cooperative learning strategy of learning together activities build upon peer interaction, and secondly it will advance the theory by analyzing the academic success on reading comprehension pretest and posttest.

### **1.2.3. The Social Interdependence Theory/ Cooperative Learning Theory**

Social interdependence is another name for cooperative learning which refers to a group of people including more than one person where each person has an effect on one another (Johnson & Johnson, 2016). Tran (2013) stated, “This theory is compatible with the nature of cooperative learning in which knowledge and skills are constructed through mutual interaction among participants” (p. 101). Kurt Koffka was the main theorist who studied social interdependence in the early 1900’s (Johnson & Johnson, 2016).

Johnson and Johnson (1989) stated that Kurt Koffka was a German psychologist who believed cooperative groups were considered “dynamic wholes” where the dependence among members in a group may differ. It is important to note that cooperative learning is not group work in the traditional sense, but instead, according to Kagan (2013), there are four components that must be present in a cooperative learning lesson that separate it from traditional group work: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction.

With the same token, cooperative learning elements include positive interdependence, individual accountability, group processing, small-group and interpersonal skills, and face-to-face interaction (Jolliffe, 2007). Jolliffe (2007) stated positive interdependence is the feeling that group members need each other in order to complete the task at hand; it is the idea that only through everyone’s individual success can the team succeed. Teachers may set the outcomes, but it is important that the students take ownership of the goals and ownership of their individual role in the group’s success (Stahl, 1994).

Individual accountability, the second component, however, holds the individual accountable for his or her own learning. Rather than assigning a group grade or a grade that would mask one student doing all of the work, with individual accountability, students must ensure that all group members master the content, because all students will be graded in their academic achievements on their own (Jolliffe, 2007). Because cooperative learning is used most often so that students achieve greater learning outcomes than if teachers taught in traditional classes, students must then be assessed in a way that looks at the individuals’ achievement (Stahl, 1994).

With the third element, equal participation, students are expected to collaboratively and efficiently work together building trust and communication skills. Students must feel that through their participation in which ever group they are placed, that the student will feel success. Stahl (1994) noted “In other words, the student must not feel penalized academically by being placed in a particular group” (p. 2). Lastly, in simultaneous interaction, students elaborate and evaluate the group, how it is functioning, all the while making changes to components that are not working to encourage the group’s success (Jolliffe, 2007). In this debriefing time, students reflect on:

(a) how well they achieved their group goals, (b) how they helped each other comprehend the content, resources, and task procedures, (c) how they used positive behaviors and attitudes to enable each individual and the entire group as a group to be successful, and (d) what they need to do next time to make their groups even more successful. (Stahl, 1994, p. 3)

All four of these components, in one way or another, depend on peer interaction. Identifying the best way to create peer groups while implementing cooperative learning methods in a classroom will add to these theories. Therefore, putting students together should not be done by random assignment, but instead with deliberate, thoughtful planning so that students achieve the greatest amount of academic and social gain possible.

Theoretically, instructional methods that match individual learning styles can bring positive changes in students’ scholastic performance across the disciplines and at all academic levels because adjustment to students’ learning style preferences helps improve their learning experience (Maric, Penger, Todorvic, Djurica, & Pintar, 2015). Moreover, it has been debated that instructors can improve students’ complex cognitive and metacognitive reading comprehension skills by embedding regular

teaching instructions into socially enhanced learning environments (Kuhn, 2015). These proposed beliefs to improve EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension performance and achievement are grounded in a number of learning theories.

This study on the use of learning together with learners in the reading comprehension classes is based on the theoretical framework of positive social interdependence theory. One method to capture the complexity of social influences is using the lens of the social interdependence theory (Deutsch, 1949), which suggests that social interactions established by either cooperative or competitive classroom structures can promote acquisition of advanced academic skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). The distinction between cooperative learning based instruction and instructor-directed instruction is essential; as Bilgin (2006) pointed out, "In traditional teaching approaches, students are passive recipients, but in the cooperative learning approach, students are in an active position" (p. 33). Cooperative learning involves "students working together in small groups to accomplish shared goals" (Gillies, 2007, p. 1). The students support each other to improve the learning of everyone in the group (Jolliffe, 2007).

By the students' cooperative learning grouping process, the theory of positive social interdependence, an essential factor to meeting the needs of all different styles learners, is nurtured (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; I. C. King, 2003). Positive social interdependence is believed to have taken place when students' group members work together to accomplish a common goal (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, 2002). Just assigning learners into random groups does not automatically support positive interdependence; cautious heterogeneous grouping of students must be well planned and attentively monitored throughout the cooperative learning experience (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, 2002).

In order to foster the theory of positive social interdependence, numerous aims were set by EFL undergraduate students who got involved in Learning Together instruction in the reading comprehension classroom. The perception of positive social interdependence comprises positive goal interdependence, positive resource interdependence, and, finally positive role interdependence. Johnson and Johnson (1994) explained the working of cooperative learning as follows:

Group membership and interpersonal interaction among students do not produce higher achievers unless positive interdependence is clearly structured. The combination of goal and reward interdependence increases achievement over goal interdependence alone and resource independence does not increase achievement unless goal interdependence is present also. (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, p.54)

Methods that could be used to facilitate positive social interdependence in a Learning Together instructional group are outlined in table 1.1.

**TABLE1.1.** Methods of Facilitating Positive Social Interdependence in a Learning Together Group

Positive social interdependence type	Description of participant students' activities
Positive goal Interdependence	All members of the Learning Together group work cohesively to obtain a common group goal.
Positive reward-celebrate interdependence	Each Learning Together group member receives an identical reward for the group's efforts. Additional individual rewards are presented as deemed appropriate.
Positive resource interdependence	Each Learning Together group member has fractions of the reading comprehension course materials, layouts of printed sheets, needed to accomplish the group's duty, in order to improve social interdependence.
Positive role interdependence	A specific task has been given to be fulfilled by each group member throughout Learning Together activities in order to reduce any inactive performances.

*Note.* Adapted from "Professional Development in Cooperative Learning: Short-Term Popularity vs. Long-Term Effectiveness," by D. W. Johnson and R. T. Johnson, 1994, *Cooperative Learning*, 14, pp. 52-54. Copyright 1994.

As illustrated in table.1.1, Positive goal interdependence is meant to be created as soon as group members work cohesively to gain a shared group goal (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). A positive reward-celebrate interdependence is cultivated when each member of a group is given an equal reward for the group's efforts (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). Extra individual rewards are offered whenever properly required. Positive resource interdependence is intended to be encouraged when each group member has a portion of the materials required to accomplish the group's duty in order to develop social interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). Positive role interdependence is stimulated by giving each group member a specific role to be fulfilled cooperatively, thus reducing any unexpected inactive behaviors (Johnson & Johnson, 2002).

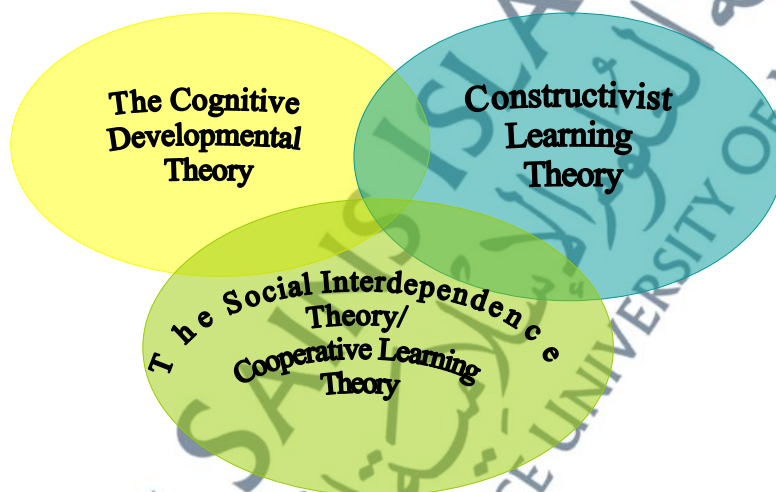
Cooperative learning strategy of learning together allows for a student to be weak in one area, but help in other aspects of the group's learning (Clapper, 2015). Students may have gifts in leadership skills, artistic abilities, or speaking abilities, which all have a significant role in a cooperative learning lesson. Working together, students evaluate each other's ideas, ask questions, and use each other's gift and talents to make the most of each learning experience (Spooner, 2015). The specific research focus, the effectiveness of using the learning together instruction in improving EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension, relates to the cooperative learning theory. This will advance or extend the theory's knowledge base.

For this study, the theory of positive social interdependence was tested via utilizing a cooperative learning strategy called Learning Together for one undergraduate EFL third-level reading comprehension classroom and not utilizing it for another classroom. Learning together questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, pre and posttests identical reading comprehension confirmed whether the theory of

positive social interdependence had affected improving achievement of EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension.

The above discussed theoretical framework that included three theories that support the cooperative learning strategy of learning together, namely, The Cognitive Developmental Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, and The Social Interdependence Theory/ Cooperative Learning Theory are illustrated in the following figure, figure 1.1.

**FIGURE 1.1:** The Three Theories that Support the Cooperative Learning Strategy of Learning Together.



### 1.3. Problem Statement

Even though most incoming Qassim University students are high school graduates from the Saudi school system, they lack the necessary reading comprehension skills to perform well in the college setting. Despite being placed in an intensive course program reading classes during their first semester of joining university, these students are slow to improve in their word knowledge and reading comprehension skills.

Based on the researcher observation of his EFL Saudi students, it could be noted that students were not actively involved in developing knowledge; they used to receive information passively and to be less motivated. This passivity has attracted the researcher's attention and caused much of his concern. Having good reading comprehension skills has become necessary for Saudi EFL undergraduates. Reading comprehension skills play a significant role in enhancing the students' academic achievement and success in all academic subject areas. In addition, while modified teaching strategies that match students' learning styles promote effective learning (Schilling, 2016), students are rarely given, due to the excessive use of traditional teaching methods, the opportunity to exercise their preferred learning style, which leaves them with less desire to learn. Ultimately, with minimal progress in achieving the required reading comprehension skills and proficiency, many students fail the English intensive course repeatedly.

Hence, it is believed that Qassim University students' recurring failure in the intensive course program is caused by deficient vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension skills, lack of learning motivation, and mismatch between the traditional teaching methods used and students' learning styles. Pascual and Goikoetxea (2014) stated that inadequate vocabulary knowledge and failure to comprehend difficult texts at the college level are key reasons for poor academic performance among post-secondary students, but the extent of their influence on an individual student's academic performance is unclear. In Saudi EFL classrooms, reading is a problematic skill for both teachers and learners. One problem faced by most of Saudi students, is that their achievement in reading performance, as measured by standardized TOEFL test scores, portrays them as deficient in reading skills, and not proficient readers.

According to Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2011), Saudi EFL students of different educational levels are unable to read efficiently or comprehend what they read. In fact, TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) reports for the past ten years shows that Saudi students' performance is the worst among Middle Eastern students, particularly in reading (Al Abik, 2014). Even worse, Al Abik (2014) points out that Saudi TOEFL candidates' average mean score in reading ( $X=12$ ) is far below the average mean score worldwide ( $X=20$ ). This result was supported by his own study of Saudi English-major undergraduates, in which he concluded that the majority of students (almost 70 percent) who were majoring in English and translation could not score more than 10 in the reading comprehension test. He emphasized that reading comprehension instruction in Saudi Arabia is not given proper attention and that there is an urgent need to change classroom practices in order to develop students' reading skills.

Likewise, as students are restricted to a single teaching style, traditional lecturing instruction, they are less motivated to learn and their academic progress is less likely to advance; on the contrary, motivation and learning will increase when instruction compliments the students' learning styles (Hung, 2012; Ku & Chang, 2011). Alsamadani (2012) affirms that reading instruction in Saudi schools is generally made up of oral repetition of passages and a literal level of comprehension. Accordingly, despite efforts made by Saudi undergraduate EFL educators, there has been little progress made in improving undergraduate EFL students' standardized reading comprehension test scores. Poor reading comprehension performance of Saudi EFL learners can be the result of multiple factors which include the traditional lecturing method of instruction.

The researcher has experienced first-hand the problems, limits and debates connected with teaching reading and developing students' reading comprehension skills. One of the reasons behind these problems could be the traditional instructional method used in the undergraduate EFL reading comprehension classroom. These problems may require EFL lecturers and educators to provide their students with new methods of instruction and remediation. This stimulates the need for changing the traditional lecture method instruction and implementing instructional practices that include manipulatives and classroom cooperative learning activities, not just lectures and teacher-centered activities, to make reading comprehension much more active and interesting. As EFL reading comprehension educators privileged with research-validated methods at the researchers' disposal, knowledge and experience must be applied to find pedagogy for teaching EFL reading comprehension within the Saudi EFL education context that will effectively teach students to read proficiently.

Among the many methods available, is learning together strategy. With the current trend toward shifting from traditional lecturing instruction to more student-centered methods, this study examines the effectiveness of using learning together instruction in improving EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension. Hence, it is alleged that a non-traditional teaching method, such as learning together instruction, can raise academic achievement, foster communication skills, promote individual interpersonal interaction and can produce reading comprehension improvement over traditional classroom instruction. Lastly, the Individual Learning Style Theory states that a mismatch of teaching and learning style between the instructor and student can result in poor learner performance and impede the learning process (Surjono, 2015). The instructors' choice of teaching strategies should complement the students' learning styles in order for learning to be more effective (Ku & Chang, 2011).

As a consequence, it is needed to further investigate the influence of learning together instruction on Saudi EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension academic performance by studying the relationship between the use of learning together instruction and students' reading comprehension achievement. The study has the potential to initiate a new and more effective way for educators to teach reading for the benefit of Saudi EFL students that uses traditional instruction. As an EFL lecturer at Qassim University, the researcher found that most students were in the position of having a reading score deficit, one that labelled them as inferior to and incapable of achieving academically as well as their contemporaries. A new way to teach them to understand what they read will give students the skills they need to read and better answer questions on standardized tests in reading.

To address the problematic issues of EFL reading education in the Saudi educational setting, this research study presents an alternative way to teach reading comprehension in Qassim University EFL classrooms. Little is known about the benefits of cooperative learning strategy of learning together and its effectiveness in improving Saudi EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension. The general problem is that there is a significant decrease in the Saudi TOEFL candidates' average mean score in reading ( $X=12$ ) which is far below the average mean score worldwide ( $X=20$ ), (Al Abik 2014).

The specific problem is that most EFL educators are unsure of what is the most effective method to teach reading comprehension. The researcher's interest in conducting this research study stemmed from the observable unsatisfactory state of reading instruction performance in Saudi Arabia. It also stemmed from the lack of sufficient empirical literature on the topic of Learning Together instruction to EFL reading comprehension learners.

The researcher has, therefore, decided to pursue the issue further and design a study to approach the teaching of reading comprehension within a Learning Together setting. The current study attempted to investigate the effectiveness of using Learning Together instruction for Saudi EFL undergraduates in improving their reading comprehension abilities and performance.

#### **1.4. Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this research study were threefold. First, this study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of using Learning Together instruction in improving reading comprehension among EFL undergraduates in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by comparing the Learning Together instruction and traditional lecture instruction; second, this study aimed to survey the students' perceptions about Learning Together instruction used in EFL reading comprehension classroom, and third, this study aimed to examine students' Learning Together behaviors during Learning Together instructional activities.

This study is a mixed-method research. The quantitative phase in this study is designed to show if there is a change in Saudi EFL undergraduates' reading performance after Learning Together instruction. The qualitative phase in this study is designed to explore EFL undergraduates' perceptions and experiences about actual Learning Together instruction use while engaging in the task of a given reading comprehension text. This research study will provide valuable insight on the effects of learning together instruction on EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension. Moreover, the study will further contribute to the existing knowledge of using learning together instruction in EFL reading comprehension classes by revealing its extent of impact on students' reading achievement, and by disclosing whether all

participants are affected equally by the learning together instruction. To this end, the following research questions were developed:

### 1.5. Research Questions

The following three research questions guided the present study. The first and the second questions were quantitative while the third question was qualitative.

**RQ1:** Is there a significant relationship between using Learning Together in undergraduate EFL reading comprehension classroom and students' reading comprehension achievement as determined by students' pre-test and post-test scores?

**Alternate Hypothesis:** There is a significant relationship between using Learning Together in undergraduate EFL reading comprehension classroom and students' reading comprehension achievement as determined by students' pre-test and post-test scores.

**Null Hypothesis:** There is no significant relationship between using Learning Together in undergraduate EFL reading comprehension classroom and students' reading comprehension achievement as determined by students' pre-test and post-test scores.

**RQ2:** What are undergraduate EFL experimental group students' perceptions of the effectiveness of using Learning Together instruction in improving their reading comprehension achievement?

**RQ3:** How do undergraduate EFL experimental group students react to using Learning Together instruction in their EFL reading comprehension classroom?

The first and second questions were directly related to the results of the quantitative phase, which related test scores measuring reading comprehension and Learning Together questionnaire scores to the influence of Learning Together instruction. The third question addressed students' reactions to using Learning Together instruction in their EFL reading comprehension classroom. This question elicited each participant's change in response to using Learning Together instruction. It also addressed the participants' actual use of Learning Together. This qualitative phase described the participants' Learning Together instruction usage in the Saudi higher education EFL academic context.

#### **1.6. Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for some reasons. First of all, this study contributes to an understanding of the role played by Learning Together instruction in EFL reading comprehension classes, through an investigation of the effectiveness of using Learning Together instruction in improving Saudi undergraduate EFL students' reading comprehension. Secondly, this study offers in-depth insight into whether a relationship exists between the Learning Together instruction and undergraduate EFL students' reading comprehension performance and achievement.

Thirdly, the results of this study may be of benefit in EFL reading comprehension instruction if they persuade EFL reading comprehension course designers and EFL educators and instructors of the importance of Learning Together instruction in EFL classroom. College EFL programs that provide courses to

undergraduates could also benefit from this study by introducing curricula that will be aligned to cooperative learning strategy of learning together and its practices. Faculty members and instructors may also have a greater understanding of this strategy, and integrate it into their classroom practice.

Fourthly, the findings of this study would hopefully fill the gap in the literature regarding the investigation of using Learning Together instruction in the undergraduate reading comprehension classroom. Fifthly, while there are a few studies that have been conducted in the Saudi educational context focusing on elementary, intermediate and secondary age students and shown a significant difference in EFL reading performance when using cooperative learning methodology in Saudi Public schools (Alhaidari, 2006; Merebah, S., 1987; Almanza, 1997; Basamh, 2002), there is no study, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, that investigated the effectiveness of using Learning Together strategy for tertiary-level EFL learners in the domain of reading comprehension instruction.

Sixthly, based on the results of this study, Saudi English language learners who are learning English as a foreign language could benefit from the information garnered from this study. This may be especially beneficial for those learners who could acquire the target language in a faster and more successful way by attaining greater comprehensible input, and through interaction, they may be able to transition to significantly higher levels of comprehensible output, as a result of this study. Such involvement will give the learners many advantages that could impact them personally, socially, educationally and academically. Finally, the expected outcomes of the student participant group in this study include increasing their communication skills and helping them learn how to learn from each other.

### 1.7. The Study Assumptions

In the course of this research study, numerous assumptions were made. It was basically assumed that all participants answered all Learning Together survey questions honestly and to the best of their abilities. It was also assumed that Learning Together strategy deemed by the researcher to be effective would result in increased reading comprehension achievement for undergraduate EFL students.

It was primarily assumed, built upon a review of the related literature, that Learning Together model-based instruction implemented properly would let the each different student develop and improve higher order thinking skills, acquire and enhance numerous oral communication skills, and create an in-depth understanding of reading comprehension content material (Berry, 2003; Jang, 2007; P. E. King & Behnke, 2005; Mastropieri et al., 2007; Topping, 2005). Implementation of the cooperative learning strategy of Learning Together was essentially assumed to improve undergraduate EFL students' reading comprehension achievement revealed by improving test scores.

Additionally, it was assumed that the theory of positive social interdependence explained what was happening in the cooperative learning settings. It was also assumed that participation in cooperative learning strategy of Learning Together in undergraduate EFL reading comprehension classroom would help students understand better reading comprehension skills like previewing, scanning, making inferences, focusing on the topic, understanding paragraphs, identifying the pattern and thinking in English.

The present study was also based on the assumptions that students of control group and experimental group had equal interests and reading comprehension skills. Similarly, it was also assumed that previous reading comprehension achievements and

family background had equal impact on the students of control and experimental group. As a final point, it was mainly assumed that undergraduate EFL third-level students in the two classrooms where this research study was carried out took and completed the pre and post reading comprehension tests for this research study to the best of their own potentials and abilities.

## **1.8. Operational Definitions of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following operational definitions of terms were used:

### **1.8.1. Cooperative Learning:**

For this study cooperative learning was defined operationally as “collaboration among individuals working together toward a common goal” (Berry, 2003, p. 2). Cooperative learning occurs when students work in small groups to complete a task, assignment, or activity while helping each other understand the lesson so that everyone in the group succeed (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

### **1.8.2. Group Processing**

Group processing is reviewing a group's gathering to determine what member actions were helpful/ unhelpful and decide which actions they should continue and/or change (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

### **1.8.3. Individual and Group Accountability**

This refers to completing one's component of the work and helping the other group members complete their work without hindering their contribution (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

#### **1.8.4. Interpersonal and Small-Group Social Skills**

These are social skills used in cooperative learning groups to achieve high-quality cooperation and be motivated to use them (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

#### **1.8.5. Positive Interdependence**

Positive interdependence is a term used when students realize that the only way the group can progress is if everyone in the group progresses (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

#### **1.8.6. Promotive Interaction**

This interaction takes place when students encourage and help others complete tasks and achieve in order to reach the group's goals (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

#### **1.8.7. Learning Together:**

Learning Together Strategy is commonly defined as a cooperative learning strategy that allows a heterogeneous group of students, assigned specific roles, to achieve a common goal (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). For this study, Learning Together is a cooperative learning method that consists of a heterogeneous group of five students who work together on assignments. The group receives praise and rewards for outstanding group performance on assignments. The purpose of this method is to emphasize team-building activities before students begin to work together and to promote regular discussions among students within the group about how well they can work together (Slavin, 2000). Learning Together is the independent variable of the study.

#### **1.8.8. Traditional Methods:**

Traditional methods of teaching depend on lecturing and individualistic mentality. The teacher's role is to give information and delivers lectures to students

who receive them and work individually or competitively on the assigned tasks in order to improve their own grades (Hoxworth, 1999).

#### **1.8.9. Reading Comprehension:**

Reading Comprehension is defined as the ability to read well allows an individual to obtain and comprehend information in written passages concurrently through active communication and participation. Reading comprehension, therefore, is a fundamental requirement in reading success (National Centre of Literacy and Numeracy for Adults, 2012). It is also defined by the 2009 NAEP Reading Assessment definition as “an active and complex process that involves understanding written text, developing and interpreting meaning, and using meaning as appropriate to type of text, purpose, and situation” (NAGB, 2008, p. 2). For this study, Reading Comprehension is defined as a dynamic process in which information from the text and knowledge possessed by the reader interact to enable the reader to construct meaning before, during, and after reading.

#### **1.8.10. ELL:**

English Language Learners are students whose first language is other than English (Freeman, 2002).

#### **1.8.11. EFL:**

This is an acronym to refer to English as a foreign language. English as a Foreign Language is taught to students in a foreign country who are non-native English speakers (Novera, 2004). In this study, EFL refers to English as a foreign language that is learned within the setting of a university foreign language classroom. According to Ellis (1999), foreign language learning takes place in settings where the language plays no major role in the community and is learned primarily in the classroom.

### **1.9. Scope, Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

The main scope of this research study concentrated on determining if there was a significant difference in the sample mean of undergraduate EFL students' reading comprehension achievement in the undergraduate EFL third-level students' class where the Learning Together model was used, when compared with the undergraduate EFL third-level students' class where lecturer-directed traditional lecturing instruction was utilized. As this research study on the use of Learning Together model was carried out in undergraduate EFL reading comprehension classrooms in one of Saudi public universities, Qassim University, it could not be generalized to yield the same results in other public or private universities, other colleges, other English language departments, other levels, other areas of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, or other domains of content areas.

Creswell (2013) stated that limitations of a study identify possible weaknesses in the research. Regarding this mixed-methods study, a number of limitations needed to be addressed and acknowledged. The study had several limitations. First of all, this study was confined to two small groups of college level Saudi students from one on-campus university site and from one geographic location. This study was limited to and conducted at two colleges, Unaizah Community College and Unaizah Science and Arts College, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The second limitation was that the study was limited to male students due to the segregated educational system in Saudi Arabia. Females and males in Saudi Arabia do not go to the same schools, and education is provided to them separately from first grade throughout the university level (Doumato, 1992). Using male students exclusively from other female students within the local university district limited the benefits of the study to students similar in size, age, gender and economic background.

The third limitation was that this study was too short to see the outcomes since it was limited to a short time length of data collection. A 12-week plan timeline was tracked for employment of the Learning Together strategy. An extended timeline of study could have made dissimilar results or outcomes. This process took place for three successive months (from the beginning of October till the end of December) for the duration of the first semester of the academic year 2016/2017 which in turn limited the number of Learning Together activities selected for implementation in the reading comprehension classroom. The treatment in this study occurred just twice a week for twelve weeks and this was not enough time for students to practice using cooperative learning strategy of Learning Together.

Therefore, it was hard to shift students from traditional lecturing instruction to cooperative learning instruction in such a short time. However, this duration of time might have helped as a base in evaluating the use of cooperative learning in the Saudi higher educational system. This restricted time might have affected the outcomes of the results. If the program lasted for a longer period, the results might have been different. Researchers like Stevens and Slavin (1991) strongly advised using cooperative learning over a complete year of school. Finally, there were some other limitations like students' major, students' age, and university area, which had a direct effect on the students' involvement and participation in the study.

#### **1.10. Chapter Summary and Overall Structure of the Remainder of the Thesis**

Saudi EFL learners' poor performance in the content area of EFL reading comprehension has become an urgent concern among Saudi EFL stakeholders. Saudi EFL learners have failed to generate improvements in TOEFL test scores in general and in reading section in particular. Of the four sections tested on the TOEFL, reading

section has produced the lowest student achievement scores. Lack of EFL vocabulary acquisition, instructors' traditional lecturing method to deliver the topics, ideas, concepts and skills covered in reading comprehension courses could justify few of the reasons behind achieving these TOEFL test scores that are very humble.

The main objectives of this study were threefold. First, it aimed to investigate the effectiveness of using Learning Together instruction in improving reading comprehension among EFL undergraduates in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by comparing the Learning Together instruction and traditional lecture instruction; second, it aimed to survey the EFL undergraduates' perceptions pertaining to using Learning Together instruction in their EFL reading comprehension classroom, and third, it aimed to examine students' Learning Together behaviors during Learning Together instructional activities.

The thesis was divided into six chapters. Chapter One, introduction, provided an overview of the study. Chapter Two presented a literature review of studies related to cooperative learning, studies related to reading comprehension and studies related to cooperative learning effect on reading comprehension and a deeper review of literature related to the Learning Together strategy, which functioned as the independent variable in this research study. Chapter Three presented the methodology and study design, the population and sample, treatment employed under this design, the instruments and EFL reading comprehension textbook and other content materials, data collection methods, data analysis methods, and ethical considerations used for the study.

Chapter Four presented the quantitative data analysis which was carried out as the first phase of this mixed-method research study comprised scores of both the pre- and posttests of reading comprehension, tables and statistical findings. Chapter Five

presented the qualitative data analysis which was conducted as the second phase of this research study. Lastly, based on the quantitative results and qualitative findings of the study, Chapter Six offered discussion of both quantitative and qualitative results of the study, implications of the study, recommendations for practice and for future research and conclusion.

**FIGURE 1.2:** A Hypothetical Framework/Flowchart

