

# The Impact of Collaborative Teaching on Learning Dynamics in an International Relations Course (ADS510) At FSPPP UiTM Seremban 3: An Observational Study

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of the collaborative teaching (CT) approach on student learning dynamics within the International Relations (ADS510) course at FSPPP UiTM Seremban 3. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive design, the research involved non-participant observation over one semester, complemented by document analysis of textbooks, syllabi, and assessment rubrics. The study aimed to identify interaction patterns, cognitive and affective engagement, academic communication, teamwork, and the use of theoretical resources during collaborative activities. Thematic analysis and data triangulation suggested that CT supported learning by shifting classroom practice from passive transmission toward more active and participatory engagement. Through authentic tasks such as diplomatic simulations, policy debates, and problem-based learning, students appeared to engage more actively with IR theories and apply them in discussion-based classroom contexts. The findings also suggest that a Global South perspective is useful in helping students relate traditionally Western-centered IR theories to local and regional realities. The study points to several practical improvements, including the use of specific group roles, clearer analytic rubrics for academic communication, structured debriefing sessions, and broader access to diverse IR texts to support a more pluriversal learning environment.

**Keywords:** Collaborative Teaching, Observation, International Relations, Thematic Analysis, Social Constructivism, Active Learning, Global South, Problem-Based Learning, Assessment

## INTRODUCTION

The discipline of International Relations (IR) is characterized by continuous debate, free inquiry, and a subject matter that is constantly in flux (Craig, 2012; Diehl & Boyer, 2021). Because the pace of change in global politics is incredibly fast, students must master complex theoretical frameworks such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism; and apply these abstract concepts to contemporary, real-world global issues (Diehl & Boyer, 2021; Marsden & Savigny, 2012). To meet these rigorous demands, higher education has increasingly shifted away from the traditional lecture-oriented paradigm toward holistic, student-centered active learning approaches designed to produce deep learning, develop critical thinking skills, and elicit the discovery of knowledge (Lantis, 2021; Leston-Bandeira, 2012).

The collaborative teaching (CT) approach integrates joint planning, delivery, and evaluation by lecturers to foster this interactive and active learning environment. Extensive pedagogical research indicates that when students are engaged as the owners of their learning, they learn more effectively, retain knowledge longer, and develop essential higher-order thinking skills (Lantis, 2021). While CT and active learning strategies are increasingly applied in IR courses to elevate deep learning through meaningful peer interactions and authentic tasks, qualitative evidence based on direct classroom observations within specific regional contexts remains limited.

Examining collaborative teaching in International Relations is important because students in this field are expected to do more than recall ideas; they must compare interpretations, assess supporting evidence, and use theory to make sense of ongoing political developments. For that reason, classroom approaches that emphasize inquiry and participation are especially useful in IR, as they encourage students to engage more actively with international issues rather than simply receiving information from lectures (Kuzma, 1998; Carniel et al., 2024). Research in IR and political science education also indicates that when students work through questions, discussions, and applied tasks, they are more likely to develop stronger analytical and reflective abilities (Lambach, 2017; Carniel et al., 2024). Viewed in this way, studying collaborative teaching in a real classroom setting can help explain how teaching practices influence student participation, interpretation, and the application of theoretical knowledge.

This observational study addresses that gap by documenting how CT is implemented in the ADS510 course at UiTM Seremban 3 in Malaysia. It examines the extent of student engagement, the dynamics of peer-to-peer collaboration, and the ways in which course materials support the development of theoretical arguments and academic literacy.

The main objectives of this study are to:

- i. Observe the implementation of CT in ADS510, focusing on session structure, lecturer roles, and activity sequencing.
- ii. Identify the forms of student engagement in cognitive, affective, and behavioral settings during collaborative activities, particularly problem-based tasks and simulations.
- iii. Evaluate CT's effectiveness based on peer interaction, academic communication, and teamwork, utilizing course analytic rubrics and IR texts.
- iv. Contextualize the learning experience within the Global South to understand how local students interpret and apply traditionally Western-centric IR theories (de Matos Ala et al., 2021).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Social Constructivism, Active Learning, and Collaborative Dynamics

Social constructivism posits that learning occurs through social interaction, shared meaning-making, and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). A constructivist, student-centered pedagogy shifts the focus away from the instructor as a passive transmitter of facts and instead builds a community of learners working together to understand complex global realities (Lantis, 2021). Active learning represents a holistic approach designed to elicit the discovery and construction of knowledge, moving students from passive reception to active synthesis and evaluation (Lantis, 2021; Prince, 2004). Collaborative learning activities, where small groups work together to increase knowledge through peer-to-peer interaction, are foundational to this process, shifting the dynamic to a space of mutual teaching and learning (Smith, 2021). Small group teaching is a highly valued practice in the social sciences because it is a particularly useful device to encourage critical learning and a deep understanding of complex issues (Briggs, 2012). In International Relations education, students are expected not only to acquire disciplinary knowledge but also to apply concepts and theoretical frameworks to unfamiliar and rapidly changing political problems. Active and inquiry-based pedagogies are therefore especially relevant in IR because they help students develop adaptive, metacognitive, and problem-solving skills that can be transferred to new contexts (Prince, 2004; Carniel, 2024). Active learning approaches have long been valued for moving students beyond passive reception of information and toward more engaged analysis of contemporary global issues (Kuzma, 1998) within the IR classroom. Collaborative and simulation-based activities further support this process by creating opportunities for students to test arguments, engage with competing perspectives, and deepen both theoretical and experiential learning (Taylor, 2013).

### Problem-Based Learning and Authentic Tasks in IR Pedagogy

Effective IR pedagogy bridges theoretical concepts with global political realities through the use of authentic tasks such as diplomacy simulations, policy debates, and problem-based learning (PBL) (Scott, 2021). PBL forces students to tackle open-ended "why" or "how" puzzles, which requires them to identify what information

they need, conduct research, and formulate solutions in collaborative teams (Scott, 2021). Role-playing exercises, case studies, and simulations are highly engaging teaching methods that allow students to navigate complex decision-making processes, negotiate, and understand differing perspectives in real-time (Carter, 2021; Curtis, 2012; Leston-Bandeira, 2012). Recent work in IR pedagogy argues that inquiry-based learning is particularly useful because it helps students develop adaptive and metacognitive skills that can be applied to new global problems as they emerge (Carniel et al., 2024). Studies on simulation pedagogy also show that authentic classroom exercises can deepen students' understanding of complex governance processes, encourage perspective-taking, and strengthen the connection between theoretical learning and practice (Maertens, 2024; Obendorf & Randerson, 2013). By wrestling with these conditions firsthand, students develop analytical, communication, and teamwork capabilities that are essential for their future professional careers (Wyman et al., 2012).

## Teaching IR in the Global South

A critical dimension of teaching IR in a Malaysian context (UiTM) is addressing the inherently Western-centric bias of traditional IR scholarship (de Matos Ala et al., 2021). Because foundational IR theories have historically been grounded in Western philosophy and historical events, teaching these concepts in the Global South can result in a "disconnect" between abstract theories and students lived realities (de Matos Ala et al., 2021). To overcome this, educators are encouraged to foster a "global pluriversal IR" perspective in the classroom, which decenters conventional Western narratives and incorporates diverse regional histories, ontologies, and epistemologies (de Matos Ala et al., 2021). A pluriversal or decolonial approach to IR teaching can help reduce this disconnect by opening space for multiple histories, epistemologies, and contextual ways of understanding the international (de Matos Ala et al., 2021; Querejazu, 2025). Collaborative teaching empowers students to critically evaluate the efficacy of Western IR theory for their own regional contexts, allowing them to adapt and synthesize knowledge appropriately. Students may engage more meaningfully with IR when dominant theories are discussed alongside regional experiences, local political practices, and non-Western knowledge traditions (Putra, 2024).

## Constructive Alignment, Assessment, and Feedback Constructive Alignment

Curriculum design requires consistency between intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment strategies (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Constructive alignment becomes especially important in the practice of collaborative and active learning environments because students must understand not only what they are expected to learn, but also how participation, communication, and applied analysis will be assessed (Biggs, 2014; Romanowski et al., 2024). Assessment is a vital step in the active learning cycle; it provides crucial feedback to both students and instructors and ensures that educational objectives are met (Hamann, 2021). Furthermore, assessment regimes must foster a "deep" rather than a "surface" approach to learning, prioritizing critical analysis and reflective practice over mere memorization (Blair & McGinty, 2012). Learning frequently solidifies after, rather than during, active learning experiences, making structured reflection and debriefing essential components of the pedagogical process (Krain & Kille, 2021). Utilizing tools like analytic rubrics clarifies expectations, reduces grading bias, focuses intellectual work on specific skills, and improves the reliability of evaluating complex collaborative tasks (Krain & Kille, 2021). Clear and well-designed rubrics can support this process by making performance criteria more transparent, helping students focus on specific dimensions of quality, and improving consistency in evaluation (Allen & Tanner, 2006; Montgomery, 2002).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Context

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design based on non-participant observation of the ADS510 class at FSPPP UiTM Seremban 3 over one semester. A qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine naturally occurring classroom interactions, student engagement, and teaching practices in their actual instructional setting rather than to test a causal relationship or measure variables statistically (Kim et al., 2017). Non-participant observation was selected because it enabled the researcher to document classroom processes, interaction patterns, and collaborative activities without directly influencing the

teaching and learning environment (Kawulich, 2005). The ADS510 course provided a relevant setting for the study because it involved the teaching of International Relations concepts that require discussion, theory application, and active student participation, making it suitable for observing the implementation of collaborative teaching in practice. The observer recorded naturalistic classroom phenomena without participating directly in the teaching activities, allowing for an authentic assessment of the learning environment.

### **Data Sources**

**Primary Data:** The primary data consisted of observation-based field notes recorded during classroom sessions involving interactive lectures, tutorial discussions, group-based activities, diplomatic simulations, and collaborative presentations. These observations focused on student-lecturer interaction, peer collaboration, cognitive engagement, academic communication, and the application of International Relations theory during classroom activities.

The secondary data consisted of course-related documents used to contextualize and support the interpretation of the observational findings. These documents included the ADS510 Scheme of Work, course learning outcomes, weekly topic schedule, assessment structure, presentation and assignment guidelines, assessment rubrics, core textbooks, and supplementary reading materials provided by the instructors. The Scheme of Work was particularly useful because it showed how the course formally integrated theory-based discussion, group presentation, written assignment, tutorial participation, and assessment tasks across the semester. It also clarified the alignment between course outcomes and expected student competencies, including oral reporting, critical evaluation, communication skills, and personal skills.

### **Data Analysis and Observation Protocol**

The observation process was guided by a structured protocol that focused on several dimensions of classroom practice, including session structure, patterns of interaction, teamwork dynamics, forms of student engagement, academic communication, and the use of theoretical concepts during collaborative activities (Kawulich, 2005). In this study, field notes were reviewed repeatedly to identify recurring patterns related to lecturer facilitation, peer collaboration, student participation, theory application, and the quality of group interaction. The coding process combined deductive and inductive approaches, in which initial coding was guided by the observation protocol and the formal course framework, while additional patterns and categories were allowed to emerge through repeated reviews of the field notes.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke, namely data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and the production of the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was suitable because it enabled the researcher to organize observational data into themes that reflected repeated patterns in student learning behaviour and classroom interaction.

To strengthen interpretation, the observational data were compared with relevant course documents, particularly the ADS510 Scheme of Work, weekly topic plan, course learning outcomes, assessment structure, presentation rubric, and written assignment rubric. These materials were examined to determine whether the observed classroom activities were consistent with the formal instructional design of the course. For example, observed patterns of discussion, group presentation, theory application, and academic communication were interpreted in relation to the course requirements for oral reporting, critical evaluation, teamwork, and the use of references. In this way, triangulation was carried out by comparing classroom observations with documentary evidence, thereby strengthening the consistency and credibility of the findings (Bowen, 2009).

## **RESULTS**

### **Student-Lecturer Interaction Dynamics in the Classroom**

Observations showed that CT sessions often began with brief theoretical framing before moving into collaborative and problem-based activities. During these sessions, lecturers played less of a transmission-based

role and more of a facilitative one by posing open-ended questions, prompting theoretical reflection, and providing structured feedback as students worked through IR-related tasks. This pattern is consistent with scholarship in IR pedagogy showing that active and case-based learning shifts students from passive listening toward more participatory roles, while lecturers guide discussion and engagement rather than simply deliver content (Carter, 2021; Kuzma, 1998). The observed interaction pattern also reflected a dialogic learning environment in which lecturer prompts and student responses contributed to the development of conceptual understanding during classroom activities. Rather than controlling discussion at every stage, lecturers appeared to scaffold learning by guiding students through questions, clarification, and focused feedback while allowing space for peer interaction and collaborative reasoning. This aligns with social constructivist perspectives that view dialogue and scaffolded interaction as important to knowledge construction and deeper understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of ADS510, this facilitative approach was especially relevant because students were required to engage with theoretical ideas and apply them to current international issues. Overall, the findings suggest that collaborative teaching shaped student-lecturer interaction by creating a more responsive and participatory classroom environment in which lecturers supported, rather than dominated, the process of learning.

### **Cognitive Engagement and Theory Application Classroom**

Observations indicated that collaborative teaching encouraged students to engage more actively with course content by explaining, comparing, and applying International Relations theories during classroom activities. In several observed sessions, students referred to theoretical perspectives such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism when discussing current international issues and group-based tasks. These patterns align with research showing that active-learning approaches in IR can help students move beyond passive reception of content and engage more deeply with theoretical material (Kuzma, 1998; Lambach et al., 2017). The course design also supports this interpretation. ADS510 formally required students to report on international events by applying IR theories and to critically evaluate the role of international actors, while the weekly structure of the course included theory-focused topics and issue-based activities that encouraged application rather than simple recall. This suggests that the theory used in the classroom was not incidental but embedded in the broader instructional design of the course. In addition, the observed use of theory during collaborative tasks is consistent with recent work in IR pedagogy arguing that inquiry-based learning helps students develop adaptive thinking, reflective judgment, and the capacity to respond to unfamiliar political problems (Carniel et al., 2024). Rather than treating theory as content to be memorized, collaborative activities can create opportunities for students to test interpretations, compare perspectives, and connect abstract concepts to changing political developments (Carniel et al., 2024). Overall, the findings suggest that collaborative teaching in ADS510 supported not only knowledge acquisition but also the active use of IR theory as an interpretive tool for understanding and discussing international issues.

### **Academic Communication and Teamwork Classroom**

Observations indicated that collaborative teaching supported the development of academic communication and teamwork through discussion-based tasks, group presentations, and collaborative assignment activities. Students were required not only to share information but also to explain ideas clearly, organize arguments, respond to questions, and relate theoretical concepts to international issues in a structured way. In several observed activities, groups that communicated more clearly and distributed responsibilities more effectively were better able to present coherent arguments and sustain discussion during collaborative tasks. These patterns are consistent with research showing that collaborative learning in political science and International Relations can strengthen participation, communication, and the quality of student interaction (Wolfe, 2012; Lambach, 2017). These observations were also consistent with the formal assessment design of ADS510. The presentation emphasized clear delivery of ideas, confident delivery, effective and articulate communication, the ability to understand and respond to questions, and adaptation to the audience's level. Similarly, the written assignment rubric emphasized relevance, curation, optimization, and articulation of references. This suggests that academic communication in the course was not treated as an incidental classroom skill, but as an assessed component of student performance. Scholarship on active and inquiry-based learning likewise shows that structured classroom tasks can help students develop reflective, communicative, and applied analytical capacities when these are embedded in course design and assessment (Carniel et al., 2024). Teamwork was also strengthened through the

collaborative structure of the course. Observations showed that groups with clearer internal coordination, informal leadership, and shared task distribution generally produced more organized presentations and more focused discussions. This pattern aligned with the course requirements for group presentation and group assignment, both of which required students to work collectively in preparing analysis, applying IR theory, and presenting or writing their findings in an academically structured form. Research on collaborative and simulation-based learning in IR similarly indicates that group-based tasks can encourage perspective-taking, shared problem solving, and more active engagement with complex political material (Maertens, 2024; Wolfe, 2012). Overall, the findings suggest that collaborative teaching in ADS510 supported not only participation but also the development of communication practices and teamwork behaviours that were closely aligned with the course's learning outcomes and assessment expectations.

### Implementation Challenges

Several implementation challenges were observed during collaborative teaching activities. These included time constraints during more complex simulations, differences in student skill levels and motivation, and limited access to reference materials. Such challenges occasionally affected the pace and quality of group interaction, particularly when tasks required students to analyze issues quickly and apply theory in discussion-based settings. Similar difficulties have been noted in work on active and collaborative learning, which emphasizes that such approaches require careful design, preparation, and support in order to function effectively (Krain & Kille, 2021; Scott, 2021). Another difficulty involved linking abstract Western IR theories to local or regional realities. At times, students were able to identify relevant concepts but needed further lecturer guidance to apply them meaningfully to non-Western contexts. This reflects a broader concern in Global South IR pedagogy that dominant theoretical frameworks do not always connect easily with local experiences unless they are deliberately contextualized in teaching and discussion (de Matos Ala et al., 2021). Overall, the findings suggest that while collaborative teaching created valuable opportunities for engagement, its effectiveness still depended on careful facilitation, adequate preparation, and access to suitable supporting resources.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this observational study suggest that the CT approach can enrich IR learning through meaningful peer interaction and authentic, problem-based tasks. The finding that lecturer scaffolding and peer dialogue supported students' understanding of complex concepts is consistent with social constructivist theory and active learning literature. Experiential learning components, such as role-playing and collaborative problem-solving, require students to apply theory directly and may strengthen their analytical and critical thinking skills.

Crucially, the collaborative environment in ADS510 allowed students to process IR theories through their own contextual lenses. By working together in small breakout groups, students from a Global South context were able to critically analyze dominant theoretical discourses and evaluate their efficacy for non-Western realities (de Matos Ala et al., 2021). This aligns with the push for a "global IR" perspective that recognizes diverse ontologies and epistemologies, making the learning experience profoundly more relevant and inclusive.

However, executing CT demands meticulous planning and robust assessment mechanisms to address challenges like time constraints, skill heterogeneity, and group accountability. Without clear procedures, continuous formative feedback, and alignment with educational objectives, collaborative learning can fail to reach its full potential. Integrating structured reflection, in which students step back to analyze what they learned from an exercise, is paramount to transferring short-term activity into long-term cognitive retention (Krain & Kille, 2021).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Collaborative Teaching (CT) approach in ADS510 shows immense potential to strengthen cognitive and affective engagement, elevate academic communication, and build essential teamwork skills. To further optimize the implementation of CT in IR courses, the following recommendations are proposed:

**Utilize Analytic Rubrics for Assessment:** Academic communication should be facilitated through the use of analytic rubrics (Krain & Kille, 2021). These tools can reduce grading bias while also serving as instructional guides that clarify expectations regarding citations, theoretical application, and argument structure before an assignment begins.

**Implement Structured Debriefing and Reflection:** Simulations and collaborative activities should be followed by structured debriefing sessions. Tools such as “minute papers” can induce metacognitive thinking, clarify ambiguous ideas, and enable improved information retention (Krain & Kille, 2021).

**Facilitate Specific Group Roles:** To enable more organised collaboration, lecturers may assign or encourage specific group roles such as discussion leader, note-taker, timekeeper, or devil’s advocate during small-group tasks and problem-based activities (Briggs, 2012).

**Embrace a Pluriversal Curriculum:** Students should be given access to varied reference sources and encouraged to examine classic IR ideas from a Global South viewpoint. Incorporating local case studies and non-Western texts can help reduce the gap between abstract theory and lived reality (de Matos Ala et al., 2021).

**Assign Structured Pre-Task Readings:** Mandate pre-reading assignments prior to collaborative activities to ensure all students enter the group space with a foundational understanding of the core concepts, maximizing the efficiency of face-to-face interaction.

### **Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it was conducted within a single course, ADS510, at one campus of Universiti Teknologi MARA. Because of this limited scope, the findings reflect a specific teaching and learning context and may not automatically represent the experience of students in other courses, disciplines, or institutional settings. In addition, the study relied primarily on non-participant observation, which allowed the researcher to record classroom interaction in a natural setting but did not provide direct access to students’ personal reflections, perceptions, or motivations. As a result, the findings offer insight into observable classroom dynamics, but they may not capture the full range of students’ internal learning experiences.

Another limitation is that the study focused mainly on interactional patterns, engagement, teamwork, and theory application as they appeared during collaborative activities. While these dimensions are important for understanding the classroom effects of collaborative teaching, they do not provide a complete measure of long-term learning outcomes or individual academic development. For this reason, the findings should be interpreted carefully and should not be generalized too broadly beyond the immediate context of ADS510 at UiTM Seremban 3.

Future research could build on this study by incorporating additional forms of qualitative and comparative evidence. For example, student reflective responses, follow-up interviews, or concept-mapping activities could provide deeper insight into how learners interpret their collaborative experiences and how they connect theoretical knowledge with practice. Comparative studies involving multiple sections, courses, or institutions could also provide a broader understanding of how collaborative teaching functions across different learning environments. Such approaches would help strengthen the evidence base and provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between collaborative teaching and student learning in International Relations education.

In terms of ethical considerations, approval was obtained from the faculty’s Research Ethics Committee before the study was conducted. The research was carried out with attention to confidentiality and academic responsibility. Student identities were not disclosed in the reporting of findings, and all collected data were used solely for academic and research purposes. These measures were taken to ensure that the study respected participant privacy and maintained ethical standards throughout the research process.

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