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Implementation of Cooperative Learning in EFL Classrooms: Issues and Perceptions from Teachers 73

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Abstract

In recent years, English language teaching approaches have shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered. From the latter has emerged interest in cooperative learning by many researchers in language education. With cooperative learning, students are expected to work in groups of two or more, mutually constructing meanings or understanding. Taking this lens, the current study sought to examine EFL teachers' perceptions of cooperative learning and the challenges that affect their attempts to implement it in their classrooms. Ten (10) EFL teachers provided data through structured and semi-structured interviews. Findings indicated that teachers see cooperative learning as a way of promoting students' interdependent learning and communicative skills. Teachers also believe that cooperative learning offers an avenue to students for free chatting and gossiping and that it may render weak students weaker and bright students brighter. The study further revealed a couple of issues or challenges that affect cooperative learning. These include large or overcrowded classes and limited resources. Insights generated by this study are useful as they call for the need to provide more support to teachers for a better understanding of the cooperative learning approach.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, teachers' perceptions, English as a foreign language.

Résumé

Les années récentes ont été marquées par des mutations pédagogiques en faveur des approches axées sur l'apprenant. De ces nouvelles approches fut né l'intérêt de plusieurs recherches sur l'apprentissage coopératif dans le domaine d'enseignement de l'anglais comme langue étrangère. L'apprentissage coopératif s'inscrit dans le but de faire travailler les apprenants en groupes de deux ou plus, construisant ainsi mutuellement leur compréhension sur l'objet de l'enseignement. C'est dans cette optique que l'étude a été entreprise pour examiner les perceptions des enseignants d'anglais sur l'apprentissage coopératif et les défis qui influent sa mise en œuvre dans leur enseignement. Dix (10) enseignants d'anglais ont accepté de participer à cette étude à travers des entretiens structurés et semi-structurés. Les résultats indiquent que ces participants considèrent l'apprentissage coopératif comme un moyen pour promouvoir l'interdépendance chez les apprenants ainsi que l'acquisition des compétences communicatives. Paradoxalement, les participants croient également que l'apprentissage coopératif offre aux apprenants la possibilité de bavarder et constitue un moyen qui peut rendre les apprenants faibles plus faibles et les apprenants brillants plus brillants. L'étude a en outre révélé quelques problèmes ou défis qui influent l'apprentissage coopératif. Il s'agit notamment des classes surpeuplées et le manque de ressources didactiques. Les idées générées par cette étude sont significatives car elles soulignent la nécessité de soutenir davantage les enseignants pour une meilleure compréhension de l'approche d'apprentissage coopératif.

Mots-clés : Apprentissage coopératif, perceptions des enseignants, Anglais langue étrangère.

Introduction

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Cooperative learning is a pedagogical practice that has attracted much attention over the last three decades (Gillies & Boyle, 2010) and has tended to concern every discipline at every level of education (Goodsell et.al, 1992). Effective cooperative tasks play a vital role in enhancing cognitive engagement and task achievement in English language teaching (ELT) by activating learners' interest, introducing rich learning opportunities, and allowing the use of effective teaching and learning strategies (Sulaiman & Thakur, 2022). According to Barron and Darling-Hammond (2008), decades of research illustrate the benefits of cooperative learning in helping students develop the knowledge and skills necessary for being successful in a rapidly changing world. A large body of research demonstrates students' academic development as they get opportunities to interact with their mates to accomplish some activities in class (Gillies & Boyle, 2010).

However, despite the acknowledged importance of cooperative learning today, it does not seem to be common practice in certain contexts. Based on several studies (Chaibou, 2023; Moussa, 2022) conducted in Niger, this practice seems to be rare in EFL classrooms. A study from Chaibou (2023) has shown that EFL teachers lack knowledge about learner-centered pedagogy and tend to teach English based on traditional approaches. It, therefore, appeared necessary to identify EFL teachers who are knowledgeable of the learner-centered pedagogy and examine their perspectives about cooperative learning in EFL classrooms. In line with this, the current study sought to build insights based on the following research questions:

- ✓ What are EFL teachers' perceptions of cooperative learning?
- ✓ What are the challenges of implementing cooperative learning in EFL classrooms?

These questions permitted the researchers to gather diverse perspectives from ten EFL teachers. Besides, answers to both questions lend support to the significance of this study which contributes to knowledge by providing insights from Niger.

1. Theoretical Frame of the study

To understand the notion of cooperative learning, the study has drawn from diverse conceptions and provided empirical examples from current studies.

1.1. Conceptions of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning refers to collaborative tasks between learners in which the teacher provides help for the development of skills and competencies through dynamic and active learning (Nasser, 2019). In other words, it requires students to work in groups on an assignment or project under conditions that impose accountability on group members for the completion of the task (Felder & Brent, 2001). According to Goodsell et.al (1992), cooperative learning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches – Federated Learning Communities (FLCs), Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS), learning communities, collaborative learning groups, linked courses, interdisciplinary seminars, and joint student-faculty research – which involve a joint intellectual effort by students or students and teachers together. In most cooperative learning situations, students work together searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. There is wide variability in cooperative learning activities, but most of them center on the students' exploration or application of the class materials, rather than the teacher's presentation or explication of it. In a cooperative learning process, every member participates and works with other learners as partners. Goodsell et.al (1992) further explicated that cooperative learning reforms classroom learning by changing students from passive recipients of information to active agents in the construction of knowledge. As a consequence, it represents a significant shift away from the typical teacher-centered or lecture-centered to student-centered process in classes.

In Cohen's (1994) perspective, cooperative learning allows students to work together in small groups so that everyone can participate in the collective tasks that have been assigned. It is beneficial for students in terms of social and behavioral skills, including student self-concept, social interaction, time on task, and positive feelings toward peers. Furthermore, cooperative skills developed by students through cooperative learning can help them feel less anxious during their oral production among peers (Dornyei, 2002). Johnson et.al (2000) further indicated that cooperative learning promotes positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual

accountability, and appropriate use of collaborative skills. With ⁷⁷ specific regard to positive interdependence, Roger and Johnson (1994) supported the view that it provides the context within which promotive interaction takes place. Group membership and interpersonal interaction among students do not produce higher achievement unless positive interdependence is established. To provide a better understanding of cooperative learning, a review of current empirical studies is presented next.

1.2. Relevant Studies on Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning remains an important approach to the improvement of learning. Based on a multiple case study research conducted by Arta (2018) on the influence of cooperative learning on Indonesian secondary high school students' speaking performance, three key benefits were found. These encompass the decrease of language anxiety during English classroom activities, the increase of learner participation, and the improvement of learner confidence during speaking activities. Despite this evidence, cooperative learning is not common practice in many EFL contexts. The reasons for this situation are partly unknown due to the dearth of research on EFL teachers' perceptions of cooperative learning and the difficulties affecting its implementation in EFL classrooms. Because of limited access to such research, the current review is only focused on a couple of studies that appeared relevant for understanding the issue.

Christopher et.al, (2017), for example, collected data from EFL teachers on the impact and functionality of cooperative learning as a professional learning model. Regarding teachers' perceptions of what inhibits their positive experiences with cooperative learning, the results revealed multiple factors. The most dominant of them were students' unwillingness to try new things, teachers' lack of confidence, the unwillingness of colleagues to listen to teachers' ideas, and the perception that it takes too much instructional time. These are extended by Barron and Darling-Hammond (2008) who underlined three major challenges to the implementation of effective cooperative learning: developing norms and structures within groups to allow individuals to work together; developing tasks that support useful cooperative work; and developing discipline-appropriate strategies for discussion that support rich learning.

Gillies and Boyle (2010) also conducted a study on teachers' reflections on cooperative learning and issues linked to its implementation in EFL classrooms. They interviewed middle-year teachers who implemented cooperative learning during two school terms. Findings demonstrated teachers' attachment to cooperative learning. It also revealed many difficulties that teachers encountered while using it in their classrooms. Students' tendency to socialize during group activities instead of working on the task and issues of time management were some of the difficulties. Other issues that the teachers identified as being important for successful cooperative work included effective group formation, clarity of the task, social skills training, and assessment of group learning. The difficulties found in this study may be linked to teachers' lack of classroom management skills and deep knowledge of the cooperative learning approach.

2. Research Methods

This study takes to the constructivist viewpoints. Constructivism is "a view holding firmly to the position that knowledge and truth are created rather than discovered and that reality is pluralistic" (Richard, 2003:39). The goal of constructivist research is, therefore, to rely as much as possible on the participants' views and beliefs for generating knowledge (Creswell, 2014:34). This is different from positivistic research as the current study was aimed at understanding EFL teachers' perspectives about the focused phenomenon rather than determining or verifying their perspectives. Based on this positionality, the study used a qualitative framework to achieve its goal. Creswell (2008:4) defined qualitative research as "a means of exploring and understanding the individual or groups to a social or human problem." As Phipps and Borg (2009) argued, studies employing qualitative strategies to explore language teachers' perspectives and practices are more productive in advancing our understanding of the complex relationships between both. In this perspective, interviewing strategies were used to construct insights from ten (10) teachers who are familiar with cooperative learning.

The ten (10) secondary school EFL teachers who voluntarily participated in the study had, prior to data collection, demonstrated knowledge of cooperative learning and confirmed using this approach in their teaching. They all come from different schools of Agadez, Niamey, and Zinder, and only four (4) of them have five (5) years or more of teaching experience. The table below gives more details about them.

Participants	Gender	Experience	Region
Teacher 1	Male	4 years	Agadez
Teacher 2	Male	3 years	Agadez
Teacher 3	Male	7 years	Niamey
Teacher 4	Male	5 years	Niamey
Teacher 5	Male	4 years	Niamey
Teacher 6	Female	2 years	Niamey
Teacher 7	Female	6 years	Niamey
Teacher 8	Male	7 years	Zinder
Teacher 9	Male	4 years	Zinder
Teacher 10	Female	2 years	Zinder

Based on the interview procedures, the ten (10) EFL teachers were brought to answer questions about their perceptions of cooperative learning and the factors that affect their effective implementation of this approach. By definition, interviewing is “an interactional event in which one party asks questions on a topic relevant to the goal of the study and the other party answers these questions” (Kasper & Prior, 2014:209). It is an ideal means of exploring teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about learning and teaching and could be useful for collecting information on attitudes or personal beliefs (Hassan, 2013). In this study, interviewing was used as a data collection instrument because of its practicability and efficiency in meeting the research purpose. For reasons of convenience, two types of interviews were used: structured and semi-structured interviews. Due to distance, four of the participants were interviewed through WhatsApp. The others were interviewed face-to-face at their convenient time. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. (Braun & Clark, 2006).

3. Research Findings

This section presents the findings of the study. It is divided into two parts. Each part provides answers to a specific research question. The first part describes teachers' perceptions of cooperative learning, whereas the second offers insights into the issues affecting cooperative learning in EFL classrooms.

3.1. EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Cooperative Learning

The current study has revealed mixed feelings about cooperative learning. First, the latter is believed to promote the interdependence of learning and the acquisition of communicative skills. Second, it is seen by teachers as a way that favors bright students and prevents low achievers from learning. Third, for some teachers, cooperative learning tasks constitute an avenue for learners to socialize.

3.1.1. *Learner Interdependence and Communicative Skill*

The analysis of data showed that almost all the interviewed teachers have positive perceptions about cooperative learning. For them, it promotes students' interdependence of learning in the EFL classroom. In this vein, *Teacher 4* sees this approach as “a way of motivating students to be interdependent learners, because sometimes students understand better what their classmates explain” rather than the teacher. It constitutes a facilitating factor for the teacher. Similarly, *Teacher 1* believes that cooperative learning is one of the ways to make students mutually share their understanding of a specific object with their peers, since “some students understand better than others.” He added that:

In implementing such an approach, students have the chance to interact so that everyone can participate; they can be dependent on each other in their capacity to think, evaluate, analyze, and solve the problem under study (Teacher 1).

In other words, cooperative learning allows students to fill their learning gaps. It is in this sense that *Teacher 10* indicated that cooperative learning enables students to exchange among themselves about some aspects that some of them did not grasp well.

For Teachers 3 and 7, cooperative learning in EFL classes promotes, ⁸¹ not only interdependent learning but also learners' communicative skills. Learners are enabled to communicate among themselves and develop speaking skills. According to Teacher 8, cooperative activities help learners to speak with less fear and stress, but with much ease within their groups.

As we deal with language learning, the cooperative approach is an opportunity for students with low language proficiency to get involved in classroom activities. Even if the student does not contribute to solving the problem, he or she will have, at least, the chance to read something out loud (Teacher 8).

Confirming their position on the fact that cooperative learning promotes students' interdependence and speaking skills, Teachers 1 and 8 linked this approach to the learner-centered approach. They both believe that it requires the teacher's strategic efforts to place students at the center of his teaching by involving them in effective cooperative learning. According to Teacher 1,

It is not good for a teacher to be 'Mister-I-know-everything' in class, to speak from the beginning of the class until the end. You need to allow students to talk among themselves. With cooperative learning, students are active, not silent in class.

Considering the above insights, it is evident that EFL teachers perceive cooperative learning positively. This constitutes evidence that they will continue using this approach in their classroom and possibly convince other teachers to use it. Benefits expressed in terms of building communicative skills or scaffolding are foundational to the Vygotskian perspectives from which cooperative learning originated (see Vygotsky, 1978).

3.1.2. It renders weak students weaker and bright students brighter

Contrary to the positive perceptions presented above, cooperative learning is believed by some teachers to render weak students weaker and bright students brighter. For those teachers, in cooperative learning tasks, good students always have the last words. Their point of view is always maintained rather than something negotiated.

Weak students are just present. Their thought, efforts, ideas, and contributions are generally not welcome.... especially if the teacher is going to grade the work (Teacher 1).

Some group members are so lazy in cooperative learning. They don't make any effort, while motivated and bright students always concentrate on the task. Most of the time, the work is done by those motivated intelligent students (Teacher 3)

Learners with low proficiency, therefore, hardly participate in group work. They only sit down looking at those who are assumed to be intelligent. In this sense, there is no advancement of learning for them, because “those good students are always the model and sometimes authoritative” (Teacher 5).

From the above perspectives, teachers view cooperative learning as a way of helping high achievers. Low achievers, on the contrary, are subject to neglect. Arguably, this situation could find its origin in teachers' failure to form balanced groups in which each learner is given a role to play. Furthermore, this could be explained by the teachers' tendency to summatively assess group work, with the risk of creating competition among learners rather than collaboration.

3.1.3. Chatting and Gossiping Opportunity

Another perception that emerged from the data is the idea that cooperative learning tasks give way to chatting and gossiping among learners. As such, cooperative learning procedures may open doors to unfavorable practices in learning. According to Teacher 4, some students never miss the opportunity to talk about their social matters or something irrelevant to the task at hand.

Now the students always look for the opportunity to chat in class while the teacher is explaining the lesson. And as soon as you ask them to work in groups, they will be talking about something else and if the teacher asks what happens they will say they are working on the given task, which is obviously not.

Similarly, Teacher 8 sees cooperative learning as a creation of gossip bands. He indicated that when the group is composed of girls and other talkative learners, nothing positive may happen. They may deliberately take the

chance to disturb rather than work on the task. Teacher 9 expressed 83 similar ideas. His advice to teachers willing to implement cooperative learning is expressed below:

Do not make groups made of only girls, weak or smart learners. In each group, mix your students and motivate them to have specific roles in their groups.

Based on the above statement, cooperative learning works well if every group member has a specific role to complete. Otherwise, “the classroom will become like a market in which everyone talks in group for the sake of cooperative learning” (Teacher 4). Teacher 10 shared this perception and added that the failure of cooperative learning could also be linked to large classes. This issue is further discussed in the following section related to factors creating obstacles to cooperative learning.

3.2. Factors Affecting Cooperative Learning

This section provides answers to the second research question, which relates to issues and challenges that affect the implementation of cooperative learning in EFL classrooms. In this sense, large size classes, students’ bad behavior, and limited resources are presented as obstacles to the use of cooperative learning.

3.2.1. Large Size Class

As mentioned earlier, large-size classes constitute a factor that hinders the implementation of cooperative learning. This has been consistent throughout the data collected. For Teacher 5, having a huge number of students in one class hinders the success of group work. This was supported by Teacher 4.

Imagine a classroom in which you have over 70 students. In forming groups of five, you will have 14 different groups with different genders, levels of motivation, and learning capacity. Such a huge number of groups in a class will render cooperative learning difficult. The teacher cannot easily manage, and control each and every group and prevent students from chatting among themselves (Teacher 4).

According to the above statement, cooperative learning practice may be effective if the class is made up of a small number of learners. This would facilitate monitoring the groups, and “the teacher will not suffer a lot in explaining the task loudly and repeatedly” (Teacher 5). Furthermore, in a

class with a small number of learners, those with bad behavior can easily be controlled.

Even if a student has bad behavior in class, he cannot succeed in disturbing others in a classroom that has a small number of students. And what is sure is that, even if they behave badly, the teacher can control them, because they are not many in number (Teacher 10).

In other words, the effect of students' bad behavior depends on the size of the class. Nonetheless, the idea of large classes affecting the use of cooperative learning is contentious. Researchers, such as Rhoades (2013), see cooperative learning as a way for effectively managing large classes.

3.2.2. Limited Resources

Limited resources have been raised as another noteworthy factor that affects the implementation of cooperative learning in EFL classes. This factor is connected to the shortage of teaching materials and certain classroom equipment. In his attempt to frame this issue, Teacher 8 asserted that in his area, there are lots of overcrowded classrooms with about 80 to 100 students. With this, "the teacher hardly circulates from here to there, because there is no space to move, and the students are on the ground because there is a shortage of tables." This situation was also underlined by Teachers 2 and 4. The former indicated that most of the classrooms are made of straw, with no tables and chairs.

Cooperative learning can be successful in those private schools with a limited number of students per class. For example, in a class with 20 to 30 students and enough tables, chairs, books, and additional documents, students can form groups and move around with ease (Teacher 2).

Here we have a class that contains over 100 students with few tables. There are four students on each table, and others are sitting on the ground. Besides, we don't have modern books containing such activities...In this situation, teachers are obliged to teach English in traditional ways (Teacher 8).

With this limitation of resources and the large number of students in small rooms, teachers find it difficult to implement cooperative learning. 85

4. Discussion of Findings

The current study sought to explore teachers' perspectives on cooperative learning in EFL classrooms. It has demonstrated that teachers see cooperative learning as a way of promoting interdependence among learners and their communicative skills. Cooperative learning, therefore, opens doors to learners of different levels to participate in classroom debates, discussions, and role plays. Group members would rely on one another to achieve the learning goal. If one member fails to do his/her part, all the members will bear the consequences (Felder & Brent, 2001). As Arta (2018) underlined, cooperative learning decreases language anxiety during classroom activities and increases learner participation in the learning process. These benefits are confirmed by Gillies and Boyle (2010) whose participants concurred that they had positive experiences using cooperative learning. They reported that learners enjoyed knowing each other, accepted their group roles, and learned to take some risks and interact with each other.

This study has also revealed the fact that teachers perceive cooperative learning activities as avenues for gossiping and useless chats among learners. This finding lends support to JoNell et al. (2001) who reported that students who work in same-gender dyads on a creative writing task showed a greater sense of affiliation, influence, and enjoyment than students in mixed-gender ones. Additional to these perceptions is an interesting finding that cooperative learning prevents low achievers from learning but helps high achievers to learn better. This, to our knowledge, has not been reported by any previous study and may be conceptualized as a real barrier: teachers who express this perception are likely to withdraw from using cooperative learning activities in their classes.

About the second research question, this study has revealed some issues and challenges that prevent teachers from implementing cooperative learning in their classes. These include large classes which may contain more than 80 students. This finding is supported by Renaud et al. (2007). Their study showcased difficulties expressed by teachers having classes of 70 to 200 students. On the contrary, Rhoades (2013), as mentioned earlier, adamantly rejects this position. He argued that "the larger the class is, the more

important it is to implement cooperative learning”. Following from this, there is the need to differentiate large from overcrowded classes. As highlighted by certain participants, an overcrowded class is characterized by a large number of learners in a small room. This was underlined by most of the participants in terms of limited resources (lack of big classrooms, enough tables and chairs, and teaching materials). The problem caused by overcrowded classrooms to cooperation learning is better exemplified below by Renaud et al. (2007) from a Haitian context.

Josue enters his classroom where his secondary school students— all 78 of them—are waiting, squeezed together on sagging wooden benches. The small room is so crowded that Josue cannot move from the narrow space left for him between the front wall—where the polished cement has been painted black to serve as a blackboard—and the first row of benches. His students have no books. There is no electricity, it is hot, and Josue has only a piece of chalk and his imagination to help him teach his students English.

Conclusion

The discussed findings above clearly denote the existence of real problems pertaining not only to the nature of the classrooms but the teachers themselves. Even though those participants were selected based on their familiarity with the cooperative learning approach, some of them seemed to ignore how to practically implement it. Issues of resources underlined by teachers are also indicative of the lack of creativity from participants to make changes or stand as material designers. However, this could be explained by the fact that most of them are novice teachers. They still need more time to experiment with all the theoretical knowledge they have acquired during initial teacher training and build more understanding of the reality of the field. The merit of this research can, therefore, be acknowledged through the understanding it generated on how, rightly or wrongly, they perceive cooperative learning so that necessary actions could be taken by educators and education authorities for improvement. Future studies on this issue could also extend insights by using more instruments, as teachers, for example, need to be observed for triangulation purposes.

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