COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Annotation: Cooperative learning is an effective pedagogical approach in primary school English Language Teaching (ELT), emphasizing collaboration and communication. This article explores the benefits and strategies of implementing cooperative learning in the ELT context. It discusses how cooperative learning enhances language development, communication skills, and creates a positive classroom environment. The article also emphasizes the importance of social skills, cultural awareness, and inclusive practices in cooperative learning. Strategies such as varied activities, technology integration, and clear learning objectives are highlighted. The article concludes by stressing the long-term impact of cooperative learning on language proficiency and essential life skills.

Keywords: Cooperative Learning, English Language Teaching, Primary School Education, Language Development, Communication Skills, Positive Classroom Environment, Social Skills, Cultural Awareness, Group Dynamics, Varied Activities

Introduction: Cooperative learning has emerged as a powerful pedagogical tool, particularly in the realm of English Language Teaching (ELT) for primary school students. This teaching approach emphasizes collaboration, communication, and shared responsibility among students, fostering not only language development but also important social skills. This article explores the benefits and strategies of implementing cooperative learning in the primary school English language classroom.

The goal of the 21st-century education system is to develop in learners the 4Cscommunication skills, critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills and collaborative skills (Sipayung et al., 2018; Wahyuddin et al., 2022). These skills are essential in completing a task, solving a problem, or creating a product (Azar et al., 2021). In order to help learners acquire these skills, the teaching and learning process must be interactive, challenging, interesting, inspiring, creative, motivating, encouraging active learner participation and welcoming student initiative. Therefore, globally, educators are shifting from the traditional conventional teacher-centred approach to teaching and learning to a student-centered one (Muniandy & Shuib, 2016).

Cooperative learning (CL) is a student-centred approach in teaching, where learners are provided with opportunities to think actively and engage in practical exercises and mutual discussions on the (dis)similar attributes of a task in small groups of two or more students to achieve definite and shared learning goals (Chen, 2022; Lu & Smiles, 2022). The group comprises learners at various ability and thought levels who are jointly engaged in the learning activities and expected to take responsibility for their own learning and support each other to achieve a common goal (Dewi et al., 2021; Warsah et al., 2021). According to Norman (2022), CL activities are based on pair work (a group of two students) or group work (more

than two students) who are assigned a task to collectively deliberate, discuss and interrogate to achieve the learning objectives. It is instructive to emphasize that CL is not a single teaching strategy, nor is it a mere synonym for pupils being made to learn in groups (Gull & Shehzad, 2015) but a generic concept that includes all teaching strategies which promotes group interaction, cooperation, collaboration and group cohesion (Namusoke & Rukundo, 2022; Simsek et al., 2013). The proponents of the CL model insist that the active exchange of ideas among small group members enhances student interest in the lesson and promotes critical thinking. For instance, Restivo (2022) insists that the acquisition and assimilation of knowledge come from the process of communication, interaction, explanation, debate, reconstruction and clarification among teachers, students and their peers, which are characteristic of cooperative learning. In the English language teaching and learning context, the CL approach propels the learners to practice the language competencies: listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar skills (Fekri, 2016). This is because the group activities compel the learners to actively listen to each other, interact or speak constructively to each other, read to/from each other and write what the group discusses. The continuous employment of the CL in the English classroom would therefore demand that the students constantly use the language skills. The more they get exposed to the skills and put them into practice, the more likely they would develop them. According to Albuhassan & Hamid (2021), while the CL enhances student participation in the language classroom, it also creates opportunities for them to use the (second) language in expressing their thoughts on the subject matter or tasks, improving their language skills. Norman (2022) intimates that the CL is particularly beneficial to learners who are reluctant to participate in classroom discussions due to their shy nature, lack of confidence, speaking anxiety, fear of the teacher, or fear of the classroom 'crowd'. When such learners are put into smaller groups, they are able to actively interact among themselves since there is no 'teacher figure' to be fearful of or a 'crowd' to feel intimidated by.

LITERATURE REVIEW. Several research studies on the CL approach have adduced empirical evidence to show that CL has many benefits and advantages (Al-kaabi, 2016). For instance, the studies of Ehsan et al. (2019), Awada et al. (2020) and Dendup & Onthanee (2020) collaboratively found that CL effectively improves upon students' English writing, English reading comprehension and English speaking skills. Johnson and Johnson (2018) also assert that CL improves learners' motivation, social skills and cognition. To them, CL creates a more conducive learning environment for the students, increasing their motivation to participate in classroom activities. Also, CL requires that learners interact, share resources, help one another, cooperate, complement and collaborate with each other in groups; hence, apart from academic skills, CL enhances learners' social and emotional skills, such as empathy, values and appreciation (Dyson et al., 2021; Hossain & Tarmizi, 2013). There is less tension and competitive spirit in the CL classroom since group members work together (not against each other) to achieve the collective goal (Simsek et al., 2013). In their respective studies, Gull & Shehzad (2015) and Smith et al. (2015) also found that while CL enhances learners' motivation and participation in the teaching and learning process, it results in higher academic techievements. Wahyuddin et al. (2022) add that the CL approach creates new learning opportunities and experiences for the students regarding competencies, knowledge and skills. In their studies, Hua (2014) and Namusoke & Rukundo (2022) investigated the university and primary classrooms in non-native contexts- Asia and Africa- respectively. Both

studies found that students who were taught using the CL approach outperformed those who were taught using the traditional teacher-centred teaching method across both respective levels and contexts. This implies that CL is applicable and effective in different contexts and at any level of education. Han and Ellis (2021) contend that the CL approach shifts the focus of the classroom from a teacher-centred one to a student-centred one, which is the ideal 21st-century classroom environment and teaching approach that foster effective teaching and learning. Emphasis must be made in contexts such as Ghana, where the average classroom size is large, and teachers may not be able to deal directly with each student. CL becomes a more realistic means of connecting with each student through the group system. Chen (2022) believes that, in addition to its effectiveness in the classroom, the CL approach also has social advantages since it incorporates team spirit, group work and socialization skills in the learners, which are essential for post-school life experiences. In heterogeneous classrooms, the CL approach encourages tolerance and adaptability to other cultures, opinions and orientations. It is, therefore, not surprising that CL is argued to be one of the most widespread and effective pedagogies (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Most studies on CL focus on its benefits, importance and effectiveness in teaching and learning (Norito et al., 2019; Sugiharto, 2020). Meanwhile, like every other classroom approach, the CL approach has its challenges and barriers (Jamil & Paul, 2016; Loh & Teo, 2017; Mahbib et al., 2017; Prosser & Trigwell, 2014; Tadesse & Gillies, 2015). Even though it is good to continue to research the advantages of CL and encourage more teachers to employ it in teaching, the researchers believe it is equally important to investigate the challenges that impede the effective implementation of CL so that stakeholders, policymakers and teachers can design and develop effective programmes and strategies to curb the challenges and ensure that the approach becomes more plausible and feasible to use in the classroom. Not many qualitative studies deeply interrogate the phenomenon, especially in the Ghanaian context. To fill this research gap, the current study investigates, discusses and highlights the challenges that teachers of English in Ghana encounter in implementing CL.

While the teacher guides the groups, sufficient room is given for the group members to discuss, discover and manipulate the classroom facilities. While in the process of interaction, the learners employ all the language competencies, that is, listening, speaking, reading and writing, thereby helping them to reach a higher level of (second) language development (Athirah et al., 2020). The assertion is that when learners learn and perform tasks in groups, they gain a deeper understanding and retain more knowledge, and low-performing students eventually perform better as well (McHugh et al., 2020; Warsah et al., 2021).

Benefits of Cooperative Learning. Language Development: Cooperative learning provides students with ample opportunities to use and practice English in a supportive environment. Engaging in group activities, such as storytelling, role-playing, and collaborative writing, allows students to express themselves creatively and develop their language skills.

Communication Skills: Working in small groups encourages students to communicate effectively with their peers. Through pair work, discussions, and collaborative projects, students learn to express their ideas, listen actively, and negotiate meaning—a crucial aspect of language proficiency.

Positive Classroom Environment: Cooperative learning promotes a positive and inclusive classroom culture. Students feel a sense of belonging and are motivated to contribute to the group's success. This positive atmosphere enhances their overall learning experience.

Social Skills Development: Collaborative activities require students to work together, share ideas, and solve problems as a team. This not only improves their language skills but also nurtures essential social skills such as teamwork, empathy, and conflict resolution.

Cultural Awareness: Group projects that involve research on different cultures, traditions, or countries contribute to students' cultural awareness. This expands their worldview and enhances their understanding of diversity, fostering a global perspective.

Strategies for Implementing Cooperative Learning. Group Dynamics: Establish clear guidelines for group work, including roles and responsibilities. Encourage students to rotate roles to ensure everyone has a chance to lead and contribute. Monitor group dynamics to address any issues promptly.

Varied Activities: Incorporate a variety of cooperative learning activities to cater to diverse learning styles. From language games and pair work to jigsaw reading and collaborative writing, offering a mix of activities keeps students engaged and motivated.

Technology Integration: Leverage technology to enhance cooperative learning. Platforms like Google Docs, interactive whiteboards, or language learning apps can facilitate collaborative writing, research, and communication among group members.

Clear Learning Objectives: Clearly define the learning objectives of each cooperative activity. This helps students understand the purpose of the task and stay focused on language development goals while working together.

Reflection and Feedback: Incorporate reflection sessions after cooperative activities. Encourage students to discuss their experiences, challenges faced, and lessons learned. Provide constructive feedback to guide their future collaborative efforts.

Inclusive Practices: Create an inclusive classroom environment by considering the diverse needs and abilities of students. Differentiate tasks or provide additional support as needed to ensure that every student can actively participate and contribute to the group.

What is Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative Learning is an instructional method in which students work in small groups to accomplish a common learning goal under the guidance of the teacher.

Cooperative learning strategies offer students the possibility to learn by applying knowledge in an environment more similar to the one they will encounter in their future work life.

Teachers get the chance to work on core competencies and on students' communication and soft skills, which are valuable for students' success in life and work, integrating them in school curricula.

Cooperative learning strategies are content-free structures that can be reused in different school contexts and we are going to learn how to use some of them.

Strategies can be used both in pairs and groups and are designed to fulfill all the so-called PIES principles: Positive interdependence, Individual accountability, Equal participation and Simultaneous interaction.

Personal Interdepence. In general we talk about positive interdependence when a gain for one is a benefit for the other. Pair and group members experience themselves as a team and are on the same side working toward the same goal.

To ensure positive interdependence while working with cooperative learning, two requisites must be met: students should feel on the same side and the task should require working together. Check out our course on collaborative learning if you wish to know more about how to promote students' colaboration and engagement in the classroom.

Individual Accountability. In the cooperative classroom, students work together as a team to create and to learn, but ultimately every individual student is responsible for his or her own performance.

It is exactly to fulfill both positive interdependence and individual accountability that in every cooperative learning strategy students are given both time to think/work alone and to interact with peers. In this way students' autonomy and cooperation are improved.

Equal Participation. Pair and group work is usually very well welcomed by students, but the problem is that it is difficult to check whether students are equally working.

Cooperative learning strategies instead make sure every student in each team or pair is equally contributing to the final achievement. They are actually designed to make students interact and to have everyone at every step of the activity fulfil a specific task.

Simultaneous Interaction. In sequential interaction, when only one student at a time is engaged, the teacher talks (at least) twice for each time a student talks. And when the teacher is the most active participant in the classroom, students are obviously disengaged (and most likely bored as well).

Cooperative learning strategies on the contrary are designed to produce simultaneous interaction, so to engage as many students as possible simultaneously.

Cooperative Learning and Classroom Management. What teachers soon observe when working with cooperative learning strategies is that working together will offer students the chance to know their classmates better. It also helps to create a better community and therefore a warmer atmosphere in the classroom.

Cooperative learning, reducing students' disengagement and favoring the natural need of students for social interaction instead of contrasting it, helps also minimize classroom management issues. Moreover, cooperative learning strategies often offer students a break from the lesson, giving them also the possibility to move around in class.

"Schools on the move" – The Finnish programme. The Finnish programme "Schools on the move", with 90 percent of Finnish schools participating, has proven that implementing short active breaks during the lessons improves the health and wellbeing of students, as well as school enjoyment. And cooperative learning strategies are a great opportunity to engage students in active learning methods involving movement as well.

Using different strategies in class fosters communication among students, and can make the class more meaningful and fun at the same time. Communication skills are recognized to be valuable for students' future work- and personal life. But yet they are often neglected in school curricula. If you wish to promote your students' engagement in class, we recommend you check our course and learn how to enhance their communication and social skills through drama techniques.

Are Cooperative Learning Strategies difficult to implement?

Are they time consuming?

Cooperative learning strategies are not only very scalable but most of the time they require very little to no preparation. And some of them last less than 5 minutes, having in this short period of time all students in class being challenged and engaged.

Teachers can start by implementing one single strategy in their own lesson and then evaluate the outcomes in different school classes. Strategies like Think-Pair-Share or Circle-The-Sage, for example, are not time-consuming at all and do not require a long preparation either.

Think-Pair-Share. hink-Pair-Share is the solution to the situation every teacher encounters when asking a question in class: having the same student(s) answering every single time.

Most of the students do not even feel challenged to think of a possible answer, not to mention speaking up. This happens for many reasons, probably not only due to a lack of knowledge or preparation, but also due to a lack of self-confidence.

Moreover, research on "wait time" reveals that most teachers provide an average of only one second of think time after they ask a question.

Cooperative learning strategies also engage introspective and slower students, who need time before they feel ready to answer.

In Think-Pair-Share the teacher asks a question to the whole class, as he or she would do at the beginning or at some point of the lesson.

Depending on the age and on the level of the students, it could be something that requires personal interpretation at some point or not. Students get some solo time to think about a possible answer- or to write it down- then they turn to their classmate sitting next to them and get some pair-time to share and discuss what they have just found out.

At the end of this activity, the teacher randomly chooses two or three pairs and asks them to briefly share their answers or responses.

No matter how old students are- I have successfully used this strategy not only for small children but even in my teacher training courses– it is astonishing how much mutual interaction deepens their understanding.

Pairs will most of the time succeed where single students would have probably failed.

Think-Pair-Share can also be used to have students reflect on a topic, even when no right interpretation is needed, and, being the simplest and most famous cooperative learning strategy, can be the first one to be implemented.

Timed-Pair-Share. Communication includes not only speaking, reading and writing, but also listening. And it is exactly in practising the latter that the next strategy focuses on.

Timed-Pair-Share is perfect for students to interact and practise the language, so it can be used in every subject where the context is everything and it makes sure every student will talk and listen for the same amount of time.

After having given a topic and some time to think about it, the teacher asks students to pair up and states how long they will share- one or two minutes are a good start. In pairs, partner A shares and partner B listens. To rapidly check if the person who is talking is the one supposed to, partners can hold a pen while sharing. At the end, partners B provide positive responses, like "I enjoyed listening to you because…" or "Your most interesting idea was…" and partner switch roles.

The strategy Timed-Pair-Share makes shy and less talkative students speak up and force everyone to be listening for a specific amount of time. Through this activity, students improve speaking and listening skills equally and get to know their classmates better.

Moreover: listening without the urge to respond helps listeners focusing on the speaker and listening only to understand, which is the definition of active listening.

In second-language instruction Timed-Pair-Share can be used with any possible topic, depending on language proficiency, whether for subjects like history or literature it can be used to ask for opinions or personal interpretations.

Agree-Disagree Line-ups. A good way to involve some movement before starting a Timed-Pair-Share and to make sure students get to talk to everybody else in the classroom and not merely their neighbours is Agree-Disagree Line-ups.

The teacher announces a statement, such as, "I feel my opinion matters in this class" "Taxes should be raised" etc. The strongest 'agree' student stands at one end of the line while the strongest 'disagree' stands at the other. The remaining students stand between, closer to one end or the other. Through Timed-Pair-Share, students listen carefully to those with a similar point of view (those standing next to them in the line) or the teachers folds the line so they listen to and understand a point of view different from their own.

Conclusion: Incorporating cooperative learning into primary school English language teaching is a dynamic way to cultivate language proficiency, communication skills, and a positive classroom culture. By fostering collaboration, educators not only contribute to academic development but also equip students with essential life skills that extend beyond the language learning context. Through well-designed cooperative activities, educators can create an environment where students thrive linguistically and socially, setting the foundation for a lifelong love of language and learning.

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