

EFL Learners' Reflections on Cooperative Learning: Issues of Implementation

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Abstract—This study has described and identified the opinions and experiences of the EFL learners who participated in CL English lessons. The participants in this study were 10 tenth-grade male students, aged 14-15 years in four boys' secondary schools in Al-Baha city. Two English teachers were asked to implement cooperative learning in their classrooms for 12 weeks. The researcher interviewed ten randomly selected students from the cooperative learning classes at the end of the study.

The results and findings of this study showed that most students found that CL enabled them to improve their English skills, make new relationships with others classmates, perform different roles, improve their oral presentation skills, build their self-confidence, take on responsibility, respect different opinions and offer their different views, increase their motivation, and develop their friendships with their classmates.

However, there were few drawbacks and obstacles to using the CL method. These included: low achiever EFL learners depending on high achiever learners, classmates not giving group members a chance to state their opinions, and poor group member distribution and supervision by the teacher. In the following chapter, the researcher presents a general discussion of the results in this study.

Index Terms—applied linguistic, teaching English as foreign language, cooperative learning, traditional small groups

I. INTRODUCTION

When students work together in small groups to achieve shared goals, it is called cooperative learning (CL). Research on CL over the past three decades has documented the academic and social benefits derived by students when they work together (Gillies, 2011)

For instance, previous research has shown that when CL is compared to individual learning, students who learn cooperatively obtain better academic results (Gillies, 2011). Similarly, when it is compared to lecture-directed learning, students also obtain better academic results (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). The other benefits of CL include enhanced thinking skills, more self-motivation to learn, higher self-esteem, greater respect for others and improved attitudes towards learning (Slavin, 1995). CL helps enhance thinking, acquisition of information, communication and interpersonal skills, and, most importantly, self-confidence (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). These skills and outcomes are produced by dividing students into groups and then allotting them structured cooperative tasks where students work together on homework assignments, laboratory experiments, or design projects.

Some advantages of the different aspects of CL that Gillies (2011) discusses are as follows. Firstly, students' time is utilized in a more productive way when they work cooperatively. Students are able to learn more effectively and the teacher is also able to teach more students at a time. Secondly, CL positively affects the performance of students. According to Hertz-Lazarowitz (1990), the level of boredom in students is reduced significantly in the classroom when CL is used. The troubling behaviour of students is also reduced considerably. Further, working mutually on a single task enables every student to contribute ideas and information so all students are motivated to provide assistance to each other (Sharan, 1990). Finally, the involvement of every group member is critically important when each works on a common task. It leads to the development of positive social relationships among students which boosts their contribution level in a single task and this is appreciated by most class teachers (Gillies, 2003).

This study will increase the possibility of persuading individuals and policy makers in Saudi Arabia to accept the importance of CL methods in classrooms and update discussions on both content and other academic matters across the Saudi educational system. For such a purpose, this study helps to examine the progress of CL in secondary education in Saudi Arabia.

II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant because CL has many benefits for EFL learners, including reducing anxiety, increasing students' motivation, increasing students' learning outcomes, enhancing students' social skills and classroom participation, fostering students' independence and increasing students' self-esteem (Jalilifar, 2010). Moreover, this study is significant because it investigates how EFL learners' responses to their new experience in learning English in a CL environment

Investigating the potential of CL in the context of EFL teaching and learning is important for several reasons. There is substantial evidence from different social contexts on the academic advantages and other advantages of CL pedagogy in different subject areas.

Teaching EFL has been encouraged in Saudi Arabia where students regard English as a difficult language to learn. Consequently, they do not generally achieve good grades in this subject at secondary and intermediate levels (Alghamdi, 2008). Researchers have conducted many studies to shift from traditional learning to a more interactive environment for EFL learners' to facilitate language learning.

Research advocates a transfer from traditional teaching methods to new methods, such as CL, that encourage greater interaction between students and their teachers.

III. METHODS

A. Participants

The participants in this study were 10 tenth-grade male students, aged 14-15 years in two boys' secondary schools in Al-Baha city. Two English teachers were asked to implement cooperative learning in their classrooms for 12 weeks. The researcher interviewed ten randomly selected students from the cooperative learning classes at the end of the study. The purpose of the interview questions was to identify how Saudi students responded to their new experiences in learning English in a CL environment. The interview questions were designed by Gillies and Boyle (2011) and modified by the researcher to seek information on students' perceptions of learning English in a CL environment. The student interviews were conducted individually and were audio-recorded by the researcher. The interviews were conducted in the Arabic language and the researcher later translated them into English.

B. Procedures

The interviews were semi-structured (Freebody, 2003) to provide more opportunities for each student to elaborate on the different questions that were posed. Each interview was audio taped and fully transcribed by a research assistant and checked and rechecked for accuracy by the researcher. In this study, the interview data were presented and analysed using the inductive approach; that is, the data was transcribed and coded to identify themes that emerged from the data. The student interviews were conducted in Arabic because it is the students' mother tongue and allowed them to express their views with a clarity that would not have been possible in English. The researcher translated and transcribed the interviews to identify different themes in the data (Creswell, 2012).

The researcher reviewed the data to ensure that the themes were representative of the interview data. The researcher identified these themes by keywords and phrases that students used to respond to the different questions that were posed. These themes were identified by sentences, phrases, and keywords that the students used to answer the different questions that were asked. For instance, students were asked to comment on their perceptions about working in a group as a team, and the importance of working together to achieve a task. Phrases and key words used to identify this theme included: "working in team is good" (Student 6); "working in a team assists us to achieve our goals" (Student 10); and "I prefer to work in team rather than working alone" (Student 2). The researcher broke the phrases and key words down, read and reread them, examined, conceptualized, compared, and categorized them, guided by the theoretical framework and previous research in the same field (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher grouped the different themes that emerged from the interview data into seven main themes: academic achievements; social skills and self-confidence; performing different roles; CL and individual learning; CL as a method that does not work for all students; and lastly, barriers of CL.

IV. FINDINGS FROM THE POST-TASK SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Ten students were interviewed individually by the researcher at the end of the study to identify their thoughts and experiences in learning the English language in a CL environment. The interview gathered data about the EFL learners' experiences and their perceptions about CL's efficacy as a method of learning in their classroom, and the extent to which they believed they benefited from learning English in a CL environment. Moreover, the interview investigated students' perceptions of the difficulties and barriers they experienced learning English in a CL environment. The researcher grouped the different themes that emerged from the interview data into seven main themes: academic achievements; social skills and self-confidence; performing different roles; CL and individual learning; CL as a method that does not work for all students; and lastly, barriers of CL .

A. Academic Achievements.

The first of the seven themes that emerged from the data was that of increased academic achievement in the CL environment. Some students indicated that they learned more through CL and they were satisfied with their achievements. After CL was implemented in the English classroom, the students worked in groups and expressed satisfaction that CL increased their English outcomes. One student commented, "It [cooperative learning] increases my understanding of English lessons and I noticed that my English is getting better" (Student 3). Another student added, "Absolutely. I can speak English well and I can communicate with my English teacher in English" (Student 8). A third

student indicated, "My English grammar is improving and I can write some sentences without grammar mistakes (Student 10). Similarly, Lord (2001) found that the students who participate in CL obtain higher grades and are more likely to achieve their goals than their peers who learn using the traditional learning method.

Furthermore, some students expressed the belief that working in groups increased their motivation to learn, as well as their tendency to study English skills. Student 6 commented, "Learning English in a cooperative learning environment motivated me to understand the different tasks of English. It is very difficult to learn these skills." Another student remarked, "In fact, I hate to learn English because it is not my native language, but now, I start to like it because my classmates encourage me to speak English during the cooperative learning method" (Student 8). This is in line with Shaaban (2006), who stated that CL offers students a chance to identify the value of the content of their studies, and perceive themselves as competent contributors to their purposes; as a result, their motivation is enhanced and promoted.

In general, students declared that using CL changed their routines inside the classroom and it facilitated the development of a good environment in which to improve one's English skills. One student pointed out "The teacher explains and we just listen; this is our daily routine. But the cooperative learning method gives us a chance to see different learning styles and methods. Working in groups is a good solution to avoid boredom in the classroom" (Student 1). Another student revealed, "I am happy working in groups because it definitely pushes us to read and learn. In contrast, I dislike the teachers who use one teaching method all the time because it is monotonous" (Student 6).

Overall, the students highlighted many academic skills that they developed while learning English using the CL method. One student remarked, "I noticed that our English speaking skills are getting better and we can communicate with each other in English but before we started using cooperative learning it was very difficult to talk in English" (Student 10). Another student said, "Listening to each other is an important skill that we learned using the cooperative learning method" (Student 3). Johnson and Johnson (2004) pointed out that the students who study according to the cooperative teaching approach have high grades compared to students who were taught using traditional teaching methods. Tuan (2010) showed that language skills were improved; previously undeveloped interpersonal skills emerged as a result of the introduction of the CL method.

Moreover, it is apparent that most students have a strong tendency to continue to learn English skills when they are working in groups and would prefer their teacher not return to using the individual learning method. One student stated, "This is a good idea of the English teacher to use cooperative learning method in all classes and in the future" (Student 2). Another student commented, "I hope that my teacher keeps on using the cooperative learning method" (Student 8). This is in line with the work of Muhammad (2010), who found that students' achievements and attitudes toward mathematics improved as a result of the cooperative grouping method.

B. Social Skills and Self-confidence

The second theme to emerge from the data was that of increased social skills and self-confidence in the CL environment. Some students revealed that using the CL method enabled them to improve their social skills, such as talking in front of their teachers, classmates, and the general public. Student 8 stated, "I can talk in front of my classmates normally. I used to encounter problems presenting a topic to others." Another student commented, "Presenting a topic in front of people was very difficult to me, but I have trained to talk and present a topic through a comfortable learning method, that is, cooperative learning" (Student 3).

Students claimed that having a chance to present different topics in front of other classmates was exciting. One student remarked, "I am very happy with cooperative learning method because I had a chance to present topics and this experience is not a forgettable event for me" (Student 1). Another student said, "It was very wonderful. Now, I have ability to present any topic, either in the school assembly or in the general public... It is an incredible experience" (Student 10). Similarly, Kao (2003) indicated, in his study, that the students' speaking skills, such as presenting in front of other students, increased as a result of students' use of the CL method.

When asked if the CL method has improved their social skills and self-confidence, a few students declared they have obtained the ability to manage different tasks and they feel more confident when discussing topics with others. One student commented, "Absolutely. I can manage different jobs and I have sufficient ability to lead any task. Leading was difficult for me but now I feel more comfortable" (Student 1). Another student stated, "Definitely. One of CL benefits is that I feel more confident to state my opinions with others" (Student 3).

Students declared that they achieved and learned many new skills in the CL environment, such as oral presentation skills, self-confidence, responsibility, to respect different opinions, and to offer different viewpoints. Student 10 said, "I learned many new skills such as presenting in front of my classmates and respect their opinions." Another student mentioned, "Offering my ideas and views to my friends was too difficult for me. At this time, I can state my opinions frankly and normally" (Student 2). Gillies (2004) highlighted that the students who learn during the CL method were more cooperative when they had been trained in the social skills that increase effective cooperation between students.

C. Performing Different Roles.

The third of the seven themes to emerge from the data relates to the students' increased ability to perform different roles in the CL environment. Students indicated that CL enabled them to perform different roles in the classroom, such as a leader, presenter, writer, and time controller. Student 2 stated, "I [would] like to be a leader of my group all the time", while Student 6 remarked: "My friend encountered troubles with presenting at the beginning of using the

cooperative learning method because he is a shy person. During the time, he gets along with it and he can present without any fear or shyness.”

Some students delegate different roles to each other. For example, sometimes a student might be a presenter, while another time he may take on the role of a leader. As Student 8 explained, “We are four students; each one is responsible for a different role.” Another student commented, “It is wonderful to play many roles, such as a leader, presenter, time controller, and writer” (Student 3).

Many students understood and were able to explain their different roles and the expectations placed on them as individuals with regard to these roles. For instance, one student stated, “My responsibility in this group is to write down information” (Student 10). Another student declared, “Leading the group is not an easy task because I have to listen to each one in the group” (Student 1). The challenge of group members playing different roles in a collaborative learning environment is supported by the work of Gillies (2011), who argued that the adoption of different roles by group members was important to ensure that the members cooperated, contributed, and were accountable for their contributions to the group.

D. Increased Students' Relationships.

The fourth theme to emerge from the data was an increase in students' relationships with their peers in the CL environment. In general, students indicated that a CL environment enables them to forge new relationships with other classmates in the classroom. For instance, Student 3 admitted, “My relationship with my classmates was not good. Now, I have dealt with many students in the class and I like them. They are helpful and friendly.” Another student said, “Through the cooperative learning discussions, we know each other better and we improve our relationships with each other” (Student 1). A third student commented, “At the beginning of using cooperative learning in the classroom, I had only one friend. At this time, most of the students in the class are my friends” (Student 10). The experiences of these students is similar to the findings of Johnson and Johnson (2004), who revealed that learning in a CL environment, as compared with more competitive and traditional learning methods, results in more positive and supportive relationships, more friendships, and fewer pupils remaining isolated.

Some students revealed that they like to spend more time at school as well as more time doing group work with their colleagues after the CL method was implemented in their class. Student 8 declared, “In fact, I dislike the school because it is boring. But now I want to spend more time at school because I have the chance to talk and discuss some issues with my classmates. Also, I get along with all my classmates.” Another student added, “I want to stay more time with my classmates. I enjoy learning English with them. We enjoy our time and make some jokes” (Student 6).

CL assisted some students to build new skills that enabled them to develop their friendships with their classmates. One student stated, “At the beginning of implementing cooperative learning in our class, I could not talk in front of my friends, but at this time I communicate with them very well. Working in groups assists me to build my skills in presenting some topics to audiences” (Student 2). Another student remarked, “Now, I respect my classmates' opinions. In the past, I did not accept different ideas and I thought that my point of view was correct and the others were wrong” (Student 10). Yet another student declared, “At this time, the majority of my classmates are my close friends, but before using cooperative learning in our class, I had only two friends” (Student 2). This positive feedback is supported by the work of Gillies (2004), who found that the CL environment enables students to work with each other, assist each other, discuss, explain, and share information.

E. Cooperative Learning and Individual Learning.

The fifth of the seven themes to emerge from the data was the positive impact CL had on students' ability to learn as individuals. Some students pointed out that they could learn easier and faster from their classmates than their teacher. Also, they indicated that there is a difference between CL and individual learning in terms of mental ability. In a CL environment, the students work together to learn on a level playing field, whereas in individual learning, the teacher is positioned as the ‘keeper of knowledge’ and has the difficult task of conveying complex concepts to students who lack a similar understanding of the material. Student 6 commented, “The teacher explains the lessons and answers the questions in the individual learning, but the teacher could not deliver information to students because of the mental level. But in cooperative learning, student's mental levels are close and they can discuss different lessons.” Another student stated, “I prefer to learn English through cooperative learning because it assists the students to learn from each other in a comfortable environment. But learning English through individual learning is not well suited for shy students, as they cannot ask the teachers for more clarifications” (Student 1). Similarly, Vo (2010) highlighted the positive correlation between the introduction of CL and improvements in interpersonal skills and the promotion of creative thinking.

Some students indicated that CL increases their motivation to work as a team, unlike individual learning. Team members need to synchronize their actions to achieve a goal if they want to have successful teamwork; this creates a state of positive interdependence where, in order for the members of group to succeed, all group members must also succeed. One student stated, “Collaborative learning depends on teamwork and it increases the students' love of teamwork. It is a very interesting education environment in which to learn English. In individual learning, the student depends on himself alone and it is a traditional, boring education environment” (Student 10). Another student remarked, “To me, I dislike individual learning because it is very tedious” (Student 8). These sorts of comments are supported by

Liao (2005), who showed that motivation could be enhanced via CL. Terwel, Gillies, van den Eeden, and Hoek (2001) pointed out that teamwork and accurate information provided by the group members are interrelated and improve learning skills, whereas inaccurate information shared in a student group results in low achievements.

In general, it is essential to train group members in the skills needed to achieve successful teamwork. Gillies (2003) pointed out that when different groups had been trained so that learners worked cooperatively together, they give more verbal help and assistance to each other than learners who did not work in cooperative groups.

Some students prefer to discuss lessons in a CL environment, which enables them to learn from their classmates' experiences, which is not possible in the individual learning method. One student stated, "Students can discuss different lessons and identify the experiences of their colleagues through the cooperative learning method. However, students in individual learning could not discuss some lessons and cannot identify the experiences of their colleagues in the class" (Student 3). Another student commented, "Definitely, the cooperative learning method enabled me to learn from my classmates' experiences" (Student 6).

Some students declared that there is a better chance of learning tasks faster with the CL method than with the individual learning method. In addition, they stated that they could understand different lessons well in CL, but not in individual learning. Student 1 commented, "From my point of view, collaborative learning is an excellent way to get the information well through consultation and discussion with colleagues." Another student stated, "I can understand the lesson well and quickly through the cooperative learning method because my colleagues assist me to learn. But in individual learning, it takes much time to understand the lesson" (Student 2). Further, another student remarked, "In fact, I identify and understand different themes in the English subject when I learn them via the cooperative learning environment" (Student 6).

However, it is worth noting that a few students felt there was little difference between the CL method and the individual learning method. Moreover, they declared that they could achieve and learn through both learning methods. One student stated, "There is no difference between language learning through the cooperative learning or the individual learning method" (Student 9). A second student remarked, "My progress was the same either when learning English through cooperative learning or through individual learning" (Student 2). Yet, in contrast to these students' comments, Slavin (1995) reviewed 99 studies and showed that only 5% of these studies support learning via traditional learning gains, while 63% of these studies showed significant gains for learning via the CL method.

F. Cooperative Learning Method Does not Work for All Students.

The sixth theme evident in the data was the fact that, although CL is beneficial for most students, the method does not work for all students. For instance, some students revealed that they did not like to work in groups with their colleagues. One student mentioned, "I have troubles with one of my group members. We compete with each other so that we miss the agreement between each other. Consequently, we cannot reach a good decision" (Student 7). Another student stated, "One of my friends in the group is very weak in the English subject and he does not participate with us all the time. I think cooperative learning is not useful for him" (Student 9). A third student remarked, "To be frank with you, I do not like to work in groups because weak students waste my time; I spend much time teaching them" (Student 4).

Moreover, some participants stated that they felt the teacher is responsible to clarify and explain the lessons. Also, some students declared that they did not have a natural tendency to share and participate in the classroom. One student commented, "I think English teachers should explain and clarify different tasks to the students inside the classroom. Low achievement students need much work from the teacher to assist them. Learning English in a cooperative learning environment is not good for good students because they have to teach low achievement students in the different groups; for me, I am against it" (Student 5). Another student indicated, "One of my classmates refused to discuss and share his ideas with us; he just sits down and listens to us. For example, he sometimes plays during group discussions and draws pictures in his notebook" (Student 7). This non-participatory behaviour by some students is confirmed by Bock (2000) whose research on CL pedagogy in Vietnamese EFL classrooms found that some students were unwilling to cooperate with the teachers.

Additionally, some students revealed that they prefer to work individually rather than sharing tasks with their classmates, especially learning English in a CL environment. One student commented, "In fact, I am not in favour of learning English in a cooperative learning environment for two main reasons. Firstly, I can manage my time when I learn English through traditional learning, whereas I cannot manage my time if I learn English through cooperative learning. There are other three students with me in the group; I have to share my ideas with them and this requires a lot of time to solve different exercises. Secondly, some students do not cooperate with us and they constantly make noise in the group" (Student 5). Similarly, another student declared, "I am totally against the cooperative learning method, whereas I prefer learning English in the traditional method because I and my classmates used to learn English through this method. Also, we need much time get along with cooperative learning and I feel there is no difference between either the traditional method or the cooperative learning method" (Student 4).

Gillies (2003) indicated that when group members in science class were structured so that learners worked cooperatively together, they provided more verbal assistance to each other than learners who did not work in cooperative groups. Similarly, EFL learners needed training in cooperative learning to gain different language skills.

Another issue raised by some students was that the teacher did not properly distribute the students into groups. As a

result of what appeared to be random groupings, some groups were excellent, while others were bad and consequently did not work well with each other. One student stated, "Our teacher did not divide us [into groups] well; he just put students who were sitting close to each other in a group. Consequently, some groups consist of excellent students while other groups have all weak students. In this way, CL is not helpful and useful" (Student 9). Another student said, "My teacher usually put me in a very bad group. I have asked him to change me to another group but he rejected [my request] without any reason. I am not happy with my group and that means I do not like cooperative learning" (Student 3). Therefore the teachers need more training in how to implement the cooperative learning method properly.

G. Barriers to Cooperative Learning.

The seventh and final theme to emerge from the data has to do with the barriers to CL. Simply put, some students did not have the basic skills of CL that would enable them to work in groups properly. Moreover, some students pointed out that low achieving students depend on high achieving students to carry out different tasks and produce the bulk of the work. One student commented, "I think the most important barrier [to CL] is that students are not familiar with basic skills of cooperative learning; they need more training to perform it well" (Student 1). A second one stated, "Weak students do not work hard; they depend on good ones to do the job" (Student 8). Johnson and Johnson (1999) revealed the drawbacks that learners may encounter while learning via the CL method including the fact that some students putting in less effort, while others are left to do a greater share of the work. Furthermore, low ability students participate less in the learning process and leave the work to the high ability students.

A few students revealed that some teachers were not good facilitators of the CL process within the classroom. For instance, some teachers simply split the class into groups and sat down without providing any guidance or supervision. One student indicated, "Some teachers are not qualified to manage cooperative learning in the class, so that it is difficult to implement cooperative learning" (Student 6). Another student commented, "The role of our teacher is to put us in groups and then he did not assist us or explain difficult tasks" (Student 10).

Students highlighted that their classmates did not give them enough chances to state their opinions. In addition, they declared that a few students did not participate with them, but worked alone instead. One student said, "I do not like to work in groups because my classmates do not give me a chance to participate" (Student 1). Moreover, another student complained, "One of my classmates does not work with us. He just plays, laughs, and wastes our time" (Student 8). It is apparent from comments like these that while CL works well and is beneficial for many EFL learners, it does not suit some for a variety of reasons. It might be that some students do not get enough chance to participate with their classmates.

V. CONCLUSION

This article has described and identified the opinions and experiences of the EFL learners who participated in CL English lessons. In general, most students found that CL enabled them to improve their English skills, make new relationships with others classmates, perform different roles, improve their oral presentation skills, build their self-confidence, take on responsibility, respect different opinions and offer their different views, increase their motivation, and develop their friendships with their classmates.

However, there were few drawbacks and obstacles to using the CL method. These included: low achiever EFL learners depending on high achiever learners, classmates not giving group members a chance to state their opinions, and poor group member distribution and supervision by the teacher. In the following chapter, the researcher presents a general discussion of the results in this study.

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