



ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS COOPERATIVE LEARNING

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Abstract: *The main purpose of this study was to investigate EFL teachers' attitude towards cooperative learning in North Shoa Zone Preparatory Schools. The study was designed to explore how teachers perceive cooperative learning in English classrooms. For this purpose, 40 English language teachers of eight preparatory schools were participated in the study. In order to collect the necessary data, questionnaire, Interview and focus group discussion were successively used. Teachers filled in questionnaires, responded to interviews and discussed on focus group discussion points. The data collected through questionnaire were tabulated and analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage quantitatively. Likewise, data obtained from interview and focus group discussion were organized and described qualitatively. On the basis of the analysis made, it was concluded that most teachers were found to have positive attitude towards cooperative learning as it enhances their students' interdependence, and accountability. However, perceiving CL as if it had another issue, were time consuming, created idleness of some students, demanding of high control, etc are the major factors which were found to affect their positive feelings. Based on the findings of the study, some recommendations are forwarded to address certain issues that could affect teachers' positive feelings. Ttraining on cooperative learning should be given to teachers.*

Key words: *Cooperative Learning, Attitude, Preparatory Schools, Collaborative, Limitations*

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

For many years, English language has been the most dominant language in the world. Like in many other countries, it is being used as a medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary educational levels in Ethiopia. Hence, learners are expected to have adequate skills in using the language. This is basically because the learner's skills in using the language highly determine their academic success. In other words, the success of the learners in English language can be determined by their performance in listening, speaking, writing and reading. Atkins et al, 1995 ^[1]

Since English language is the major means of communication among the language widely spoken around the world, people who are qualified in English are needed to be hired by governments, business companies, ministry of education and nongovernmental organizations. This indicates that everyone had better learn and speak English in order to achieve one's goal.

According to McGroarty (1989) ^[2] cited in Ghaith, (2003:451^[3]) CL provides maximum opportunities for meaningful input and output in a highly interactive and supportive environment. It also integrates language and content learning, and its varied applications are in harmony with the pedagogical implications of the input, socialization, and interactive theories of L2 acquisition. This is because CL enhances the motivation and psychosocial adjustment of L2 learners. Likewise, CL may be especially useful for learners based on the assumption that it provides a variety of ways for organizing instruction and integrating language and content into various discourse and instructional contexts.

In line with this, CL encourages active participation in genuine conversations and collaborative problem-solving activities in a class climate of personal and academic support. It also empowers learners and provides them with autonomy and control to organize their own learning (Thomson, 1998; Clifford, 1999 ^[4]). Cooperative learning groups in an EFL classroom provide students with ample opportunity to interact with their peers. Interaction is critical for English language learners to be able to master the language. Echevarria and Vogt (2010) ^[5] suggest that ELL students need to be actively engaged 90-100% of instructional time to realize academic success. Cooperative learning groups are an excellent way to keep students actively involved in the classroom.



According to Krashen (1985) ^[6], the fundamental principle of second language acquisition is that people obtain a second language only if they receive comprehensible input and their affective filter is low enough to receive it. By using cooperative learning in the EFL classroom, students are provided comprehensible input by their peers and teacher. Cooperative learning keeps students actively engaged, so they are interested and motivated. This can lower their affective filter so they are more receptive to learning English. Learning groups are effective for all students, but that they are especially important for English language learners because of the interaction and peer modeling of English. Listening and communicating with many different students in many different situations (rotating groups) offers a great deal of communication practice for EFLs. Hence, students are expected to learn the language interactively and independently. In order to enable students learn the language interactively, cooperative learning has been proclaimed as one of the effective instructional approaches in our country.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Ethiopia's Educational policy, the change in the aims of learning and teaching English in recent years has led to the change of teaching method, i.e., from a teacher centered to student centered method. In order to increase students' communicative competence, student-student interaction is emphasized in learning English. One of the most useful ways of achieving this goal is creating a learning group environment which provides so many opportunities for students to communicate and a means of integrating the main language skills-listening, speaking, reading and writing (Harmer, 1998) ^[7]. And this is the reason why cooperative learning within group works is specially paid much attention to, and it has been implemented in different educational levels in our country.

As to Swartzel (1997) ^[8], cooperative learning is realized when both teachers and students have a positive attitude towards it because some teachers and students may view it as if it has a political aspiration beyond the leaning-teaching process. When giving different English language courses, the researcher observed that several students seem unhappy while they are requested to be organized in one-to-five groups. This might be because of the English language teachers' attitudes towards cooperative learning. In addition, the attitudes teachers have towards learning in one-to five group organization (cooperative learning) has not been yet studied. If so, the expected change may not be able to be realized in the



learning-teaching process. This is the reason why the researcher determined to conduct this study. Therefore, the researcher made a study on exploring English language teachers' attitude towards cooperative learning in English language classes in North Shoa Zone preparatory schools. To do so, an attempt was made to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main factors that affect teachers' attitude towards CL?
2. What is the perception of English language teachers towards CL.?
3. What are the advantages and limitations of cooperative learning?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective

The main objective of this study was to explore English language teachers' attitude towards cooperative learning in English language classes in North Shoa zone preparatory schools.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this study were to:

- see whether English language teachers perceive CL positively or negatively
- assess the advantages and limitations of cooperative learning
- identify the factors that affect English language teachers' perception towards CL

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The finding of the study is expected to have its own significance for English language teachers. It may provide useful information to them about the consequence of cooperative learning, i.e. it can show them how to improve their students' language skills, build cross-ethnic friendships, practice enhanced self-esteem, and build life-long interaction and communication skills through implementing cooperative learning. It could also help the concerned bodies, including researchers, identify why teachers have positive or negative attitudes towards cooperative learning. This again can contribute for practitioners to think ahead of improving CL in English classroom. Furthermore, the finding may serve as a source of information for further researchers who want to conduct a study on the same area.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

There are 21 main districts with one preparatory school in each district in the selected zone. Thus, the study was limited to seven preparatory schools in the zone, i.e., *Hailemariam Mamo, Enewary, Debre Sina, Shewa Robit, Minjar, Mera Betie* and *Ankober Preparatory*



Schools. Therefore, the sources of the data were English language teachers of those schools, and the other preparatory schools in the selected zone were not the focus of this study for different reasons.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The main objective of the study was to explore English language teachers' attitude towards cooperative learning in English language classes. To achieve this objective, a descriptive research design was employed, and in order to conduct the study, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed.

Methodology

The data gathering instruments, data sources, data collection procedures and the method of data analysis were implemented based on the following expressions.

Data Gathering instruments

So as to achieve the main and specific objectives stated earlier, questionnaires, focus group discussion and semi-structured interview were employed to gather data. The researcher hoped that using these three data gathering tools enabled him to collect sufficient data from the participants of the study.

Source of Data

To obtain information for this study, English language teachers of *HaileMariam Mamo, Enewary, Debre Sina, Shewa Robit, Minjar, Mera Betie* and *Ankober* Preparatory Schools were the main sources of data. The researcher decided to focus on preparatory school teachers hoping that they are somewhat confident to express their feelings freely.

Sample size and sampling technique

As the number of English language teachers in the selected schools was not large in number, all of them who were teaching in grade 11 and 12 were involved using available sampling technique.

Data collection procedures

After preparing the instruments, the researcher got the consent of the participants from each school, and then questionnaires were administered to get the general feeling of teachers whereby their attitudes to CL was evident in their answers followed by a semi structured interview. The interview was conducted with two teachers in each school. Finally,



to get what common feelings teachers had on cooperative learning, focus group discussions were held with teachers in each school. The subjects who took part in the interview and focus group discussions were randomly selected from those who were selected to fill in the questionnaire.

Methods of data analysis

To assess the attitudes of English language teachers, the data which were gathered through questionnaire was categorized, tabulated and analyzed in a quantitative method. And the data which was collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interview was summarized and treated qualitatively organizing the information obtained from the participants thematically.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Data Analysis of Teachers' Questionnaire

Table 1: Teachers' response to item 1 - 3

No	Items	F.& %	Responses			
			Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
1	<i>My students willingly participate in cooperative learning activities.</i>	F	9	6	25	40
		%	22.5	15.0	62.5	100
2	<i>When students work together, they achieve more than they work alone.</i>	F	3	3	34	40
		%	7.5	7.5	85.0	100%
3	<i>Cooperative learning can improve students' attitude towards work.</i>	F	3	4	33	40
		%	7.5%	10%	82.5%	100%

As indicated in Table 1, item 1, 25 (62.5%) of the respondents believed that their students willingly participate in cooperative learning activities where as 9 (22.5%) disagreed saying that their students do not willingly participate in cooperative learning activities. Only 6 (15.0%) of them were not sure about the given opinion. Therefore, from the table it is possible to see that most of the English language teachers agreed that students are not reluctant to work cooperatively.

With regard to item 2 of the same Table, the majority of the respondents 34(85.0%) agreed that when students work together; they achieve more than they work alone. Those who disagreed with the given idea were only 3 (7.5%) respondents, and 3 (7.5%) were neutral. Therefore, one can see that most teachers realize that students can achieve a better result when they cooperate together than working individually. From the analysis, we can possible



deduce that the more students work together, the better they will achieve.

Concerning item 3, the figure shows that most of the respondents 33(82.5%) respondents think that cooperative learning can improve students' attitude towards work, where as very few 3 (7.5%) disagreed that cooperative learning cannot improve students' attitude towards work. Similarly, in the table, only 4 (10.0%) did not say whether cooperative learning can improve or not students' attitude towards work. Thus, from the table it is possible to infer that most English language teachers agreed that cooperative learning can make students change their attitude towards work.

Table 2: Teachers' response to item 4 - 6

No	Items	F.& %	Responses			
			Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
4	<i>Cooperative learning helps students to socialize more.</i>	F		1	39	40
		%	0%	25.0%	97.5%	100%
5	<i>Cooperative learning enhances good working relationships among students.</i>	F	1	1	38	40
		%	2.5%	2.5%	95.0%	100%
6	<i>Cooperative learning enhances class participation.</i>	F		7	33	40
		%	0%	17.5%	82.5%	100%

Item 4, in Table 2, required the respondents to agree or disagree if cooperative learning helps students to socialize more or not. Almost all of the respondents 39 (97.5), agreed that cooperative learning can help students to socialize more. Nobody disagreed with the idea given, but only one was not sure about it. Hence, one can conclude that English language teachers believe in the fact that when students learn cooperative they can socialize easily with others.

The response given to item 5 indicates that most, 38 (95.0%) respondents agreed that cooperative learning enhances good working relationships among students. Only 1(2.5%) and 1 (2.5%) respondent disagreed and was neutral respectively. Thus, we can deduce that the belief that cooperative learning enhances good working relationships among students is acceptable by most English language teachers.

When respondents were asked, item 6, whether they agree or disagree with the given idea that cooperative learning enhances class participation, the majority of the respondents 33(82.5%) agreed while very of them 7(17.5%) were neutral about the idea forwarded. Therefore, it is possible to say that most English language teachers believe that cooperative learning promotes students participation in the classroom.



Table 3: Teachers' response to item 7 - 9

No	Items	F.& %	Responses			
			Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
7	<i>Creativity is facilitated in the group setting.</i>	F	1	5	34	40
		%	2.5%	12.5%	60.0%	100%
8	<i>Group activities make the learning experience easier.</i>	F	2	7	31	40
		%	5.0%	17.5%	77.5%	100%
9	<i>Students prefer to work with other students who are different from them.</i>	F	14	10	26	40
		%	35.0%	25.0%	65.0%	100%

The majority of respondents 34(60.5%) in Table 3 agreed that creativity is facilitated in the group setting while only 1(2.5%) participants disagreed with the given idea. Some respondents 5(12.5%) were not sure whether creativity is facilitated in the group setting or not. Thus, from the given data, one can say that although there are some teachers who were neutral, most teachers agreed that creativity can be facilitated in group setting.

In item 8 of the same Table, most respondents 31(77.5%) agreed that group activities make learning experience easier for their students, whereas only 2(5.0%) respondents disagreed. However, there were 7 (17.5) respondents who were neutral to agree or disagree with the idea stated. From the response, one can deduce that a lot of English language teachers take for granted the benefits of group activities to make learning experience easier for the students in the English classroom.

The information given to item 9 indicates that 26 (65.0%) respondents agreed that students prefer to work with other students who are different from them, whereas some respondents 14 (35.80%) disagreed with the idea. Not negligible number of respondents 10(25.0%) were neutral. Hence, from the response, we can deduce that although some English language teachers believe that students prefer to work with those students who are not the same as to them, the number of respondent teachers who disagreed with this idea is not negligible. Similarly, some English language teachers are not sure whether the students prefer it or not. Therefore, from the response we can conclude that the idea that students prefer to work with students who are different from them is not believed by most of the English language teachers as there are some English language teachers who did not agree and were neutral.



Table 4: Teachers' response to item 10 - 12

No	Items	F.& %	Responses			
			Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
10	<i>Students enjoy the material more when they work together.</i>	F	3	4	33	40
		%	7.5%	10.0%	82.5%	100%
11	<i>Students' work is better organized when they are in group.</i>	F	3	6	31	40
		%	7.5%	15.0%	77.5%	100%
12	<i>I prefer to give my students more group activities / assignments.</i>	F	5	6	29	40
		%	12.5%	15.0%	72.5%	100%

The majority of respondents to item 10, 33(82.5%) agreed that students enjoy the material more when they work together, while very few of them 3(7.5%) disagreed. The other 4 (10.0%) respondents were neutral to the given idea. From the given data, we can see that most English language teachers accept that students like discussing the material with others in the classroom.

With regard to item 11, in Table 4, we can see that most respondents 31(77.5%) agreed that students' work is better organized when they are in group, whereas very few respondents 3(7.5%) and 6(15.0%) disagreed and stayed neutral with the idea. Therefore, the data clearly indicate that most English language teachers agreed that when students work together their work is well organized.

In item 12 of the same Table, the given data shows that 29 (72.0%) respondents agreed that they prefer to give their students more group activities or/and assignments. Nevertheless, only 5 (12.5%) respondents disagreed with the idea while the other 6(15.0%) respondents were not sure to agree or disagree with the given idea. Hence, from the analysis we can infer that most English language teachers believe in the benefit of giving group activities to their students.

Data Analysis of Teachers' Interview

Qn.1. Teachers were asked what they preferred to teach in, i.e., in a large (7 and more students) or a small (5 and less students) group? Thus, almost all the respondents responded that they preferred teaching in a group with small members saying that the smaller the students' number is the better the teacher monitors the class. They also added that teaching in a group with small members enables to give feedback to the given activity within the given time. It can also give a chance to each member to participate, and enables them/teachers to manage and give feedback easily.

Qn.2 The second question was whether the English language teachers use their own



method instead of cooperative learning. In view of that, most English language teachers replied that they preferred using cooperative learning to teach because it gives a chance to every member to take part, let students help each other, and develop new approaches to resolving differences

However, a few respondents reported that the method they use depended up on the nature of the lesson. Therefore, according to their answers, they sometimes use different methods based on what they believed and decided to use.

Qn.3 The third question was if English language teachers preferred giving group activities and assignments. Accordingly, most of them responded that they give activities and assignments in group. They reasoned out that the more the students do activities and assignments in group, the better they learn from each other. In addition, they said that giving activities and assignments in group could support students to contribute their own part to the given activities and assignments, enable them to achieve better than they do individually, enhance their thinking ability and makes them active participant, and promote their cooperation in and outside the classroom. In contrast, some teachers revealed that they do not give group assignment. In their perception, only one or two students can do the given assignments. Therefore, they preferred giving assignments individually or in pair.

Qn.4. The participants were also asked whether they gave clear guidelines for the completion of group activities and assignments in or outside the classroom. In relation to this, the respondents responded that they give clear guidelines for the completion of each work given in and outside classroom.

On the contrary, only some respondents answered that they did not give any guideline to their students on how and when they should do and complete the assignments. For them, students do their assignment in a way they like and complete any time they want. However, a few of the respondents also stated that they do not give group assignments; instead, they assess their students giving individual tests and quizzes. Accordingly, one can see that English language teachers, except very few, give clear guidelines to their students for the completion of group activities and assignments to be done in or outside the classroom.

Analysis of Teachers' Focus Group Discussions

The focuses of teachers' focus group discussions were on their perceptions, advantages, limitations and solutions of cooperative learning. This was to enable the participants express



their feeling in an open-ended situation, and to enhance the data collected through questionnaire and interview. Hence, the analysis of the focus group discussions (**FGDs**) focused on these issues.

The first issue discussed was to see English language teachers' attitudes towards teaching English through cooperative learning. They replied that they had a positive attitude towards it as they believed that learning-teaching through this would be equally interesting for both teachers and their students. The participants said that when the students work with their partners asking each other for help, they could have a high level of enthusiasm, curiosity and involvement in being taught through cooperative learning. This, as a result, led them trust each other in the group promoting their interaction in and outside the classroom. For this reason, they understood that moving together would bring success to all of them. They also informed that careful consideration should be given to some English language teachers who perceived cooperative learning as if it had a political aspiration.

In relation to the advantages of cooperative learning, English language teachers explained that it provides several academic benefits for students. They may be beneficiary from it in the sense that there is more of a potential for success when they work in groups, and their grades can tend to increase when doing so. Similarly, they revealed that cooperative teaching method utilizes a variety of learning styles and assessments since grades are not dependent only on tests and individual assignments. It also promotes students' social interactions in a number of ways when explaining their reasoning and conclusions.

Despite many advantages in social interaction, self confidence, positive interdependence, etc., English language teachers stated that cooperative learning has its own possible drawbacks. They stated that English language teachers who are unfamiliar with cooperative learning may not initially accept this style of learning/teaching because they think as if it is too time consuming. Besides, if students are expected to explore on their own, they may have questions that the teacher is not capable of doing that. On the other hand, in their view, cooperative learning may allow one student not to do anything while his/her partners carry out a given task.

Finally, the focus group participants discussed what can be the possible solutions to the limitations of cooperative learning. Regarding this, some English language teachers have a negative attitude towards it, which in turn may affect the implementation of cooperative



learning, and they suggested that proper training should be given to English language teachers about the implementation of cooperative learning.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

As mentioned earlier, this study was conducted to find out English language teachers' attitude towards cooperative learning in English language classes. Accordingly, the results of the data lead to reach the following conclusions:

In order to find out what attitudes English language teachers have towards cooperative learning, the researcher tried to answer the research questions raised in this study. To do so, three types of data gathering instruments, i.e., questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion were employed to collect relevant and reliable data from different perspectives. From the data gathered through the various types of techniques, the researcher made an effort to realize the kind of reaction that the sample participants have towards the major aspects of cooperative learning in English language classroom. The data gathered through questionnaire were first tabulated and analyzed quantitatively in terms of frequency and percentages, whereas the data gathered through interview and focus group discussion were organized and described qualitatively using themes in order to support the data gathered through the questionnaire. As a result, the findings of the study are summarized based on the analysis and interpretation made to each instrument as follows.

The findings based on the questionnaire indicated that most English language teachers were found to have a positive attitude towards cooperative learning in teaching and learning English. Similarly, in the interview and focus group discussions, they confirmed that moving together, i.e., learning cooperatively, would bring a success to students promoting their positive interdependence, **individual accountability**, **face-to-face interaction**, etc. In contrast, time consuming, idleness of some students, demanding of high control, sense of being pooled back by the low-performing students etc., were mentioned to be some of the factors affecting cooperative learning. In addition, some English language teachers were found to have a negative attitude towards cooperative learning viewing. Hence, they suggested that proper training should be given to English language teachers about implementing cooperative learning in English classrooms.



Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions reached, the following recommendations are forwarded:

- As some English language teachers perceived cooperative learning in a wrong way, this perception could affect the purpose of using the method which can promote learning English language cooperatively. Hence, training about the idea of cooperative learning should be given by the researcher of this study and those who have experiences on implementing CL to English language teachers to change the negative attitude they have towards CL and start using it in their English classroom.
- To minimize the factors that hinder the proper implementation of CL in the English classroom, English language teachers should be well oriented about the principles of CL by university trainers who have the expertise in the area.
- The findings indicated that most teachers were found to have a positive attitude towards cooperative learning in teaching English. Therefore, university instructors from the department of English language and literature should make these positive attitudes of teachers be disseminated to others by creating the opportunity to share their experiences.
- Finally, as CL enhances students' academic and communication/social skills, English language teachers in preparatory schools should work collaboratively with English language teachers in universities to help students learn cooperatively.

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