Cooperative Learning Strategies for English as a Second Language (ESL) Module Development

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ABSTRACT

English language teaching approaches need to shift from traditional teacher-centred methods to more collaborative and interactive practices in order to create a more engaging and meaningful learning. Teachers often report that students tend to shy away from participating when they working individually compared to when they work collaboratively. Research suggests that students benefit more when they are able to share their thoughts and ideas and engage in discussions with one another. However, group work does not necessarily guarantee effective learning, as some students may not actively participate in their groups. The present study focuses on cooperative learning as an effective instructional strategy in English language teaching, with a particular emphasis on its role informing the development of a Cooperative Learning Strategies Module for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. The study employs a qualitative research approach using document analysis of academic sources such as journal articles and other related documents of cooperative learning strategies. Findings reveal that cooperative learning positively affects student motivation, engagement, social skills, language proficiency, and academic attainment in ESL and other subjects. Studies reveal that structured cooperative learning strategies, such as Jigsaw and Team Games Tournament, promote accountability, collaboration, and self-confidence while reducing learning anxiety. Moreover, cooperative learning supports the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, self-confidence, and positive intergroup relationships. The findings imply that integrating cooperative learning principles and structured activities into ESL modules can create a more interactive, student-centred classroom, fostering both academic and social development among primary school learners.

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1. Introduction

In the Malaysian education system, English is recognised as a second language. In line with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB), English was established as a compulsory subject across all levels of schooling to enhance students' language proficiency and global competitiveness. This emphasis continues in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2026-2035), which further strengthens the role of English in developing communicative competence, higher-order thinking skills, and students' readiness for participation in an increasingly globalised world. This direction aligns with the aspiration outlined in the blueprint that every student should acquire proficiency in multiple languages, including English, to function effectively in both local and international contexts.

As mentioned in the blueprint, students are expected to possess the ability to interact, collaborate, and comprehend, while also demonstrating a positive impact on others emotional intelligence. In addition, they should have the capacity to communicate their ideas and intentions effectively, both orally and in writing, reflecting strong communication skills. To cultivate these qualities in every student, teachers need to incorporate learning strategies that promote collaborative group work in the classroom. However, each classroom is diversified in the sense of students' proficiency, academic ability, learning styles and ethnicity. So, to expect every student to participate and perform well during the group activities would be difficult especially to those students with lower proficiency which could lead to free riders in the group. Hence, teachers are tasked to implement learning strategies that can address the needs of all their students.

Many studies have encouraged the implementation of cooperative learning to assist teachers in addressing the needs of their students. In each cooperative learning group, group members work toward a common purpose; are responsible for their duties; are equivalent from the point of race, religion, and gender; are equally responsible for making contributions to the group; have the right to express their own opinions and ideas; take on leadership roles; build confidence; practice trouble-shooting and decision-making skills; make decisions after wide discussion; and take the welfare and common benefit of the members of other groups into consideration (Erbil & Kocabaş, 2018). A lesson that implements cooperative learning strategy helps students take learning in their own hands and assist them in expressing ideas as well as improve their communicative skills along with their grades.

Various research carried out in different countries have indicated the positive impacts of the implementation of cooperative learning strategies on learners' language proficiency, social skills, and learning behaviour. For instance, in Taiwan, Liang (2002) used a pretest posttest on 70 junior high school students to investigate the effects of cooperative learning on their language learning. The study reported results reflecting an increase in students' active communication and performance. In New Zealand, Li and Campbell (2008) conducted a study on twenty-two Asian students from a New Zealand tertiary institution to explore their perception on the cooperative learning concepts in the form of group work and assignments. The research reported that these students appreciated the cooperative concepts as it enabled them to develop their language abilities. In Europe, Daiva Jasavonyte-Staskuviene (2021) aimed to investigate 186 first to fourth year students from a Lithuanian city school perspective on the benefits of cooperative learning of language. It was reported that students found learning through cooperation significant and beneficial.

The main philosophy behind cooperative learning is social interdependence theory. Social interdependence is the mechanism whereby the outcomes of individuals in a group are affected by the actions of the other group members (Butera & Buchs, 2019). Two of the five elements of cooperative learning; positive interdependence and individual accountability highlight the social constructivism theory where students are held accountable to complete their part and are to rely on each other to achieve the particular goal. In short, when the achievement of a certain goal is affected

by others through their actions (unwilling to do their task), we can relate it to the social interdependence theory.

Social constructivism theory by Lev Vygotsky would be another theory that is relevant to cooperative learning. Vygotsky's study about the growth of children from their environment and interaction with others revealed that what happens in the social environment helps children learn, develop, and grow (Li & Lam, 2002 as cited in Dendup et al., 2020). Vygotsky further relates it to the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is defined as "the distance between a learner's actual development level, as determined by independent problem solving, and his/her potential development with guidance from ``a capable other'', or in collaboration with ``more capable peers''" (Vygotsky, 1978 as cited in Bitzer, 2001). This means that when things are challenging for students to comprehend on their own, they may be able to master the content with the assistance of adults, more knowledgeable person or a more proficient student. According to Yassin et al. (2018), this theory supports the significance of cooperative learning which depends too much on the interaction between the learners as they provide each other with ideas and knowledge.

Based on the definitions and elements mentioned above, the Social Interdependence Theory and Social Constructivism Theory may be able to provide a theoretical concept for the research on primary school English language students. This study intends to provide an effective cooperative learning strategies English language module to be implemented in the Year 4 ESL classrooms in order to address all the needs of the students in a classroom.

In light of this, the present study focuses on cooperative learning as an effective instructional strategy in English language teaching, with a particular emphasis on its role informing the development of a Cooperative Learning Strategies Module for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction.

2. Literature Review

Cooperative learning involves structuring classes around small groups that work together in such a way that each group member's success is dependent on the group's success (Teed et al., 2023). Cooperative learning is an instructional method where students work in small groups or even in pairs to accomplish a common goal with the guidance of the teacher. What happens in a cooperative learning environment is that students work with one another where they have a certain task to accomplish and explain to others. Based on the context of the study, cooperative learning will be implemented in the module. Lessons in the module will consist of activities that include a mix of cooperative learning strategies.

Cooperative learning is defined as the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximise their own and each other's learning (Namaziandost et al., 2020). Many scholars have demonstrated the effectiveness of cooperative learning as one of the best teaching approaches. Cooperative learning has demonstrated to be one of the effective teaching approaches across a diverse curriculum, particularly in the field of the second/foreign language (Hsu, 2007). A lesson that implements cooperative learning helps students take learning in their own hands and assist them in expressing ideas as well as improve their communicative skills along with their grades. Vygotsky (1978) states that students are capable of performing at a much higher intellectual level when they work together in collaborative/cooperative situations than when they are required to work individually.

Johnson *et al.*, (1994) has listed down the five key elements of cooperative learning as follows: • Positive Interdependence
• Individual Accountability

• Face-to-Face Promotive Interaction
• Interpersonal and Small Group Social Skills
• Group Processing

Just as there are many definitions of cooperative and interactive learning, there are several underlying theories and related typologies of theoretical foundations. This study shall rely primarily on the typology offered by Robert Slavin (1989), who describes six theories supporting cooperative learning. One of this is relevant to tertiary students: motivational. Motivational theories are the most widely researched and rely on Kurt Lewin's field theory and Morton Deutsch's theory of interdependence. Both these imply that actions are determined by motivation, which can be shaped by rewards and goals, classified as cooperative, competitive, or individualistic. In other words, students are motivated via rewards and goals to see their personal success as positively correlated, negatively correlated, or unrelated to the success of others in their group. According to social-cognitive theories, the social contexts for interacting together with the cognitive efforts of the speaker. Second language speaking involves the cognitively demanding task of generating meaningful interaction in a second language. Second language students need more teacher involvement and guidance. Hence teachers need to understand the social and cognitive factors involved in the process of acquiring the second language and errors in speaking as these factors have an important effect on L2 speaking development (Myles, 2002). In view of such needs, it is intended in this study to provide the students guidance in the form of a cooperative interactive learning module to enable them to learn English and to explore the extent to which it will help the students to develop their proficiency as they acquire the skills.

When students believe that they are connected in a way where nobody is able to succeed unless everyone succeeds, positive interdependence is achieved. This can be done through an established common goal, setting roles for each member, work segregation and division of materials where each student will play a part in ensuring the groups success. Individual accountability looks into each student taking responsibility for their contribution and comprehension of the lesson or material. The sharing of resources, ideas, knowledge as well as discussing with each other in order to promote each other's learning would lead to face-to face promotive interaction. When teaching, it is important to not only focus on the content of the lesson but also teaching students interpersonal and small group social skills like communicating, cooperating, reinforcing, solving problems or even giving positive and constructive feedbacks. Group processing would be the reflective phase where students reflect on their learning and their cooperation as a group. This is when students can sit down and reflect on the things their group members or themselves need to improve in order to continue reaching the learning goals. Based on the key elements above, it can be seen how cooperative learning is more of an active learning process where students are responsible for their own learning. Cooperative learning also builds students life skills especially communication, leadership and teamwork.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, employing thematic analysis as the primary method to obtain accurate findings. The analysis focuses on previous studies concerning teachers' application of cooperative learning strategies in the ESL classroom, which constitutes the main objective of this research. Thematic analysis is a methodology employed for the examination of qualitative data, involving the systematic exploration of a given dataset in order to discern, scrutinise, and subsequently communicate recurring patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The aforementioned approach serves as a means of delineating data, yet it concurrently entails the exercise of

interpretation during the stages of code selection and theme construction. One notable characteristic of thematic analysis lies in its inherent adaptability, enabling its utilisation across a diverse array of theoretical and epistemological paradigms.

4. Literature Review Analysis
4.1 Skill Development through Cooperative Learning

Alghamdy (2019) claimed that CL improved students' English skills, oral presentation skills, self-confidence, motivation, taking of responsibility, sharing and respecting others' views, and developed good relationships with their classmates. This is because cooperative learning ensures every individual in a group takes up a role to complete the task or solve the problem given. Students are held responsible for their own learning as well as the success of the group.

4.2 Motivational Benefits of Cooperative Learning

Students' motivation would increase with the use of cooperative learning in the classroom. Cooperative learning maximizes the motivation allowing individual learners to showcase their talents enabling self-learning, building self-confidence and develops positive attitude towards other members of the group (Dendup et al., 2020). This is supported by Munawar & Chaudhary (2019) when they reported observing the low achievers and the students with low self-esteem raised their hands to answer even when they had the wrong answer or only sometimes the correct answer. Dendup et al., (2020) reported that students interacted freely with their friends without any hesitation and with reduced anxiety as well as demonstrated an increased ability to discuss tasks with peers improving the use of communication skills with a variety of skill level in students. This proves that cooperative learning has the ability to motivate students to actively participate in the classroom and improve students' academic performance.

4.3 Positive Outcomes of Cooperative Learning

Looking into the implementation of cooperative learning in the Malaysian primary school classrooms, positive effects have also been recorded. Kamaruddin and Yusoff (2019) stated that cooperative learning proved to be effective in improving the social skills of year three pupils in Islamic Education subjects. This is because the cooperative learning model of Jigsaw (CLMJ) and Cooperative Learning Model of Team Games Tournament (CLMTGT) train pupils to be disciplined, environmentally conscious, respecting groups, encouraging interaction, stimulating leadership, responsible attitude and striving to achieve group goal (Kamaruddin & Yusuf, 2019). Based on an excerpt from the Malaysia Education Blueprint Annual Report 2013 (Ministry of Education 2014, 2013, p. 67), it can be concluded that cooperative learning is an effective strategy to be implemented in the primary school English language classrooms.

> *"The cooperative learning methods, consistent with the concept of school-based assessment, helped boost student confidence and fostered student interest in learning. Another benefit of the cooperative method is that it indirectly encourages children to become more independent and responsible for their learning. Since 2011, the school has consistently recorded attendance of more than 90% of students." - En Samion Kassim, Principal, SMK Semenchu Kota Tinggi, Johor*

5. Cooperative Learning and Students' Performance in Science

Molla and Muche (2018) conducted a study to evaluate the impact of cooperative learning methods on students' academic achievement and laboratory proficiency in biology subject. This study adopted quasi-experimental control group interrupted time series design. Data were collected from 369 students and 18 biology teachers in three schools. A series of biological tests and semi structured questionnaire were used to collect data. Multivariate analysis (two-way ANOVA) was used to analyse the test scores exposed by teaching methods, and semi structured questionnaire was administered to comprehend factors that hamper the successive execution of CL. Hence, multivariate analysis revealed that there was no significant difference in the pretest score of the learner academic performance; however, there were significant differences in the post-test results by teaching methods, but not by schools. Correspondingly, there were significant differences in the pretest and post-test results of the student's laboratory proficiency by teaching methods. The results exemplify that there was significant learning gain obtained via CLAD followed by cooperative discussion group (CDG). The result from the questionnaire survey showed that the number of students, lack of laboratory equipment, and so on hamper consecutive execution of CL.

6. Implementation Challenges of Cooperative Learning in EFL Classrooms

A study conducted by Ghaith (2018) on teachers' perceptions of the challenges of implementing concrete and conceptual cooperative learning revealed that cooperative learning is valued as an important pedagogy for achieving communicative competence and social cohesion. The study reports the results of a mixed-methods study of the perceptions of a selected group of experienced teachers of English as a foreign language of the challenges and potentials of using various cooperative learning methods, in the context of achieving the communicative and social goals of a modern theme-based curriculum. Participants (N =18) took part in a three-day refresher in-service program, during which they completed a semantic differential scale and kept journals to record their perceptions of the congruence, cost, difficulty, and importance, as well as to express their views regarding the challenges and potentials of using cooperative learning in their respective classrooms. The findings of the study showed that the participants tended to perceive the more concrete Jigsaw cooperative learning methods and the cooperative learning Structural approach to be more congruent to their practices, less costly, and easier to implement; although equally important, to the more conceptual methods of Group investigation, Learning together, and Creative controversy. Likewise, the study showed that all cooperative learning methods and strategies are valued, despite implementation challenges related to teacher knowledge, proper implementation, curriculum alignment and crowdedness, time on task, and school policy.

7. Theoretical Foundations and Benefits of Cooperative Learning

Teaching ESL can be challenging when student engagement is lacking due to high teacher talk, scripted curriculum, or lack of interest. Fortunately, cooperative learning structures give students the engagement they desire while making the classroom student-centred and exciting [9]. Baloche and Brody [1] further explicated that cooperative learning has the potential to effect positively students' achievement, motivation for learning, intergroup relations, critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, and a host of other well-researched outcomes (p.1). Furthermore, cooperative learning is supported by a number of psycho-social theoretical frameworks such as the motivational, cognitive

developmental/ elaboration, social cohesion/cognitive, social interdependence, and the behavioural as well as the social constructivist theories of teaching and learning [7,16]. Cooperative learning is also proclaimed as an instructional framework in the context of educational reforms and modernising educational systems in many countries throughout the world, given that it addresses universal curricular, cognitive and social goals [15].

8. Conclusion

The findings and final results of this study will be extremely beneficial to both pre-service and in-service teachers. The researchers expect to provide a cooperative learning strategies module that can be used in schools and act as a guide for teachers who intend to implement cooperative learning strategies in classes other than year four. This study aims to give teachers an alternative method in the teaching and learning process. Findings reveal that cooperative learning positively affects student motivation, engagement, social skills, language proficiency, and academic attainment in ESL and other subjects. Studies reveal that structured cooperative learning strategies, such as Jigsaw and Team Games Tournament, promote accountability, collaboration, and self-confidence while reducing learning anxiety. Moreover, cooperative learning supports the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, self-confidence, and positive intergroup relationships. The findings imply that integrating cooperative learning principles and structured activities into ESL modules can create a more interactive, student-centred classroom, fostering both academic and social development among primary school learners. The competition between groups, which is stressed by cooperative learning has motivational advantages for low and middle achieving students that individual competition does not. By grouping students of different abilities into one team as is recommended in cooperative learning, the joy of success can be more evenly distributed to a greater number of students in the classroom. Cooperative learning principles encourage students to look to themselves for resources rather than relying solely on the teacher. When student groups are having difficulty, it is very tempting for teachers to intervene either in a particular group or with the entire class. We may sometimes want to resist this temptation, because as Roger Johnson writes. Teachers must trust the peer interaction to do many of the things they have felt responsible for themselves.

Acknowledgement

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