

## Impacts of cooperative learning: A qualitative study with EFL students and teachers in Vietnamese colleges

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This study aims to investigate the positive impacts and challenges of cooperative learning as a pedagogical practice in teaching English as a foreign language. It applied the social theoretical frameworks by Dansereau and Johnson (1994) and by Johnson and Johnson (2009). Fifty participants (twenty EFL teachers and thirty EFL students) from several different colleges in Vietnam were interviewed. The results showed that students gained group work skills, problem-solving skills, and confidence. However, they suffered challenges in report making and relationships. While some students reported benefits in communication, others revealed that it was challenging. The benefits or challenges were mainly the results of the participants' compliance with the five principles of cooperative learning. It is implied from the study that EFL teachers applying cooperative learning should play their key role as counsellor and supervisor to help students overcome problems arising from the tasks and socialisation. It is also important to structure interdependence and mutual respect among group members before cooperative learning commences. Further studies can explore the impacts of cooperative learning in other disciplines and contexts.

### Introduction

Cooperative learning (CL) refers to a set of teaching and learning strategies which are used to enhance students' collaboration in pairs or groups of up to five, to incorporate peer education into students' learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). CL has two main types: formal and informal. The formal type refers to the techniques applied in classrooms, while the informal type is defined as group work between students outside the classroom. CL is emerging into high importance in education as it can enhance students' academic performance (Yamarik, 2007), engagement (Herrmann, 2013), interaction in the classroom (Gillies, 2016) and need for cognition (Castle, 2014). In English language teaching and learning, research has demonstrated that CL can improve students' motivation for language learning (Ning & Hornby, 2014) and language competence (e.g. Liang, 2002).

However, much of the research into applying CL has focused mainly on basic levels of education. Recent research investigating the impacts of CL in higher education has demonstrated controversial conclusions. Although some studies have shown positive effects of CL on students' efforts and engagement, others have shown negative effects on the sharing of work between group members (Cavanagh, 2011; Kember, 2003). There is a lack of research interest in investigating students' opinions. Contemporary literature shows that learner-centredness should be emphasised by having educational administrators, researchers, and teachers listen to student voices (Bishop, Caston & King, 2014).

In Vietnam, CL has been encouraged by teachers in the classroom (Nguyen, 2008) and at an institutional level (Nguyen, 2011). CL has also entered into a national educational

policy to make a change from teacher-centredness to learner-centredness (MOET, 2006). Accordingly, there have been national projects and workshops for teacher training to apply CL in several disciplines, including foreign language teaching. The relatively late adoption of CL and lack of interest in exploring the impacts of CL on students' foreign language learning provides reasons for conducting the present study.

## **Integrating cooperative learning in foreign language education**

Educators have made suggestions on how to apply CL. It should be applied in colleges as undergraduates are especially in need of peer interaction. At this level, CL is believed to help students learn from one another (Herrmann, 2014). It can also assist those who miss or do not understand some points in lectures (Anderson, 2005). The effectiveness of CL is higher when all the group members' goals are in line with the entire class's goals which individual goals depend on. Positive interdependence and promotive interaction are assumed to assist students in achieving their goals and higher academic results (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Researchers have established several guidelines and principles to maximise CL benefits. Johnson, Johnson and Shin (2014) proposed guidelines for group members to achieve the objectives of the entire group, with three key principles: positive interdependence, individual accountability, and individual contribution. Positive interdependence refers to a situation when group members are aware that individuals should make some contribution to the entire effort of the group, which in turn affects other group members to a certain extent. Individual accountability takes place when assessment is based on individual performances. To put it another way, individuals are allowed to pursue their own goals while their personal goals align with the goals of the whole group. That means, CL should make individuals contribute to the success of the group, but grading can distinguish individuals' contributions. The common goals of a group cannot be achieved when the individual contributions are not considered. Ning (2013) added a key principle: group cohesion. When students interact with each other comfortably, a CL condition for successful interaction is attained. "Think-pair-share" can facilitate both an individual's cognitive processing and group work, in that students have opportunities to interact first with a pair partner for feedback and with a larger group for further opinion sharing, through encountering challenges and different or opposing opinions from their classmates (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000).

## **Impacts of cooperative learning**

Previous studies by Castle (2014), Cavanagh (2011), Gillies (2016), Ghufron and Ermawati (2018), Herrmann (2013), Johnson, Johnson, and Stanne (2000), Ning (2013), and Yamarik (2007) demonstrated a large number of effects of CL. These effects were more positive than negative. However, there has been little interest in investigating the impacts of CL on EFL learning in Vietnamese contexts.

### **Positive impacts**

Cooperative learning generally shows a number of positive impacts. First and foremost, participating in CL generally affects undergraduates' needs for cognition (Castle, 2014), which is necessary for their knowledge development and retention of information through meaningful learning (Hung, Vien & Vu, 2018). Higher education is commonly expected to develop critical thinking skills which can emerge from students' cognitive processing. Another benefit of CL is that learning can occur during students' collaboration, as it gives opportunities to exchange their opinions and learn from peers (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Also, students may feel more comfortable when communicating amongst peers rather than with teachers. Those who lag behind their classmates may feel less threatened, and therefore better able to learn from other group members. As a consequence, learning is deepened. In this way, CL may provide a benefit for large classes with students of different levels.

In addition, collaborative tasks prove successful in improving students' motivation for learning (Ning & Hornby, 2014). Accordingly, integrating CL into English language teaching can help students, especially those at an advanced level of proficiency who are supposed to be less motivated than low-level students, to be more motivated from positive interdependence in collaborative tasks. To put it another way, working together with peers generates an assistive learning environment in which social interactions take place. As a result, learning is facilitated. To ensure the learning outcomes, individual responsibility may be the first to be concerned about (Ning, 2013). Finally, CL may make students more active and engaged in the learning process (Meyer, 2009; Herrmann, 2014). In particular, CL encourages students' involvement in group work, and their meaningful engagement improves students' dynamics (Biggs & Tang, 2011) and reasoning ability (Chang & Brickman, 2018).

### **Negative impacts**

On the other hand, there are a number of limitations of CL. For the learning process, Strom and Strom (2002) uncovered two main weaknesses of CL. Specifically, it is difficult to assure a fair assessment and evaluation of students' work. The accomplishment of a group work is the result of the group members' contributions and principles which all the group members are committed to. The recognition of individuals' contributions may be difficult to integrate into the assessment and evaluation of the whole group's work. Secondly, students with different backgrounds may demonstrate diversity in culture, ethics, perceptions, and experiences. This is the source of potential conflict among group members in close contact. Ghufroon and Ermawati (2018) concluded from their study that CL is time-consuming. Teachers, in particular, need time to prepare, and students need time to interact and assist each other in the same group. Group members who are not good at time management may not complete the assigned task on schedule. Also, it is hard for the teacher to group students when they belong to different backgrounds as they may hesitate to get involved in group discussions. Finally, low-achieving students may not benefit cognitively from CL since it takes a large amount of time (Chang & Brickman, 2018).

In addition to the previous studies reviewed above, recent studies by Lange, Costley, and Han (2016), Ghaith (2018), and Ibrahim and Ibrahim (2017) relating to CL centred on the five principles of CL: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, social cohesion, and group processing. Their studies focused mainly on the formal type of CL in contexts other than Vietnam. The present study aims to explore social benefits and challenges of both formal and informal types of CL, as perceived by college EFL teachers and students at Vietnamese higher education contexts. It attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What benefits does cooperative learning bring about for EFL students?
2. What challenges do EFL students encounter from cooperative learning?

## Theoretical framework

Dansereau and Johnson (1994) introduced a model of CL based on two main perspectives: social-behavioural and cognitive-developmental (Figure 1), incorporating three main phases in an implementation of CL. The initial phase is called *Structures*. This usually takes place in the induction into CL. From the social-behavioural perspective, specific goals and task interdependence should be set, and cooperative processes should be specified from the cognitive-developmental perspective. In the second phase called *Processes*, the specific goals and task interdependence generate higher motivation to achieve individuals' goals and the entire group's goals. Also, the specific cooperative processes and group members' motivation together leads to a rise in interactions among members. In the final phase, the outcomes are fostered. However, educational outcomes can take place immediately or long after the learning process (Church, Elliot & Gable, 2001). That is, outcomes may be generated during the processes.

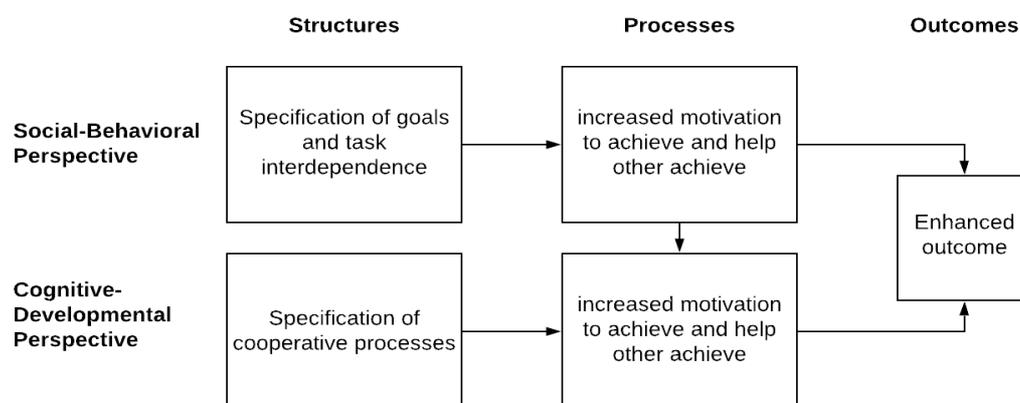


Figure 1: A model of cooperative learning (adapted from Dansereau & Johnson, 1994)

Johnson and Johnson (2009) introduced a theoretical framework of social interdependence which measures the effects of CL from the motivational, social, and cognitive perspectives. In this framework there are five main factors that contribute to the success of CL. The first factor is positive interdependence. All group members should

perceive the significance of their contributions to the entire group, which may affect the accomplishment of the entire group and other group members. Secondly, individual responsibility or accountability should be taken in that individuals need to complete their own work and assist other group members. Thirdly, promotive interactions need to take place among group members. In details, individuals within the group should share resources, offer assistance to each other, constructively and critically challenge the opinions introduced by other members, and consider different perspectives. All of these may help motivate and facilitate other group members' work. Fourthly, social skills play significant roles in making group members have mutual trust, foster communication, assist one another, and resolve emerging conflict between group members. Last but not least, the mechanism for group work and reflection should be established in that group members should be allowed to set their collective goals, and give positive and negative comments on other group members' performance and interactions.

The present study integrated the two existing frameworks for CL outlined above. The framework by Dansereau and Johnson (1994) was employed to construct the interview protocols. The data analysis and results were also structured into three phases. The framework by Johnson and Johnson (2009) was used to interpret the benefits and challenges of CL, as it shows the principles which CL has to follow. As this study applied a social framework to investigate the benefits and challenges perceived by EFL students and teachers, the element of language development was not considered.

## **Research methods**

### **Research approach and design**

This study adopted a qualitative approach as it attempted to explore in-depth information about both positive and negative impacts of CL, which had been undertaken recently prior to the time of conducting this study. Semi-structured, open-ended interview protocols were administered to teachers and students because these participants could identify impacts of CL. The teachers were the ones who applied strategies of CL, and the students were the ones who were required to exercise it.

### **Participants**

Fifty participants were involved in the present study. These participants were from three different institutions of higher education located in Vietnam. A purposeful sampling strategy was applied in participant selection (Creswell, 2013). Twenty foreign and Vietnamese teachers, with at least two years experience as EFL teachers and two years working at the surveyed institutions, were invited to face-to-face interviews. The involvement of teachers from diverse backgrounds was to increase the generalisability of this study. The foreign teachers, though not speakers of Vietnamese, had experience in teaching English in different Asian contexts. They had masters degrees in sociology and business administration and a certificate in English language teaching. The Vietnamese teachers had masters degrees in English language teaching. Thirty sophomore EFL students who were specialising in English participated in the present study. They revealed

that they had been experiencing CL since their first year in higher education. In the interviews, the participants' responses were analysed to uncover the root impacts of CL which they had experienced.

### **Ethical considerations**

In the interviews, the participants were treated with full respect and dignity. They were informed of their rights as participants. They could refuse to answer questions that they did not want to and could leave the interviews when they wanted to. All the participants were anonymised. The transcription of the interview responses was shown to the participants for confirmation.

### **Institutional settings**

The three institutions surveyed had a similar course design, particularly in EFL courses. The teachers, as reported, did not receive any formal in-service training in how to apply CL, but they had taken some modules in this practice in a TESOL course and/or a TESOL conference.

In the classroom, EFL students were required to work in pairs or groups of up to five regularly for discussion on an assigned topic relevant to the unit required by the course outline. The students were grouped randomly or allowed to choose a partner or partners whom they would like to work with. During the discussions in pairs or groups, the teacher coached the students' work. After their discussions, students reported their group's work to the whole class and teacher. Other class activities included lectures, individual or group presentations, and solitary work, especially in writing tasks.

The students were also given at least one group assignment each semester, to be completed in about four weeks. Group members were required to see the teacher at least once a week and report their progress while they were doing the assignment. For group work, they were introduced to or provided with social media references and print resources by the teacher.

### **Data collection, instruments and procedure**

All the participants were invited to personal interviews in which they were asked the semi-structured, open-ended interview protocols. Prompts were given where necessary to help them produce accurate responses. For the practical purpose of this study, the interview protocols for students and teachers had two main parts: positive impacts and negative impacts. The participants were also encouraged to address impacts of CL which they had experienced other than the ones listed in the protocols. The participants were asked to explain their responses and provide examples as illustrations. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and then transcribed into English by the researcher.

All the interviews were administered after all the participants had completed the semester courses and taken the final tests offered by the institutions. They were allowed to choose the time which they found the most convenient for the interviews. The interviews were all

audio-recorded, and conducted by the researcher in the attendance of a research assistant sitting behind whose role was to remind the researcher of ethical concerns and recording examination during the interviews.

### Data analysis

All the collected data were scrutinised, transcribed, coded, and analysed into two broad themes: positive impacts and negative impacts. In each of the themes, the responses were classified into two sub-themes: (1) structures, and (2) processes and outcomes. Each sub-theme included motivational, social, and cognitive aspects with their impacts on the learning process. In the interviews, no participants asked to end the interview or refused to answer a question. All the questions and answers were made explicitly. Examples of data analysis were given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Examples of participants' coded responses

Participant response	Broad theme	Sub-theme	Participant
Some group members did not cooperate. They did not engage in the assigned group work. Finally, other group members had to do that work share to keep up with the schedule.	Negative	Social (structures and processes)	Student 2
Learning in groups helped group members exchange ideas. People can show critical thinking through the ideas collected in reports.	Positive	Cognitive (structures)	Student 9
Some responsible people made attempts to achieve the goals set in advance because they were afraid that their low achievements would influence other group members' academic results.	Positive	Motivational (structures)	Teacher 3

### Findings

The data obtained from the interviews were coded and analysed into themes as presented earlier. The analysed findings are presented in this section as answers to the research questions: the benefits of CL perceived by EFL students, and challenges encountered by EFL students in CL. In each answer, the participants' responses are presented into two phases: (1) structures, and (2) processes and outcomes. Each phase comprises motivational, social, and cognitive aspects.

### The benefits of cooperative learning

#### Structures

The participants responded that the common benefits were incentives for learning, group work skills, and critical thinking. In terms of motivation, most students with high academic achievements, as said by the respondents, showed their willingness to make appointments for group meetings. Some other students even formed a chat group with other members about the issues related to the main task. They actively chose their group

members, who usually had formed a group with them in the previous semesters. Some responses by students and teachers are provided as follows:

My teachers usually asked us to form a group of three to five to work on an assignment. Some group members urged other members to make appointments to meet and actively prepared things to discuss at the meetings. (Student 4)

We usually chose to cooperate with the students who were usually worked with us in the previous semesters. They expressed their willingness to work hard enough on the assignment by forming a chat group on social networking for detailed discussions on what to prepare for the meetings. (Student 12)

High-scoring students usually demonstrated their eagerness to cooperate with others in the group. From my experience as a supervisor on group work, these students were afraid that the results of the group work would affect individuals' grades. (Teacher 11, foreign)

However, students with low academic achievement showed no motivational gain from CL. Some of them did not even know the group members they were assigned to work with because they did not update the teachers' instructions from the class sessions they missed and did not log into their portals in the school's website. Some of the responses are illustrated as follows:

I was assigned by my writing teacher to work in a group on an assignment, in which one student did not show up regularly at group meetings. He even asked us to give him a share of work to do it independently. (Student 1)

To be honest, low-scoring students do not usually express their willingness to work in groups. There was almost no rise in their motivation to learn, as a result. (Teacher 8, Vietnamese)

Regarding social benefits, most teachers and students believed that students acknowledged ways of making appointments, organising schedules, solving conflicts with group members, and preparing for group work. The respondents believed that most students, to a certain extent, learned ways of working in groups. Group work potentially had problems arising, such as task sharing and time conflict in the preparation stage. Students who worked in groups could learn how to choose the most agreeable time for meetings and what to do before meetings. According to these students and teachers, almost all students benefited from these issues. Examples of their responses are provided below:

Even students who did not show their desire for group work learn about how to work in groups successfully to a certain extent. For instance, a group member of mine, assigned the last semester, always declined the meeting time suggested by other group members because she was busy working part-time. We suffered a lot of trouble then. However, in this semester, all the group created a chat group, and each member uploaded his or her available time. That way worked it out. (Student 7)

All students somehow learn about how to work in groups. When they are familiar with cooperative learning, they know how to solve frequently occurring problems, particularly about time conflict in the preparation stage. (Teacher 8, Vietnamese)

Respondents also identified the cognitive benefits among students with high academic results. The students, in the interviews, believed that high-scoring students were well-prepared, usually brought critical opinions and made interesting arguments to group meetings. However, low-scoring students were usually passive in group meetings. Most of them listened and made notes. The teachers also revealed that the work by students with good academic achievements usually indicated good critical thinking, developed mind mapping, and made persuasive conclusions. Their work showed development in their arguments and thinking over time. Low-scoring students, by contrast, just showed a collection of ideas, which they gathered from their group partners.

I usually view an issue both positively and negatively because no opinion is considered to be perfect, from my view. I also want to hear my group partners' criticism on my opinion. (Student 20)

I do not have many ideas to talk about. I come to group meetings to hear from my partners. It is a good way for me to improve my work. (Student 28)

High-scoring students indicated cognitive developments from cooperative learning. They criticised other group members' ideas and then suggested an agreeable solution or made quite a convincing conclusion which was supported by contemporary literature. Their works showed interesting opinions. However, low-scoring students sometimes had interesting ideas, but these ideas did not show any coherence and cohesion. (Teacher 15, foreign)

In summary, in the structuring stage, CL benefited most students socially. They gained ways of working in groups, particularly arranging appointments. However, only students with high academic achievements expressed their improvements in motivational and cognitive aspects. These results generally show the benefits of CL.

### **Processes and outcomes**

Most of the participants responded that the main benefits of CL were social: group work skills, problem-solving skills, communications, and self-confidence. Concerning group work and problem-solving skills, the respondents said that they learned about how to share the tasks assigned by the teacher. Although they did share tasks assigned in the structuring stage, task sharing was subject to adjustment in the processing stage of group work. Student 17 responded:

A task assigned occasionally has specific requirements that I do not have. Only when I am doing it, I know if I can manage it as required. That's why sometimes group members have a further discussion on distributing tasks among group members. (Student 17)

Some students who worked part-time also revealed time conflict between group members. At the beginning, conflicts took place, but then they figured out solutions by forming chat groups or self-suggestion of meeting time. Student 6 said:

A benefit from group work is that we learn how to solve problems, particularly time conflicts, between group members. It is, in my opinion, especially important to my future job and daily life. (Student 6)

Regarding communications, two main benefits reported were etiquette and clarifying techniques. During interactions, group members learned how to request and respond politely, which aroused awareness of communication etiquette to be considered polite or good-mannered. However, only those who would like to listen really made changes. Those who did not make changes exposed their inadequate understanding of etiquette in communication. Students also learned how to clarify their opinions. Communications between students were potentially vague. Face-to-face communications help students gain skills in clarifying opinions in order to avoid misunderstanding. Student 15 exemplified:

In one online discussion on lesson planning for teaching a grammar point, I suggested the use of model to frame the class activities and then gave some examples as illustrations of pedagogical model because I was afraid other group members did not make sense of model ... However, a group member made an argument on my examples rather than my suggestion of using a model. Misunderstandings are frequent among new group members. However, this usually becomes better when group members are more acquainted.

Students were also thought to be more confident from CL. During group discussions, they had opportunities to exchange opinions and know whether their opinions were accepted by their peers. Secondly, presentations in a foreign language needed in-advance practice in terms of both language and ideas. Group discussions could help provide exposure to practice, which in turn improved students' confidence. Student 25 said:

I was very shy. Working in groups made me more confident in presenting to a small group as it gave me practice opportunities. (Student 25)

Teacher 4 (Vietnamese) responded:

My students became more confident when they appeared in public as a result of CL. After two semesters working in groups, they were more confident. (Teacher 4, Vietnamese)

The less prominent positive impacts of CL were cognitive (knowledge, critical thinking) and motivational. The students who worked effectively made some gains in knowledge, critical thinking, and motivation. The extent of development depended on how much they wanted to learn. Teacher 6 (Vietnamese) said:

Some students seemed to show their wider knowledge in their reports, but this supposed development did not retain after a semester because they did not explore the issues profoundly. (Teacher 6, Vietnamese)

Teacher 18 (foreign) responded:

Critical thinking is illustrated through the arguments made in reports or presentations. Those students who did not really want to learn did not show regular high academic achievements. (Teacher 18, foreign)

The explanation for this was that some students only collected opinions from CL, but did not really learn from these. The hard-working students also demonstrated a higher level of

motivation in group work. They rarely missed group meetings, actively made appointments, and worked seriously on the share of the work for which they were responsible. Some responses are provided below:

Those students with high motivation are usually interested in cooperative learning. However, students with low motivation do not care about group work or individual work. (Teacher 16, foreign)

Cooperative learning helps those who want to learn have a higher score. Students who are serious about academic achievements want to work in groups. (Teacher 1, Vietnamese)

The participants' responses showed that students developed socially, cognitively, and motivationally in CL. However, social benefits seemed to be more prominent than cognitive and motivational benefits. The students who adhered to the five principles of CL made some improvements, but the students who were not interested in the accomplishments of the whole group and did not participate in group work, did not achieve significantly.

## **Negative impacts of cooperative learning**

### **Structures**

In the structuring stage, the most identifiable challenges were found to be social: choosing group members, choosing a topic of interest, and scheduling the group work. The challenge from grouping reduced when students became more familiar with each other and CL. In the first year, grouping usually was done by the teacher. For instance, Teacher 19 (foreign) said:

The grouping is randomly done by the teacher in order to give students socialisation opportunities. When students know their classmates better, they are allowed to choose the members they prefer to work with. (Teacher 19, foreign)

Students also agreed that choosing group members was a difficult task for them in the first semester. Student 30 revealed: "CL was not commonly applied in high school. Our first experience in CL was not really successful."

Choosing a topic of interest to all group members was also challenging. When a group received a new member, it was hard to choose a topic which all group members were interested in. Some responses by the students and teachers were as follows:

We have to report the topic to the teacher when a group is formed. I often choose to group with those whom I know well. Choosing a topic usually takes a long time when my group has a new member. (Student 8)

When a group has new members, it regularly takes students a long time to report their topic to me. This problem is particularly frequent among first-year students. (Teacher 5, Vietnamese)

Setting up a schedule for CL was also considered an inherently challenging task in the preparation stage. Different students usually had different strengths and weaknesses. Task allocation had to count on individuals' competencies.

Distributing shares of work to group members was difficult. It had to be based on individuals' abilities and availability. Otherwise, it might make all the group work behind schedule. (Student 27)

It is important to set up a schedule before all the group members begin to work on their shares. However, some group members always report their business in order to avoid the task assignment. Finally, that share is given to other group members. (Student 5)

Sharing a task inappropriately might result in a break-up in friendship. Some students even requested to move to another group because the task assigned did not match their strengths. (Teacher 9, Vietnamese)

I always require students to discuss and report their timeline in preparation for the group assignment. This is important because it makes students keep up with the deadline. It probably places pressure on students with limited available time and/or low motivation to learn. (Teacher 14, foreign)

### **Processes and outcomes**

In processing and outcome stages, a number of other challenges occurred, mainly social and cognitive: communication, report making, and relationships. In CL, students were faced with cold feet problems in communicating with their group partners. Some students were not really nice enough to deal with when a problem emerged. Although this problem was not common among group members, two out of the thirty surveyed students experienced this problem responded they encountered this problem once. From their responses given below, it can be inferred that they also had emotional suffering. Teachers also confirmed this communication and emotion problem.

I used to encounter a communication problem with my group member that she seemed to be rude when group members made a decision which was not favourable to her. She was not kind of negotiable. (Student 13)

I am too scared to cooperate with rude students. I usually avoid communicating with them due to their inappropriate manner and language. (Student 26)

Students usually have different backgrounds. Academically, this is called learner differences. Despite the positive effects of varied opinions, some students seem to be rather sensitive. They may keep away from those with inappropriate manner. It is true that some students unexpectedly satisfy etiquette. (Teacher 7, Vietnamese)

Another problem arose from varied, occasionally even opposing, opinions from group partners. This problem could result in two different challenges in two different conditions. The first circumstance was that the teacher asked students to make a group presentation, orally or written. All group members wanted their opinions heard, so the presentation "was just a mix" (Student 22). "Making arguments with opposing opinions was hard for

first-year students who were unfamiliar with critical thinking and CL.” Another circumstance took place when group members were required to make individual reports. This application was considered as challenging as making a group report, but in different respects. It was thought by most low-scoring students that this task required more effort as they had to work independently in making a complete report, but high-scoring students showed less desire to write group reports. The teachers also confirmed this trend among the students. Some responses by students and teachers are illustrated below:

Although we are asked to collaborate on discussion and doing other things, writing an individual report is always challenging. It requires more time and cognition than writing a group report. Writing a report is not just about combining ideas. We have to show our points of view among the opinions of other group members. (Student 3)

Writing an individual report requires much effort. Sometimes I am confused with the opposing views I have heard from my partners during the group work. Writing a complete report also takes a lot of time, and reporting other people’s opinions is harder than writing about my own view. (Student 7)

Cooperative learning benefits students much in many respects. However, students with academic achievements demonstrate a desire to write individual reports, but less capable students show high needs to make a group presentation in which they are only responsible for an assigned share. (Teacher 10, Vietnamese)

As is typical in foreign language education, all of the students responded that they suffered from the challenges of vocabulary and discourse resources. As they learned English as a foreign language, the available resources were crucial. Although they could look up vocabulary in a good dictionary, the lexical definitions of some words were hard to understand. Some students further explained that they found the definitions of some words (e.g. *verify* and *confirm*) were very similar in the dictionary; however, they heard that there was some difference in their meanings. Some students also expressed their concern about language use because words in the dictionary were in isolation; sometimes, it was hard to know how to use them accurately.

The students also expressed the risk of break-ups in relationships between group members. When there was a conflict between group members, some students chose to keep silent and turned uncooperative, or displayed uncontrolled manners. The teachers also confirmed that they had experienced circumstances when group members kept away from their partners and did not complete the task share assigned, due to conflicts. Finally, they refused to group with the conflicting members in the following semesters. When traced to the root reasons, the participants revealed that this kind of conflict, although rare, was more common among girls than boys because “girls are usually more emotional and sensitive than boys,” (Teacher 12, foreign). “This kind of conflict, in my experience as a supervisor, is personal rather than academic.” Student 14 (female) also confessed: “I used to suffer a twinge of envy from a female in my group just because she did not like the colour of my dress. She refused to talk to me.”

Some students also revealed their loss of motivation due to unsociable group partners. When dealing with group members who lagged behind schedule or did not aim for successful completion of the task, some students lost their motivation. One reason was the assessment system that did not take individual contributions into account; students who regarded personal recognition and academic achievement as important could be demotivated in their paths to the quality of their work.

In summary, the challenges which students encountered in the structuring stage were mainly social, but the ones that occurred in the processes and outcomes were social (communication and relationship), cognitive (critical thinking), and motivational (task accomplishment). Typically in EFL contexts, students were in need of language resources, particularly for language in discourse.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

### **Key findings**

It can be seen from the results that CL has benefits and challenges. Students who participate in CL may gain group work skills, problem-solving skills, communication skills, and confidence. However, they suffer challenges in communication, report making, relationships, and resources.

The most common benefits of CL were group work skills, problem-solving skills, and communication. Thanks to interactions, group members learned how to cooperate with other people successfully and solve problems that occur during group work. They could develop skills and strategies to help overcome problems arising from the task, such as re-assigning or consulting group members and teachers, and problems occurring between group members.

Students and teachers also revealed that those students with high academic results and motivation seemed to gain more in confidence and foreign language than peers with low academic records and motivation. A previous study by Johnson, Johnson and Shin (2014) suggested that structuring positive interdependence among group members is relatively significant in the achievement of group work as it can maximise individuals' motivation and contributions. CL as a pedagogical practice can be applied in settings where low motivation in students is identified, but administrators and teachers should be aware that group members' interdependence leaves less room for the benefits of CL.

On the other hand, teachers and students revealed some challenges of CL. Previous studies (e.g. Gillies, 2016; Herrmann, 2013; Ning & Hornby, 2014) have investigated the impacts of CL on students' academic achievements and motivation. However, these quantitative studies seemed to focus primarily on students' development after the interventions. The present study, nevertheless, reveals interesting negative impacts of CL from teachers' and students' experiences, thereby increasing awareness from those who practise and would like to practise this pedagogy.

The present study is generally in line with the previous studies. When the five principles of CL, positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, social cohesion, and group processing were applied, students made motivational, social, and cognitive gains in the areas mentioned above. On the other hand, challenges could be generated from the students who did not keep well-aligned with these principles.

The findings also suggest that mutual respect is a key factor for social cohesion and interaction in CL. Students can communicate enthusiastically and form cohesion with other group members when they do not encounter any potential threats in communications. In foreign language education, communications in the target language are essential so that students' language can be scaffolded and mediated (Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2017).

To minimise these challenges, teachers should play a key role in facilitating effective collaboration between group members. Although students are encouraged to solve problems arising between group members (Gillies, 2016), they can consult the teacher where necessary. It is important to note that CL works best when all group members collaborate constructively, appear democratic in solving problems, and show mutual respect. Also, the teacher should be aware of his or her role as a supervisor. Rarely are students' assignments or projects of high quality when they do not receive close supervision and support from their teacher, because high-quality products usually require good cognitive processing (King, 2002). Besides, in the structuring phase, teachers should set standards, as indicated in the five principles, so that a group can achieve the common goals. Finally, assessments should consider both the achievements of the entire group and individual contributions, to ensure that students are aware of the importance of the quality of their work (John, John & Shin, 2014). As CL requires compliance with the principles for being successful, professional development is essential in order that teachers are informed of potential challenges and trained in applying CL properly.

### **Limitations**

Although this study provides interesting additions to the contemporary literature, some limitations should be noted. Although the research approach adopted in this study is commonly applied in education and social sciences, the data collection was mainly based on teachers' and students' responses. Results reflect the participants' opinions and experiences in CL, rather than how CL influenced EFL learning. Researcher observations of classroom or group activities in CL could provide further evidence to corroborate the participants' responses. However, the relatively large sample of both teachers and students helped to ensure reliability for the findings, further helped by responses from the students being compared with responses from teachers.

### **Recommendations**

Cooperative learning has social benefits and challenges. It increases opportunities for interactions between students, from which they gain knowledge and skills. However,

teachers who apply CL should also be aware of its challenges so that students can participate more comfortably. Further studies can explore the impacts of CL on students' foreign language development and academic achievements in other disciplines and in other contexts.

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