COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Empirical studies are consensual in their claims that one of the most effective student-centered approaches in teaching is the cooperative learning (CL) approach. This study investigates the challenges inherent in the CL approach. The study was set in the Agona West Municipality. 20 teachers of English language, two each from 10 basic schools participated in the study. A semi-structured interview and classroom observations were the primary data source and teachers' lesson plans and students' assessment reports were the secondary data used for the study. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning was adopted as the theoretical framework. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The outcome of the study reveals six fundamental challenges inherent in the CL approach. These are low individual accountability, time consuming and low teaching efficiency, heterogeneity of the classroom, difficulty with balancing subject content and social skills, lack of curriculum provision and negative interdependence among students. Based on the findings, the study recommends that curriculum planners should incorporate CL in the language curriculum to serve as a blueprint for the teachers to adopt in their teaching.

Keywords: *Student-centered, Cooperative learning, Sociocultural, language curriculum, curriculum planners, Agona West Municipality*

INTRODUCTION

The goal of the 21st century education system is to develop in learners the 4Cs- communication skills, critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills and collaborative skills (Sipayung et al., 2018; Wahyuddin et al., 2022). These skills are essential in completing a task, solving a problem or creating a product (Azar et al., 2021). In order to help learners acquire these skills, the teaching and learning process must be interactive, challenging, interesting, inspiring, creative, motivating, encouraging active learner participation and welcoming student initiative. Therefore, globally, educators are drifting away from the traditional conventional teacher-centered approach to teaching and learning to a student-centered approach (Muniandy & Shuib, 2016). This is because the student-centered approach equips students with the relevant skills (the 4Cs,) to be able to flourish both in the academic environment and the workplace (Athirah et al., 2020). It is established that one of the student-centered teaching and learning approaches that can effectively develop these skills in the learners is the cooperative learning model (Sipayung et al., 2018).

Cooperative learning (CL) is a student-centered approach in teaching, where learners are provided with opportunities to think actively and engage in practical exercises and mutual discussions on the (dis)similar attributes of a task in small groups of two or more students to achieve definite and shared learning goals (Chen, 2022; Lu & Smiles, 2022). The group comprises learners at various ability and thought levels who are jointly engaged in the learning activities and expected not only to take responsibility for their own learning but also support each other to achieve a common goal (Dewi et al., 2021; Warsah et al., 2021). According to Norman (2022), CL activities are based on pair work (a group of two students) or group work (more than two students) who are assigned a task to collectively deliberate, discuss and interrogate to achieve the learning objectives. It is instructive to emphasise that CL is not a single teaching strategy neither is it a mere synonym about pupils being made to learn in

groups (Gull & Shehzad, 2015) but a generic concept that includes all teaching strategies which promote group interaction, cooperation, collaboration and group cohesion (Namusoke & Rukundo, 2022; Simsek et al., 2013). The proponents of the CL model insist that the active exchange of ideas among members in the small groups does not only enhance student interest in the lesson but also promotes critical thinking. For instance, Restivo (2022) insists that the acquisition and assimilation of knowledge come from the process of communication, interaction, explanation, debate, reconstruction and clarification among teachers, students and their peers, which are characteristic of cooperative learning.

In the English language teaching and learning context, the CL approach propels the learners to practice the language competencies, that is, listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar skills (Fekri, 2016). This is because the group activities compel the learners to actively listen to each other, interact or speak constructively to each other, read to/from each other and write what the group discusses. The continuous employment of the CL in the English classroom would therefore demand that the students constantly make use of the language skills and the more they get exposed to the skills and put them into practice, the more likely they would develop them. According to Albuhassan and Hamid (2021), while the CL enhances student participation in the language classroom, it also creates opportunities for them to use the second language in expressing their thoughts on the subject matter or tasks, thereby improving on their language skills. Norman (2022) intimates that the CL is particularly more beneficial to learners who are reluctant to participate in classroom discussions due to their shy nature, lack of confidence, speaking anxiety, fear of the teacher, or fear of the classroom 'crowd'. When such learners are put into smaller groups, they are able to actively interact among themselves since there is no 'teacher figure' to be fearful of or a 'crowd' to feel intimidated by.

Several research studies on the CL approach have adduced empirical evidence to show that CL has many benefits and advantages (Al-kaabi, 2016). For instance, the studies of Ehsan et al. (2019), Awada et al. (2020) and, Dendup and Onthanee (2020) found that CL effectively improves

upon students' English writing, English reading comprehension and English speaking skills. Johnson and Johnson (2018) also assert that CL improves learners' motivation, social skills and cognition. To them, CL creates a more conducive learning environment for the students which increases their motivation to participate in the classroom activities. Also, CL requires that learners interact, share resources, help one another, cooperate, complement and collaborate with each other in groups. Hence, apart from academic skills, CL enhances learners' social and emotional skills, such as empathy, values and appreciation (Dyson et al., 2021; Hossain & Tarmizi, 2013). There is less tension and competition spirit in the CL classroom since group members work together (not against each other) to achieve the collective goal (Simsek et al., 2013). In their respective studies, Gull & Shehzad (2015) and Smith et al. (2015) also found that while CL enhances learners' motivation and participation in the teaching and learning process, it results in higher academic achievements. Wahyuddin et al (2022) add that the CL approach creates new learning opportunities and experiences for the students in terms of competencies, knowledge and skills. Hua (2014) and Namusoke and Rukundo (2022) investigated university and primary classrooms in non-native contexts- Asia and Africa- respectively. Both studies found that students who were taught using the CL approach outperformed those who were thought using the traditional teacher-centered method of teaching, across both respective levels and contexts. This implies that CL is applicable and effective in different contexts and at any level of education.

Han and Ellis (2021) contend that the CL approach shifts the focus of the classroom from a teacher-centered one to a student-centered one, which is the ideal 21st century classroom environment and teaching approach that fosters effective teaching and learning. It must be emphasized that in contexts such as Ghana where the size of the average classroom is large and teachers may not able to deal directly with each individual student, CL becomes a more realistic means of connecting with each student through the group system. In fact, Chen (2022) believes that, in addition to its effectiveness in the classroom, the CL approach also has social advantages since it incorporates team spirit, group work and socialization skills in the learners which are essential for post school life experiences.

In heterogeneous classrooms, the CL approach encourages tolerance and adaptability to other cultures, opinions and orientations. It is therefore not surprising that CL is considered one of the most widespread and effective pedagogies (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Most studies on CL focus on its benefits, importance and effectiveness to teaching and learning (Norito et al., 2019; Sugiharto, 2020). Meanwhile, like every other classroom approach, the CL approach has its challenges and barriers (Jamil & Paul, 2016; Loh & Teo, 2017; Mahbib et al., 2017; Prosser & Trigwell, 2014; Tadesse & Gillies, 2015). Even though it is good to continue to research the advantages of CL and encourage more teachers to employ it in teaching, the researchers believe it is equally important to investigate the challenges that impede the effective implementation of CL so that stakeholders, policy makers and teachers could design and develop effective programmes and strategies to curb the challenges and ensure that the approach becomes more plausible and feasible to use in the classroom. There is not much qualitative studies that interrogate deeply into the phenomenon of CL, especially in the Ghanaian context. To fill this research gap, the current study sets out to investigate, discuss and highlight the challenges that teachers of English in Ghana encounter in the implementation of CL. The aim of the study therefore, is to document the challenges of CL as the teachers share their practical classroom experiences to serve as a basis for policy direction, action plan and a consideration for the language curriculum.

Methodology

The study adopts Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of learning (ST) as the theoretical framework. The CL approach is based on the notion that learning is a social interaction (Lu & Smiles, 2022), where learners converse, discuss and share ideas among themselves for a better understanding. The emphasis on social interaction in learning makes Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of learning (ST) a more appropriate theoretical framework for the study (Azar et al., 2021). The Sociocultural Theory, as propounded by Vygotsky (1986), stipulates that learners' cognitive and language skills develop as they engage in critical classroom discussions and social interactions as members of a small group with a

collective interest of accomplishing tasks assigned by the teacher (Albulhassan & Hamid, 2021). The theory is built on the hypothesis that knowledge is generated through social interaction (Hadwin et al., 2018). In cooperative learning, the students put in a group usually come from different backgrounds, have peculiar perspectives and varied abilities and skills which make group outputs more rich, holistic and comprehensive (Koretsky et al., 2021). While the teacher guides the groups, sufficient room is given for the group members to discuss, discover and manipulate the classroom facilities themselves. While in the process of interaction, the learners employ all the language competencies that is, listening, speaking, reading and writing thereby helping them to reach a higher level of (second) language development (Athirah et al., 2020). The assertion is that, when learners learn and perform tasks in groups, they gain deeper understanding and retain more knowledge, and low performing students eventually perform better as well (McHugh et al., 2020; Warsah et al., 2021).

The study adopts the qualitative approach and the case study design. The approach and design are most effective in collecting, analysing and interpreting data on non-quantifiable characteristics such as attitudes, experiences, virtues and perceptions (Creswell, 2014). They are able to delve deeper into a phenomenon and bring out every necessary detail that are needed to draw incontrovertible inferences and conclusions. The study investigates and reports the experiences of language teachers who employ the CL approach in their classroom, focusing on the challenges they encounter in incorporating CL in their lessons.

The setting of the study is the Agona West Municipality. Ten (10) basic schools were selected and 20 English teachers were engaged (two from each school). These schools were selected because they were willing to participate in the research process. The researcher only worked with schools and teachers who willingly gave their consent.

The study employed four different data collection instruments. These were semi-structured interviews and classroom observations as primary data and documents such as teachers' lesson notes and learners' assessment

reports as secondary data. Twelve (12) teachers were interviewed. Each interview spanned between 30-40 minutes. The interviews were conducted to take the teachers' understanding and experiences of the hurdles they confront in applying CL in the classroom. With the observation, each of the 20 English teachers had their class observed, at least, once. The researcher employed the participant observation technique, where she sat in the class, and got involved in the process. The aim was to observe how the teachers composed the groups, assigned tasks, interacted with the groups and assessed them, and also observe and experience first-hand, the challenges involved in the process. All the observations were recorded through note taking. The teachers also graciously made their lessons plans, lesson materials and assessment reports available upon request. These documents also provided some insightful perspectives to the phenomenon which broadened and enriched the data.

The inductive analysis technique was used to analyse the data using the two-cycle coding framework of Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) to construct themes from the data. The first cycle coding involved identifying, evaluating and re-evaluating the codes that emerged in the initial coding process (Saldana, 2016). The second cycle coding involved putting the first cycle codes into groups and themes (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher triangulated the data from the interviews, observations and the secondary data and identified various codes that had similar characteristics. These characteristics were then grouped into themes which made it easier for analysis and discussion in line with the research inquiry.

Ethical Consideration

Ethically, the researcher ensured that no participant was compelled, coerced, forced and made to participate under duress. Participation was completely voluntary. The schools and participants were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity, which gave them the confidence to participate.

Results

This section presents the outcome of the interview and observation the researcher had with the teachers, their classroom activities and the lesson plans**.** These results are thematised, with the support of excerpts recorded from the sessions. Six (6) barriers of CL were discovered in the data, as presented in the sub-sections below.

Low individual accountability

In cooperative learning, learners are minimally held individually accountable for their outputs. Usually, it is the group that is assigned tasks, hence, held accountable for the tasks. This makes it difficult for the teacher to measure the progress of the individual learners. A teacher recounted,

> *One of the challenges I encounter implementing the CL is that, it is difficult to measure the progress of individual students, and develop the appropriate teaching methods and strategies to improve on their learning. This is because, the individual's peculiar learning interests and needs are usually subsumed in the group activities (Teacher 1).*

Another participant reported,

> *Not all the students actively participate in the group activities. Usually, group tasks are left for only a few active members to do it. This does not help the individual learners to make effective progress in learning (Teacher 2).*

The researcher's engagements with the teachers and observations in the classrooms revealed that while the learners with high thinking skills usually worked hard to ensure the group's goal is achieved (and 'protect' their reputation as good students), many of the low thinking learners only participate passively knowing that they will not be held individually accountable.

Time consuming and low teaching efficiency

Another challenge found in the data is the time consuming nature and low teaching efficiency of CL. The teachers stated that cooperative learning is time consuming and reduces teaching efficiency. It takes considerable productive time to put the students in desirable ability groups, re-arrange and restructure the classroom setting to suit the group structure, and orient the students to work effectively in the group. To them, such time 'wasted' on setting up the group, could be used for actual teaching and learning. Some of the participants indicated,

> *Setting up the group is time consuming. Each topic or task needs peculiar groupings in terms of the number of students to be in a group, gender balance, arrangement of tables and chairs, distribution of the scarce learning resources among the groups, etc. Such activities consume a lot of productive time. (Teacher 11)*

> *Grouping students to learn cooperatively or perform a task is not as simple as people think. Several factors need to be considered in setting up the group. And serious monitoring needs to take place else some of the students will not actively participate in the group. (Teacher 5)*

Clearly, putting the students into productive and effective groups takes time and effort.

Heterogeneity of the classroom

The typical Ghanaian classroom is heterogeneous. The average basic school classroom is made up of students from various cultural roots, language backgrounds, religious orientations, social ranks and financial statuses. All these different backgrounds have a way of influencing how the students work in a group, and to large extent, inhibits effective cooperation and collaboration. It is not in doubt that the differences of people can get in the way of working harmoniously together to achieve a common goal. The data proved that how to amicably bury learners' differences in a group is a challenge to CL. A participant elaborated,

> *I realized that students who come from poor homes find it difficult to mingle and work comfortably with the rich kids. When put in a group, the rich kids among them form an internal click and converse among themselves and the poor ones too form their own league. I think it's because rich kids have more relatable issues to discuss, same for the poor ones. Therefore, crossing carpet to work together becomes a challenge. (Teacher 8)*

Also, the researcher observed in one of the classes that gender differences and orientations interrupt group harmony. The researcher found that, anytime groups were formed with both male and female membership, the males tend to take leadership positions, become domineering and sometimes, reject the opinions of the females without any just reasons. The females also tend to be submissive, passive, and non-indulgent in the group activities, suggesting they 'look up' to the males. This deprives the group from getting the best contribution from each member, especially the females.

Difficulty with balancing subject content and social skills

While cooperative learning is inarguably a good approach to teaching, the fact cannot be discounted that it requires students to adjust and compromise their beliefs, perceptions and orientations to suit the group interest. They also have to adapt to the group culture, develop good socialization skills and tolerance levels to be able to work within the group. The need to learn and use these social skills in order to fit in the group sometimes clouds the actual learning of the subject content, which are the actual language skills. An excerpt from the interview reveals;

> *The students are careful not to offend themselves in group discussions. They are therefore mindful of what and how they speak and relate with each other in order not to touch on the sensitivities of their friends. This sometimes prevents them from freely expressing their thoughts. They therefore end up developing their social skills at the detriment of the language skills (Teacher 7).*

Another participant who consents the arguments for social skills indicated,

> *The balance between social skills and language skills is a serious issue in cooperative learning. The learners become preoccupied with how to 'fit' in the group sometimes to the detriment of developing their grammar skills. They are careful with their facial expressions, body gestures, seating style, among others. Eventually, they end up sharpening their social skills more than the language skills (Teacher 19).*

Lack of curriculum provision

The basic school English language curriculum does not make sufficient explicit provisions for cooperative learning in the teaching of English language. It does not document how teachers can or should use the cooperative learning approach to teach the various strands. This leaves the adoption of the CL approach to the discretion of the teachers. Obviously, a blueprint in the curriculum would become a good resource for such teachers. A participant emphasised,

> *If you look at the English curriculum, cooperative learning and how to effectively implement it in teaching language have not been explicitly captured. Cooperative learning is a technical approach and an explicit description in the curriculum in terms of the ideal number of students in a group, types of ability levels to form each group, gender balance, etc will be helpful. The lack of clear guidelines in the curriculum makes it difficult to employ in the classroom (Teacher 9).*

The researcher carefully examined the English language curriculum to confirm the claims herself. In her search, it was found that cooperative learning approach is underutilized in the curriculum and, by implication, the CL approach is underutilized in the language classroom.

Negative interdependence among students

The researcher observed that, CL makes the students, especially the low performing students, become overly dependent on the good students. These students are not able to do anything meaningful on their own, except to consult, and sometimes, copy from their peers. This makes the adoption and use of the CL undesirable, confirming what the researcher observed in the classroom. A participant intimated,

> *In putting students together in groups, we usually consider different ability groups- those with low abilities and those with high ones. However, it is realized that, those with high abilities quickly take over the group tasks and the low ability students become overly dependent on them. Eventually, the work gets done by only the good students. And the low ability ones do not benefit (Teacher 14).*

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges to the effective implementation of the CL approach, from the perspective of basic school English language teachers. It is reiterated that CL is a group learning process where students work together in groups, contribute information, share ideas, experiences, skills, opinions, attitudes and abilities in order to jointly enhance the understanding of all members, improve on the social skills and cognitive abilities (Hong et al, 2022; Wahyuddin, et al, 2022). Literature on the CL approach reveals that, in many ways, CL is a student-centered approach to teaching which helps to enhance students' academic achievements (Bower et al, 2013; Marzban & Alinejad, 2014; Motaei, 2014). In the earlier studies, it was revealed that students who were taken through the CL approach were found to achieve higher academic results than those who were taught through the traditional teacher-centered approach (Munir et al, 2018).

In the quest to encourage the adoption of the CL approach, it cannot be discounted that the CL has challenges that need to be addressed (Hong et al, 2022). It is based on such premise that the study was conducted to

examine, reveal and create empirical awareness of the challenges inherent in the CL approach.

The results showed that, from the perspective of the English language teachers, CL has six fundamental challenges. The first is that, CL encourages low individual accountability. The result of this study is inconsistent with Chen's findings. Chen (2022), in his elaboration of the elements of CL, indicates that individuals are expected to make meaningful contributions to their groups so CL has a high individual accountability. The study found that the teachers minimally hold the individual learners accountable to the group output since the focus of CL is the group, not the individual students (Johnson & Johnson, 2018).

Tadesse and Gillies (2015) also found that CL is time consuming and could result in low teaching efficiency because the students need time to adapt to the group culture in CL. Unlike the traditional teacher-centered approach where the transfer of information is simplistic and linear (direct from teacher to student), CL is comparatively complex and the learners will need time to adjust to the peculiarities of the individual members in the group. In consonance with Tadesse and Gillies, this study found, through the classroom observations and interactions with the teachers, that it took the learners time to adjust to the group while it took the teachers time to form ideal learning groups, with good gender balance and ability variations.

Furthermore, the results of the study revealed how the heterogeneous nature of the Ghanaian classroom impedes the effective implementation of CL. In their study, Loh and Teo (2017) confirmed that the different backgrounds, cultural differences, knowledge systems and thought patterns of students in a heterogeneous classroom affect learners' cooperative learning. They assert that these peculiarities often generate prejudices and stereotypes, which sometimes lead to unnecessary communication conflicts. This corroborates the finding of the current study that the heterogeneity of the classroom affects the CL.

The study also found that the development of social skills overrides the learning of subject content. That is, in CL, learners get preoccupied with social skills such as tolerance, respect for each other, peaceful co-existence, and others often to the detriment of developing sufficient content in the subject area. In the end, a consistent adoption of CL would help learners to live peacefully and tolerant of each other while developing poor reading, writing, speaking and grammar skills. While it is acknowledged that social skills are important values in learning, a good balance with the subject contents is preferable (Dyson et al., 2021; Namusoke & Rukund, 2022; Slavin, 2014).

The study equally found that, there is limited provision of the CL in the English language curriculum. In teaching and learning, curriculum is a very important document that prescribes useful pedagogies and spells out what to teach, how, where and when to teach (Chen, 2022; Namusoke & Rukund, 2022). Teachers are guided by the curriculum in their execution of classroom activities. Therefore, what the teachers see or read as recommended in the curriculum is what they employ in the classroom. Since the CL is minimally encouraged in the curriculum, teachers also rarely employ it in their teaching. CL is a phenomenon whose deployment would need explicit guidance, in terms of, among others, which topic to employ CL to teach, how many students should make up a group, what should be the gender composition and who must be selected to lead. If these are stipulated in the curriculum, teachers would feel comfortable employing it. But as the current situation pertains, adopting the CL becomes difficult.

Finally, the result showed that CL offers a fertile platform for negative interdependence among students. Johnson and Johnson (2009) found that CL could brood negative interdependence, especially of the low performing students on the high performing ones. It must be underscored that CL thrives on the sharing of information and meaningful contributions of learners towards achieving the group's goal. However, low performing students and learners with low social skills tend to overly depend on the high performing learners (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014). It was observed that the low performing students often contribute almost nothing and become

passive in the group, often because they lack confidence in themselves. This renders CL ineffective. Even though Mahbib et al. (2017) admit that low performing learners gain considerably from the experiences of the high ability learners, it is expected that the former supports the latter too.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Although the study was conducted on a relatively limited scale as characteristic of qualitative studies, it has made some important revelations about the challenges of CL in the ESL classroom that should have implications on pedagogy, policy and curriculum decisions. The participants were 20 English language teachers from 10 selected basic schools in the Agona West Municipality of Ghana. The primary data for the study were gathered from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations while the secondary data were sourced from documentations such as teachers' lesson plans and students' assessment scores.

Based on the results, the study concludes that;

1. CL approach is one of the most effective student-centered approaches to teaching and learning. That is why many studies on CL recommend that it should be adopted in the language classroom (Athirah et al., 2020; Han & Ellis, 2021).
2. The CL approach has both academic and non-academic benefits. In that, academically, studies have proved that CL helps learners to improve on their speaking, reading, writing and grammar skills (Wahyuddin et al., 2022), while non-academically, CL helps learners to develop team spirit, tolerance, respect, socialization skills and emotional skills (Chen, 2022; Hong et al., 2022).
3. Regardless of its proven effectiveness, this study revealed, that CL is bereft of inherent challenges. These challenges are low individual accountability, time consuming and low teaching efficiency, heterogeneity of the classroom, difficulty with balancing subject content and social skills, lack of curriculum provision and negative interdependence among students.

Based on the outcome of the study, the following recommendations are made;

1. Curriculum planners must explicitly emphasize the concept of CL in the language curriculum, and make provisions of how, when and where it should be employed.
2. Language teachers must endeavour to minimize the traditional teacher-centered approach to teaching and adopt the student-centered one, especially the cooperative learning approach in order to achieve the optimum learning goals.
3. Future and further studies on CL may want to adopt the quantitative approach in order to render the study results generalizable. A future study could even do a comparative investigation on how the perspectives of the teachers and students converge and diverge respectively and how the differing perspectives can be incorporated in the language curriculum to make it more robust.

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