RESEARCH ARTICLE

PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING COOPERATIVE LEARNING: ETHIOPIAN HIGH SCHOOL EFL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Cooperative learning is widely endorsed as a pedagogical practice that promotes student learning. Recently, the research focus has moved to the role of teachers' discourse during cooperative learning and its effects on the quality of group discussions and the learning achieved. Although the benefits of cooperative learning are well documented, implementing this pedagogical practice in classrooms is a challenge that many teachers have difficulties accomplishing. The subjects of this study were 52 randomly selected English language teachers who teach in three different Zones of Southern Nations, Nationalities and peoples' regional State namely Gedeo, Sidama and Segen peoples'zones. Questionnaire and semi-structured interview were used to collect the required data. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive methods and the qualitative data were analyzed using narrative techniques. The findings of the study revealed that majority of the teachers did not have clear understanding of the principles and feature of cooperative learning. Among the interviewed 12 teachers, only two had a detailed understanding of the terms and features. The study indicated that the extent to which factors were perceived as barriers to cooperative learning, or issues that could be effectively managed by teachers, differed depending on the teacher's knowledge of cooperative learning features and function. The study revealed that lack of training on how to successfully implement cooperative learning, lack of students' accountability for their learning and the learning of others, lack of motivation, students' reservation to get actively involved in cooperative learning, lack of awareness and absence of clear guidelines for assessments, students' competition to score better grades, and negative attitude of teachers towards the instructional approach were the major challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching style of cooperative learning is affected by cognitive theory. Teachers teaching style is highly student-centered. As a Robinson (1995) stated that "teacher conceives self as flexible, permissive, interested in stimulating discussion and seeing others grow" (p.57). As Lightbown and Spada (1993) stated teachers should more carefully design what students need to learn before they apply those learning activities into their teaching. A teacher in the cooperative learning plays a role as a supporter, facilitator, observer, change agent, and adviser (McDonell, 1992). On the other hand, traditional language teaching which emphasize the teaching of language rules and vocabulary tend to create competition of grades. In order to get good grades in English, the teacher might bring the competition into the classroom. Such a traditional instructional approach causes competitive

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learning and individual performance in the classroom teaching (Slavin, 1995). However, too much competition might bring negative interdependence and lower the teaching effects. Cooperative learning seems a potential solution to teaching problems. It is one of the teaching methods to improve language learning, academic achievement and social skills by students' interaction (Kessler, 1992; Wei, 1997). The teacher usually observes students' interaction and encourages all groups to work together effectively during the classroom activities.

Successful Cooperative Learning contains two factors (a) the teacher's first task is to induce students to produce active learning (b) teachers have to provide necessary proficient knowledge, and inducement to work harder cooperatively; before the class the teacher should offer designs and arrangement of curriculums (Johnson and Johnson, 1987). Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (Johnson and Johnson, 1987, p.5). In order to have small groups work together

successfully, a teacher has to compose five essential elements in each lesson (Johnson and Johnson, and Holubec1990.1993): (a) positive interdependence, (b) face-to-face interaction, (c) individual accountability, (d) social skills, and (e) group processing. To improve teaching and learning effects, teachers can use these five elements as important guidelines in their teaching situations. Research on cooperative learning is one of the greatest success stories in the history of educational research. While there was some research on this topic from the early days of this century, the amount and quality of that research greatly accelerated in the early 1970's, and continues indebted today, a quarter-century later. Hundreds of studies have compared cooperative learning to various control methods on a broad range of measures.

Studies of the achievement effects of cooperative learning have taken place in every major subject, at all grade levels, in all types of schools in many countries. Both field studies and laboratory studies have produced a great deal of knowledge about the effects of many types of cooperative interventions and about the mechanisms responsible for these effects. Further, cooperative learning is not only a subject of research and theory; it is used at some level by millions of teachers. A national survey in USA (Puma, Jones, Rock, and Fernandez, 1993) found that 79% of elementary teachers and 62% of middle school teachers reported making some sustained use of cooperative learning.

Given the substantial body of research on cooperative learning and the many cooperative learning programs in widespread use, it might be assumed that there is little further research to be done. Yet this is not the case. There are many very important questions in research on this topic, and a great deal of development and evaluation remains to be done. In its fullest conception cooperative learning provides a radically different approach to instruction, whose possibilities have been tapped only on a limited basis. Johnson and Johnson (1994) advocated that two principles in implementing Cooperative Learning are necessary to teachers: (a) to learn knowledge and the skills of CL to apply the concept and strategies to designing curriculum units for their students' needs; (b) to train teachers to implement curriculum, strategies and activities of Cooperative Learning.

These two approaches are complemented with each other (Wei, 1997; Wang, 2001). Cooperative learning has been thoroughly studied in relation to its effect on student achievement, with substantial evidence suggesting that this structured style of learning is effective in maximizing the learning outcomes of a range of students (Gillies, 2003; Johnson and Johnson, 1994; Johnson, Johnson and Smith, 2004; Slavin, 1995; Slavin, 1996). Since cooperative learning is such a well - researched area one would assume that teachers broadly implement this approach. However, cooperative learning is often underutilized in schools (Muijs and Reynolds, 2005) and "the extent of its use has not been firmly established" (Lopata, Miller and Miller, 2003, p. 233).

Research has shown that cooperative learning groups are rare, because many educators are not well trained, often seek shortcuts to quality group work, perceive time as a barrier to its implementation, and/or tend to assume that traditional classroom groups will suffice (Antil, Jenkins, Wayne and Vadasy, 1998; Johnson and Johnson, 1994). More research is needed to explain how teachers' knowledge of cooperative learning can shape what teachers' perceive as barriers to effective implementation, thus affecting the success of cooperative learning in practice. In this paper since the introduction of cooperative learning is a recent phenomenon in Ethiopia, we argue that teachers require knowledge of cooperative learning features and terms, and how these features function, to implement cooperative learning successfully in their practice. In other words, teachers require a particular professional pattern language in order to use cooperative learning effectively.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research employs a mixed method approach. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaire. The questionnaire items focused on the current practice and understanding of principles and features of teachers in implementing cooperative learning in the classroom. Moreover, questionnaire which elicits information on teachers' attitude towards the cooperative learning groups and its effect in improving students' achievement were used. Qualitative data were generated using semi-structured interview.

Subjects and sampling technique

The subjects of this study were teachers in selected high schools in Gedeo, Sidama and Segen People's zones. Fifty two English teachers were selected based on random sampling technique.

Data Collection tools

The questionnaire items focused on the current practice and understanding of principles and features of teachers in implementing cooperative learning in the classroom were used. Moreover, questionnaire which elicits information on teachers' attitude towards the cooperative learning groups and its effect in improving students' achievement were used. Qualitative data were generated using semi-structured interview. Semi - structured interviews were used to examine teachers' understandings of the term and features of cooperative learning and their perceived factors affecting its implementation, teachers commitment and understanding towards incorporating continuous assessment to accomplishing cooperative learning effectively. To examine teachers' attitude towards cooperative learning, attitude scale questionnaire and interview were employed.

Procedures

Each participant was informed about the topic before their interview. Each interview began with a screening question: What do you understand by the term cooperative learning? Depending upon this initial response, the interviewer classified the participants into one of three categories (limited, general or detailed understanding of cooperative learning).

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency and percentage based on the constructs. Whereas qualitative data which were generated through semi-structured interviews were audio - taped, and then transcribed and read several times. Initially, each transcript was coded by using three codes, i) understandings, ii) opportunities, and iii) barriers. The codes, 'opportunities' and 'barriers' focused on those factors that affect each teacher's implementation of cooperative learning. The intra - textual analysis approach (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) was used for the identification of raw data themes within each teacher's transcript that represents factors affecting cooperative learning. The code 'understanding' was further divided into 'limited', 'general' and 'detailed' by comparing teacher knowledge of cooperative learning terms and functions against cooperative learning features and terms described by Johnson and Johnson (1994) and Bain et al. (2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A reluctance to embrace cooperative learning may be partly due to the challenge it poses to teachers' control of the channels of communication, the demands it places on curriculum organization, and the personal commitment teachers need to make to sustain their efforts (Kohn, 1992).

It may also be due to a lack of understanding of how to use this pedagogical practice in their classrooms. Certainly, Blatchford, Kutnick, Baines, and Galton (2003) recognized the difficulties teachers encounter in trying to introduce cooperative learning and argued strongly that if it is to be used successfully in classrooms, the context in which it is to be introduced needs to be prepared, students need to be taught the appropriate interactional skills, teachers need to be taught how to work with groups, and the lessons and tasks need to be well organized. Likewise, Hertz-Lazarowitz (2008) emphasizes the importance of preparing the physical space for learning and teaching, ensuring the learning tasks are challenging and engage students in higher-order thinking, helping teachers to understand that they need to accept their role as producers of new classroom curricula and programs, and training students in the social and academic skills they will need to negotiate their new learning environments.

The data in Table 1 clearly revealed that the subject teachers did not have good understanding of the principles of cooperative learning. Among 52 respondents, 10 (19.2,%), 20 (38.5) and 7 (13.5) rated somewhat, slightly and not at all respectively that they have the understanding of cooperative learning group to successfully implement its principles. However, only 8(15.4%) and 7(13.5) rated entirely and largely they understand well enough to implement cooperative learning successfully.

Table 1. Teachers' Understanding of the principles and features of cooperative learning

No.	Items	Strongly agree		Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
		no	%	No	%	no	%	no	%	no	%
1	I understand cooperative learning well enough to implement it successfully	8	15.4%	7	13.5%	10	19.23%	20	38.5%	7	13.5%
2	In cooperative learning individuals are accountable to the success of the group.	12	23.07%	10	19.23%	6	11.5%	17	32.7%	7	13.5%
3	In CL individuals are awarded marks/ grade based on their contribution to the group work	10	19.23%	6	11.5%	6	11.5%	18	35%	12	23%
4	Cooperative team should work together for a long time since it needs understanding each other in detail.	14	26.9%	12	23%	7	13.5%	10	19.23%	9	17.3%
5	There should be face to face interaction among the CL groups after the completion of certain activities.	12	23%	8	15.4%	12	23%	14	27%	6	11.5%
6	Teachers should support CL groups in explaining the activities to be done.	15	29%	16	31%	9	17.3%	8	15.3%	4	7.7%
7	Engaging in cooperative learning enhances students' social skills.	10	19.2%	10	19.2%	10	19.2%	12	23%	10	19.2%
8	.The teacher is responsible in training students to be successful in their CL groups	8	15.3%	10	19.2%	20	38.5%	14	27%	0	0
9	Teachers should award equal grade or mark for members of cooperative group.	20	38.5%	15	28.8%	10	19.2%	7	13.5%	0	0
10	Cooperative learning group is similar to any grouping we use in classroom	22	42.3%	18	34.6%	8	15.3%	4	7.7%	0	0
11	In cooperative group, bright learners scaffold slow learners, till these slow learners become independent.	13	25%	16	30.8%	11	21.2	12	23.07%	0	0
12	It is difficult to implement CL grouping where there are students with diverse ethnic and religious background.	20	38.5%	17	32.7%	3	5.8%	8	15.3%	4	7.7%
13	It is advisable to use friendship grouping in CL.	18	34.6%	16	30.8%	8	15.3%	9	17.3%	3	5.8%
14	Competition best prepares students for the real world.	24	46.15%	18	34.6%	4	7.7%	6	11.5%	0	0
15	Using mixed ability groups is key for successful cooperative learning.	12	23.07%	10	19.2%	10	19.2%	16	30.8%	4	7.7%

The data indicated that the majority of respondents had little understanding of the principles of cooperative learning. It is also clearly indicated that when respondents rated the individual accountability to contribute to the success of the whole group as 17 (32.7%) and 7 (13.5%) disagree and strongly disagree whereas 12 (23%), 10 (19.2%) rated strongly agree and agree respectively. This data also revealed the limited understanding of the subjects. The subject teachers also rated their understanding of whether the team members should get equal mark on a given task, 10(19.2%) rated strongly agree, 6 (11.5%) rated agree. On the other hand, 18 (35%) and 12 (23%) rated disagree and strongly disagree. This implies that the respondents had limited understanding. With regard to whether the team members work together for a long time to know each other well, 14 (26.9%) and 12 (23%) rated strongly agree and agree respectively. On the other hand, 7 (13.5%) rated undecided, 10 (19.2%) disagree and 9 (17.3%) rated strongly disagree. This data indicated that the respondents had just general understanding of the principles of cooperative learning.

In Table 1, Item 5, the data revealed that 12 (23%), and 8 (15.4%) rated that they strongly agree and disagree that there should be face to face interaction respectively. On the other hand, 12 (23%), 14 (27%) and 6 (11.5) respondents rated undecided, disagree and strongly disagree that face to face interaction should be used in cooperative learning group. This result clearly revealed that majority of the respondents had misunderstanding of the principles and features of cooperative learning. Regarding the role of cooperative learning groups in improving social skills of the learners, 10 (19.2%) and 10 (19.2%) of the subjects rated strongly agree and agree whereas 10 (19.2), 12 (23%) and 10 (19.2%) of the respondents rated undecided, disagree and strongly disagree respectively. This implies that the subjects had limited understanding of one of the principles of cooperative learning. In the same line of discussion, respondents rated the responsibility of teachers in training students in the essences of cooperative learning as 20 (38.5%) rated undecided, 14 (27%) rated Disagree respectively. These are the clear indicators of teachers' limited understandings of the principles of cooperative learning.

Concerning grouping techniques in cooperative learning, 22 (38.5%), and 18 (34.6%) respondents rated strongly agree and agree that cooperative learning groups are similar to any other groupings they have been using in their classes. This shows that the subject teachers had not got proper orientation or training on how to form cooperative learning. In Table 3, item 11, among 52 subject teachers' 13 (25%) and 16 (30.8%) rated strongly agree and disagree that in cooperative learning bright learners scaffold the average and struggling learners till they become independent whereas, 11 (21.2%) and 12 (21.1%) of the teachers rated disagree and strongly disagree. This indicates that majority of the subject teachers had general understanding of the contribution of bright learners.

Dealing with the grouping technique, 20 (38.5%) and 17 (32.7%) of the subjected rated strongly agree and agree that it is difficult to implement cooperative learning where there are students of divers ethnic and religious background. On the other hand, 8 (15.3%) and 4 (7.7%) of the subjects rated disagree and strongly disagree respectively. This result shows a clear misunderstanding of the merits of cooperative learning groups which help students of different background to know each other and develop tolerance, in other words the merit of cooperative learning in developing social skills. These teachers' limited understanding is also reflected in item 10, which they rated CL as similar to any other groupings they use i.e 77% as strongly agree and agree. Moreover, similar results were reported in item 13, and 15, that 34 (65%) of the respondents rated that they prefer friendship grouping for cooperative learning groups in item 13, and 10 (19.2%), 16 (30.8%) and 4 (7.7%) of the respondents rated undecided, disagree and strongly disagree that mixed ability grouping is the key for success in cooperative learning groups.

In Table 1, item 15, teachers also rated their position whether competition best prepares students to the real world. Among the total of 52 respondents, 24 (46.1%) and 18 (34.6%) rated strongly agree and agree that competition best prepares students to the real world whereas 4 (7.7%) and 6 (11.5%) of the subjects rated undecided and disagree that competition best prepares students to the real world of work. This finding clearly indicated that teachers had very limited understanding of cooperative learning groups and it also implies that teachers had a negative attitude towards the CL. The questionnaire result revealed that the subject teachers had very limited understanding of the principles and features of cooperative learning and its implementation. To verify these findings, interview has been conducted with 12 English language teachers and the finding from the interview also confirmed questionnaire results.

Teachers' cooperative learning knowledge affected the way they perceived and managed factors such as grouping technique, class size, student behaviour, and teacher control and planning. Of the twelve participants in this study, half were categorized as having limited understanding of cooperative learning (5 female and 1 male). Of the remaining participants, four were seen as having a general understanding (2 female, 2 male) and two showed a detailed understanding (1 female and 1 male). T1 demonstrated 'limited' cooperative learning knowledge when she said, "I don't have much understanding of it … it's something to do with group work and working as a team". This teacher has equated group work with cooperative learning and does not appear to realize that cooperative learning extends beyond traditional group work (Artzt and Newman, 1997; Johnson, Johnson and Holubec, 1993; Kohn, 1998). For example, she added:

… I have used group work … you can get around to each group and see what they're doing, I try and make it so that there is a higher achiever that can sort of control the group, and then a lower achiever so they can benefit … the higher achiever can help the lower achiever. T1's response illustrates a number of misconceptions about students' ability to perform particular roles. Johnson and Johnson (1994) argue that every student should be provided with the opportunity to develop the skills needed to fulfill different roles. Bain *et al.* (2009) uses the phrases 'all levels of learning' and 'focus on group processes' to describe cooperative learning pattern language in

this regard, but T1 assumes that the role of leader has to be filled by a student who is perceived to be of higher ability. She appears to assume that the lower achiever is the one who benefits from the group process, which can lead to a breakdown of positive interdependence and individual and group accountability, as articulated by Johnson and Johnson (1994).

T2 articulated more clearly her 'general' level of cooperative learning knowledge by stating:
Cooperative learning to me is the students working cooperatively in small groups through varieties of tasks or undertake lessons or activities and it's more student- centered and directed rather than teacher - directed.

This response highlights the characteristic of positive interdependence as a way of structuring cooperative learning (Bain et al., 2009; Johnson and Johnson, 1994). Although T2 admitted, "I've mostly had experience in teaching grade 9 and 10 students and I haven't used it very much, because it's very hard to do...." T2 implies that the lack experience of students in shouldering responsibilities and the difficulty in teacher planning and control that is required for effective cooperative learning implementation restricts her usage of this approach. These findings will be explored further in the remaining themes.

T4 provided a more 'detailed' understanding of cooperative learning:

Cooperative learning to me would be students working together … to develop an understanding of what is being taught … first off maybe individual instructions by the teacher and then moving together to get the students to teach each other, because the way they explain it to each other is at their level, and much better than the way the teacher can actually explain it to them. So, we give them some sort of guidance and then allow the students to do their own building and teaching to each other.

T4's (detailed) response demonstrates a recognition of three principles of cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1994): positive interdependence, by " … students working together …"; promotive interaction, by "… get[ting] the students to teach each other …" and students promoting the success of others through encouragement and support; and, students being taught social and team building skills and then using them to work collaboratively. It also demonstrates recognition of the teacher's role as a facilitator. Although Teacher "D" does not use the exact cooperative learning pattern language terms outlined by Bain et al. (2009), he does describe 'face to face interaction', 'positive interdependence', 'interpersonal skills', 'social cohesion' and 'all levels of learning' in his explanation above.

Teacher planning and control

Teachers with a general and limited understanding of cooperative learning expressed difficulty in planning and control, whereas the teachers with a detailed understanding recognized the need for a delicate balance between teacher control and student autonomy. To achieve the latter, it was acknowledged that careful teacher planning is required. T4 (detailed) explained that in cooperative learning settings some students seek to be uninvolved in the group process:

… students who will tend to allow other students to do all the work for them, students lazing [and thinking] 'well, good, group work, I can sit back and have a rest'.
As an extension of the previous theme, T4 believed that the 'free - rider problem' (Joyce, 1999) only occurs if there is a lack of teacher planning and control in the learning environment. Elmore (1996) stated that the majority of teaching in schools is characterized by teacher control and student submissiveness and powerlessness, in essence a teacher- directed learning environment. However, a student- centered learning environment, which is more conducive to cooperative learning, provides students with opportunities to explore, examine and critique content and concepts whilst applying their knowledge, understandings and skills to solve real - life problems (Slavin, 1995).

T12 (detailed) believed that barriers to implementing cooperative learning could be easily overcome by teachers:

… they're only there if you set them … I don't see any barriers there to it. It comes down to the individual; do you want to do it or don't you? Do you want to include the students in the decision - making process? It's up to the individual to come to terms with that and go for it. In this instance, T12 expressed the stereotype that good teaching is an individual trait. This assumption, however, can be problematic, because it assumes that teachers cannot be taught how to change their practice (Elmore, 1996; 2007).

When teachers were asked about the grouping techniques they use in cooperative learning, majority reported that they use the usual grouping which is based on the sitting arrangement. T6 and T9 said that because of the large number of students in the classroom and uncomfortable sitting arrangements, they group students who sit near to each other. All the subjects reported that they organize 6 students in one cooperative learning group and one of the students is given the responsibility of leading the group. However, when they were asked about the justification for grouping six students in one learning sets, they explained that they were ordered to do so by the school principals.

With regard to the ability composition of the groups, T1, T3, T7, T10, explained that using mixed ability grouping is very ideal in their context and not applicable. Their reasons are: first, there are few high achiever students in a class and these students also do not want to work with low achiever students. In most of the cases majority of students want to work with their friends rather than in the groups they are assigned in. T6, and 11 also explained that when female students are grouped with male students, they do not feel comfortable and try to remain silent. Constructing groups so that students work well together can be difficult, however, the research does provide some insights on group composition and group size with gender composition being an issue that warrants consideration.

Webb (1991), in a study on student interactions during small-group mathematics lessons, found that when boys outnumbered the girls, they tended to interact with each other more and ignore the girl. In contrast, in groups where there were more girls than boys, the girls spent more time trying to involve the boy in the discussions to the detriment of their own interactions. In both these groups, the boys outperformed the girls even though the boys and girls did not differ in initial ability. However, when groups were gender-balanced, boys and girls were equally interactive and there were no differences in achievement outcomes. In short, the gender composition of the group appears to be an issue that warrants attention.

Another issue to consider in group composition is the role friendship plays in promoting group interactions. Certainly there is evidence that students who know and like each other benefit most from working together as they tend to accept more responsibility for their learning and are more motivated to achieve their goals than students who are not friends (Abrami, Chambers, Poulsen, DeSimone, and Howden, 1995). Teaching students the interpersonal and small-group skills that facilitate cooperation in groups is critical to the success of these groups (Blatchford et al., 2006; Johnson and Johnson, 1990). Gillies and Ashman (1996, 1998) found when students worked in groups where they were trained to cooperate, the students demonstrated more on-task behaviour, gave more detailed explanations and assistance to each other, and obtained higher learning outcomes than their untrained peers.

The research on group size and ability composition is clearer with Lou et al. (1996) reporting in a meta-analysis of 6 studies on small-group work that students learned better in small groups of three or four members. Furthermore, students, generally, performed better in mixed-ability groups, although medium-ability students appeared to perform better in same-ability groups. Follow-up research on group size by Lou, Abrami, and d'Apollonia (2001) found that students achieved more when they worked in pairs rather than groups of 3-5 students while Webb, Nemer, Chizhik, and Sugrue (1998) reported that low-ability students benefited from working in groups with students of medium- or above average ability.

While many of the teachers' comments about the use of CL were positive, it is also important to explore the difficulties they had encountered with implementing it in their classrooms because their perceptions may help us to understand why it is not implemented widely or consistently (Baines et al., 2008). Several research findings indicated that there are several challenges in cooperative learning practices. For instance, students developed in a very competitive environment as well as students who have poorly developed social and emotional skills consider cooperative learning activities as a treat or challenging (F. Ashman; 2003). In this study, in order to indentify the problems which affect cooperative learning practices, about fifteen variables were presented for the respondents to rate on the issues saying; Strongly agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree and Strongly disagree.

As indicated in Table 2, from fifteen expected problems in cooperative learning instructors rated as 'serious problems' on item number 1, 2 and 3, 4, 6 and 8 with the highest percentage of 65% and 28.8%rated strongly agree and agree respectively that students reservation to get actively involved in cooperative learning groups, 57% and 22% rated strongly agree and agree that lack of awareness of students about the cooperative learning, 63.3% and 42.3 % rated strongly agree and agree that students negative interdependence is the most challenging aspect in implementing CL, 63.3% and 22.07% rated strongly agree and agree that lack of appropriate training for teachers on the essences of cooperative learning, 61.5% and 32.7% rated strongly agree and agree that unequal share of work among students creates problem in implementing cooperative learning and 51.9% and 34.6 % rated strongly agree and agree respectively that competition among students to better grade worked against the smooth implementation of CL. The result revealed that reservation of students to get actively involved in the CL activities, lack of appropriate training for teachers and unequal share of work among members in CL group are the major problems hindering the practices of cooperative learning.

Table 2. Challenges in implementation cooperative learning

No.	Items	Strongly agree		Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
		no	%	no	%	no	%	no	%	no	%
1	Students reservation of getting actively involved in cooperative learning.	34	65.4%	15	28.8%	3	5.8%	0	0	0	0
2	Lack of awareness about cooperative learning.	30	57.7%	22	42.3%	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	Negative interdependence of students.	32	61.5%	10	19.2%	12	23.07%	0	0	0	0
4	Lack of appropriate training for teachers on the essences of cooperative learning.	35	67.3%	12	23.07%	5	9.6%	0	0	0	0
5	Lack of motivation of student	28	53.8%	20	38.5%	4	7.7%	0	0	0	0
6	Unequal share of work among group members.	32	61.5%	17	32.7%	3	5.8%	0	0	0	0
7	Lack of time to cover contents in students' books.	24	46.2%	26	50%	2	3.9%	0	0	0	0
8	Competition among students to score high marks.	27	51.9%	18	34.6%	7	13.5%	0	0	0	0
9	Insufficient support from school principals	25	48.07%	20	38.5%	5	9.6%	2	3.9%	0	0
10	Unwillingness of teachers to implement CL	20	38.5%	12	23.7%	10	19.23%	10	19.23%	0	0
11	Absence of clear guidelines to assess group performance	26	50%	15	28.8%	5	9.6%	6	11.5%	0	0
12	Poor command of language of the students	25	48.07%	17	32.7%	8	15.4%	2	3.9%	0	0
13	Low-self-esteem of struggling students to work with bright learners	18	34.6%	26	50%	8	15.4%	0	0	0	0
14	Lack of accountability of students for their learning and the learning of other group members	27	51.9%	20	38.5%	0	0	5	9.6%	0	0
15	The physical set-up of my classroom is an obstacle to using cooperative learning.	20	38.5%	22	42.3%	10	19.23%	0	0	0	0

Regarding appropriate training for teachers Johnson and Johnson (1994) advocated that two principles in implementing Cooperative Learning are necessary to teachers: (a) to learn knowledge and the skills of CL to apply the concept and strategies to designing curriculum units for their students' needs; (b) to train teachers to implement curriculum, strategies and activities of Cooperative Learning. This implies that teachers cannot properly handle this pedagogical approach if they are not well trained. The data also revealed that students' competition for better grade is the other challenge for successful implementation of CL. With regard to this competition, Salvin (1995) says traditional language teaching which emphasize the teaching of language rules and vocabulary tends to create competition of grades. In order to get good grades in English, the teacher might bring the competition into the classroom. Such a traditional instructional approach causes competitive learning and individual performance in the classroom teaching. However, too much competition might bring negative interdependence and lower the teaching effects. Therefore, it seems that teachers follow traditional teaching methods in the classroom which in turn encourages students' competition.

Teachers also rated lack of students' motivation as one of the major challenges in implementing CL. Among 52 respondents, 28 (53.8%) and 20 (38.5) rated strongly agree and agree respectively that students' motivation is one of the hindering factors. Regarding impacts of students' motivation on learning, Rhem (1995) as cited in (Millis, 2009) stated that deep learning in cooperative learning depends on motivational context. Courses that remove these take away the sense of ownership and kill one of the strongest elements in lasting learning. The data in Table 2 also clearly revealed that teachers focus on covering the course contents in the students textbook. Among the subject teachers, 24 (46.2%), and 26 (50%) rated strongly agree and agree respectively that lack of time is one of the factors which hindered them from using CL. This implies that teachers dominate the class times and it is more of teacher centered classroom.

Moreover, the data indicated that students' poor command of English and low self-esteem of struggling students to work with bright students were the other factors. Majority of the respondents: 25 (48.07%) and 17 (32.7%) rated strongly agree and agree respectively that students' poor command of language is a hindering factor. With regard to low self-esteem of struggling students, 18 (34.6%) and 26 (50%) rated strongly agree and agree respectively that low achiever students do not want to work with high achiever students. It implies that students do not have good understanding of how one can learn from the other. The data also indicated that lack of accountability of students to their own learning and learning of others in a CL stands in their ways. 27 (51.9%) and 20 (38.5%) of the respondents rated strongly agree and agree respectively that students do not have developed the sense of accountability. This implies that there is lack of awareness among students. This in turn calls for teachers' attention in training students on their roles for success of all group members.

The insufficient support of school principals and the physical set up of the classroom were also considered as factors which hinder the implementation of CL successfully. Majority of respondents i.e 25 (48.07%) and 20 (38.5%) rated strongly agree and agree that the support from school principals is not sufficient. Moreover, the physical set up of the class hindered the implementation of CL. Among the respondents, 20 (38.5%) and 22 (42.3%) rated strongly agree and agree that the classroom setting is not comfortable to implement cooperative learning successfully. The interview data also revealed that the practice of implementing cooperative learning is not well understood. For example, T8 said, "Students in the cooperative learning groups do not actively participate to contribute their share for the success of the group. Rather, majority of the students keep silent and few bright students dominate the groups." He also added that they were made to organize students in cooperative learning groups without any training about its concept. The other teacher, T7 responded that they organize students in cooperative learning groups just simply to obey the school principles. He added, "I think cooperative learning groups are politically motivated in Ethiopian context".

T9 said that the role of cooperative learning groups in improving students' academic achievement and social skills can be achieved if and only if teachers are well trained in the features of the pedagogical approach. However, he added, "we all are doing it without the understanding of the basic principles." T2, and T3 also share the same concern as T9. They said that they are implementing cooperative learning just in the same way as they have been using group and pair works. They explained that very few teachers were trained cooperative learning for 2-3 days. The subject teachers were also asked about student preparation for successful cooperative learning groups. T3, T5, T8, and T10 explained that let alone training students in the concepts of how to work successfully in cooperative groups, we ourselves did not attend any training to implement cooperative learning successfully. They concurred that students needed to be prepared or taught to work cooperatively together, but they ask how untrained teacher can train his or her students.

However, T4 and T12 explained that they attended 2 days workshop in the principles of cooperative learning and types of activities. They mentioned that teachers explicitly need the skills of facilitating cooperation . These included skills such as identifying the characteristics of successful groups: "The first thing that we need is look at successful groups and talk about what they look like, sound like. How to encourage others to talk and have a voice" (T10); teaching specific interpersonal skills: "You have to do them (skills) early in the year. T4 and T12 also stressed that teachers need the skills of how cooperative learning groups should contribute their shares and how to resolve conflicts in case it arises. They concluded that teachers should be trained and then they need to train or prepare students for cooperative learning success. These teachers themselves, however, witness that they themselves could not successfully implement what they were being trained to train their students. They mentioned workload and students' attitude as the barriers.

Table 3. Teachers' Attitude towards cooperative learning

No.	Items	Strongly A		Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Strongly D.	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
1	If I use cooperative learning, the students tend to veer off task.	27	51.9%	16	30.8%	2	3.9%	7	13.5%	0	0
2	Cooperative learning holds bright students back.	25	48.07	20	38.5	0	0	7	13.5%	0	0
3	Cooperative learning places too much emphasis on developing students' social skills.	10	19.2%	17	32.7%	12	23.07%	11	21.2%	2	3.9%
4	I do not think that cooperative learning is appropriate for Ethiopian students.	30	57.7%	13	25%	9	17.3%	0	0	0	0
5	Cooperative learning encourages dependency.	25	48.07%	22	42.3	5	9.6%	0	0	0	0
6	Engaging in cooperative learning interferes with students' academic progress.	27	51.9%	17	32.7%	3	5.76%	5	9.6%	0	0
7	Using cooperative learning fosters positive student attitudes towards learning.	10	19.2%	14	27%	10	19.2%	18	35%	0	0
8	I prefer using familiar teaching methods over trying new approaches.	20	38.5%	20	38.5%	8	15.4%	4	7.7%	0	0

In Table 3 above, the subject teachers' response on students' participation on doing tasks indicated that 27 (51.9%) and 16 (30.8%) rated strongly agree and agree that if they use cooperative learning, students will tend to veer off task. This result indicates that teachers did not want to work in groups for fear that they will be ideal. In other words, the teachers did not want to give responsibility for students for their own learning. Teachers also did not have understanding of how to facilitate and manage cooperative learning activities to engage students in their own learning. It was also indicated in Table 3, item 2 that majority of teachers, 25 (48%) and 20 (38.5%) rated strongly agree and agree that cooperative learning holds bright students back. In the same line of discussion among the subject teachers 27(48%) and 17 (32.7%) rated strongly agree and agree that cooperative learning interferes with students' academic progress respectively. The findings revealed that teachers had misunderstanding and negative attitude towards cooperative learning groups. Teachers' attitude is also reflected on their rating on they do not think that cooperative learning is appropriate for Ethiopian students. Such understanding of teachers on cooperative learning was also reflected in Table 3, item 11 which deals with the diversity of ethnic group and religion.

With regard to the role cooperative learning in enhancing students' social skills, among 52 subjects, 10 (19.2 %), and 17 (32.7%) rated strongly agree and agree that CL give too much emphasis for improving social skills, however, this result contradicts with question item 7 in Table 3. Teachers also rated the role of CL in fostering students' attitude towards learning. It was indicated that 10 (19.2%) and 18 (35%) rated undecided and disagree respectively that CL fosters positive attitude whereas, 10 (19.2%) and 14 (27%) respondents rated strongly agree and agree. The questionnaire result also indicated that the respondents responded that among 52 subjects, 20 (38.5%), and again 20 (38.5%) rated strongly agree and agree respectively that they prefer using familiar teaching methods to trying new ones. This indicates that teachers are resistant to new ideas and concepts with regard to the use of teaching methods. According to the data, it can be concluded that these teachers focus on routine teaching rather than being reflective. The interview results are in concurrent with the results of questionnaire. T1, T6, T7, T8 and T10 believed that cooperative learning places strong burden on bright learners.

They said that these learners are expected to do group assignments all the time and explaining some concepts for their group members. In other words, they said that these bright learners waste their time since they do not have time to study individually. These teachers explicitly explained that cooperative learning holds bright students back and it interferes with students' academic progress. This implies that for one thing, these teachers misunderstood what cooperative learning is and they do have also negative attitude towards it.

However, T4 and T12 explained that cooperative learning helps all the students in the groups since they deepen their understanding when they explain to each other. They also added that students learn better when they discuss with each other since the concepts and terms they use are at their level of understanding. These teachers underlined that if the classroom situation, the sitting arrangements and class size are well thought out, teachers can successfully implement cooperative learning and students will benefit from it. On the other hand, T1, T6, T8 and T9 explained that they have been organizing students in cooperative learning groups since 2004. However, they said that they could not see any difference in academic achievement and social skills since students leave the tasks and activities to be done by bright students. The teachers explained their worries that students may develop dependency on the efforts of others.

Conclusion

The findings in this study highlight the challenges that teachers face when attempting to implement an instructional methodology that is well theorized and advocated, but not well embedded in teacher training nor traditionally supported in schools. The study showed that only two teachers in the sample had the knowledge and cooperative learning pattern language required to meet Johnson and Johnson's (1994) and Bain et al.'s (2009) criteria. Teachers classified as having limited or general cooperative learning knowledge typically perceived potential problems with student discipline, grouping technique, staying on-task, and, in general, did not feel comfortable allowing students to make decisions or work independently. Therefore, while it is acknowledged that this data is self-reported the finding that those few who had a more sophisticated understanding of cooperative learning features, functions and pattern language described more effective cooperative learning practice, provides preliminary

evidence to support the view that when teachers have this pattern language and understanding it can lead to more effective practice.

Moreover, this study shows that the extent to which factors were perceived as barriers to cooperative learning, or issues that could be effectively managed by teachers, differed depending on the teacher's knowledge of cooperative learning features and function. The study revealed that lack of training on how to successfully implement CL, lack of students' accountability for their learning and the learning of others, lack of motivation, students' reservation to get actively involved in CL, lack of awareness and absence of clear guidelines for assessments was the challenges to successfully implement CL. The results also revealed that limited understanding of the principles and features of cooperative learning resulted in the negative attitude towards the new instructional approach. Teachers did not implement it properly because they believed that it was politically motivated; hold bright learners back and an ideal approach in Ethiopian context. The result also revealed that teachers believed cooperative learning did not bring change in academic achievement and social skills of the students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

Most teachers in the sample had limited knowledge and practice of cooperative learning (and little or no use of cooperative learning pattern language) reinforces the need for the embedded design of cooperative learning pattern language in teacher training and continuous structural support for the implementation of cooperative learning. Without repeated exposure to cooperative learning pattern language throughout teacher training programs, or the reinforcement of this language in ongoing professional development courses, how can we expect teachers to adopt cooperative learning effectively in practice? How can we improve practice in education on a larger scale if teachers do not have the required professional pattern language to manage the barriers and implement cooperative learning successfully?

In particular, this study showed that teachers need time and structural support to develop curriculum units that embody cooperative learning approaches to teaching. The existence of external professional norms of cooperative learning competencies and incentives that encourage teachers to try innovative approaches, like cooperative learning, will give visibility and status to those who exemplify them and trait theories of teaching competence should diminish. Student training should also be at the heart of cooperative learning. For successful implementation of cooperative learning, students should be given explicit training on how to work with others, how to develop interactional skills, the accountability of group members for their learning and the learning of other group members. They should also be trained in managing their learning and resolving conflicts. Stakeholders should assist and maintain rapport with teachers and let them experiment with the instructional approach to help them believe and change attitude towards the benefits of cooperative learning in maximizing students learning and social skills.

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