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CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Group work: effect of cooperative learning method on academic performance in English language among pupils in Universal Primary Education schools in Kashari, Uganda

Edith Namusoke[1] and Aloysius Rukundo[1]*

Abstract: As compared to traditional modes of delivery, cooperative learning (CL), as a teaching method, is said to be effective in improving learners' academic achievement. A plethora of studies underscore CL as a strategy of instruction that delivers improvement in learning outcomes. However, not many of the studies consider the role of CL in facilitating pupils' learning in English language, and in universal education primary schools. This study explores the role of cooperative learning in performance of primary school learners in English language. The study employed a quasi-experimental design to investigate how CL affected performance in the experimental group. A purposive sample of 180 primary seven pupils in two Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools was considered. The schools were selected using simple random sampling (rotary method). Observation checklists and classroom tests for English language were used to collect the data. Assessment was done at the baseline and after treatment. There were no statistically significant differences in pupils' performance in English language at the baseline assessment. After treatment, CL had a statistically significant effect (Mean difference = −5.07, Cohen's d = −1.84, p < .001) on the performance of pupils in the experimental group. As a pupil-centred learning method, CL could be an impactful teaching-learning strategy for English language.

Subjects: Primary/Elementary Education; Study Skills; Curriculum Studies

Keywords: cooperative learning; group work; performance; learning methods; experiment

1. Introduction

Unlike traditional modes of delivery, cooperative learning (CL), as a teaching method, is said to be effective in improving learners' cognition, social skills and motivation (Johnson & Johnson, 2008, 2018; Johnson et al., 2000; Slavin, 2011). Cooperative learning is a teaching method that involves students in learning process in order to understand and learn content of the subject (Slavin, 2011). Also, cooperative learning could be expounded in terms of instructional strategy where learners work as a team to in achieving a learning outcome (Abrami et al., 2004). So, when cooperative learning method is used as a teaching activity, it improves pupils' motivation to learn, participation in learning and academic achievement (Gull & Shehzad, 2015; Simsek et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2015). The connotations highlighted above, regarding CL point to a learner-centred mode of delivery. As a result, a plethora of studies underscore CL as a strategy of instruction that delivers improvement in learning outcomes (Gull & Shehzad, 2015). However, not many of the studies consider the role of CL in facilitating pupils' learning in

English language, and in universal education primary schools. This study explores the role of cooperative learning in performance of primary school learners in English language. The study results potentially enable recourses in delivery of English, and in general improvement of learning, as English language is a medium communication in the local classrooms. Possibly, the outcomes place CL in a central position as a source of empowerment of the learner as the primary focus of the teaching-learning process.

As a learner-centred technique, CL is not a mere synonym about pupils learning in groups (Gull & Shehzad, 2015). It encourages the key cooperative learning elements, including cognitive complexity quality teamwork (Curşeu & Pluut, 2013). Accordingly, CL facilitates development of cognitive complexity, in terms of the level and depth of knowledge a group has to achieve in a certain subject or area of knowledge (Curşeu & Pluut, 2013). Consequently, CL as viewed in terms of quality teamwork has many aspects that could help in developing in a group. Such aspects include collaboration, cooperation, and group cohesion (Simsek et al., 2013). Further, CL could be employable in teaching and learning of any type of task pupils partake in, and as assigned by the instructor (Maceiras et al., 2011).

For its key role in instruction, CL becomes a well-documented technique in the educational research, and as a successful pedagogy to improve students' academic achievement (Ballantine & Larres, 2007). In essence, its fundamental principles of grouping class members are linked together in such a way that individual group members cannot succeed unless everyone succeeds. CL benefits learners in a way that they actively assist one another, ensuring that the assigned task is done and the group purpose is achieved (Deutsch, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 2018). CL achieves its efficiency by enabling learners develop a cooperative spirit, helping their colleagues, sharing resources, and encouraging each other's efforts (Hossain & Tarmizi, 2013). CL stimulates a non-competitive classroom environment (Simsek et al., 2013). As a result, learners who work in cooperative groups outperform their colleagues do work by themselves or in competition with each other (Johnson & Johnson, 2005).

In investigating its role in students' achievement, Hua (2014) found that CL had a positive impact on students' participation in a large-sized class of English language in China. Hua further explored the feasibility and effectiveness of CL learning strategies in Chinese universities, and discovered higher scores in all the domains of learning among the group that was engaged in CL strategies, especially vocabulary, listening and speaking skills. Other sources depict CL as being effective in passive learning environments (Alshammari, 2015; Hwang et al., 2005).

Upon realization of the numerous positive outcomes of learner-centred techniques, countries, including Uganda, instituted mechanisms to improve the use of such strategies among Universal Primary Education (UPE) Schools. School inspections, for example, were emphasized. Despite efforts by the government of Uganda to upgrade achievement of primary school pupils' in English, national examination results over the years show that pupils' performance in the subject in various parts of the country remains dismal. This study is important because it illuminates CL as potentially viable teaching strategy of English language. Further, as English remains a medium of communication in upper primary section and in examinations, its improvement would cause a multiplier boost in other subjects taught at primary school level.

2. Methods and procedure

2.1. Design
We employed a quasi-experimental design based to study the role of CL in performance of pupils in English subject. Quasi-experiment was particularly used due to its effectiveness in determining measurable outcomes of a study (please put a citation). A quasi-experiment was performed by first identifying two of UPE schools in Mbarara that used traditional, teacher-centered methods of instruction. Then, a standard English comprehension test at the level of the Uganda National Examinations

Board was set for pupils of primary seven in the two schools previously observed as using teacher-centred means of instruction. Pupils in the two schools were assessed using the test described above.

After the initial assessment, one of the two schools was considered for introduction of CL, and the other school was left as a control. The teachers of English in the experimental group were trained in using CL to teach their students. Training of teachers in the experimental group involved retooling teachers in using group work and cooperative learning. Teachers were trained in grouping of learners and then assigning learners tasks as groups. The duration of the training was three months, from for September, October and November 2019, just before the first COVID-19 lockdown.

Through lesson observation technique (by sitting at the backbench during lesson time), one of the authors used a checklist to ensure CL was being implemented in the school. The checklist used in observing the lessons is described in detail under section 2.3. Lesson observation took two months, November and December 2020, after the Government lifted the first COVID-19 lockdown. Lesson observation was done after every fortnight (after two weeks), for 40 minutes per school per day for five days. After two (2) months of observing the teachers in the experimental school using CL as a teaching strategy, the test that was given to pupils of both schools before the intervention was re-introduced to assess the pupils for the second time. Pupils' performance in the experimental and control schools and in respect of the first and second assessments was compared. Comparison of the pupils' scores of the two schools was done to determine whether use of CL in the experimental school had an impact on the pupils' achievement.

2.2. Population and sampling

The study population was primarily seven candidates in UPE schools in Kashari County, Mbarara District. The primary seven classes were chosen because being at the helm of primary education; they were envisaged to understand English language better than the lower classes. Moreover, the content on which the students were to be tested was from a primary seven syllabus. The number of UPE schools in Kashari was 72, as obtained from the Principal Education Office records of 2019.

Since the study was experimental in nature, we targeted pupils in only two schools for effective measurement and control (Gavin, 2008). The two schools were selected using simple random sampling (Gavin, 2008). A simple random sample of two schools, one with 89 primary seven pupils and the other with 91 primary seven students, was considered.

2.3. Instruments

An observation checklist, as presented in addendum 1, was used to ascertain the use of CL in the experimental school, and non-use of CL in the control school. The checklist contained 11 items on a dichotomous (Yes/No) scale. The structure of the checklist followed the order which teachers were expected to follow when using group work or cooperative learning method. The content of the checklist contained activities that were expected to be followed by the teachers when using group work. An item, for example, read: the teacher gives group homework/assignments to pupils (Yes/No). CL was observed to have taken place if all the items on the checklist were checked "yes".

Further, classroom tests of English Language were used to measure students' performance, in both experimental and control schools. The test was based on a story, dialogue and a poem (see Addendum 2). Academic achievement was measured using test scores of pupils before and after the experiment. The test used to assess pupils' achievement in comprehension. Compression is this, was measured through pupils' ability to read, understand and then answer questions about a particular story. The questions used to assess pupils for CL were set up to the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) standard. UNEB is the national examinations body responsible for assessing pupils leaving the primary school level and going to secondary schools. Usually, UNEB scores the section that we used to measure cooperative learning out of 30%, and we focused only on that for our experiment. The score for the test therefore was out of 30, based on 30 test items.

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2.4. Procedure and ethical review

Ethical clearance was sought from the Mbarara University Research Ethics Committee (MUREC), under protocol number 09/12-20. Permission to access the study participants then was sought from the school head teachers, using a cover letter from MUREC. Teachers consented to participating in the study, through signing of the MUREC consent form. Head teachers consented on behalf of the pupils' parents. Before participating, teachers and pupils of primary seven in the participating schools were orally briefed about the study and its aim. Teachers in the treatment school were requested and consented to participate in guiding their pupils using CL. Pupils in particular were requested to participate in the two sets of tests, by their teachers and on behalf of the researchers.

2.5. Data management and analysis

The data were analyzed using Excel and Special Package for Social Scientists SPSS, version 20. SPSS was used in computing descriptive and inferential statistics. Excel was used because SPSS version 20 could not compute Cohen's D. We used an observation checklist with 11 items rated on a dichotomous ("Yes"/"No") scale. "Yes" was coded on a score of (1), while "No" was coded on a score of Zero. The scores were then summed. The maximum score was 11.0 while the minimum score was 0.0. A score of 11.0 meant that all items on the checklist were observed and were being applied while zero means that no item was observed/was being applied. A lesson was considered as using CL if the entire checklist were observed during the lesson. In that regard, lessons where the checklist was incomplete were not considered for the study. Further, it was presumed that the learners in each of the groups followed through the teachers' instructions, and learned the lesson material, as expected, as would be evidenced through pupils' performance in the test,

The data was analyzed by generating mean differences and standard deviation through an independent samples t-test. An Independent samples t-test was used because it is a statistical method most suitable comparing scores on the same variable but for two different groups of cases and for determining whether there is a statistically significant mean difference between two categories, groups, or items (Singh & Masuku, 2014). To determine the magnitude of the effect, Cohen's D was used as: Cohen's D = $(M_1 - M_2)$/Pooled SD

Where:

SD = Pooled standard deviation

M_2 = Mean of control school

M_1 = Mean of experimental school

The hypotheses were tested by comparing probability Eigen values (p-value) with the critical significance level at .05.

3. Results

This study aimed at understanding the role of CL in pupils' performance in English language among UPE schools, using a quasi-experiment. The objective was to explore the effect of cooperative learning (group work) method on pupils' academic performance. A null hypothesis was set thus: *Cooperative teaching (group work) method has no statistically significant effect of on pupils' academic performance. To test the hypothesis, differences in pupils' performance before and after the experiment were generated*. Differences in performance among pupils in experimental and control schools were adduced using t-tests of independent samples. First, some demographic characteristics of the sample are described.

The results in Table 1 indicate that majority of the pupils were males (60.0%).

As regards to age, majority of the pupils (50.6%) were 14 years old.

Table 1. Sex and age of the learners			
Sex of the pupils			
Details	**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Cumulative percent**
Male	108	60.0	60.0
Female	72	40.0	100.0
Total	**180**	**100.0**	
Age of the pupils			
12 years	11	6.1	13.7
13 years	54	30.1	46.9
14 years	91	50.6	73.4
15 years	19	10.3	93.4
16 yrs	5	2.9	100.0
Total	**180**	**100.0**	

Source**: Primary Data, 2020.**

3.1. Pupils' performance at baseline level

The performance of pupils was analyzed with respect to CL. We used an observation checklist with 11 observation items, rated on a dichotomous ("Yes"/"No") scale.

Table 2 shows that there was no significant difference (cooperative (−0.06), role play (0.02) and demonstration (0.01)) since all the p-values were >.05 between the control and the experimental groups.

Table 3 shows that cooperative teaching has a statistically significant effect (Mean difference = −5.07, Cohen's d = −1.84, p < .001) on the pupils' performance in the experimental UPE school. Since p-value was <.05, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis "*Cooperative teaching (group work) method has a statistically significant effect on pupils' academic performance in UPE schools*" was taken. Specifically, there was a better performance in the experimental group (M = 9.00, SD = 2.80) as compared to the control group (M = 3.93, SD = 2.72) at post-experimental time of cooperative teaching.

4. Discussion

Statistically significant differences were found between the group that was taught using CL techniques and the pupils that were taught using ordinary, teacher-centered methods of delivery in the English language lessons. The null hypothesis was not taken, and the alternative hypothesis was considered. The implication is that CL made a statistically significant impact on the academic performance of pupils in the experimental group. Seemingly, the findings suggest that CL places the learners in the focal area of the teaching-learning process, thereby empowering pupils to gain more from the instructional process. The significance of the results reminds us of the students' desire to interact in groups in fulfillment of their desire to innovate around the demands of the subject (Algani & Alhaija, 2021; Karali & Aydemir, 2018; Maceiras et al., 2011). To that end, CL turns out to be a technique that catalyzes understanding of subject material among learners.

Indeed, other previous studies in literature point to a similar view of CL as a learning strategy that facilitates delivery and conceptualization of subject material. So, the present study findings appear in cohorts with literature from studies elsewhere that found CL associated with positive changes in pupils' performance. The study findings revealed that cooperative teaching has a large statistically significant effect on the pupils' performance. The findings of this study are comparable with extant literature that explored the feasibility and effectiveness of cooperative teaching and learning strategies. It was found that after introducing CL, a significant improvement was observed in students' performance in mathematics (Algani & Alhaija, 2021; Hossain & Tarmizi, 2013; Hua,

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Table 2. Pupils' performance in the test at baseline level before CL method (N = 180)										
Teaching method	School	n	Mean	SD	F	Sig.	T	df	Mean difference	Sig. (2-tailed)
Cooperative	Control	89	3.88	0.45	4.43	0.037	−1.03	178	−0.06	0.31
	Experiment	91	3.93	0.29						

Source: **Primary Data, 2021.**

Table 3. Effect of CL on pupils' academic performance in the test (N = 180)

School	N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.	T	df	Mean difference	Cohen's d	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	89	3.93	2.72	11.61	0.00	−68.68	178	−5.07	−1.84	0.000
Experiment	91	9.00	2.80							

Source: **Primary Data, 2021.**

2014). Further, performance of high school Ethiopian students in biology subject increased after exposure to CL (Molla & Muche, 2018).

Also, the findings of this study are consistent with Hwang et al. (2005). CL methods had a significant effect on performance of students, and students who worked as groups outperformed students who were taught by using lecture. Similarly, CL has been documented in the educational research as a successful pedagogy to improve students' academic achievement (Ballantine & Larres, 2007; Parveen et al., 2017). So, CL method when used as a teaching activity, improves motivation, class participation and academic achievement of students (Gull & Shehzad, 2015).

The present study outcome is testimony to the role of CL in achieving capacity for success in English language. The present study and literature show that CL potentially causes significant changes in performance of learners at different levels of learning. Moreover, the impetus of CL in changing learning outcomes is exemplified in different subjects and in several contexts.

5. Study limitations and implications for further studies

This study considered a few attributes, and only CL in the case of this paper. Indeed, the assessment was out of 30, as opposed to the usual 100% score considered by the national examinations body, UNEB. This study, therefore, could not account for the many skills normally tapped by the ordinary classroom assessment. It could be necessary that in future, wider experiments consider multiple attributes. In addition, the study considered just a few schools for quasi-experimental purposes, and with the limitations of experimental design born in mind. For that matter, the degree to which the results herein could be generalizable to other schools remains a huge mountain to climb. Moreover, the trend of results if a larger sample was considered stays unclear to us. The study findings could form the basis on which future global studies on CL could be anchored.

6. Conclusion

Cooperative learning was found to have a large, statistically significant effect on the pupils' performance in UPE schools where it was applied. Hence, as a pupil-centred learning method, CL could be an impactful teaching-learning strategy for English language.

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Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Author contributions
EN conceptualized the study and applied for clearance for data collection. Further, she participated in data collection and analysis and reporting. She helped AR in drafting of the manuscript. **AR** moderated conceptualization of the study. He oversaw the data collection process, and participated in analysis. He drafted the manuscript, helped by **EN**.

Recommendation
Primary schools need to enforce use of CL, to realize positive change in pupils' performance.

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Addendum 1: Checklist for Cooperative Learning (Group Work)

	Observable items	**Yes**	**No**
Cl 1	Does the teacher define learning objectives for the subject activities and assigns pupils to groups?		
Cl 2	Does the teacher give group home work/ assignment to pupils?		
Cl 3	Does the teacher encourage pupils to participate in discussions?.		
Cl 4	Does the teacher allow pupils to consult other pupils about certain topics or subjects for discussion?		
Cl 5	Does the teacher encourage pupil's academic groups to reflect on their interactions to identify potential improvements for future group work?		
Cl 6	Does the teacher monitor pupils' group work and evaluating group and individual performance?		
Cl 7	Does the teacher assign pupils specific roles, and communicates the criteria for group success?		
Cl 8	Does the teacher give individual home work/ assignment to pupils?		
Cl 9	Does the teacher ensure that each pupil is individually accountable for the group's task or tasks?		
Cl 10	Does the teacher ensure that the whole group is collectively accountable for the group's task or tasks?		
Cl 11	Does the teacher allow pupils to question and challenge each other on different learning aspects, share and discuss their ideas, and internalize their learning?		

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Addendum 2: Passage, Dialogue, and Poem

A: PASSAGE

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow in full sentences.

MR. KARAGIRE'S FAMILY

My name is Muriisa Paul. I come from Kyaruhinga Village in Kitagwenda District. My father is Mr. Karagire Samuel, a farmer. He owns a very big piece of land. He keeps a lot of cattle on one part of the land, and the rest, he plants crops seasonally.

In our family, we are five boys and two girls. Each son has a role to play. My elder brother washes the farm car every Saturday while four of us clean the compound and water the flower gardens. We make sure that the fallen leaves are collected and burnt in a pit.

Our elder sister supervises all the home chores while the other girl is in charge of the meals. She makes sure that food is well prepared and served at the proper time.

My father's duty is to take care of his cattle. He checks them regularly to see if they have ticks. He sprays them fortnightly and all our animals look very healthy.

We have a cousin who helps our father to monitor the milking parlour. He makes sure that the three workers on the farm carryout their roles very well. They milk the cows, clean the cans and take the cattle to drink water.

Whenever my aunt visits us, she trains the girls how to make ghee. We don't stay with our mother more often because she is a politician and she travels a lot. However, she provides money to cater for our needs.

I love my family because we all work together and our home is peaceful.

Questions:

(a) What is the story about?

(b) Who is the writer of this passage?

(c) Where does the writer come from?

(d) How many children are in this family?

(e) When does their elder brother wash the farm car?

(f) How often does the father spray his cattle?

(g) According to the passage, who trains the girls how to make ghee?

(h) Why does the writer love his family?

(i) Write a suitable title to this passage.

(j) Give a group of words to mean "fortnightly" as used in the passage.

B: DIALOGUE

Read the conversation below and answer the questions that follow in full sentences.

THE MISSING DICTIONARY.

Hakim: Hullo, Adam, Good evening to you.

Adam: Good evening, Hakim.

Hakim: Where are you heading to with your cousin this evening?

Adam: I am leading him to my aunt's hotel.

Hakim: Are you going to have dinner with her?

Adam: No, she is taking her application. She wants to get a job as a waitress.

Hakim: I am also heading to that hotel.

I want to pick my Mum who had gone for Sauna services.

She has received a visitor at home.

Adam: My dictionary is missing. Could you have seen it anywhere?

Hakim: Yes, I saw Beatrice picking it from your bag. I heard she wanted to look up a word.

Adam: She word was it?

Hakim: She wanted to look up the word "menu"

Adam: Menu! The word. Jogo has just taught us!

Hakim: She was not around. She had gone to attend a workshop about "safety on the Road"

Questions.

1. Who are talking in the dialogue?

2. Where was Adam going?

3. Why was Hakim going to the hotel?

4. Which post had Adam's cousin applied for?

5. Why had Beatrice picked Adam's dictionary?

6. Who teaches English in Adam's class?

7. Why didn't Beatrice learn about the word "menu" with Mr. Jogo?

8. In which class do you think are the pupils in the dialogue?

9. Give one word or group of words that have the same meaning as the underlined words.

10. (i) Menu _____

    (ii) Waitress _____

Addendum 2

C: POEM

Read the poem below and answer the questions that follow in full sentences.

Examinations!   **Examinations!**

There is nothing on earth,

That causes panic to pupils like examinations,

Revising here, Revising there,

Preparing for examinations

Days become hours,

Hours become minutes

And minutes become seconds

It is time for the examinations

The bell is sounded

For the candidates to enter the examination rooms.

Envelopes have been opened.

The invigilators are ready

To watch the candidates as they write their exams

And also serve the scripts.

Start answering! Announces the supervisor

The hands shake

But we remember God by praying.

Fellow candidates,

My advice is to have adequate revision

Before the examination period
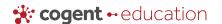
And also look for assistance from our teachers

Finally, to pray to the Almighty God,

"With God everything is possible".

Cathy, P.7 East.

Questions:

1. What is the poem about?

2. What makes pupils panic according to stanza one?

3. Why do you think the candidates revise here and there?

4. Why is the bell sounded?

5. State one duty of an invigilator.

6. According to the third stanza, how do the candidates remember God?

7. How many stanzas does this poem have?

8. By whom was this poem written?

9. Give another word or group of words with the same meaning as the

    words underlined in the poem,

    (i) scripts

    (ii) adequate

10. Suggest a suitable title to the poem.

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