



## Cooperative Learning Practice in Primary EFL Classrooms: Teachers' Perspective on Benefits and Challenges

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#### ABSTRACT

*This study explores teachers' perspectives on the implementation of cooperative learning in primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and the strategies employed to address related challenges. Using a qualitative research approach with a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with twelve English teachers from SD Negeri 13 Sesetan, Bali. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved data familiarization, coding, categorizing, and interpreting recurring themes related to teachers' experiences, challenges, and strategies in implementing cooperative learning. Triangulation between interview and observation data was also conducted to ensure the credibility and consistency of the findings. The findings reveal several major challenges categorized into pedagogical, contextual, and student-related issues. Pedagogically, teachers struggled to manage heterogeneous student abilities, unequal participation, and classroom management during group activities. Contextual challenges included limited instructional time, inadequate classroom space, and insufficient teaching resources, which affected the effectiveness of cooperative learning implementation. In addition, student-related challenges such as inconsistent use of English and low self-regulation hindered productive interaction during collaborative activities. To address these issues, teachers implemented various strategies including structured grouping, role assignment, cooperative learning techniques, interactive teaching materials, and continuous emotional support for students. These findings indicate the importance of effective instructional planning, classroom management, and institutional support in optimizing cooperative learning practices. This study contributes to the growing body of research on cooperative learning and primary EFL education by providing practical insights into how teachers adapt cooperative learning strategies to EFL classroom.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Effective instructional practices in primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom have become increasingly important. Young learners require learning environments that support both cognitive and social development. English is introduced at an early age to prepare students for global communication and future academic opportunities (Haryadi & Aminuddin, 2023). Therefore, teachers are expected to implement instructional approaches that are developmentally appropriate and encourage meaningful student participation. Recent educational trends have emphasized student-centred learning that promotes collaboration, interaction, and active engagement in the classroom (Islam et al., 2022).

Cooperative learning has gained considerable attention because it encourages students to work collaboratively in small groups while sharing responsibility for achieving learning goals (Silva et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown that cooperative learning improves classroom participation, communication skills, and academic achievement in EFL contexts (Beirovi et al., 2022). In addition, cooperative learning provides opportunities for students to practice English through meaningful peer interaction, which supports communicative language teaching principles (Chen, 2020).

The theoretical foundation of cooperative learning is closely related to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in language and cognitive development (Erbil, 2020). Through collaborative activities, students develop language skills through communication, negotiation, and shared problem-solving. This interaction is particularly important in EFL classrooms where students have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom setting (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). Furthermore, cooperative learning promotes positive interdependence and individual accountability, which help create supportive and interactive learning environments (Zhou & Colomer, 2024).

Despite its benefits, implementing cooperative learning in primary EFL classrooms remains challenging. Teachers often struggle to manage heterogeneous classrooms where students have different proficiency levels, motivation, and participation patterns (Dunn & Iwaniec, 2022). Some students dominate discussions while others remain passive, reducing equal participation during group activities (Hsieh, 2020). In addition, classroom management becomes more difficult during collaborative activities because increased interaction may lead to noise and off-task behaviour (Tamimy et al., 2023). Teachers are also required to provide clear instructions, monitor several groups simultaneously, and maintain students' focus throughout the lesson (Khair et al., 2021).

Practical challenges also affect the implementation of cooperative learning. Group-based activities often require more time than traditional teaching methods, while limited facilities and teaching resources may reduce instructional effectiveness (Hanif, 2020). These conditions indicate that cooperative learning requires careful planning, structured interaction, and continuous teacher facilitation to be successful (Herrera-Pavo, 2021).

Another important issue concerns the limited focus of previous research on teachers' perspectives regarding cooperative learning implementation in primary EFL classrooms. Previous studies have focused on students' achievement or motivation, while teachers' experiences in managing cooperative learning remain underexplored (Zaafour & Salaberri-Ramiro, 2022). Teachers play a central role in designing, adapting, and facilitating cooperative

learning activities according to classroom conditions (Seyoum & Molla, 2022). Therefore, understanding teachers' perspectives is important for identifying practical strategies and challenges in implementing cooperative learning effectively.

In addition, many previous studies were conducted in secondary schools or higher education settings, with limited attention given to primary school contexts, particularly in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Therefore, this study specifically explores primary school English teachers' perspectives on the pedagogical, contextual, and behavioural challenges of implementing cooperative learning, as well as the practical strategies they employ to address these challenges in classroom practice. This focus provides a clearer understanding of cooperative learning implementation from teachers' perspectives and contributes to the existing literature by addressing the limited research in primary EFL.

The present study aims to explore teachers' perspectives on the benefits and challenges of implementing cooperative learning in primary EFL classrooms at SD Negeri 13 Sesetan, Bali. The study seeks to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the main challenges faced by primary EFL teachers in implementing cooperative learning in classroom practice?
2. What strategies do primary EFL teachers consider effective in addressing the challenges of implementing cooperative learning?

## METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore teachers' perspectives on the benefits and challenges of implementing cooperative learning in primary EFL classrooms. The participants were twelve English teachers from SD Negeri 13 Sesetan, Bali, selected through purposive sampling based on their teaching experience and familiarity with cooperative learning strategies such as Think-Pair-Share, group discussion, and collaborative tasks. All participants had at least two years of teaching experience and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations were conducted first to directly examine classroom interaction, teacher facilitation, group dynamics, and students' participation during cooperative learning activities in natural classroom settings. Observation checklists and field notes were used to systematically document classroom practices and teaching processes. Classroom observation is an effective technique for capturing behaviours and instructional processes in authentic contexts (Creswell, 2014). After the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper information about teachers' experiences, challenges, and instructional strategies in implementing cooperative learning. The interview guide was adapted from recent studies on cooperative learning and collaborative classroom interaction (Farrell, 2022). Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian to encourage detailed and meaningful responses.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis following (Lochmiller, 2021). The analysis involved several stages, including data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, and interpretation. Interview transcripts and observation notes were repeatedly reviewed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to teachers' experiences in implementing cooperative learning. To enhance credibility, the findings from interviews and observations were triangulated to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Challenges in the Implementation of Cooperative Learning

#### a. Pedagogical Challenges

The findings revealed that one of the main challenges in implementing cooperative learning was managing heterogeneous student abilities. The teachers reported difficulties in balancing instruction for students with different proficiency levels, which affected participation during group activities. Observation results showed that higher-achieving students tended to dominate discussions, while lower-achieving students often relied on peers rather than contributing actively. This condition made cooperative learning difficult to manage in mixed-ability classrooms and required teachers to provide continuous scaffolding to ensure meaningful participation (Mulaudzi, 2025).

The teachers noted that in cooperative learning settings, some students tended to dominate group discussions, while others remained passive during activities. Classroom observation data also indicated that unequal participation frequently occurred, particularly when group composition was not carefully structured. Most students were actively involved in classroom activities; however, the quality and intensity of participation varied considerably among group members. Some students contributed only minimally and appeared hesitant to express their opinions, preferring instead to rely on more confident peers to complete tasks and lead discussions. In contrast, higher-achieving students often assumed greater control over decision-making processes and group interactions. As a result, opportunities for quieter or less confident students to practice communication skills became more limited. Teacher 1 explained:

*“There are students who are very active and dominant, while others tend to be passive. It becomes challenging to ensure that all students are equally involved.”*

Similarly, Teacher 3 emphasized:

*“The gap between students’ abilities is quite significant. Some students can follow the task easily, while others struggle even with basic instructions.”*

These findings indicate that cooperative learning does not automatically guarantee equal participation. Without clear structures and individual accountability, some students tend to depend heavily on more capable peers (Arikan, 2023). Therefore, teachers need to monitor participation continuously and assign clear responsibilities during collaborative tasks.

Another challenge involved giving clear instructions and monitoring all groups effectively during classroom activities. Observation findings showed that some students became confused about task procedures and repeatedly asked peers for clarification. Teachers explained that maintaining guidance during group work was difficult because they needed to divide attention among several groups simultaneously. Effective teacher facilitation and feedback are therefore essential for successful cooperative learning implementation (Abramczyk & Jurkowski, 2020).

Another pedagogical issue identified was classroom management, particularly during group-based learning activities. Observations showed that noise levels and lack of control occurred in more than half of the classes, especially when students were highly engaged. Students occasionally shifted discussions to unrelated topics, which reduced the effectiveness of learning activities. In several cases, students became overly excited during collaborative tasks and ignored classroom rules. Teacher 2 noted:

*“Sometimes students get too excited and start talking about unrelated topics. It becomes difficult to control the class.”*

This finding shows that increased interaction may also lead to off-task behaviour if not properly managed. While cooperative learning encourages active participation, it also requires strong classroom management skills. Teachers must balance student autonomy with clear rules and expectations. Some teachers addressed this issue by establishing routines before group work began and reminding students of behavioural expectations throughout the lesson. Effective classroom management also involved maintaining students' attention without limiting opportunities for interaction. Classroom management becomes an essential component of successful cooperative learning implementation (Purwanto et al., 2020).

#### **b. Practical and Contextual Challenges**

Time limitation was another major challenge in implementing cooperative learning. Teachers emphasize that group-based activities often require more time compared to traditional teaching methods. Based on classroom observations, time management issues were identified in most classes, where activities exceeded the planned duration. Teachers explained that students frequently needed additional guidance before fully understanding group tasks. This caused delays during classroom activities and reduced the amount of time available for lesson completion. Teacher 4 stated:

*"The time is limited, while group activities take longer, especially when students need more guidance."*

These findings align with previous study which indicates that cooperative learning demands flexible time allocation and careful classroom planning (Yang et al., 2022). Teachers also reported that preparation for cooperative learning activities was demanding because they needed to organize groups, prepare materials, and design suitable tasks. Observation findings showed that teachers who prepared structured materials and activities managed classrooms more effectively. However, preparation was often difficult because teachers also needed to complete administrative responsibilities and assessment tasks simultaneously.

Similarly, Teacher 1 explained that preparation time is also demanding:

*"Cooperative learning requires careful preparation, from grouping students to designing tasks and materials."*

In addition, physical classroom conditions and limited teaching resources created challenges in implementing cooperative learning effectively. Some classrooms lacked flexible seating arrangements, which restricted student movement and interaction during group work. Teachers also explained that engaging learning materials such as flashcards, videos, and visual aids were limited. As a result, teachers often relied on simple or self-made materials to support classroom activities (Bobkina et al., 2025).

#### **c. Student Engagement and Language Use Challenges**

Although cooperative learning generally increased student engagement, challenges remained in ensuring consistent participation and effective use of the target language. Classroom observations showed that most students were enthusiastic during group activities; however, this enthusiasm did not always translate into meaningful language practice. Many students still relied on their first language when discussing tasks, particularly when explaining ideas or completing activities collaboratively. The frequent shift to Indonesian or Balinese language suggests that interaction alone does not necessarily promote English use without explicit scaffolding and guidance from the teacher. As noted by Teacher 2, students tended to use to their familiar

language during discussions, indicating the need for more structured support to encourage consistent target language use:

*“Students enjoy working in groups, but they often switch to their local language when discussing tasks.”*

This finding shows that interaction alone does not automatically encourage target language use. Students still lacked confidence and vocabulary support to communicate consistently in English (Pramerta, 2024). Therefore, teachers needed to provide modelling, vocabulary support, and communicative scaffolding during activities.

Furthermore, some students showed low self-regulation skills during cooperative learning activities. This resulted in off-task behaviour and reduced focus during group discussions. Several students became distracted during activities and discussed topics unrelated to the lesson. As Teacher 2 explained:

*“Some students cannot manage themselves well and end up talking about unrelated things.”*

Young learners may need guidance to develop self-regulation abilities before they can fully participate in collaborative learning activities. Teachers must provide clear expectations and continuous support to maintain student focus. Observation findings also showed that students became more disciplined when teachers established structured routines and assigned clear responsibilities. Overall, maintaining productive engagement remains a challenge. These findings demonstrate that cooperative learning effectiveness depends not only on instructional design but also on students’ behavioural development and classroom discipline.

## **2. Strategies Employed by Teachers**

### **a. Structured Grouping and Role Assignment**

To address unequal participation, teachers implemented structured grouping strategies by forming heterogeneous groups and assigning specific roles. These roles included leader, note-taker, reporter, and encourager to ensure active involvement among all students. Observation results showed that assigning responsibilities encouraged quieter students to contribute more actively during discussions. Teacher 1 explained:

*“I assign roles in each group so that every student has a responsibility.”*

This strategy helped increase individual accountability among students. Students appeared more engaged when they clearly understood their roles and responsibilities within the group. However, observation data show that implementation was not always consistent across classrooms. Students ignored assigned roles and returned to passive participation patterns. Teachers also rotated roles regularly to ensure fairness and equal participation opportunities. This strategy helped strengthen individual accountability and improve collaborative interaction among students.

### **b. Using Simple and Adaptable Cooperative Techniques**

Teachers preferred using simple and adaptable cooperative learning techniques such as Think-Pair-Share. These strategies were considered more manageable and time-efficient compared to more complex cooperative methods. Observation findings suggest that students responded positively to short and clearly structured collaborative tasks. Teacher 4 stated:

*“Think-Pair-Share is the easiest to apply, especially for lower grades.”*

Similarly, Teacher 2 noted that combining strategies improved student engagement and classroom interaction. Teachers explained that simpler strategies helped maintain classroom order while still encouraging collaboration. These findings suggest that practicality strongly influences instructional choices in primary classrooms. Simpler techniques allow teachers to maintain structure while promoting interaction. In addition, they reduce the complexity of classroom management during collaborative activities. Consequently, adaptable cooperative techniques become more suitable for young learners with limited attention spans and varying proficiency levels.

### **c. Improving Classroom Management**

To improve classroom management, teachers implemented clear rules and structured routines before starting group activities. They established expectations regarding participation, noise levels, and time management. The use of timers helped students manage their time effectively during activities and reduced unnecessary delays. Teacher 2 explained:

*"I set clear rules and use a timer so students know how much time they have."*

Observation data showed that the majority of teachers provided clear instructions before activities began. This contributed to smoother group work and reduced confusion among students. Teachers who consistently reinforced routines appeared to maintain better classroom control throughout lessons. Students also became more disciplined when instructions were repeated clearly and consistently. Therefore, structured procedures enhance classroom control and support effective cooperative learning implementation. Classroom management strategies are essential for maintaining productive interaction in collaborative learning environments (Kayyali, 2025).

### **d. Enhancing Teaching Materials and Learning Resources**

Teachers also enhanced teaching materials by incorporating visual aids, games, and interactive media into classroom activities. These materials made learning more engaging and meaningful for students, particularly for young learners who require visual stimulation. Observation findings showed that students were more enthusiastic when teachers used colourful flashcards, videos, or game-based activities. Teacher 1 stated:

*"More interesting materials like flashcards and videos really help students understand better."*

Despite limited resources, teachers demonstrated creativity in adapting materials to suit classroom conditions. Some teachers created their own visual aids and simplified materials based on students' proficiency levels. However, they emphasized the need for greater institutional support to access more effective teaching resources. This showing that resource availability directly affects teaching quality and classroom engagement. Teachers also noted that interactive materials helped maintain students' attention for longer periods during lessons. Therefore, material development plays an important role in supporting cooperative learning implementation.

### **e. Providing Emotional Support and Encouragement**

To support students emotionally, teachers provided encouragement and positive feedback during cooperative learning activities. Teachers attempted to create supportive classroom environments where students felt comfortable participating without fear of making mistakes.

Observation data showed that students became more confident when teachers acknowledged their efforts rather than focusing only on correct answers. Teacher 4 noted:

*"Students become more confident when they feel supported and not judged."*

Teachers also built rapport with students to better understand their individual needs and learning difficulties. This supportive approach increased student participation and reduced anxiety during classroom interaction. Students who initially hesitated to speak gradually became more active when teachers consistently provided encouragement. Emotional support played a significant role in promoting cooperative learning effectiveness (Siswantini et al., 2025). Positive teacher-student relationships contribute to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

The findings of this study reveal that cooperative learning offers important benefits for primary EFL classrooms, particularly in promoting interaction, engagement, and collaboration. However, its implementation also presents pedagogical, contextual, and behavioural challenges that require careful teacher facilitation. These findings support previous studies which argue that cooperative learning effectiveness depends largely on classroom management, structured interaction, and teacher adaptability (Nguyen & Oanh, 2025).

The findings also demonstrate that cooperative learning is not automatically effective simply because students work in groups. Teachers must continuously guide interaction, monitor participation, and adapt instructional strategies according to classroom conditions. The issue of unequal participation particularly highlights the importance of individual accountability and structured collaborative tasks (Nweke, 2026).

The findings of this study confirm that some students tend to dominate while others remain passive during activities. This condition reflects a mismatch between students engagement and actual participation quality, as learners may appear actively involved but do not always contribute meaningfully (Pramerta et al., 2025). This indicates that cooperative learning requires explicit structures to ensure equal contribution among group members. Teachers also need to monitor group dynamics continuously to maintain balanced interaction and encourage participation from quieter students.

From a sociocultural perspective, the findings emphasize the role of interaction in language development. However, the frequent use of students' first language indicates that collaborative interaction alone is insufficient to support target language acquisition. Teachers therefore need to provide scaffolding, modelling, and vocabulary support to encourage students to communicate more consistently in English (Arora et al., 2024).

Cooperative learning is a powerful pedagogical approach in primary EFL classrooms. However, its success depends on careful planning, teacher adaptability, and continuous reflection on classroom practice. Teachers must consistently evaluate and adjust instructional strategies to address emerging classroom challenges and student needs. In addition, teacher education programs should emphasize practical training in cooperative learning strategies, classroom management skills, and material development. Such training should include opportunities for teachers to practice instructional design and facilitation in authentic teaching contexts (Kunnari et al., 2021).

Finally, classroom management and time constraints remain significant barriers in implementing cooperative learning effectively, particularly in primary school settings. Strategies such as assigning roles, using timers, applying simple cooperative techniques, and establishing clear routines were found to help teachers maintain productive classroom interaction. These

findings suggest that successful cooperative learning requires careful planning, teacher flexibility, and continuous reflection on classroom practice.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the challenges faced by primary school English teachers in implementing cooperative learning in EFL classrooms, along with the strategies they employed to address these challenges. The findings reveal three interconnected categories of challenges pedagogical, contextual, and student related which collectively imply the gap between cooperative learning theories and actual classroom realities. Despite these obstacles, teachers demonstrated notable adaptability and creativity in sustaining student engagement and collaborative practices. The study implies that successful cooperative learning requires collective effort from multiple stakeholders. Schools must provide adequate facilities, resources, and ongoing professional training, while teachers must actively seek to expand their knowledge and pedagogical skills. Teacher education programs, in particular, should offer more practical preparation in cooperative learning strategies, classroom management, and material development. Future research is encouraged to explore specific cooperative learning techniques across different educational levels and examine how digital technologies may support collaborative learning in EFL contexts.

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