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B.Ed. Students' Perceptions of Cooperative learning in an English Language Class in South Africa

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The objective of this study was to determine the perceptions and experiences of recently graduated English for Education students at a South African tertiary institution when cooperative learning was employed in two of their modules – one for third-year and one for fourth-year. In addition to this, the study provided insights into how cultural issues shape pedagogical choices. Students were requested to comment on two specific activities, where cooperative learning was implemented – a moot court activity based on JM Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*, and a panel discussion on various approaches to teaching grammar, specifically within a South African context. This research is underpinned by the social interdependence and socio-cultural theory. Curriculum development was used as an opportunity for professional learning. A qualitative approach with a case study design was used. Data were generated by using a written interview. The findings indicate that students generally perceive cooperative learning in a positive light and as an opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills through interaction in safe social spaces. Cultural differences in the groups influenced what choices students made in terms of cooperative learning.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, B.Ed. students, *Disgrace*, Grammar teaching approaches, moot court and panel discussion

Introduction

Cooperative learning is defined by Bosch et al. (2019) as an approach that involves a small group of students working together, who has a common goal and aims to solve a problem or complete a task. Cooperative learning as a teaching and learning strategy has been well-researched for more than four decades, and its positive effects on students' social and academic achievements have been established (Johnson et al., 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Mardiani & Hanifah, 2023; Kyndt et al., 2013; Slavin, 1995; Roseth et al., 2008; Tolmie et al., 2010). There are many advantages of cooperative learning, including opportunities for interaction, sharing of ideas, clarifying differences, and constructing new knowledge. Gillies (2006) argues that students are less reluctant to engage in discussions at a more advanced level, tend to interrupt one another less, and provide more intellectual input during cooperative learning than in more traditional classroom settings. Tlhoaele et al. (2014) reiterate that cooperative learning offers opportunities for interaction among students but also mention the development of critical thinking. This is supported by Johnson and Johnson (1999, pp. 72) as they argue that cooperative learning results in "higher-level reasoning" and "more frequent generation of new ideas and

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solutions". Cooperative learning is, unfortunately, often equated with traditional group work, where students are divided into groups and are expected to complete assignments or projects. There are fundamental differences between the two learning strategies, with cooperative learning being more than group work. Hwong et al. (1993) posit that group work in and of itself may not be enough to effect higher achievement in learning. Johnson and Johnson (2002, pp. 95) concur with this sentiment when they maintain that "putting students into groups to learn is not the same thing as structuring cooperation among them". Some drawbacks of traditional learning groups include the individual evaluation of students' performances and free riding. When working in traditional learning groups, students may not be required to pay attention to how groups function, and individual accountability may not be required, whereas in cooperative learning, lecturers need to prepare, plan, and monitor the group work meticulously. Johnson and Johnson (2009) posit that cooperative learning as an approach has been successful, as it is underpinned by sound theoretical foundations.

Despite the fact that cooperative learning activities have many benefits for students, these are not promoted widely in South African schools. The discussions in classrooms are mostly teacher-dominated and directed (Murphy et al., 2020). Teacher-centred pedagogies are compounded by the fact that there are many home languages in one classroom, which results in rote learning (Murphy et al., 2020). Such rote learning inhibits learners' ability of learners to think critically and develop discourse skills. Sikhakhane et al. (2020, pp. 706) share that South Africa's teaching and learning system is "overall marred by traditional model-kind of pedagogy characterized by teacher-centred approaches and its infrastructure of the classroom, the textbook and the assessment strategies". These teacher-centred practices will not change in secondary school classrooms if preservice teachers are not taught how to engage their learners in discussions in classrooms and, more specifically, small group discussions to help learners reach their full potential and contribute to knowledge construction. The research questions that informed this study were: What are B.Ed. students' perceptions of cooperative learning in an English language class in South Africa? How do cultural issues shape pedagogical choices?

The following sections include a literature review, a discussion of the theoretical framework, and an explanation of how the students were prepared for the implementation of cooperative learning. This is followed by a section detailing the methodology used in the study, the results and discussion, and a concluding section.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This research is underpinned by the Social Interdependence Theory, established by Lewin (1949), Deutsch (1949, 1962), as well as the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (1978). Many researchers used these theories as a foundation for their research, for example, Gerpott et al. (2018), Shimizu et al. (2020), Alkhudiry (2022), Dewi and Oktapiani (2022). The work of Barnes (1992) and Mercer (2007) on the

value of small group discussions is also relevant to this research. Lewin and Deutch argue that individuals may be dependent on one another through having common goals and that the actions of one individual have an influence on all others. Therefore, it is important to structure cooperative learning opportunities carefully, and Johnson and Johnson (1989) and Johnson et al. (1998) recommend five elements that will assist in ensuring quality cooperative opportunities. These 5 elements are: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing. The researchers briefly explain these elements in the next section:

- Positive interdependence: The idea that one person is connected to another and can only succeed if they do so. According to researchers in the theory of social interdependence, there are two types of social interdependence: positive and negative social interdependence, such as Deutsche (1949, 1962); Johnson (2003); Johnson and Johnson (1989, 2009). According to Johnson and Johnson (2015, pp. 164), "there is negligible interdependence (i.e., competition) when individuals recognize that they can achieve their goals if and only when other individuals they are competitively linked to cannot achieve their goals", and there is no interdependence (i.e., individual efforts) when individuals recognize that they can achieve their goals, regardless of whether other individuals in the situation achieve or do not achieve their goals".
- Individual accountability: The performance of each student in the group is assessed, and each is held individually accountable.
- Face-to-face promotional interaction: Group members promote one another through help, support, encouragement and praise. Johnson and Johnson (2002) point out that this element explains verbally how problems can be solved, discusses fundamental concepts, concepts learned, teaching students what they have learned, and makes connections between what they have learned in the past and in the present.
- Social skills: Some skills, such as leadership, decision-making, trust building, communication, and conflict management, are necessary for successful cooperation learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 2014).
- Group processing: This means examining the success of group members in achieving goals during or after the completion of assignments or projects. Johnson and Johnson (2002, pp. 98) conducted a meta-analysis and identified that group processing improves daily and post-instructional performance, retention, motivation, positive relations between students, success in problem-solving and self-esteem, and positive attitudes.

The five elements of cooperative learning discussed above are relevant to the activities that students had to complete and share their perceptions through a questionnaire. However, Vygotsky's (1978) understanding of the social nature of learning also provides a powerful counterpoint to the privileging of individual cognitive development that is a hallmark of traditional educational settings. His socio-cultural theory is pertinent to this research, as he argues that knowledge is

constructed through social interaction among individuals. The social aspect of learning and the importance of group work are echoed by Douglas Barnes. He has provided a rigorous analysis of small group situations and how other individuals (i.e., not just the teacher) can scaffold peers into learning through talk in which they engage. In *Communication to Curriculum* (1992, pp. 14), Barnes argues that what is intended in any curriculum is transformed in classrooms when these intentions reflect "the communicative life of an institution, the talk and gestures by which pupils and teachers exchange meanings". Barnes (1992, pp. 14) continues to say that in order for a curriculum to be meaningful, it has to be "enacted by pupils as well as teachers, all of whom have their private lives outside school". The social skills needed to work in small groups need to be honed and developed. The benefits of small group discussions are mentioned by Barnes et al. (1969, pp. 28) as providing learners space for the "hesitations, uncertainties, rephrasings and false starts which would be impermissible in the 'final draught' talking, in front of the whole class" as "valuable way-stations as students '[are] groping towards a meaning". They further argue that in small group discussions, the "usual source of authority" is removed, and this compels learners to think for themselves. The work of Neil Mercer is heavily indebted to Barnes' work. Mercer's work is explicitly Vygotskian in nature in that he emphasises that language and learning should be conceived as social activities, rather than simply as cognitive processes that occur within individuals' heads. Mercer (2000) advocates for an intermental developmental zone, which is in contrast to Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. This intermental developmental space is a space that language makes possible and where learners interact and develop critical thinking and reasoning skills (Littleton & Howe, 2010). In a more recent chapter, Mercer (2008, pp. 67) maintains that learners "internalise the dialogues they have been involved in as models for their own thinking". He echoes Johnson and Johnson (1989, 2009) when he says that a group "seems to achieve more than the sum of the individual contributions" (Mercer, 2008, pp. 67), reminding one of individual accountability and positive interdependence. Mercer and Littleton (2007) also maintain that classroom talk should encourage exploration rather than being disputational, should encourage cooperation and not competition, with the former focusing on explaining ideas, paying attention to the views of others, and encouraging mutual understanding in contrast to the latter, where disagreement is often the focus.

However, for cooperative learning to be successfully implemented in their own classrooms one day, B.Ed. students need to be adequately prepared in terms of the theoretical background to cooperative learning, approaches to cooperative learning, and various skills needed when implementing cooperative learning. Theoretical knowledge alone will not be sufficient, and students need to design activities themselves, which they can then use in their classrooms once employed as teachers. Abramczyk and Jurkowski (2020, pp. 298) maintain that teachers use cooperative learning less often than traditional approaches, and mention factors such as gaps in teacher knowledge about cooperative learning, as well as their beliefs about the effectiveness of and difficulties implementing this approach, as contributing to a reluctance to implement cooperative learning. It is important to keep in mind that culture and other aspects influence how learners prefer to learn and engage with

content. For this reason, teachers need to take cognisance of learning style preferences, values, and socioeconomic aspects when choosing pedagogical strategies. Some cultures may prefer rote learning, while others prioritise critical thinking; some have access to technology, while others do not.

Preparation of Students for the Implementation of Cooperative Learning

Students were introduced to various methods and approaches of teaching from their first year of this B.Ed. qualification at a tertiary institution in South Africa. These include the Grammar-translation, Direct-, and Audio-lingual methods, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, Total Physical Response, The Silent way, the Communicative approach, Task and text-based language learning, as well as Cooperative learning. However, many of these are outdated and not utilised today, and the latter three approaches were emphasised in this B.Ed. programme. A balance between theory and practice was maintained by providing the theoretical background to the approaches as well as opportunities for students to apply these in their preparation of lessons. As this article concerns the perceptions of recently-graduated students about cooperative learning, we will focus on how they were prepared to apply this approach.

The researchers, firstly, distinguished between collaborative and cooperative learning, with the latter being more structured. The students, then, did their own research and reported back on this. In small group discussions, they suggested what the common goals of cooperative learning are. Once students had a basic grasp of the approach, a more theoretical session ensued where the five elements of cooperative learning (Johnson et al., 1998) were taught with input from the students. A whole group discussion on the difference between a traditional and cooperative classroom situation provided further theoretical knowledge to students. This was followed by a description of the pitfalls of cooperative learning. Thereafter, students were given an assignment utilising one of their prescribed novels, *Disgrace,* by J.M. Coetzee (1999). The assignment entailed preparation for a mock trial (i.e., a drama) at the actual moot court, and students were placed in groups of eight. The students needed to be familiar with the plot of the novel to conduct a proper trial. This was a summative assessment after an in-depth look at the philosophical concept of "the other" and existentialism as these manifest in the novel, characterisation, major themes, and symbols, and how these contribute to the message of the novel. Thorough preparation and research needed to be done before the trial date. General information was given with regard to the roles, procedures, and terminology used in a court of law. The case to be argued was whether David Lurie was guilty of rape after having been accused by the character of Melanie Isaacs. This opportunity allowed for the development of skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. The outcome of the trial was not the most important issue, but rather the skills learned and the opportunity to collaborate. There were eight roles from which group members could choose from: Judge; counsel for the prosecution; counsel for the defence; defendant (David Lurie); complainant (Melanie Isaacs); witness for the prosecution (former student of David Lurie); witness for the defence (neighbour or colleague of Lurie); usher and clerk of the

court. The groups were heterogeneous, with both male and female students. The rationale for this was that certain roles were more demanding and complex than others, thus providing opportunities to students who had stronger and weaker proficiency levels when choosing roles. Role definitions and role guides were discussed with students, examples of opening and closing statements, cross-examination examples, a glossary of terminology, as well as the general procedure in a court were provided. Two groups, who had differing opinions concerning the guilt of David Lurie, were evaluated at a time, while arguing their cases in front of a panel of lecturers. Moges (2019) argues that students have particular roles to play when doing group work, and all members have a shared responsibility to find solutions collaboratively. The criteria for assessment of each role were clearly stated in the rubric provided to students before the activity, e.g., the judge: are they familiar with the case, do they manage the trial effectively, and do they maintain an authoritative presence? The students also received a mark for overall group work in terms of teamwork, overall performance, and whether the trial flowed.

The second assignment that required students to employ cooperative learning was after a unit on how to teach grammar. As this is a contentious issue, students explored various points of view, such as a focus-on-form, focus-on-forms and focus-on-meaning approaches, as well as a balanced view on teaching grammar by taking into account the unique South African context. Unique implies that many learners take English as a home language, when in fact English is a first, second, or maybe third additional language. Students also designed activities with a focus on accuracy and meaning before the summative assessment of an online panel discussion. In groups of 5–6, students had to organise a panel discussion about grammar teaching and the different approaches advocated. This was a culmination of the knowledge that students had gathered through reading articles by experts in the field, class discussions, and having designed the activities with a focus on accuracy and fluency. Roles were once again suggested, but students could choose these among themselves. Each group had a moderator, and the rest of the group members were panellists advocating for an approach or a combination of approaches. The moderator was not a panellist and played a different role, and their ability to control the event was important. The panel members had to state their point of view and argue from an empirical point of view by referring to research. Criteria that were assessed for individual students were: content knowledge, ability to persuade the audience, and academic use of language; and for the whole group: preparation and appeal to the audience. The next section elaborates on the methodology followed for this research.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative approach with an interpretivist paradigm and a case study design. This paradigm served as a lens to explore how recently-graduated students perceive cooperative learning, and how they construct their social world (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). The students were purposefully selected and had to adhere to criteria: 1) recently-graduated B.Ed. students from one tertiary institution and 2) currently teaching English at a school. All recently-graduated

students were invited to participate. The possible sample size was 40. Eight students agreed to participate, nine pursued further studies and could not be included, ten were not employed as teachers, and the rest declined to participate. The experiences of the eight students who participated are the case in this research. The written interviews were sent to the students by email to explore their perceptions of cooperative learning in an English class. The trustworthiness strategies suggested by Denscombe (2018) were used for this research: credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. Students were asked to review summaries of their written interviews (i.e., credibility), the researchers kept a detailed audit trail of the research (i.e., dependability), provided thick descriptions of the research for other researchers to judge the relevance to their own research or contexts (i.e., transferability), and shared verbatim words of students (i.e., confirmability). The following questions were posed to the participants:

1. Comment on the two specific cooperative learning opportunities from the modules ENGV 311 and ENGV 421, respectively, and say how successful you think these were in terms of execution and knowledge acquisition.
2. What did you appreciate/enjoy and what did you not appreciate or enjoy about these cooperative learning opportunities?
3. Explain how you organised yourself in your groups in terms of leadership, role division, communication and preparation.
4. Which forms of technology were used to communicate with your group members, and how effective were these?
5. What difficulties did you experience as an individual and as a group in general, and how did you deal with these?
6. Comment on the value and effectiveness of cooperative learning opportunities compared to more traditional learning opportunities.
7. Do you believe that the two respective cooperative learning opportunities adhered to the principles of: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction (appropriate use of social skills), and group processing? Please elaborate.
8. How possible and how likely is it for you to implement cooperative learning at school level? Please elaborate.

Results and Discussion

After analysing the data thematically, the following themes emerged: Deeper understanding of the content, learning from one another, online challenges, group dynamics, communication platforms, and future implementation. In the next section, we provide the responses of the students and short discussions on these results.

Deeper Understanding of the Content

Students mentioned the following, which indicated their perceptions that cooperative learning provides opportunities for alternative and effective entry into texts. These are some of the students 'responses.

> "I gained a better understanding of the novel."
> "… we were able to step into the characters of the story and imagine their interaction as it would have happened in the novel."
> "The opportunity to interact with the novel and physically put it into play made me understand it better. I did not understand what people meant when they said it is better to meet theory with practice, but now I know it is a better way to retain information."
> "It really helped to acquire knowledge about the book and understand the book better. We had the opportunity to talk about issues such as rape and violence against women."
> "The moot court was initially met with resistance and a sense of anxiety. Many of us were worried whether we would successfully complete the task and what relevance it had to the module or novel…however, once we were made to understand what was expected from us…it proved to be more fun than stressful"
> "When theory is met with practice, I retain information better."
> "As a whole, I would say that this cooperative learning opportunity was a success."

Students overwhelmingly felt that cooperative learning provides an opportunity to understand content better and to enhance knowledge acquisition. The two cooperative assignments allowed them to immerse themselves deeper into the complexities of the novel, *Disgrace*, by J.M. Coetzee (1999), and to understand the different approaches to grammar teaching. Meaning is negotiated when students work collaboratively. Yandell (2020, pp. 16) argues that literary texts open up possibilities of learning, development, and semiotic work. He continues to say that these possibilities are not necessarily inherent in the texts themselves – in their literary qualities, say – but rather that the possibilities arise out of the kinds of engagement with the text (Yandel, 2020). This is echoed by Doecke and Mead (2018, pp. 252), whose essay prompts the role that literary knowledge plays in the subject, English. The researchers maintain that to "read a text" is to engage in a process of making meaning through interaction with others, and the "social exchanges that occur within classroom settings are not simply incidental or instrumental to this process but the necessary conditions for meaning making to occur at all." Preparing a moot court activity based on a novel or a panel discussion on different grammar approaches is very different from just answering a set of questions based on the content. The comment that the cooperative moot court activity enhanced understanding of the novel points to an opportunity to explore issues such as social justice, equity, and diversity in the text. Students may explore how characters and cultures are represented, which in *Disgrace* varies from being dominant to marginalised. The moot court activity is a different pedagogical strategy for dealing with a sensitive issue, such as rape and violence against women. South Africa has sadly been dubbed the rape capital of the world. It is mentioned in the South Coast Herald (2018) that South Africa is known for high rape statistics but refers to being dubbed the rape capital of the world as arbitrary.

The students also mentioned the ability to gain a deeper understanding of the content in terms of the various grammar approaches:

> "… since the discussion with peers who were more knowledgeable others in a specific topic helped us all to understand the different concepts much better."
> "I for one was struggling a bit to make sense of the perspectives from the articles… but when I did more research, and started to make my own notes, I could connect the dots and the light bulb went on."

The students felt that the panel discussion afforded them the opportunity to learn in ways different from the traditional way of learning. They had to become experts in different approaches to grammar teaching and had to share this knowledge as panellists. Doing their own research also assisted them in becoming more knowledgeable about diverse viewpoints.

Students may bring diverse cultural lenses when they collaborate and design activities (like a moot court or a panel discussion). They seem to regard cooperative learning as a pedagogical strategy that values multiple perspectives. The next theme is related to the theme of gaining a deeper understanding of the content.

Learning from One Another

Students commented the following on how cooperative learning provides opportunities for learning from one another by exchanging ideas and engaging in discussions:

> "… it gave you the opportunities to share knowledge with each other and also to learn from each other."
> "The panel discussion felt as if we were teaching each other, because we shared our understanding of the terms and got a chance to ask questions."
> The students indicated that they enjoyed the opportunity to collaborate and learn from each other, as well as the learning of a new approach that they can employ in their own classrooms. Students commented:
> "We learned new methods which we can implement in future literature or language classes."
> "… we had fun and learnt a lot from each other."
> "Everyone got a fair chance to teach one another about what they learned concerning their section."
> "I enjoyed the collaboration and with other students and being able to learn from them and being able to change or shape one's own viewpoints based on what you can learn from others."
> "I was able to build great friendships."

When employing cooperative learning, every member of the group should be responsible for a concept/idea and then explain that to the rest of the group. This ensures that everyone learns something. Research has proven that when students explain concepts/ideas, it has a positive effect on understanding and cognitive development (Jacob et al., 2020; Kobayashi, 2019; Wellman & Liu, 2007). The feeling of being an expert on a topic also enhances self-confidence. The benefits of

learning in social contexts became apparent, and students seemed open to new ways of teaching and learning.

Cooperative learning does not come without its challenges and especially so when implemented in contexts that may not be conducive to the approach.

Online and Other Challenges

Students commented on what hampered the implementation of cooperative learning: The following quotations refer specifically to the panel discussion on grammar teaching approaches:

> "… we had the problem of doing it online which I know was a struggle for everyone and we would have loved to be in class, but we did try to make the best of it."
> "… This activity was different from the above-mentioned [moot court] as we never came together physically. We still needed each other's work to complete the task and we were therefore held accountable for our own work to ensure the success of the group work."
> "The panel discussion was not easy for me to understand or implement."
> "I missed the variety of scaffolding activities in this task."
> "It was hard not to be physically able to work with students."
> "I didn't enjoy all the research that we had to put into the task."
> "I enjoyed the research part of the activity and expanding my own knowledge in my own way."

The panel discussion activity was executed online and students found this activity generally more difficult, and it seems as if the online mode contributed to this. However, the fact that the scaffolding was mostly self-directed could also have contributed to students experiencing this activity as more difficult. Their feedback was valuable in terms of how to provide additional scaffolding in the future. The reading of the academic articles on the different approaches to grammar teaching was daunting to the students, and this may have to be approached differently for future endeavours. There were contradictory feelings regarding the research, as some students enjoyed the academic articles, while others did not. Jacob et al. (2020, pp. 7) in a study conducted on students explaining concepts to one another found that "the effect of explaining modality depends on the level of linguistic text complexity of the studying material". The more complex the text, the more difficult students find it to explain concepts from the text to others. However, students explaining orally outperformed those who explained in written form (Jacob et al., 2020).

It is clear from responses that participants learned from one another by becoming experts on a specific approach and then sharing ideas with one another. Their preference for face-to-face contact was clear in their feedback. This is an aspect that may need attention, as teaching globally is moving more toward hybrid modes.

Group Dynamics

This theme is related to social skills and group processing as necessary elements for cooperative learning as suggested by Johnson et al. (1998).

Students commented as follows:

> "When we organised ourselves with the moot court, we decided that we would all get together and chose the roles that we think will work for everyone."
> "This meant we partner with students whom we knew are diligent, would come prepared and takes responsibility for his/her own section of the assignment."
> "What I did not enjoy was when I was unable to choose who I wanted in my group."
> "In the moot court activity, we did not have to appoint a leader per se, since we valued each other's opinions equally. We decided as a group, who would be best suited to portray each character."
> "We actually just chose roles…we would look at each other's characters and decide as a group that this role would suit this one."
> "We also decided that the one with the strongest personality would take on the role of group leader, while the person who is always on time and organised, will take on the role of communicator."
> "Leadership was usually given to the person that had the most knowledge."
> "… frustration came in when other students did not do his/her part or did not meet deadlines. This meant that I had to alter my own planning for my studies."
> "Our biggest problem during the moot court project was making sure that everyone produced quality work on time. Many thought that it would be easy to sponge off of the work of the others."
> "… the difficulties we experienced was finding suitable dates and the time to have Zoom meetings."

Gilles and Boyle (2010) comment that it is not that easy to construct groups to work well together. The students indicated that they preferred to choose their own groups. There is generally no consensus on whether heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping is more effective for student learning. A study conducted by Baer (2003) found that college professors usually place students in groups on a heterogeneous basis, but that homogeneous grouping in their specific study resulted in better achievement than the heterogeneous grouping. As far as role division is concerned, it appears as if this occurred without any challenges. Students assigned the more difficult roles to the academically stronger students; however, personalities were also taken into account, as both of these activities required students to perform. The online activity seems to have required more control from appointed leaders. Kaasila and Lauriala (2010, pp. 855) comment that group members develop expectations on the basis of their own "status characteristics" and that an individual's status characteristic is associated with a belief of how this individual is expected to perform. The weight given to an individual member is determined by their status. The "higher the status and role of an individual" (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2010, pp. 855), the more is expected of them in terms of contribution. It appears as if the appointment of leaders and roles happened naturally, with students knowing the abilities and personalities of their fellow group members.

Premo et al. (2018, pp. 1) confirm Johnson and Johnson's (1999) sentiment that simply being paced in groups does not guarantee effective cooperation by stating that "unstructured groups may have negative interpersonal effects, including decreased motivation". Participants seemed to have one common problem, which relates to free-riding, as some students were unmotivated. A strategy to mitigate the effect of unmotivated students, suggested by students, was to divide the task into smaller chunks so that everyone was responsible for a critical part of the task, ensuring accountability. Time was also a huge factor in the sense that students struggled to find a time to suit all the members to get together either physically or in an online mode. Abramczyk and Jurkowski (2020) found in their study that teachers wanted to incorporate cooperative learning in their teaching but experienced constraints in terms of time. Mardiani and Hanifac (2023) agree that teachers, who want to include cooperative learning through the means of drama, might not have the necessary time to do so if they only rely on allocated formal teaching hours.

When asked whether the activities the students completed adhered to the principles of positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction (appropriate use of social skills), and group processing, participants seemed to agree that they did. They had this to say:

> "The group as a whole was aware that in order to achieve, each member had to do his/her best."
> "The students challenged each other and managed to make each other see different points of view and together found ways to justify their new opinions."
> "… everyone was forced to do their absolute best in their preparation and execution to prevent failure in the larger group."
> "Members were also actively participating as they were aware that practice and discussions were needed in order to produce a good end product."
> Only a few participants mentioned aspects related to group processing:
> "… we provided feedback to one another after our trial runs to ensure that everybody was happy with the flow of the panel discussion and where we felt we could improve."
> "If a student is uncertain on the content other students will provide guidance… were always discussed and planned for together and if I was moving in a wrong direction, the other students always offered guidance and vice versa."
> "Students had to support each other continuously to better their product."
> "… we brainstormed ideas together to think of our way forward, then revised that as a group when we started practising if we saw places where we could perhaps implement changes to the initial plan."
> "With cooperative learning learners do not just learn the material but other skills as well that will help them later in life. Skills such as interdependence, where they learn that they can succeed together, and they have positive interactions with each other. Each student learns to accept their responsibility and develop their own accountability for their part."

Participants genuinely seemed to value cooperative learning, and the most common reasons are the opportunities afforded to work together and to learn from one another. They specifically mentioned that individual work isolates students. One participant also mentioned that cooperative learning promotes intellectual growth. The participants also relayed their own experiences in classrooms.

From the above statements of students, it seems as if the theoretical preparation on cooperative learning and the practical implementation of the approach in their classes helped them to gain a better understanding of the approach.

Communication Platforms

This theme has more to do with technical aspects than content. Students commented as follows:

The preferred way to communicate was by far WhatsApp groups, followed by Zoom and Google docs. WhatsApp, being a relatively cheap option, is understandable, especially when considering the high poverty levels in South Africa. Zimba et al. (2021, pp. 264) mention that factors such as: "poor access, distant geographical locations, the low socio-economic status of students, and training and support of students and staff of an inadequate quality" limit student participation in online environments in South Africa. Connection issues hampered online performances in some instances. Participants commented:

> "These [Zoom and WhatsApp] were extremely effective as if anyone had any questions regarding clarifications on their assigned topic, we could ask one another on the group and get almost an immediate response."
> "We would always start with a plenary Zoom session,"
> "Additionally, we used Zoom and emails for meetings and documents that we needed to send to each other."
> "This [WhatsApp] worked effectively because it ensured that everyone was informed at all times."

The students' preference for tools like WhatsApp and Zoom suggests concerns of equity. It was important to the students that all had access to information and the sharing of ideas. This shows that pedagogical choices do not only point to learning preferences but also to aspects such as access and inclusion, which can be shaped by cultural and economic limitations. Students' responses indicate that the choice of technologies was motivated by what was possible and not necessarily ideal. These platforms reflect cultural pragmatism, where students adapt to what works best in their cultural and socio-economic circumstances.

Future Implementation

It was important for me to measure whether students would use cooperative learning as an approach in their classrooms because, of course, it is the goal of preparing them to understand and implement it. Students commented the following on the possibility of employing cooperative learning in their classrooms:

> "Traditional learning has lost its effectiveness; learners lose interest and the motivation to learn and I've experienced myself as a student."

> "The only problem a teacher might face in the school is that the classroom sizes might be too big to do such an activity and to be able to manage and control the learners would be impossible."
> "It is less likely that I will implement cooperative learning at this current point in time… the virtual option is also difficult seeing as many learners do not have the technology available."
> "I would love being able to implement these methods in my own classroom, however, I feel that time constraints work against us at times."
> "… I think if not done correctly, it can result in teachers especially in public schools wasting time."
> "I think for me personally I will definitely try and implement cooperative learning in my lessons as the end result is worth all the hassle especially when the learners are really enjoying it and actually learning something."

Participants' responses to whether they will employ cooperative learning in their own classrooms were mostly promising. Meisner and McKenzie (2023) explicitly state that "Teaching in an online setting must become a regular and embedded part of preparation programs including learning management systems, planning, assessment, and delivery that are unique to the online setting" – cooperative learning can better prepare preservice teachers to teach and learn in online settings.

The participants did, however, also mention certain constraints, like class sizes and the difficulty of employing cooperative learning in an online setting. The difficulties of conducting online classes have to do with unequal access to technology, which affects most students in a South African context. Some participants observed that teachers need to be thoroughly prepared to implement this and that proper structure must be provided to learners before implementing cooperative learning. It is uncertain what the one student means by "hassle" with cooperative learning. It may be the effort expected from teachers in terms of planning and designing cooperative learning activities, or it may be a reference to the effort for the learners.

From the above statements of the students, it seems as if the theoretical preparation of cooperative learning and the practical implementation of the approach in their classes helped them gain a better understanding of the approach. Students are eager to implement cooperative learning. However, it remains to be seen if this will realise in their own classes. A more longitudinal study may provide an answer to that. Oftentimes, schools' instructional policy can be very prescriptive in terms of implementing certain pedagogical strategies and may not be open to include more innovative approaches to teaching and learning, even if teachers or students want to use these more innovative approaches.

Conclusions

The over-all feeling is that participants perceive cooperative learning as valuable and that it leads to a better understanding of literary texts or grammar teaching approaches. Participants indicated that they preferred cooperative learning to the more traditional way of teaching, where students are passive recipients of knowledge. The online panel discussion proved to be more challenging, and it

appears that better scaffolding should be provided in order for students to feel more confident to complete this activity. Participants seem to all prefer to choose their own groups and to work with students they are familiar with and with whom they have collaborated before. The idea of positive interdependence and individual accountability was strongly emphasised as elements of cooperative learning that participants kept in mind while working together. The responses of the students confirmed that culture shapes pedagogical choices. The results indicate how the students emphasise the value of collaborating in social contexts while being inclusive, focusing on equity and pragmatism. Some limitations of the study were the small sample, and therefore, no generalisations could be made to a larger population. Another limitation is that the data generation instruments could include observation of newly-graduated students in classrooms to see how teachers employ cooperative learning. It is hoped that students will, in fact, employ cooperative learning after having been exposed to these themselves and having reflected on these accordingly.

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