

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

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 third-year and one fourth-year. In addition to this, the study provides 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 is used as an opportunity for professional learning. A qualitative approach with a case study design was used. Data were generated by using a questionnaire. 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, 58) 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; Lou et al., 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Kyndt et al., 2013; Slavin, 1995; Roseth, et al., 2008; Tolmie, et al., 2010; Mardiani & Hanifah, 2023). 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. Tlhoale, Hofman, Winnips, and Beetsma (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, 72) as they argue that cooperative learning results in “higher-level reasoning” and “more frequent generation of new ideas and 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

1 are fundamental differences between the two learning strategies, with
2 cooperative learning being more than group work. Hwong, Caswell, Johnson,
3 and Johnson (1993) posit that group work in and of itself may not be enough to
4 effect higher achievement in learning. Johnson and Johnson (2002, 95) concur
5 with this sentiment when they maintain that “putting students into groups to learn
6 is not the same thing as structuring cooperation among them”. Some drawbacks
7 of traditional learning groups include the individual evaluation of students’
8 performances and free riding. When working in traditional learning groups,
9 students may not be required to pay attention to how groups function, and
10 individual accountability may not be required, whereas in cooperative learning,
11 lecturers need to prepare, plan, and monitor the group work meticulously.
12 Johnson and Johnson (2009) posit that cooperative learning as an approach has
13 been successful, as it is underpinned by sound theoretical foundations.

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

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

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37

38 **Literature Review**

39

40 **Theoretical framework**

41

42 This research is underpinned by the Social Interdependence Theory,
43 established by Lewin (1949) and Deutch (1949, 1962), and the socio-cultural
44 theory of Vygotsky (1978). The work of Barnes and Mercer on the value of small
45 group discussions is also relevant to this research. Lewin and Deutch argue that
46 individuals may be dependent on one another through having common goals and

1 that the actions of one individual have an influence on all others. Therefore, it is
2 important to structure cooperative learning opportunities carefully, and Johnson
3 and Johnson (1989) and Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1998) recommend five
4 elements that will assist in ensuring quality cooperative opportunities. These 5
5 elements are: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face
6 promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing. I briefly explain these
7 elements in the next section:

- 8
- 9 • Positive interdependence: The idea that one person is connected to
10 another and can only succeed if they do so. According to researchers in
11 the theory of social interdependence, there are two types of social
12 interdependence: positive and negative social interdependence, such as
13 Deutsche (1949,1962); Johnson (2003); Johnson and Johnson (1989,
14 2009). According to Johnson and Johnson (2015,164), "there is
15 negligible interdependence (i.e. competition) when individuals recognize
16 that they can achieve their goals if and only when other individuals they
17 are competitively linked to cannot achieve their goals", and there is no
18 interdependence (i.e. individual efforts) when individuals recognize that
19 they can achieve their goals, regardless of whether other individuals in
20 the situation achieve or do not achieve their goals".
- 21 • Individual accountability: The performance of each student in the group
22 is assessed, and each is held individually accountable.
- 23 • Face-to-face promotional interaction: Group members promote one
24 another through help, support, encouragement and praise. Johnson and
25 Johnson (2002) point out that this element explains verbally how
26 problems can be solved, discusses fundamental concepts, concepts
27 learned, teaching students what they have learned, and makes
28 connections between what they have learned in the past and in the
29 present.
- 30 • Social skills: Some skills, such as leadership, decision-making, trust
31 building, communication, and conflict management, are necessary for
32 successful cooperation learning (Johnson and Johnson1997; Johnson and
33 Johnson2014).
- 34 • Group processing: This means examining the success of group members
35 in achieving goals during or after the completion of assignments or
36 projects. Johnson and Johnson (2002, 98) conducted a meta-analysis and
37 identified that group processing improves daily and post-instructional
38 performance, retention, motivation, positive relations between students,
39 success in problem-solving and self-esteem, and positive attitudes.
- 40

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

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

36 However, for cooperative learning to be successfully implemented in their
37 own classrooms one day, B.Ed. students need to be adequately prepared in terms
38 of the theoretical background to cooperative learning, approaches to cooperative
39 learning, and various skills needed when implementing cooperative learning.
40 Theoretical knowledge alone will not be sufficient, and students need to design
41 activities themselves, which they can then use in their classrooms once employed
42 as teachers. Abramczyk and Jurkowski (2020, 298) maintain that teachers use
43 cooperative learning less often than traditional approaches, and mention factors
44 such as gaps in teacher knowledge about cooperative learning, as well as their
45 beliefs about the effectiveness of and difficulties implementing this approach, as
46 contributing to a reluctance to implement cooperative learning. It is important to

1 keep in mind that culture and other aspects influence how learners prefer to learn
2 and engage with content. For this reason, teachers need to take cognisance of
3 learning style preferences, values, and socioeconomic aspects when choosing
4 pedagogical strategies. Some cultures may prefer rote learning, while others
5 prioritise critical thinking; some have access to technology while others do not.
6

7 **Preparation of students for the implementation of cooperative learning**

8

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

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

1 (David Lurie); complainant (Melanie Isaacs); witness for the prosecution
2 (former student of David Lurie); witness for the defence (neighbour or colleague
3 of Lurie); usher and clerk of the court. The groups were heterogeneous with both
4 male and female students. The rationale for this was that certain roles were more
5 demanding and complex than others, thus providing opportunities to students
6 who had stronger and weaker proficiency levels when choosing roles. Role
7 definitions and role guides were discussed with students, examples of opening
8 and closing statements, cross-examination examples, a glossary of terminology,
9 as well as the general procedure in a court were provided. Two groups, who had
10 differing opinions concerning the guilt of David Lurie, were evaluated at a time,
11 while arguing their cases in front of a panel of lecturers. Moges (2019) argues
12 that students have “specific roles to play” and the entire group would be “jointly
13 responsible for arriving at an agreed-upon solution.” The criteria for assessment
14 of each role were clearly stated in the rubric provided to students before the
15 activity, e.g., the judge: are they familiar with the case, do they manage the trial
16 effectively, and do they maintain an authoritative presence? The students also
17 received a mark for overall group work in terms of teamwork, overall
18 performance, and whether the trial flowed.

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

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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 questionnaires were sent to the students by email to explore their perceptions of cooperative learning in an English class. 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.

1 Deeper understanding of the content

2
3 Students mentioned the following, which indicated their perceptions that
4 cooperative learning provides opportunities for alternative and effective entry
5 into texts. These are some of the responses of the students:

6
7 “I gained a better understanding of the novel.”

8 “... we were able to step into the characters of the story and imagine their
9 interaction as it would have happened in the novel.”

10 “The opportunity to interact with the novel and physically put it into play made me
11 understand it better. I did not understand what people meant when they said it is
12 better to meet theory with practice, but now I know it is a better way to retain
13 information.”

14 “It really helped to acquire knowledge about the book and understand the book
15 better. We had the opportunity to talk about issues such as rape and violence against
16 women.”

17 “The moot court was initially met with resistance and a sense of anxiety. Many of
18 us were worried whether we would successfully complete the task and what
19 relevance it had to the module or novel...however, once we were made to
20 understand what was expected from us...it proved to be more fun than stressful”

21 “When theory is met with practice, I retain information better.”

22 “As a whole, I would say that this cooperative learning opportunity was a success.”

23
24 Students overwhelmingly felt that cooperative learning provides an
25 opportunity to understand content better and to enhance knowledge acquisition.
26 The two cooperative assignments allowed them to immerse themselves deeper
27 into the complexities of the novel, *Disgrace*, by J.M. Coetzee (1999), and to
28 understand the different approaches to grammar teaching. Meaning is negotiated
29 when students work collaboratively. Yandell (2020, 16) argues that literary texts
30 open up possibilities of learning, development, and semiotic work. He continues
31 to say that these possibilities are not necessarily inherent in the texts themselves
32 – in their literary qualities, say – but rather that the possibilities arise out of the
33 kinds of engagement with the text (Yandel, 2020). This is echoed by Doecke and
34 Mead (2018, 252), whose essay prompts the role that literary knowledge plays
35 in the subject, English. The researchers maintain that to “read a text” is to engage
36 in a process of making meaning through interaction with others, and the “social
37 exchanges that occur within classroom settings are not simply incidental or
38 instrumental to this process but the necessary conditions for meaning making to
39 occur at all.” Preparing a moot court activity based on a novel or a panel
40 discussion on different grammar approaches is very different from just
41 answering a set of questions based on the content. The comment that the
42 cooperative moot court activity enhanced understanding of the novel points to
43 an opportunity to explore issues such as social justice, equity, and diversity in
44 the text. Students may explore how characters and cultures are represented,
45 which in *Disgrace* varies from being dominant to marginalised. The moot court
46 activity is a different pedagogical strategy for dealing with a sensitive issue, such
47 as rape and violence against women. South Africa has sadly been dubbed the
48 rape capital of the world. It is mentioned in the South Coast Herald (2018) that

1 South Africa is known for high rape statistics but refers to being dubbed the rape
2 capital of the world as arbitrary.

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

5
6 “... since the discussion with peers who were more knowledgeable others in a
7 specific topic helped us all to understand the different concepts much better.”

8 “I for one was struggling a bit to make sense of the perspectives from the articles...
9 but when I did more research, and started to make my own notes, I could connect
10 the dots and the light bulb went on.”

11
12 The students felt that the panel discussion afforded them the opportunity to
13 learn in ways different from the traditional way of learning. They had to become
14 experts in different approaches to grammar teaching and had to share this
15 knowledge as panellists. Doing their own research also assisted them in
16 becoming more knowledgeable about diverse viewpoints.

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

22 23 **Learning from one another**

24
25 Students commented the following on how cooperative learning provides
26 opportunities for learning from one another by exchanging ideas and engaging
27 in discussions:

28
29 “... it gave you the opportunities to share knowledge with each other and also to
30 learn from each other.”

31 “The panel discussion felt as if we were teaching each other, because we shared
32 our understanding of the terms and got a chance to ask questions.”

33
34 The students indicated that they enjoyed the opportunity to collaborate and
35 learn from each other, as well as the learning of a new approach that they can
36 employ in their own classrooms. Students commented:

37
38 “We learned new methods which we can implement in future literature or language
39 classes.”

40 “... we had fun and learnt a lot from each other.”

41 “Everyone got a fair chance to teach one another about what they learned
42 concerning their section.”

43 “I enjoyed the collaboration and with other students and being able to learn from
44 them and being able to change or shape one’s own viewpoints based on what you
45 can learn from others.”

46 “I was able to build great friendships.”

47
48 When employing cooperative learning, every member of the group should be

1 responsible for a concept/idea and then explain that to the rest of the group. This
2 ensures that everyone learns something. Research has proven that when students
3 explain concepts/ideas, it has a positive effect on understanding and cognitive
4 development (Wellman and Liu, 2007; Kobayashi, 2019; Jacob, Lachner, and
5 Scheiter, 2020). The feeling of being an expert on a topic also enhances self-
6 confidence. The benefits of learning in social contexts became apparent, and
7 students seemed open to new ways of teaching and learning.

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

10 **Online and other challenges**

11 Students commented on what hampered the implementation of cooperative
12 learning:

13 The following quotations refer specifically to the panel discussion on
14 grammar teaching approaches:

15 “... we had the problem of doing it online which I know was a struggle for everyone
16 and we would have loved to be in class, but we did try to make the best of it.”

17 “... This activity was different from the above-mentioned [moot court] as we never
18 came together physically. We still needed each other’s work to complete the task
19 and we were therefore held accountable for our own work to ensure the success of
20 the group work.”

21 “The panel discussion was not easy for me to understand or implement.”

22 “I missed the variety of scaffolding activities in this task.”

23 “It was hard not to be physically able to work with students.”

24 “I didn’t enjoy all the research that we had to put into the task.”

25 “I enjoyed the research part of the activity and expanding my own knowledge in
26 my own way.”

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

42 It is clear from responses that participants learned from one another by
43 becoming experts on a specific approach and then sharing ideas with one
44 other.

1 another. Their preference for face-to-face contact was clear in their feedback.
2 This is an aspect that may need attention as teaching globally is moving more
3 toward hybrid modes.

4 5 **Group dynamics**

6
7 This theme is related to social skills and group processing as necessary
8 elements for cooperative learning as suggested by Johnson, Johnson, and
9 Holubec (1998).

10 Students commented as follows:

11
12 “When we organised ourselves with the moot court, we decided that we would all
13 get together and chose the roles that we think will work for everyone.”

14 “... we did not have any problems with two or more students wanting the same
15 role.”

16 “This meant we partner with students whom we knew are diligent, would come
17 prepared and takes responsibility for his/her own section of the assignment.”

18 “When we put into groups, I dreaded the activities.”

19 “What I did not enjoy was when I was unable to choose who I wanted in my group.”

20 “We were able to appoint each other as leaders of specific activities. That leader
21 was in charge of making sure that everything was done on time and that everyone
22 fulfilled their different roles.”

23 “In the moot court activity, we did not have to appoint a leader per se, since we
24 valued each other’s opinions equally. We decided as a group, who would be best
25 suited to portray each character.”

26 “We actually just chose roles...we would look at each other’s characters and decide
27 as a group that this role would suit this one.”

28 “It depended on what you were comfortable doing.”

29 “We divided the roles equally depending on what role one was comfortable with...
30 everybody knew what they wanted.”

31 “We also decided that the one with the strongest personality would take on the role
32 of group leader, while the person who is always on time and organised, will take
33 on the role of communicator.”

34 “Leadership was usually given to the person that had the most knowledge.”

35 “... there was one member who did not do proper research on their given topic...
36 resulted in me and another student having to write their section of the assignment.”

37 “... frustration came in when other students did not do his/her part or did not meet
38 deadlines. This meant that I had to alter my own planning for my studies.”

39 “Our biggest problem during the moot court project was making sure that everyone
40 produced quality work on time. Many thought that it would be easy to sponge off
41 of the work of the others.”

42 “... some members were less committed to the task, which led to frustrations for
43 more diligent students.”

44 “... the difficulties we experienced was finding suitable dates and the time to have
45 Zoom meetings.”

46 “The most difficult thing we had to do was find a suitable date and time to have the
47 Zoom meetings.”

48

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

21 Premo, Cavanetto and Davis (2018, 1) confirm Johnson and Johnson’s
22 (1999) sentiment that simply being paced in groups does not guarantee effective
23 cooperation by stating that “unstructured groups may have negative interpersonal
24 effects, including decreased motivation”. Participants seemed to have one common
25 problem, which relates to free-riding, as some students were unmotivated. A
26 strategy to mitigate the effect of unmotivated students, suggested by students, was
27 to divide the task into smaller chunks so that everyone was responsible for a
28 critical part of the task, ensuring accountability. Time was also a huge factor in
29 the sense that students struggled to find a time to suit all the members to get
30 together either physically or in an online mode. Abramczyk and Jurkowski
31 (2020) found in their study that teachers wanted to incorporate cooperative
32 learning in their teaching but experienced constraints in terms of time. Mardiani
33 and Hanifac (2023) agree that teachers, who want to include cooperative learning
34 through the means of drama, might not have the necessary time to do so if they
35 only rely on allocated formal teaching hours.

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

40 “The group as a whole was aware that in order to achieve, each member had to do
41 his/her best.”

42 “The students challenged each other and managed to make each other see different
43 points of view and together found ways to justify their new opinions.”

44 “... everyone was forced to do their absolute best in their preparation and execution
45 to prevent failure in the larger group.”

46 “Members were also actively participating as they were aware that practice and
47 discussions were needed in order to produce a good end product.”

1 Only a few participants mentioned aspects related to group processing:
 2 "... we provided feedback to one another after our trial runs to ensure that
 3 everybody was happy with the flow of the panel discussion and where we felt we
 4 could improve."
 5 "If a student is uncertain on the content other students will provide guidance...
 6 were always discussed and planned for together and if I was moving in a wrong
 7 direction, the other students always offered guidance and vice versa."
 8 "Students had to support each other continuously to better their product."
 9 "... we brainstormed ideas together to think of our way forward, then revised that
 10 as a group when we started practising if we saw places where we could perhaps
 11 implement changes to the initial plan."
 12 "With cooperative learning learners do not just learn the material but other skills
 13 as well that will help them later in life. Skills such as interdependence, where they
 14 learn that they can succeed together, and they have positive interactions with each
 15 other. Each student learns to accept their responsibility and develop their own
 16 accountability for their part."

17
 18 Participants genuinely seemed to value cooperative learning, and the most
 19 common reasons are the opportunities afforded to work together and to learn
 20 from one another. They specifically mentioned that individual work isolates
 21 students. One participant also mentioned that cooperative learning promotes
 22 intellectual growth. The participants also relayed their own experiences in
 23 classrooms.

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

28 29 **Communication platforms**

30
 31 This theme has more to do with technical aspects than content. Students
 32 commented as follows:

33 The preferred way to communicate was by far WhatsApp groups, followed
 34 by Zoom and Google docs. WhatsApp, being a relatively cheap option, is
 35 understandable, especially when considering the high poverty levels in South
 36 Africa. Zimba, Khoza, and Pillay (2020, 264) mention that factors such as: "poor
 37 access, distant geographical locations, the low socio-economic status of students,
 38 and training and support of students and staff of an inadequate quality" limit
 39 student participation in online environments in South Africa. Connection issues
 40 hampered online performances in some instances. Participants commented:

41
 42 "These [Zoom and WhatsApp] were extremely effective as if anyone had any
 43 questions regarding clarifications on their assigned topic, we could ask one another
 44 on the group and get almost an immediate response."
 45 "We would always start with a plenary Zoom session,"
 46 "Additionally, we used Zoom and emails for meetings and documents that we
 47 needed to send to each other."

1 “This [WhatsApp] worked effectively because it ensured that everyone was
2 informed at all times.”
3

4 The students’ preference for tools like WhatsApp and Zoom suggests
5 concerns of equity. It was important to the students that all had access to
6 information and the sharing of ideas. This shows that pedagogical choices do not
7 only point to learning preferences but also to aspects such as access and
8 inclusion, which can be shaped by cultural and economic limitations. Students’
9 responses indicate that the choice of technologies was motivated by what was
10 possible and not necessarily ideal. These platforms reflect cultural pragmatism,
11 where students adapt to what works best in their cultural and socio-economic
12 circumstances.
13

14 **Future Implementation** 15

16 It was important for me to measure whether students would use cooperative
17 learning as an approach in their classrooms because, of course, it is the goal of
18 preparing them to understand and implement it. Students commented the following
19 on the possibility of employing cooperative learning in their classrooms:
20

21 “Traditional learning has lost its effectiveness; learners lose interest and the
22 motivation to learn and I’ve experienced myself as a student.”

23 “The only problem a teacher might face in the school is that the classroom sizes
24 might be too big to do such an activity and to be able to manage and control the
25 learners would be impossible.”

26 “It is less likely that I will implement cooperative learning at this current point in
27 time... the virtual option is also difficult seeing as many learners do not have the
28 technology available.”

29 “I would love being able to implement these methods in my own classroom,
30 however, I feel that time constraints work against us at times.”

31 “... I think if not done correctly, it can result in teachers especially in public schools
32 wasting time.”

33 “I think for me personally I will definitely try and implement cooperative learning
34 in my lessons as the end result is worth all the hassle especially when the learners
35 are really enjoying it and actually learning something.”
36

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

44 The participants did, however, also mention certain constraints, like class
45 sizes and the difficulty of employing cooperative learning in an online setting.
46 The difficulties of conducting online classes have to do with unequal access to
47 technology, which affects most students in a South African context. Some
48 participants observed that teachers need to be thoroughly prepared to implement

1 this and that proper structure must be provided to learners before implementing
2 cooperative learning. It is uncertain what the one student means by “hassle” with
3 cooperative learning. It may be the effort expected from teachers in terms of
4 planning and designing cooperative learning activities, or it may be a reference
5 to the effort for the learners.

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

16 17 18 **Conclusions** 19

20 The over-all feeling is that participants perceive cooperative learning as
21 valuable and that it leads to a better understanding of literary texts or grammar
22 teaching approaches. Participants indicated that they preferred cooperative
23 learning to the more traditional way of teaching, where students are passive
24 recipients of knowledge. The online panel discussion proved to be more
25 challenging, and it appears that better scaffolding should be provided in order
26 for students to feel more confident to complete this activity. Participants seem to
27 all prefer to choose their own groups and to work with students they are familiar
28 with and with whom they have collaborated before. The idea of positive
29 interdependence and individual accountability was strongly emphasised as
30 elements of cooperative learning that participants kept in mind while working
31 together. The responses of the students confirmed that culture shapes
32 pedagogical choices. The results indicate how the students emphasise the value
33 of collaborating in social contexts while being inclusive, focusing on equity and
34 pragmatism. Some limitations of the study were the small sample, and therefore,
35 no generalisations could be made to a larger population. Another limitation is
36 that the data generation instruments could include observation of newly-
37 graduated students in classrooms to see how teachers employ cooperative
38 learning. It is hoped that students will, in fact, employ cooperative learning after
39 having been exposed to these themselves and having reflected on these
40 accordingly.

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