Cooperative Learning Approach in Teaching and Learning Writing Skills: Practices and Challenges

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Abstract: The study tried to investigate the practices and challenges of the cooperative learning approach in teaching and learning writing skills of Grade 11 students, Afar Regional State, Logia Secondary and Preparatory School, in focus. More specifically, the study addressed the following research questions: (1) How is cooperative learning practised in teaching and learning writing skills? (2) What challenges hinder the effective implementation of cooperative learning in writing skills? The main subjects of the study were Grade 11 students of Logia Secondary and Preparatory School. Moreover, one of the social science classes was randomly selected. The data for this research were collected through students' questionnaires and interviews with teachers and students. Regarding the practices of CL in writing skills, both the teacher and students have positive attitudes, i.e. teaching writing cooperatively improves students' writing performance. Both the teacher and students believed that the cooperative learning approach is practised in their teaching and learning of writing. Based on the data obtained from teachers' interviews and students' questionnaires, many challenges hinder the successful implementation of CL. These could be grouped under student-related, teacher-related, classroom-related, time-related, and weather condition-related problems. As per the students' questionnaire and interview, the fear of grammar, the writing itself and how to organise ideas are the problems students face in learning writing skills. Some recommendations were forwarded to keep the implementation more effective and overcome the challenges.

Keywords: Challenges of CL, Cooperative Learning, Cooperative Writing, Practices of CL, Writing Skills

1. INTRODUCTION

The Afar National Regional State of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is situated within the Great East African Rift Valley System in northeastern Ethiopia. The region shares international boundaries with Eritrea in the northeast and Djibouti in the east. It also shares borders with the Regional States of Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and Somali in the north-west, south-west, south and south-east, respectively (Mitiku Teshome and Italo Beriso, [20]).

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The Afar National Regional State has five administrative zones, 32 'weredas' and 401 rural and urban 'kebeles'. The Afar National Regional State (ANRS, 2000) Constitution recognises 'weredas' as autonomous with clearly defined power and functions. Cognizant of this, the 'wereda' system had been laid down over two decades, and power is now being devolved upon the 'wereda' structures.

The total population of the Afar Region is estimated to be about 1.4 million people (CSA, 2008). Most of the population (87%) is rural and mainly dependent on pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihood systems. Regarding sex composition, males constitute 57% while the remaining 43% are females. With an estimated area of about 94,885 square kilometres, the region has an estimated population density of about 15 people per square kilometre. This research was done at one of the region's schools, Logia Secondary and Preparatory School, with grade 11 students in focus.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Despite the importance of writing skills in students' lives in and after school, little attention has been given to such skills. For instance, Italo Beriso [12] states, "There seems to be a general tendency amongst language teachers (in Ethiopia) to relegate writing to homework or avoid it altogether." Similarly, Alamirew G/Mariam [1] reports, "Writing is not effectively taught in the high schools. The teachers do not teach writing properly, that is, they do not give attention to the teaching of writing." To change the attitude and practice of teaching writing in Ethiopian high schools, many things can be done to promote suitable teaching methods and techniques that improve students' writing skills.

Incorporating cooperative learning is one approach that boosts students' writing skills (Kagan and High [17]). Studies also show three significant positive impacts of collaborative learning: greater effort to achieve, more positive relationships among pupils and greater psychological health (Johnson and Johnson [14]). Thus, this research will contribute to the existing body of literature by investigating the effects of cooperative learning with a group of adolescent learners in an Ethiopian secondary and preparatory school context. It will focus on the impact of using collaborative learning in developing the students' writing skills.

Teaching writing using a cooperative learning approach has been conducted by some researchers internationally and locally, who tried to promote it to be used in a classroom setting to teach the English language. Internationally, teaching writing by using cooperative learning has been conducted by some researchers, such as Tsailing and Harmer. They studied the influence of cooperative learning on students' achievement, practices, motivation, and attitudes. One of the researchers who studied teaching writing using cooperative learning is Tsailing [19], who conducted her research on Implementing Cooperative Learning in EFL Teaching: Process and Effect in 2002. She focused on the process and effect of cooperative learning in two classes of the first-year Junior High School students in a rural town in central Taiwan. Her study found that cooperative learning created a positive environment and gave the students opportunities, freedom, and interaction in the classroom because cooperative learning created a more friendly and supportive learning environment within which students had more opportunities and enjoyed more freedom to explore and practice the target language in the writing process. Similarly, Harmer [8] states that group writing allowed the lecturer to give more detailed and constructive feedback since he was dealing with a small group rather than many individual students. Individual students also found themselves saying and writing things they might not have come up with on their own, and the group's research was broader than an individual typically was.

Mitiku Teshome and Italo Beriso [20] say that as the importance of English in our

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country for education and communication is increasing, conducting research into the quality of teaching and learning English is vital. Specifically, studies related to reading and writing appear to be more important than other skills in helping students use these skills in their studies. Reading and writing skills allow them to pass their courses successfully or write essays effectively. To achieve it, cooperative learning should be implemented effectively, though it has various challenges. Therefore, researcher is, hence, initiated to conduct this study as of the failure to use cooperative learning effectively to teach writing skills by EFL teachers as far as my experience is concerned and the absence of effective implementation of collaborative learning in EFL classrooms in preparatory schools in Ethiopian context amongst the literatures and researches I have read through. Thus, this study was aimed at answering the following fundamental research questions.

The research questions proposed in this study are: (1) How is cooperative learning practised in teaching and learning writing skills? (2) What challenges hinder the effective implementation of cooperative learning in writing skills? The study's general objective is to investigate the practices and challenges encountered using CL in teaching and learning writing skills. More specifically, the study tried to: (1) Investigate how cooperative learning is practised in teaching and learning writing skills, (2) Identify the challenges that hinder the effective implementation of CL in writing skills.

1.2. Definition of Cooperative Learning

There are many claims about pupils working together cooperatively. Indeed, seating children in small groups is a common practice in UK classrooms, but this may not mean they are cooperating. Thus, it is essential to be clear about the defining features of cooperative learning. Regarding its classroom application, Cohen [3] defined cooperative learning as *"Students working together in a group small enough that everyone can participate in a collective task that has been assigned. Moreover, students are expected to complete tasks without direct and immediate teacher supervision."* This indicates that cooperative learning is a broad concept with a range of methods; the key factor being that pupils are placed in small groups and *help one another* with academic tasks. Similarly, Johnson and Johnson [13] state that '*cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals.* The key aspects concern joint working with a shared purpose.

1.3. Elements of Cooperative Learning

CL advocates believe that placing students in groups and expecting them to work together is not enough. This set of teaching principles can be most effective only if certain conditions are met. Johnson, Johnson and Holubec [15] suggest five elements, which they call "the essential components of cooperation", that should be present to consider a teaching instruction as CL: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing. These elements should be structured altogether to obtain satisfactory positive results.

1.3.1. Positive Interdependence

Positive interdependence is regarded as the first and most crucial element to structure CL, where students work toward a common goal together and rely on each other to succeed, each performing an individual focal role for the end product to be positive. Johnson and Johnson (1999; cited in Gillies et al., [5]) argue that positive interdependence occurs when "individuals realise that their efforts are required for the group to succeed so that it is not possible to get a free-ride."

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In other words, this component underlies students' perception that they are related to one another in some way in which the participant in a group cannot succeed unless their team-mates succeed –the benefit is a two-way process. Group members are positively interdependent and have a specific contribution to the success of the whole group due to the shared resources, common goals, mutual support, and the celebration of the joint reward. They will perform better in their writing when there is a high positive interdependence among their group mates.

1.3.2. Face-to-Face Promotive Interaction

Positive interdependence creates promotive interaction. The latter occurs when "individuals encourage and facilitate each other's efforts to accomplish the group's goals" Gillies [6]. This component promotes the group participants' productivity of the foreign language and achievement when each of them gives and receives practical help, assistance and feedback; exchanges explanations; and challenges each other's way of thinking through acting trustfully, being motivated for mutual benefit, influencing efforts to achieve common goals and encouraging one another.

1.3.3. Individual Accountability

Though participants in a cooperative group join their abilities and work together for the benefit of all the members, "each student needs to be made accountable for his/her contribution to the task completion," Ellis [4]. Members are responsible for completing their part of the task and assisting their partners in completing their work. If learners perceive that their performance will affect the group's outcomes, they will put in more effort to realise their objectives. Thus, each member's contribution, performance, quality, and quantity are assessed and evaluated separately, and the result is reported to the individual and the group to determine who needs more assistance, support and encouragement. Since individual accountability has been proven to increase students' academic achievement and improve their performance when they feel that their efforts are considered, teachers have to structure ways to help them assess each participant individually.

1.3.4. Interpersonal and Small Group Skills

This fundamental element promotes higher achievement and, more importantly, builds positive relationships among students, personally and professionally (Gillies et al., [5]. Crandall [2] believes that, for a group of students who cooperate striving towards attaining a shared goal successfully, "individual members need to develop not only linguistic but also social skills which facilitate teamwork, create trust and enhance communication, leadership, problem solving and decision-making in group interaction." Moreover, Slavin [22] adds that individuals must have or be taught the social and cooperative skills necessary to interact effectively with peers and, hence, produce more. They are trained to get to know and trust each other, negotiate viewpoints and respect diverse opinions, resolve disagreements and differences positively, and encourage and help each other (Gillies et al., [5]).

1.3.5. Group Processing

Groups need time to evaluate their goals and discuss how well the group participants are progressing and maintaining effective working relationships. Similarly, Gillies et al. [5] contend that teachers should devote some time at the end of each session to give learners the chance to: "(a) describe what member actions were helpful and unhelpful and (b) make decisions about what actions to continue or change." In other words, they reflect upon their

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experience as a cooperative group to determine what was positive in their handling of the task and to modify and ameliorate what was less helpful as behaviour in their joint work.

1.4. Stages in the Writing Process

Writing is considered an essential and complex process in the function of language. This involves the significance of information, formal production, and organisation in writing an idea. This requires moving through different stages to make a successful piece of writing. Harmer [9] states, "Writing is a process, that is, the stage the writer goes through to produce something in its final form". In support of this idea, Hedge [10] sees that this writing process has four main categories: planning, revising, drafting, and editing. While Hedge [10] stated, "Writing is the result of employing strategies to manage the composing process... it involves several activities: setting goals, generating information, selecting appropriate language, making a draft, reading and reviewing it, then revising and editing." So, these stages help students complete their writing task successfully and foster the writing process.

1.5. Types of Writing Tasks

The three types of writing tasks are controlled writing, guided writing and free writing. The three types are explained below.

1.5.1. Controlled Writing

Controlled writing draws students' attention to specific features of written language. It can be used to reinforce grammar, vocabulary and syntax in context. Raimes (1983:115) states, "Controlled writing tasks allow students to produce a great deal of almost error-free writing and draw their attention to
troublesome grammatical and syntactic features." Raimes [21] further notes that controlled writing is valuable at all levels. The tasks in controlled writing make students focus on one or two problems at a time. Thus, controlled writing leads students to produce correct written work.

1.5.2. Guided Writing

Guided writing is a teaching component designed to teach students a specific skill or grammar and give them practice in writing. Guided writing allows students to practice a grammatical item or syntactic structure within a text. In guided writing, students are supported as needed by a teacher who provides instruction through writing lessons and conferences. Indeed, the writing lesson session focuses on specific writing aspects that students need to develop. The purpose of guided writing is to allow students to expand their writing skills. It is also an essential step in the continuum towards free writing. Teachers could present writing lessons based on what students need to learn from observing their writing.

1.5.3. Free Writing

Free writing is an activity where students practice earlier exercises without teachers' support. In this kind of activity, there should be a link with the previous work, but students must create their own essay on a given topic. Free writing enables students to write down in their own words what they feel, their ideas, and what they think about a topic. According to Raimes [21], "Free writing is an activity where students generate, organise and express their ideas in sentences". Free writing is the final stage of a writing lesson. At this stage, students might also need to be assisted in getting started and organising their ideas to concentrate on

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the actual writing activity. The emphasis in free writing activity is usually on content and fluency rather than on accuracy and form. It is believed that once ideas are written down on the page, grammatical accuracy and organisation follow.

1.6. Phases of Writing Tasks

The writing task has three phases: pre-phase or pre-writing phase, writing phase and post-task or post-writing phase. Below are the details.

1.6.1. Pre-Task Phase

This phase prepares students to perform the task. It is directed by the teacher, so the teacher is expected to explain or discuss the language forms essential to complete the task. The teacher also helps students relate the input to the writing task.

1.6.2. While Task Phase

The second phase of the writing task centres on the task itself and gives various roles to the students. Here, the teacher monitors the process. Students undergo different steps during this phase, including planning, drafting, revising, and editing.

1.6.3. The Post-Task Phase

Here, students report their writing and the teacher or the peers give feedback and comment on their writing, and henceforth, students make a proofread and prepare the final draft of their writing.

1.7. Drawbacks of Cooperative Learning

Though cooperative learning has proved to be incredibly effective and evidence has shown an overwhelming number of benefits resulting from its instruction in language classes, different drawbacks or challenges are encountered while implementing it in classrooms. These include students benefiting from the work of others and a lack of time to get through the curriculum. The possibility of inactive students and unequal work input can also be prevented by including positive interdependence and individual accountability. If individual students are responsible for a part of the project, they know that if they do not do the work, the group will not succeed, which means they cannot achieve. Besides unequal work, many challenges prevent the successful implementation of cooperative learning in the classroom. Therefore, under this subtopic, the researcher will discuss the drawbacks of collaborative learning from the three dimensions: teacher-related, student-related and classroom-related.

1.7.1. Teacher-Related Problems

According to Crandall [2], one of the biggest impediments to cooperative learning is the “cultural expectations of appropriate roles of teachers and learners.’ That is, teachers are reluctant to implement. They also find it difficult to delegate authority and responsibility to learners because if they do so, the class becomes chaotic, and learners will not cover all the information meant to be learnt. Teachers also fear the loss of control in the classroom in terms of content and discipline (Gillies et al, [5]). Furthermore, Jolliffe [16] believes that many teachers lack the self-confidence to try new teaching methods that may expose them to unexpected challenging situations and unanticipated questions. Some teachers have expressed concern about whether they will have time to get through the assigned curriculum when they incorporate cooperative learning. This is a valid question, but it might be a larger problem when traditional group work is used instead of a cooperative learning approach. Therefore, teachers are one of the problems for the ineffectiveness of cooperative learning. According to Johnson, Johnson and Holubec [15], teachers’ lack of understanding about cooperative learning, unreasonable group division, not identifying students’ roles correctly, lack of an

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effective evaluation mechanism and unclear objectives of cooperative learning are teacher-related problems.

1.7.2. Student-Related Problems

Students also have a significant role in making CL impossible to function correctly. Crandall [2] states that students think teamwork wastes time and effort, and the teacher is not doing their job; thus, they will not cover the entire content. Similarly, Harmer [7] says, students may not have equal participation in group learning; therefore, "one student may dominate while the other stays silent." Similarly, another possible problem that can arise during cooperative learning is when group members do not get along. This can easily happen because if groups have been formed according to cooperative learning guidelines, the group has very different personalities.

In addition, using the mother tongue when discussing various topics is another drawback of cooperative learning practice. Harmer [7] states that students working cooperatively often talk "about something else completely often in their first language."

1.7.3. Classroom Related Problems

Besides teachers and students, many situations challenged the effective practice of cooperative learning in an EFL classroom, where the classroom setting is one. If the seat in a school, for example, is fixed to the ground, it is impossible to form cooperative groups easily. Another obstacle facing the use of collaborative learning is group formation. Harmer (ibid) refers to this problem, stating that "students may not like the people they are grouped or paired with" (p.21), especially if they do not know each other. Similarly, the class size will also be another problem in implementing cooperative learning. For instance, it isn't easy in large classes to form collaborative groups and manage them to complete tasks.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

The design of this study was mainly descriptive since it tried to discover the practices and challenges of using cooperative learning in students' writing skills performance. This is because its goal is to explore the implementation of CL in writing skills and to identify the challenges that hinder the effective implementation of CL in the EFL writing classroom. Moreover, the researcher used quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods, employing frequencies, percentages, standard deviations and mean values.

2.2. Data Sources

The participants and data sources of this study were Grade 11 students and the English teacher of Samara Secondary and Preparatory School.

2.3. Sample and Sampling Techniques

A simple random sampling technique was used to choose a preparatory school for the study. To this end, Samara Secondary and Preparatory School was selected using the convenience sampling method. This technique was chosen because the researcher could easily select subjects based on their relative ease of access (Kumar, [18]). Since this study is too large to handle grades 11 and 12, the researcher delimited the grade level to grade 11. On one hand, looking at a specific grade level is manageable. Similarly, Mitiku Teshome and Italo Beriso [20] state that grade 12 is busy taking the entrance exam; for this reason, they

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cannot fully engage in the study. Therefore, the sample grade level for this study was grade 11 students of the preparatory school, which were 60 students from two sections.

2.4. Data Gathering Methods

This study used a questionnaire and an interview as data-gathering methods. The students' questionnaire and both the teacher and students' interviews were used to explore the implementation of CL in writing skills and the challenges that resist its effective practice.

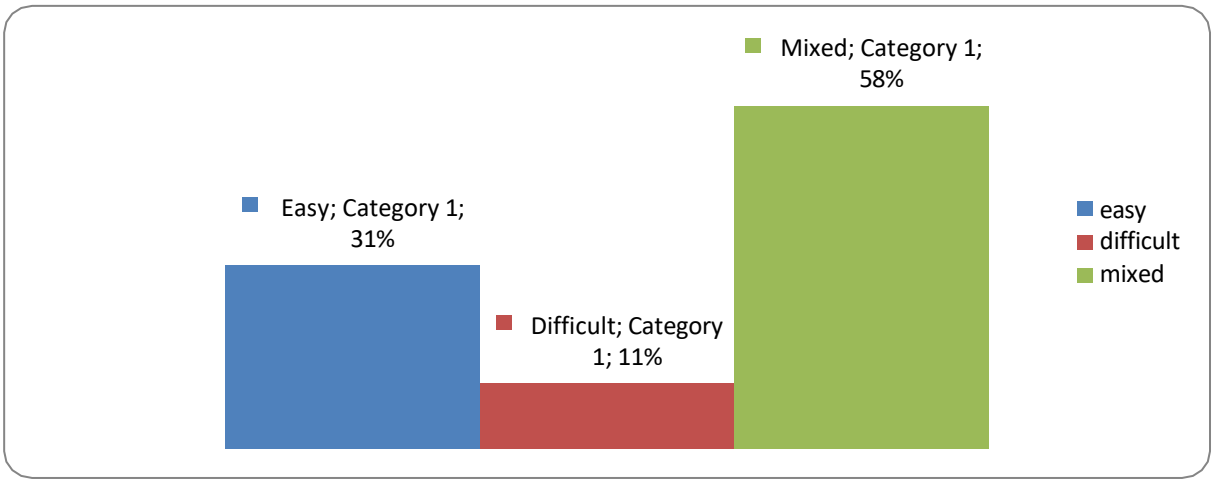
3. RESULTS

3.1. Discussions of the Results of the Students' Questionnaire

The main objective of the student questionnaire was to explore the practices of the cooperative learning approach in the context of writing skills and the challenges that hinder the effective implementation of the strategy in the skill. The questionnaire was filled in by 60 students from the two sections of Grade 11. The data collected were tabulated. The results of the questionnaire are presented below.

3.1.1. General Information

Q1. How are English classes so far? The learners were asked how their English classes are so far. Three choices were provided to assess their responses, and they answered as follows.



Graph 1. Level of difficulty in English classes

In the above item, students were asked how difficult or easy their English classes are. From the above graph, as anyone can see, 31% of the learners answered that English classes are so easy, but 58% responded that some English courses are easy. At the same time, some of them are difficult, whereas 11% of learners answered that English classes are challenging. From this, we understand English classes could be moderate, meaning they must be at an easy and understandable level. Otherwise, students would not be motivated and would dislike learning the English language.

Q2. What is the typical class size in your classroom? In this item, students were asked about the typical class size in their classrooms.

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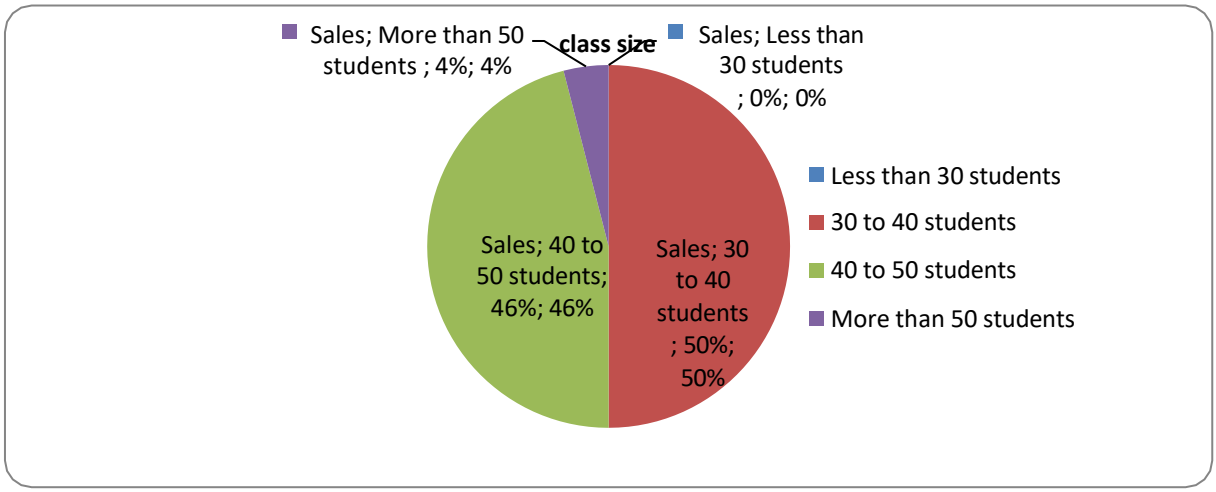

Graph 2. Class size

As we see from the above graph, 50% of the respondents replied that their class size is 30 to 40, whereas 46% answered that the class size is 40 to 50. As a researcher, from my observation, I confirmed that grade 11 sections A and B were 36 and 37, respectively, whereas the social science class, section C, was 45. The class size does not seem too large. However, teaching them in a group was very tight compared to the classroom size, and it might also be difficult for classroom management. English class needs various social interactions and discussions, so the class should be conducive to this purpose.

3.1.2. Students' Attitudes towards the Practices of CL in Writing Skills

The first section under this part was about cooperative learning practices in writing classes. In item 1, students were asked whether cooperative learning implementation is complex in the writing class. More than half of the subjects (58.33%) responded that it is challenging to implement collaborative learning in a writing class. However, in item 2, most subjects (65%) responded that students practice cooperative learning easily and effectively. However, it is challenging to implement in the writing class; students practice it when given. In response to item 3, students were asked whether teachers' intervention is necessary or not in implementing cooperative learning. As shown in the above table, more than half of the respondents (68.33%) replied that teachers' intervention is necessary in implementing CL. Similarly, the data obtained from the interview also confirmed that teachers' intervention is required in implementing CL. In item 4, students were asked whether they play their roles accordingly in CL. Thus, the results indicate that more than half of the respondents (66.66%) replied that students play their roles accordingly in CL. Similarly, item 5 asked them whether group assessment enhances CL practices. Furthermore, 76.67% of the respondents agreed that group assessment enhances CL practice.

3.1.3. Students' Attitudes towards the Challenges of CL in Writing Skills

The results, under this part, show that the implementations of cooperative learning in writing classes were challenged. In the first item, students were asked whether there is a high probability of some students not participating actively in a cooperative group. More than half of the respondents (56.66%) replied that some students are reluctant to participate actively in cooperative work. Similarly, in response to item 2, students were also asked whether they like

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working with someone who is not their choice. Concerning this question, 53.33% of the respondents agreed that they don't like working with someone who is not their choice. From this analysis, we understand that if students have their preferences for someone to work with in cooperative work, it will be challenging to have a heterogeneous group. Item 3 asked the students if they were shy about working with a group of pupils. More than half (50%) of the respondents responded that they are not shy about working with a pupil group.

In item 4, students were asked whether their teachers have enough understanding of CL. Regarding this, 50% of the respondents replied that their teachers have enough knowledge about cooperative learning. –Moreover, in item 5, students were asked how groups were formed. Most respondents (65%) responded that they are grouped according to their seats. In the teacher interview, it has been said that teachers sometimes use a conventional group in group formation. According to the teacher, a traditional group is one to five students, based on their academic achievement, made by the school administration. Similarly, in item 6, students were asked whether there is a lack of teachers' guidance and supervision during CL. More than half of the respondents (63.34%) agreed there is a lack of teachers' guidance and supervision during cooperative learning. Unlike collaborative learning, cooperative learning needs intimate follow-up and teacher supervision to succeed in cooperative work. Therefore, teachers teaching writing using the cooperative learning approach must follow up and intervene in a group as much as possible to apply it effectively (Mitiku Teshome and Italo Beriso, [20]).

In items 7 and 8, students were asked whether classroom seating and weather conditions are challenges to implementing cooperative learning. The results (61.67% and 63.34% respectively) show that the classroom seating and weather conditions are some of the difficulties that resist the successful implementation of cooperative learning. The personal observation and the interview result also confirmed that the classroom seating and the region's very hot weather conditions cannot allow students to stay closer in a group and work cooperatively. Item 9 asked students whether CL creates disciplinary problems among students. Concerning this question, more than half of the respondents (60%) agreed that cooperative learning creates many disciplinary problems among students if it isn't implemented effectively. In addition, item 10 also asked students what they do when the teacher uses CL. In the same way, 61.66% of the respondents replied that when the teacher uses CL, students tend to move away from the work.

In items 11 and 12, students were asked whether CL needs much time. In item 11, 68.33% of the respondents answered that there is insufficient time to prepare students to work in groups. Similarly, in item 12, 78.33% of the respondents replied that CL implementation takes too much class time. Therefore, we understand that CL is often not implemented in English classes in general and writing classes in particular due to the fear of the time it consumes during preparation and implementation. Concerning item 13, students were asked whether the diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds of students challenge the implementation of CL. More than half of the respondents (58.33%) agreed that when there is a high diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds of students coming together, it creates a problem in implementing CL efficiently, as students fear that they will not join the group freely.

In summary, the results showed that many challenges resist the successful implementation of CL, which could be grouped under student-related, teacher-related, classroom-related, time-related and weather condition-related problems.

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3.2. Results of Teacher's Interview

3.2.1. CL Implementation in Writing Classes

To see the implementation of cooperative learning in writing classes, interview questions (Q8, 9, 10 and 11) were given to the teacher. In the first question (Q8), the teacher was asked about group formation in general, who forms the group, group composition, and group size in particular. The teacher states,

> *The group is formed by me. I form five to six students in each group. The group has a heterogeneous composition, which considers the ability and gender. The maximum of six is the best group size that works well. If they exceed it, there will be chatting and disturbing.*

Therefore, we understand that teachers in the study area usually form heterogeneous groups based on ability and gender proportion. Regarding the learner's role (Q9), the teacher was asked what roles students play in cooperative groups. He responded that students play different roles in their groups. Students mostly assign these roles to each other, but sometimes the teacher divides roles among students to play.

> *In a cooperative group, students play different roles. One of them in a group may act as a leader, while another acts as a timekeeper, recorder, or facilitator. The roles are usually classified by the teacher, but sometimes they share roles based on their preferences.*

From the above discussion, we understand that students play different roles in a cooperative. Their teachers may give them roles, or they may assign themselves to play various roles. Therefore, students should play according to their roles for practical cooperative work. Regarding the nature of the tasks for collaborative writing (Q10), the teacher was asked what functions they select for cooperative writing. He states,

> *I have tasks from a textbook. I mostly use them when writing a letter, a biography, an essay, etc. I teach my students using a step-by-step approach from a textbook. When the textbook says to discuss and write a report, I group them to discuss and write a report. The procedure continues in such a way.*

From the above discussions, one can understand that tasks for cooperative writing should be simple, easily understandable, and of learners' interest, and have various subtopics. Regarding implementing collaborative writing, assessing students' writing was a concern. The teacher was asked how they evaluated the group work in their writing classes. He states that the paper is evaluated, marked, and available to all group members.

> *I assess the group as individuals after they finish doing it. So, the mark given for the group also belongs to each member. Therefore, they work together to score well or poorly together. An individual's success is a group's success, and a group's failure is also a failure for the individual.*

We understand, from the above discussions, that during cooperative writing, teachers should support and intervene as necessary when the group write and finally evaluate the work and give equal marks for all group members because in collaborative learning, there is sinking or swimming together (Mitiku Teshome and Italo Beriso, [20]). However, most teachers are not able to implement the cooperative structure carefully. They tend to put students in groups without carefully structuring the positive interdependence and individual accountability, which are sinking or swimming together, because they perceive cooperative learning as a time-consuming approach to teaching writing.

3.2.2. The Problems Teacher Faces in Teaching Writing Skills

Under this subsection, the interview questions (Q12 and Q13) were investigated, which dealt with barriers to cooperative learning implementation in writing classes and their possible solutions. In the first question, the teacher was asked what barriers hinder the

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cooperative learning implementation in the writing class. The respondent stated that students' frustration, which is raised from the worry about grammar, is a serious problem. He puts, 'The first and foremost barrier is the frustration. They fear writing before trying it. They also worried about grammar. These kinds of shortages make students fear writing.' On the other hand, similarly to (Mitiku Teshome and Italo Beriso, [20]) stated, the classroom seating, students' behaviour, classroom size and the region's weather conditions are also some other barriers that hinder the implementation of cooperative learning. The respondent also states,

> *The classroom situation is not comfortable for teaching in such a way. The students' behaviour is a serious barrier to teaching and learn writing using the method. The classroom size is also challenging to manage in such a way. The weather conditions also have an impact on the failure of the technique.*

Regarding the challenges of cooperative learning implementation, students were also asked and reflected in the same way that the fear of writing, lack of grammar knowledge, weather conditions, classroom seating and students' behaviour were some of the barriers that hinder the implementation of cooperative learning. Regarding the second question (Q13) under this subtopic, the teacher was asked how they can overcome these challenges. The respondent mentioned two possible solutions. The first one is that there should be training for both teachers and students on how cooperative learning works in English class. Secondly, attention should be given to writing skills starting at lower grades (Mitiku Teshome and Italo Beriso, [20]). Similarly, the teacher states,

> *In my opinion, I suggest that a university, Samara University, can arrange training for both teachers and students on the learning and teaching process in general and cooperative learning in particular. The other one may be giving attention to writing skills starting from the lower grades.*

From the above discussion, one can understand that to overcome the challenges listed above, we have to apply different strategies as a solution, such as training, classroom arrangement and choosing an appropriate time for cooperative work to avoid the weather conditions. In addition to the teacher's points of solution, students reflected on some possible solutions such as giving full attention to writing skills at lower grades, giving ample opportunities to practice writing and creating a conducive environment for cooperative writing.

3.3. Results of Students' Interview

3.3.1. Students' Attitudes towards the Implementation of Cooperative Writing

Questions (Q6, 7 and 9) were given to the students during the interview session to investigate students' attitudes towards cooperative learning practices in English classes. In the sixth question, learners were asked about group formation and composition. Regarding the group formation, most respondents answered that teachers form the group. But some of them reflected that the teachers use either the conventional group, which was already formed one to five by the school administration, or it is formed based on students' interests. A respondent states;

> *The teacher primarily forms groups in our English class, but sometimes we can also create our groups. The size of the group is at a maximum of seven. The mix of students that works well is an ability and gender approach, a heterogeneous group composition. It focuses on gender and groups top, medium, and low-ability students together to work better (KII-3).*

However, when a teacher forms a group based on the students' interests, it creates a problem in balancing group heterogeneity. A respondent stated, ''The teacher formed the group based on the students' interest. The size of the group is six to nine. The teacher grouped

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students based on their ability level, meaning there are clever, medium and low achievers who come together in each group''(KII-7). Regarding the group size, as mentioned above in the respondents' answers, the size that was usually formed in their English class was four to seven. A respondent states, ''The teacher forms the group. The number of groups is four to six. The mix works well when students from different levels of ability come together. For example, I think top, medium and low ranked students with average gender mix work well'' (KII-1). Group composition should be planned to ensure equal participation among group members. Group composition is a subject that deals with the composition of a group. Students were asked about the composition of their groups and responded as follows: When we come to the top of the group composition, the group is composed of a heterogeneous mixture, which is an equal distribution of ability and gender in each group. One of the key informants states,

> *Regarding the group formation and composition, the teacher randomly forms four to six students sitting in front and back. Therefore, it is a random composition, meaning it is all top students in some groups, and in another group, it could be low students. And in another, it could be all male or all female. So, in my opinion, it is regardless of ability and gender. Sometimes, once a month, a teacher forms a heterogeneous group, paying attention to both the ability and gender mix.*

In addition to this, another respondent also states, ''It is a teacher who forms a group. In each group, there is a maximum of ten students. The teacher forms a group based on their ability level, which means in each group there are clever, medium and low-achieving students.'' From the above discussion, one can understand that the group is better when formed by the teacher. The best group size which could be manageable and achievable is four to seven. All group members can benefit from the group when group composition is heterogeneous, which is based on the students' level of ability and gender, because groups that include students with diverse backgrounds encourage interaction, friendship and achievement.

Students were also asked what roles they play in a group regarding implementing cooperative work. Most key informants responded that students play different roles in a collaborative group, such as group leader, facilitator, time keeper, recorder and summariser. The teacher assigned the roles to them by assigning them to different roles based on their interests. It was believed that cooperative writing and group work would be fruitful when students acted upon their roles accordingly.

Under this subtopic, students were also asked how they feel about the difficulty of writing skills. Most respondents believed writing skills are more difficult than other language skills for different reasons. A respondent states, ''I think writing skills are difficult because when you write, you have to have enough vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Writing doesn't use simple and random words like in a talk, but we have to have powerful words that can express our ideas clearly. These things make the writing difficult.'' Similarly, another respondent also states, ''Writing is a challenging skill because, for example, we all fear that writing needs knowledge about grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. These challenges, I think, make writing a difficult skill.''

However, according to one of the key informants, the difficulty of writing skills at preparatory school is due to low attention given to the skill at lower grades. When students are in lower grades, no attention is given to their writing skills. He states,

> *In my opinion, it is not that difficult. However, the Ethiopian education system didn't pay attention to lower graders, especially those from kindergarten to grade five. At the primary level, the absence of attention to writing creates a difficulty with the skill at this level. Therefore, there should be attention from the system to the skill at the primary level.*

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Therefore, one can understand that writing is more difficult than other language skills because it requires more attention and knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and spelling.

3.3.2. The Problems Students Face in Learning Writing Skills

Question no 10 was targeted to assess students' challenges in learning writing skills. Students have had various difficulties when they learn writing. Most respondents replied that students fear writing because of the grammar, vocabulary, idea, organisation and mechanics of writing. A respondent stated, ‘‘In my opinion, the most horrible issue is the grammar, how to say it. The other one is the lack of word power or vocabulary. And again, I worry about the mechanics and organising the ideas.’ Similarly, another respondent states, ‘The most challenging difficulties are like grammar, organising ideas together and putting them on paper using correct mechanics are some of them.’’

In addition to this, some of the respondents replied that students fear the writing itself. For example, one of the key informants states,

> *For most of us, it is a matter of belief that helps us write effectively. If you believe that you can write, you can write. But the fear of writing is challenging for most of us. The lack of appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics is a difficulty in writing skills.*

Thus, one can understand that writing is full of challenges for the students. They face difficulties with grammar, vocabulary, organisation, content, and mechanics when starting to write.

Finally, question No. 11 was used to ask students how to overcome these challenges. The respondents reflected on some possible solutions to ease their writing. Some suggested solutions were giving attention to the writing skills of those in the lower grades, making constant practice, referring to dictionaries and reading additional reference books, training students on how to write, and helping each other in such a cooperative writing group. Similarly, Ismail [11] states that writing skills can be developed when the learners’ interests are acknowledged and given frequent opportunities to practice writing.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results and discussion of the study, the following conclusions were made:

1. However, it is challenging to implement in the writing class; students practice it when given cooperative learning easily and effectively.
2. In many cases, CL is not implemented in English classes in general and writing classes in particular due to the fear of the time it consumes during preparation and implementation.
3. The personal observation and the interview result also confirmed that the classroom seating and the region’s very hot weather conditions cannot allow students to stay closer in a group and work cooperatively.
4. Challenges that resist the successful implementation of CL were grouped under student-related, teacher-related, classroom-related, time-related, and weather condition-related problems.
5. Teacher’s intervention and group assessment enhance CL while teaching and learning writing.

Based on the findings and the above conclusion, the following recommendations were made:

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1. The class size should be manageable to make it easy to form cooperative groups in writing skill classes
2. Teachers teaching writing using the cooperative learning approach must follow up and intervene in a group as much as possible to make it effective.
3. To have practical cooperative work, students should play according to their roles, either given to them by their teacher or assigned to each other.
4. Tasks for cooperative writing should be simple, easily understandable, of the learners' interest, and have various subtopics.
5. To improve the students' writing in the region, Samara University shall arrange training for teachers and students on the learning and teaching process in general and cooperative learning in particular.
6. Full attention to writing skills should be given at lower grades, such as providing ample opportunities to practice writing and creating a conducive environment for cooperative writing.

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