

THE PERCEPTION OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN TEACHING AND LEARNING IN CENTRAL MALAYSIA HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the current understanding and perception of cooperative learning in teaching and learning in Malaysian high schools. This study emphasised on teachers' views on the cooperative learning approach to support their students' teaching and learning in the classroom. The study uses a qualitative approach involving ten academic staff of a local high school located at Subang Jaya, Selangor by using a semi-structured interview method. The findings showed positive perceptions and interest in the cooperative learning approach in teaching and learning in secondary school. There were many advantages of cooperative learning in teaching and learning both for staff and students. Nonetheless, this study found that time constraint, nature of the subject, students' capabilities, monitoring student learning, and learning assessments to be the barriers that influence teachers' disengagement with this student-centred approach. To summarise, data from this study warranted the authors to recommend educators to shift their teaching and learning from teacher-centred toward student-centred approach. Educators should also emphasise on cooperative learning approach in the classroom as it may help students to a better link between the concepts and the real world. Therefore, educators should invest



considerable time to learn and practice this concept and plan their teaching and learning around their learners.

Keywords: collaborative learning; teaching and learning; student-centred approach; learning strategies; Malaysia high school

INTRODUCTION

There are many learning strategies based on the students-centred approach that educators could use in-and-out of the classroom during teaching and learning with the students. Different learning strategies can be used according to the situation and students' background (e.g., strength, weaknesses, interests). Cooperative learning is a learning strategy commonly associated with the social theory which focuses on social interaction and active learning between teacher and students (Baloche & Brody, 2017; McWilliam, Malecha, Langford, & Clutter, 2017). The social learning theory suggests that behaviours were dynamics and develop through observation and imitating others. As most of us are visual learners, we are capable to learn and normalise practice through social engagement, observation, and direct instruction even without actual movement practice or direct reinforcement (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Chen et al., 2015). In simpler words, students would react positively or negatively based on the teacher's plan, structure, and modification made during each teaching and learning session. Students nowadays are far more technologically advanced than the previous generations. For instance, Malaysian aged between 16-64 have spent on average eight to nine hours daily with their gadgets (e.g., smartphones, tablets, wearable devices) for various purposes such as productivity, learning ideas, and socialising. Additionally, 100% of the respondents have utilised social network or messaging applications as well as spending on average two hours and 45 minutes on social media (Kemp, 2020).

Prior to this study, the authors have spent some time observing students' learning contents in-and-out of the classroom. The majority of the time students were seen to be highly dependent on the teacher's instructions and feedback to learn contents. Lack of meaningful communication between teacher and students as well as their peers between lesson reduce students' role to a receiver of knowledge and passive learners. Higher teacher talk

also leads to higher disengagement of students from learning contents and reduce the effectiveness of teaching and learning session. Higher emphasis on a textbook during learning also reduces students' excitement and the abilities to linked concepts and real-world situations.

Therefore, they need new ways of learning the subject matter and activities that can help them to remain excited and engage with the learning contents meaningfully. Students who enjoyed and presented with more learning ownership during class were associated with a higher number of physical activity (PA), interest, and engagement with contents (Chen *et al.*, 2015; Baranowski, 2016). Teachers would also have more opportunities to modify their learning contents, structure, and activities to optimised students' grasp of the contents. Besides that, teachers would also have more time to monitor students' learning and provide personalised teaching and feedbacks to their students (McDonough, Pope, Zeng, Lee, & Gao, 2018).

According to Chai, Tay, and Lim (2015), cooperative learning encourages students to form groups or partners to learn the subject more effectively. They also added the learning style that contributed to improving the students' soft skills which include communication, teamwork, and decision-making. Higher engagement between teacher-students would enhance their understanding of the concepts and achieved more set goals (Demirham & Altay, 2001). Cooperative learning is an improvement from traditional learning as students have more opportunity to improve their knowledge and skills by engaging in discussion with their peers and students dictating their learning process (e.g., generate ideas, making decisions, problem-solving) (Chai *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, they would have more freedom to explore, experiment, be creative, and have fun with the learning process. The higher freedom presented by the teachers to students also reduces the peer-pressure and fear of failure among students to participate and practice skills (McDonough *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, a previous study focuses on cooperative learning and softball striking unit with high school girls found that the approach led the students to performed fewer trials, but each of the trials was better in terms of quality, understanding, and appreciation of the skills learned (Johnson & Ward, 2001). Importantly, the adoption of cooperative learning encourages the students to be more involved during learning session and teachers emphasises on quality over quantity of the contents.

The educators as the leader in the classroom should have the initiative in making teaching and learning sessions more engaging and fun. In a cooperative learning approach, the educator would assume the role of facilitator. This allows the teacher to spend more time to observe and evaluate his/her students' learning. Higher observation time allows the teacher to identify students' correct and false techniques and provide meaningful feedback to improve teaching and learning sessions (Ozgul, Atan, & Kangalgil, 2019). Consequently, students can enjoy learning without excessive stress and fear of failure (Huang, Tu, Wang, Chen, Yu, & Chou, 2017). Besides that, a teacher who heavily involves his/her students in the planning, teaching, learning, and modification process in-and-out of classroom would also help the students to increase their self-efficacy, motivation, and learning enjoyment (Beard, 2015). Additionally, cooperative learning is capable to develop the students' whole learning domains (i.e., psychomotor, cognitive, affective) (Munir, Baroutian, Young, & Carter 2018; Raviv, Cohen, & Aflalo, 2019). For instance, learning about substance abuse during health education through role-playing would promote higher discussion, creativity, physical activity, and a sense of satisfaction among students. Different role-play between groups would also lead to higher understanding, retention, and linkage between the concept and real-life situations.

PURPOSE

This study builds on the previous studies on cooperative learning to determine the current teachers' perceptions toward this approach in their teaching and learning. Therefore, the following research questions were being addressed in this study: (1) what are the current knowledge and perceptions among teachers about cooperative learning, (2) does cooperative learning provide more advantages compared to traditional teaching and learning, and (3) what are the main barriers teachers perceived to implement cooperative learning in their teaching and learning.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants

The participants of this study were in-service local high school teachers. There was a total of ten participants with an age range of 28-50 years old participated in this study. Most participants were from Malay ethnic backgrounds with two from Chinese and Indian ethnics backgrounds, respectively. Most of the participants orally reported average knowledge on the student-centred approach and occasionally adopting cooperative learning as part of their teaching and learning process.

Settings

The Progressive High School was located in Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia. There were 1512 students currently enrolled in the school with 101 teachers responsible for morning and afternoon school sessions.

The teachers' office was the main area used to implement this study. There were three participants involved in each of the focus group discussion sessions lasting between 30-60 minutes/session (with exception of the final session which involves four participants). The questions and examples were modified to help teachers relate the cooperative learning concepts with their actual teaching approaches. The researchers prompted teachers with questions, scenarios, and past experiences to encourage participants' engagement in the discussion.

Study Design and Procedures

This study involved teachers' knowledge and perceptions towards the student-centred approach and cooperative learning to promote teaching and learning. The data collection lasted for five weeks between October and November 2018. This study primarily focused on accentuating participants' roles during learning and assessing their knowledge and self-efficacy related to cooperative learning.

Prior to the study, the researchers were required to obtain approval from the State Education Department, District Education Office, and the school's administrators. Additionally, the researchers have spent considerable time exploring the literature for issues and current gaps between studies as well as designing appropriate questions to address the study objectives during discussion sessions. The questions were designed based on knowledge and issues revolving around cooperative learning. The draft questions have been reviewed by two experts (each from the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences respectively) for validity and appropriate modification to the questions. The co-researcher through his practicum stint at the local school directly approach potential participants (i.e., verbally and written) and invited them to participate in this study. The purpose, objectives, risks (if any), and significance of the study were thoroughly explained throughout each of the processes (e.g., approval process, beginning of each discussion). Pseudonyms were used to reflect participants' answers and all data were kept confidential for the study purposes. The Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the school and the teachers provided consent to participate in this study.

Instruments

Instruments that has been shown to produce reliable and valid scores were used for this study. These include focus group discussion, sound recorder, and memos to record information. The information gained from each session were transcribed and reviewed for trends and themes. Each of the transcripts was cross-checked among researchers to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Data Analysis

This study adopted the phenomenological research approach which emphasises the wholeness of experiences and how it influences an individual's behaviours (Moustakas, 1994). Rather than describing the experience based on the categorical system, conceptual, and scientific criteria, the researchers focus more on participants' perceptions and talks about cooperative learning in their teaching and learning sessions. Additionally, the researchers' practice the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) steps which involve: (1) observing phenomena, (2) questioning, (3) collecting data,

(4) linking concepts with data, and (5) communicating (Sudria, Redhana, Kirna, & Aini, 2018) throughout each phase of this study. The data collected were transcribed to obtain important details and categorised into several themes (i.e., perception, interest, advantages, effectiveness). Systematically arranged data were helpful for researchers to analyse the data effectively and produced reliable results (Piaw, 2020).

RESULTS

These findings were organised into four themes; (1) knowledge and perception of cooperative learning, (2) interest among participants to implement cooperative learning, (3) advantages of using cooperative learning, and (4) the main barriers in using cooperative learning during teaching and learning in the classroom.

Knowledge and Perception of Cooperative Learning

Most of the respondents considered themselves to possess good knowledge about cooperative learning concepts. Respondent one explained the cooperative learning is a learning style that involved interaction between group members in solving problems; “I have known cooperative learning as the learning style which encourages the students to work in groups and there was interaction happened between them to identify issues and making collective decisions”.

Additionally, respondent two also supported the perception that cooperative learning is a collaborative effort by the students to complete a specific task given by the teacher. The respondent added “cooperative learning is the learning style of the 21st century learning by the Malaysian education system”; “I was introduced to cooperative learning through a course that I attended last year. I knew the learning style since then.” For respondent three and respondent four, they shared a similar perception toward cooperative learning; the learning style which promotes students to work in groups in learning contents or skills.

Interest among Participants to Implement Cooperative Learning

Most of the participants rate themselves as likely to practice the cooperative learning approach in the classroom with six participants rate four on a scale of 1-5 (very low and very high respectively). There were two respondents which rate themselves three and the other two considered themselves as most likely to adopt cooperative learning in their teaching and learning.

The Advantages of Cooperative Learning

Most of the respondents agreed cooperative learning approach could help them to improve their teaching and learning and students enhance their learning experience. Consequently, students were more likely to enjoy learning and achieve success during examinations. Respondent two also highlighted the reduced role of himself in the classroom to provide more time for students to discuss and practice the skills learned. Meanwhile, respondent seven suggested cooperative learning to influence higher engagement among the students to the contents learned. She explained, “students were more willing to take initiatives and responsibilities to explore, develop contents, and solving issues arises from the activities compared to when I am teaching the contents”. Both respondents four and five suggested this approach to be beneficial in reducing off-task behaviours and helping the student to focus on the learning contents throughout the session.

The Main Barriers of Cooperative Learning in the Classroom

Most of the respondents also agreed cooperative learning approaches were generally beneficial for both the teachers and students. Nonetheless, four respondents suggested the cooperative learning would not be guaranteed to improve the teaching and learning process. For instance, responded one voices concerns about students’ capabilities to learn the contents by themselves. While respondents two and three respectively were worried about classroom management and losing control when students were given more opportunities to talk and discuss with their peers. Respondent three added, “it is quite difficult for me to fully trust my students to stay on tasks throughout the session as they would probably get distracted easily and

eventually not achieving the learning objectives”. Additionally, respondent six believed he would need more time to implement cooperative learning successfully. He added, “as cooperative learning was more dynamic compared to the traditional method, I would need more time to plan, practice, and create an activity which allows them to learn effectively within this approach”.

DISCUSSION

Both Ozgul et al. (2019) and Huang *et al.* (2017) explained the cooperative learning was hugely capable of shifting education from the teacher-centred into student-centred teaching and learning. Many of the respondents consistently pointed out the higher learning ownership given to the students enables them to spend more time observing and evaluating students’ learning. Additionally, students were more likely to engage with the contents and their peers during teaching and learning compared to the previous spoon-fed culture. Besides that, the teacher as a facilitator was crucial to develop confidence and reduce the fear of failure among students, especially when learning new contents (Huang *et al.*, 2017).

According to Munir *et al.* (2018), cooperative learning was beneficial to promote wholly student development (i.e., psychomotor, cognitive, affective). These were reflected in this study; for instance, respondent one suggested cooperative learning improves the students’ confidence levels and their critical thinking. Respondents three and four also believed the approach help student to be more independent learners and work closely with their peers to understand the contents better or solving an issue. This study also reflected on Johnson and Ward (2001) when respondent seven suggested: “the task given was discussed among students thus helping me to save time and better prepare for the next session”. He also added, “problems were solved easier when the students cooperate with their peers and they enjoyed the process of learning”. Besides, as cooperative learning was more dynamic than traditional teaching and learning, students were more encouraged to move around the classroom and be more active in the classroom (Lengel & Kuczala, 2018). This would eventually reduce the likelihood of the students getting non-communicable diseases (NCDs) at the early stages of their life (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2019).

Nonetheless, some respondents suggested cautions in using cooperative learning and the approach would not be guaranteed improvement in teaching and learning. For instance, respondent one highlighted some students were struggling to engage with the contents and peers in her class when she adopted the approach. She was required to assist the students by modifying her instructions and expectations when completing the task given. Consequently, this would cause time wastage and reduce teaching and learning in class. These concerns were also highlighted in the previous study suggested the traditional method was more beneficial in teaching technical contents while cooperative learning was useful in teaching sport tactics and strategies (Karavelioglu, 2012).

Additionally, Respondent 10 also added “the approach only effective in a certain subject like language; not in some subjects which required calculation and analysing inputs”. Some respondents were also concern with monitoring students’ learning, off-task behaviours, and capabilities to learn the contents effectively when using the cooperative learning approach. The previous study accentuated the importance of practice time, teacher’s demonstrations, explanation, and attending to students’ learning to promote a cooperative learning approach in the classroom (Zulkifli & Kulinna, 2018; Vera, Alvarez, & Medina, 2008).

Implication for Practice

The results from this study are important to guide teachers in their planning, delivering contents, and management of the classroom. Although cooperative learning could be useful to promote teaching and learning, teachers need to be aware of their students’ strengths, weaknesses, and interests to ensure the approach they use is the most suitable for that specific group of students. The teacher should also vary their teaching approach by doing modifications on rules, learning area, and instructions based on students’ capabilities to ensure meaningful students’ learning. Dividing students into teams or partners, present scenarios, fantasy cards, using music as cues are important to promote active students’ involvement, enhance learning, and effective practice of skills while maintaining the authenticity of students’ learning experience (Zulkifli & Kulinna, 2018). A few limitations to this study included small sample size, lack of comparison group, and short study duration. Future studies should address these limitations and

potentially getting other stakeholders' (e.g., students, parents, policymakers) perspectives about cooperative learning. Comparisons between primary and high school teachers would also strengthen the current information about best teaching practices based on students' needs.

CONCLUSION

This study further strengthens the current knowledge of teachers' knowledge and perception of the cooperative learning approach in the classroom. Furthermore, this study believes that teachers are more willing to shift their approach from teacher-centred toward student-centred when they prioritise their students' learning as well as having supportive administrators and colleagues. Nonetheless, cooperative learning might not be the best approach in subjects that focus on calculation and information analysis due to the complexity of the contents and teachers' perceptions of their students' capabilities.

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