

Research Article

The Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning (CL) on Reading Comprehension of EFL Learners at Tertiary Education

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Abstract: This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of cooperative learning (CL) on the reading comprehension achievement of EFL students. The population of 54 EFL students was officially asked to sit the proficiency test (IELTS) to be accessed for the study. After administering the test, these students were randomly assigned to two groups, one experimental group and one control group, for the further stages of the study. The researcher implemented cooperative learning (CL) to teach students in the experimental group while the control group was instructed via conventional instructions. After two months and a half (10 weeks) of implementation, a post-test was administered and then analyzed through an independent sample t-test to see the results. With the implementation of CL in reading comprehension, students performed more efficaciously, gaining a higher mean score in PT2 (post-test) compared with students who had been instructed by traditional teaching techniques. Furthermore, students exposed their positiveness of using CL in their reading comprehension through high mean scores of 12 items in the questionnaire in combination with positive feedback on the semi-structured interview with a specific group of participants. They prefer to use CL as it brings a cluster of merits to their learning outcome.

Keywords: students' performance; cooperative learning (CL); positive feedback; English learners, EFL

1. Introduction

One of the most challenging areas EFL students have encountered is how to improve their reading comprehension achievement. With good reading comprehension, students are able to expand their further learning path due to the fact that whatever subjects or language areas you are in, being proficient in reading materials, long texts and understanding underlying theories or messages is a must. However, to enhance reading comprehension, students and teacher have to knuckle down and absorb different strategies and techniques with the aim of reading comprehension enhancement and achievement. This is not easy, unfortunately. Many researchers and educators have intensively investigated and scrutinized different approaches and strategies to help students better understand materials while they read. The approach CL was generated and has been widely used to shed new light on this matter although its effectiveness was controversially discussed in this day and age.

English majored freshmen can read the text consisted of unknown vocabulary at moderate speed without a plenty of adversity. This is because reading tasks in the classroom are usually assigned to compete the text, find main ideas or some specific information. These tasks are primarily based on set texts in the materials with a specific purpose of reading comprehension. However, to diverse the level of reading comprehension and have a good understanding of a wide array of reading materials, further and more efficacious strategies and techniques are in need.

The dominance of conventional language instructions, generated and applied for a long time, have prevailed across universities owing to its familiarities and teachers are afraid of to put an end to it and continue implementing it to the real classes. In reading classes, students are typically taught in large-classes by teacher-centered lecturing, which primarily transfer knowledge by giving explanation, vocabulary illustration and intensive drills in language form (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). The main purpose of this conventional method is to emphasize on the language accuracy and rote learning, while students play a role as passive recipients of

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teaching, teachers, the main dominant subject, serves as the sole provider to impart knowledge and languages to the passive listener (Ning & Hornby, 2014). The implementation of this method has a negative long-term effect on students' participation and engagement, feeling tedious and indifferent

Fortunately, a recent shift has brought a bright side on English reading comprehension when more student-centered and communication-oriented (Brown, 2007). He said that CL involves the characteristics of learner-centered model. Suh (2009) said that there is an urgent need of cooperation and interaction to provoke reading comprehension in terms of addressing more meaning-making and self-directed task. As the result, a very promising alternative method to well match this requirement is cooperative learning, emphasizing on cooperation, communication and promoting socio-linguistic proficiency of learners (Bolukbas et al, 2011). The effectiveness of CL implementation on learning and teaching English has been proved in a cluster of previous studies about educations in the globe. It also has a remarkable impression on improving reading comprehension skills in those studies.

According to Slavin (1980), cooperative learning refers to classroom techniques where students participate in learning activities within small groups and earn rewards and recognitions based on the group's achievement.

In order to perceive the term CL more thoroughly, Johnson & Johnson (1999) solely defined cooperation which is working together to accomplish shared goals. During the process of completing cooperative activities individual student look for outcomes that brings benefits to themselves and other members in the group. They also stated CL is the use of small groups which allow students to enhance individual learning and learning with their groupmates.

There are 5 primary elements composed in CL method, positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, appropriate use of collaborative skills and group processing. These factors play a crucial role as a frame for learners or teachers to implement on any assignment based on CL method. In order to have an efficacious application, the users have to stick to these to instruct the students how to accomplish their task with CL. These 5 certain elements get involved in different stages in the process with remarkable functionalities and detailed explanations as below (Figure 1):

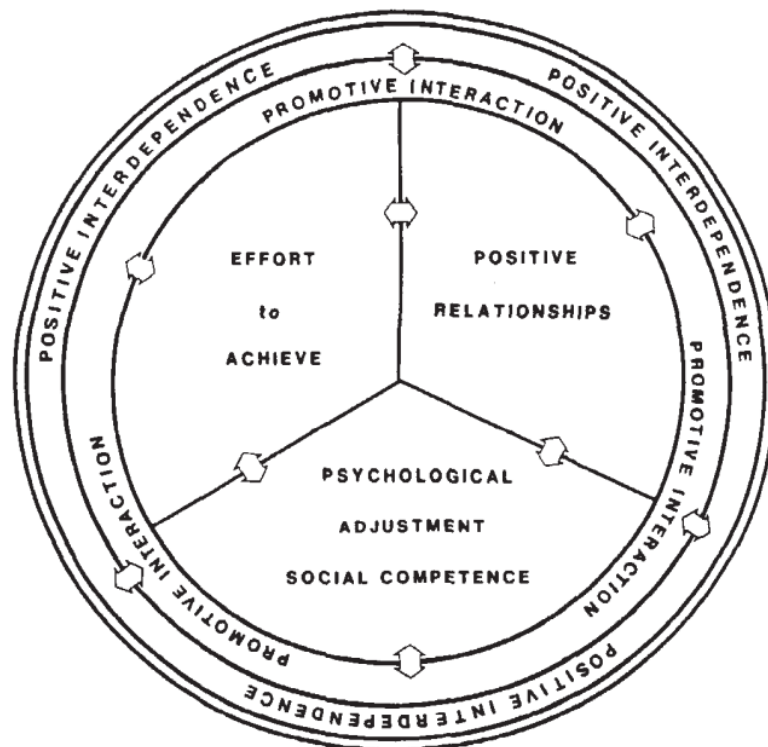


Figure 1. Outcomes of Cooperative Learning
Source: Johnson & Johnson, 1999.

- Positive interdependence is, the very first start stage of using CL, conducted by assigning students in group a task. In each task, there is a problem emerged to be solved by every member. The checker has to ensure that each one scratches

their ideas on their own paper and then be able to solve the problem correctly by themselves through the sharing and discussing with other members in group. To achieve the task fulfillment, it is necessary to encourage each member to share their insights with others to have a full picture of the problem and fully resolve it.

- The second element is face-to-face promotive interaction. In this stage, students are fully encouraged to assist each other to learn and comprehend the lesson with the main use of oral sharing. Of which, giving explanations and exchanging ideas must be the most efficient to attain the goal together. Besides, to minimize time-consuming aspect, teachers need to pay attention to seating arrangements or time management.
- The third element is individual accountability, in which each student is individually assessed and given marks or rewards for their own performance. When a group puts an end to the task, teachers have to assess each student by using the same qualified criterion to see how much each one makes contributions to the lesson and give that recognition back to the group. Or, teacher randomly selects one or two representatives to present their whole work in front and be assessed. However, to be even-handed, some factors, competency or someone who needs more assistance, are necessary to be considered through the assessment.
- Social skills are the fourth element. CL, in other words, is a group work and it can only function effectively with different needed skills such as leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills. However, obviously many students have not been trained and taught these skills effectively to meet the requirement of group work. Teachers and educators have to instruct them accordingly.
- The fifth element of the CL is group processing, finally. Group processing occurs at the end of the process, in which students have to conjure their mind up of their participation and their achievement in the group as an individual or as the whole. They summon up what they have done to achieve the task goal and envisage what might be successful solvable in the future with their group work.

As student work together in pairs and groups, they share information and come to each other's aid in order to achieve goals successfully (Slavin, 1996). The advantage of CL is to promote intrinsic motivation, heighten self-esteem, create caring and altruistic relationships and lower anxiety and prejudice (Brown, 2000).

Students are trained and learned in CL environment exposed better performance in both homework and tests (Chin-min, 2013; Ajaja & Mezieobi, 2018) and remarkable enhancement on reading performance (Huong et al 2021) than those who work individually.

In the studies of Slavin (1980; 1996) on elementary school, it was indicated that when students are offered a chance to work with their homogeneous teams for a long-term run, they are able to achieve higher scores and performance on reading comprehension and vocabulary retention.

The aims of the present study were to identify whether students' performance in reading comprehension can be enhanced with the use of cooperative learning during the course and to show students' insights on the use of cooperative learning. For these two aims, there were two research questions as below:

1. Does cooperative learning help students enhance performance on reading comprehension than those who received traditional instructions?
2. What are EFL learners' perception on using cooperative learning in reading comprehension?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research design

The experimental design was implemented to an English reading course for English major Freshman, three-credit course, during semester I-2023 at a university at Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam. The course lasted 3 months from January to April in the year 2023. In the three-credit course, 5 units are officially distributed during the course, with one unit completed on two weekly basis.

The whole population of the study were 54 students from two English major classes, which deliberately chosen and enrolled on their own at the beginning of the semester. To be not complicated and manipulate on school's regulations, the researcher jumped at a decision to label these two classes into experimental group and control group at convenience. the class 22D1 was assigned as experimental group (n=27) and the class 22D2 was called control group with the population n=27. As its name, experimental group was taught by CP method whereas control group was received traditional lecturing instructions. obviously, the researcher applied the same materials, same schedules and same tests to these two group with the exception of different teaching methods and instructions.

To clearly observe the difference between the two approaches, the research conducted to test students' levels with the use of pre-test at the beginning of the reading course and posttest at the end (Table 1). The IELTS tests were administered as pre-test and post-test to measure the reading level of students at the two group. Because they passed the entrance exam so the researcher solely embraces the reading session to examine their reading comprehension level before and after the experiment.

Table 1. General information of groups, participants and process

Group	N	Pre-test	Post-test
Control group	27	PT1	PT2
Experimental group	27	PT1	PT2

Note:

PT1: Pretest

PT2: Posttest

2.2. Research instruments

2.2.1. IELTS test

The IELTS test was delivered to students to check their English proficiency in English, especially aiming to test the level of reading comprehension. The three-sections test are comprised of 30 questions in total and varied in types of questions, namely multiple choice, matching-heading, or filling in the blanks. Due to the variety of the test, the researcher selected two tests in Cambridge IELTS test 17 to not far differentiate the level of the materials. IELTS exam have been ubiquitously taken by thousands of learners and education because its validity and reliability. Therefore, when using this test, the research can ensure and guarantee its authority, ethical issues and authentication for the study. Table 2 gives the information of the pre-test and post-test.

Table 2. Detailed information of the pre-test and post-test

Group	Pre-test	Date	Post-test	Date
Control group	Test 1 – book 17	7/1/2023	Test 6 – book 17	9/4/2023
Experimental group	Test 1 – book 17	7/1/2023	Test 6 – book 17	9/4/2023

2.2.2. Questionnaires

Regarding research question 2, an open-ended questionnaire was employed to collect data (Table 3). The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from previous study of Phipps et al. (2001) and Ching-Ying & Hui-Yi (2013), including of 5 Likert scale items and being separated into three sections: benefits of working in CL, effectiveness on exams, tests, quizzes, effectiveness in in-class activities.

Table 3. List of factors and items of the questionnaire

Factors	Which items
Benefits of working in CL	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Effectiveness on exams, tests, quizzes	6, 7, 8, 9
Effectiveness on in-class activities	10, 11, 12

2.2.3. Semi-structured interview

To have more holistic picture towards perspectives of students on using CL on reading comprehension, a semi-structured interview is also implemented to gain words and in-depth details from participants. 10 students from two different classes are selected to answer a list of questions (Appendix B). There are one closed-ended question and six open-ended questions in the interview.

2.3. Data analysis

In this study, after collecting data from PT1 and PT2, the author used SPSS statistics 25 to analyze the data set to give answer to the research question 1. The mean score of PT1 and PT2 was primarily applied to explain and interpret students' performance for the RQ1. For the RQ2, the author proceeded to analyze data set by them coding from the interview transcripts and calculating the mean score of 12 items in the questionnaire (Appendix A) to see how students reacted to CL in their learning of reading comprehension. The results of the questionnaire and interview were triangulated to have precious holistic picture of students' perception towards the CL.

3. Results

As stated earlier previously, the RQ guiding this present study were:

- RQ1:** Does cooperative learning help students enhance performance on reading comprehension than those who received traditional instructions?
- RQ2:** What are EFL learners' perception on using CL in reading comprehension?

The researcher presented the results for the two RQs below in two different sections. The first part presented the descriptive statistics of the students' performance in PT1 and PT2 after running the independent T-test. The second part displayed the results collected from the survey and semi-structured interview to express students' perceptions towards the use of CL in reading comprehension.

3.1. Does cooperative learning help students enhance performance on reading comprehension than those who received traditional instructions?

Table 4 presented descriptive statistics for PT1 results for the students' performance in the pre-test. Following independent t-test analysis using SPSS, the data in the table indicated that mean score of the control group was 23.07, while it was 23.21 for the experimental group. The significance level was 0.538. exceeding .05. Consequently, it was concluded that there was no statistically significant difference between the PT1 results of both groups.

Table 4. Group descriptive statistics for PT1 results

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control group	27	23.07	7.549	.45	0.538
Experimental group	27	23.21	7.214	.38	

Table 5 displayed the performance of students in the control group, revealing significant enhancement. There was a noticeable increase in performance, with the far difference between the two tests, indicating a higher mean score in the PT2. the reading comprehension results was confirmed by the sig. of 0.001, which is less than .005. this could be concluded that there was a statistically significant difference of the students' performance between PT1 and PT2 in the control group. In other words, the students have achieved improvement in reading comprehension although teacher applied traditional teaching method solely.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for PT1 and PT2 results of control group

Control group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	27	23.07	7.549	.45	0.001
Post-test	27	25.14	6.496	.25	

Table 6 showed the descriptive statistic of students' performance in the PT1 and PT2 results of the experimental group. As clearly seen from the table, there was a big difference in mean score from these two tests, with 23.21 for PT1, which is far lower than PT2, reaching at 26.55. This number clarified that the students' performance in PT2 was much improved after being manipulated in cooperative learning. In other words, the implementation of cooperative learning in reading comprehension obviously helps students attain more achievement in the final results.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of PT1 and PT2 of experimental group

Experimental group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	27	23.21	7.214	.38	0.001
Post-test	27	26.55	5.976	.15	

Table 7 revealed a set of descriptive statistics data of students' performance in the PT2 of both groups. Following the results of PT2 analysis using SPSS, students performed reading comprehension result differently between the control group and experimental group. Specifically, the experimental group revealed a notably higher mean score of 26.55 compared to the control group's 25.14. Moreover, the significance level, depicted in the table 5, was 0.03, less than .05, indicating statistic significance. Hence, the students of experimental group, have been taught by cooperative learning, performed better than those who was taught in traditional teaching techniques.

Table 7. Group descriptive statistics for PT2 results

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control group	27	25.14	6.496	.25	0.03
Experimental group	27	26.55	5.976	.15	

As can be seen in the series of tables and explained above, the students in both groups have somewhat equivalent level of proficiency in reading comprehension, which was proved in the results of PT1, showing not much notable difference in mean score as well significance level following the SPSS analysis. However, the enhancement of the test results started to expose in the PT2 after being immersed themselves in CL. After two months and a haft under the treatment of CL, mean score of the PT2 was far higher than those in the PT1, which evidenced the improvement of students' performance in reading comprehension. Similarly, students had progress in PT2 after being taught reading comprehension by the use of traditional teaching techniques. In other words, traditional teaching techniques and CL techniques both helps students achieve more efficacious reading comprehension scores. However, the effectiveness of cooperative learning was stronger with the experimental group's mean score of 26.55, whereas the control group's mean score of 25.14, which means that students who has been taught in CL gained more progress and improvement in reading comprehension than those who was trained in traditional teaching techniques.

3.2. What are EFL learners' perception on using CL in reading comprehension?

The research question 2 aimed to find out students' perception on using CL in reading comprehension. This was collected and analyzed from the questionnaire and interview.

3.2.1. Benefits of working on reading tasks in CL

As shown in table 8, the majority of participants strongly agreed with the benefits of the use of CL in reading comprehension. Item 1, 2 and 3 indicated that they valued CL in terms of improving their reading comprehension, namely grasping main ideas of the text, remembering new words and reminding them of neglected points in the text. The participants agreed that working in group work can definitely help them comprehend the main ideas of the text very well, with mean score of 4.3704. They also show their positive perception on the ability to remember new words when cooperating with other members in the team (M=4.3333). Besides, with the implementation of CL in reading comprehension, participants were reminded of the neglected key points of the text due to the support and notification from the peers in team, as proved as mean score at 4.3148.

The item 4 and 5 was about how participants felt about learning reading in CL. With M=4.3148 for item 4 and M=4.3889 for item 5, participants expressed their interest and confidence in working on reading comprehension task with their mates.

Table 8. Students' perception on benefits of working on reading tasks in CL

Descriptive statistics	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Group discussion helps me grasp main ideas of text better.	54	3.00	5.00	4.3704	.65290
2. Group discussion helps me remember new words.	54	2.00	5.00	4.3333	.82416
3. Group discussion reminds me of neglected key points in the text.	54	2.00	5.00	4.3148	.82013
4. CL helps me more active in reading.	54	2.00	5.00	4.4259	.60194
5. CL helps me more confident in reading.	54	3.00	5.00	4.3889	.68451
Valid N (listwise)	54				

3.2.2. Effectiveness on exams, tests, quizzes

In table 9 the participants expressed their positiveness towards receiving shared grades on item 6 and shared bonus points on item 7, which reached at $M=3.8889$ and $M=4.4444$ respectively, when cooperating with their teammates on reading comprehension tasks. One student, S1 emphasized "...I appreciate CL because it can give us equal chance to improve our grades in the exams and occasionally, we can benefit from the mutual bonus points. It is incredibly fulfilling...". As regards item 8 and 9, the participants also emphasized their contentment with getting individual grades on quizzes and tests, with mean score at 4.0741 and 4.3148 respectively. It indicated that either shared scores or individual held value for them in CL.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics of effectiveness on exams, tests, and quizzes

Descriptive statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I like shared grade on exams.	54	3.00	5.00	3.8889	.69137
2. I like shared bonus points on exams.	54	3.00	5.00	4.4444	.60397
3. I like individual grades on quizzes.	54	2.00	5.00	4.0741	.86552
4. I like individual grades on exams.	54	3.00	5.00	4.3148	.66798
Valid N (listwise)	54				

3.2.3. Effectiveness on In-class activities

As regards table 10, most of the participants put an emphasis on their preference towards in-class activities instructed and organized in CL. They firmly endorsed the cutting-edge peer review, group problem-solving skills attained in CL. Expressed in the interview, S10 expressed "...peer reviews stand out as the most impressive aspect for me in providing that It exposes me to diverse perspectives and enriching my understanding of the text and improving my skills gradually...". Or, "...concerning benefits of in-class activities, I gained valuable insight from CL, especially problem-solving skill in which as a team, we engaged in the text and try to tackle the task requirement, supporting and sharing opinions to perfect our final outcomes as a team..." (S4). One advantage confirmed was a formation of a mutually beneficial friendship from friends when they shared materials in the case of encountering new tasks from instructors, mean score reaching at 4.2407. As they received the material, they would sit closely and work on the same sheets of material.

Table 10. Descriptive statistics of effectiveness in-class activities

Descriptive statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I like peer reviews on tasks.	54	1.00	5.00	4.2593	.93537
2. I like group problem solving.	54	3.00	5.00	4.4259	.60194
3. I like sharing materials in class.	54	3.00	5.00	4.2407	.69866
Valid N (listwise)	54				

4. Discussion

From the questionnaire and interview data collection, it was evident that the use of CL enhanced students' reading comprehension.

The findings from the independent-sample t-test showed significant gains for the experiment group, aligned with the findings and conclusion of Slavin, who indicated that CL helps students achieve higher scores and performance on reading comprehension and vocabulary retention. Furthermore, Chin-min (2013) and Huong et al. (2021) validated these findings of CL to remarkably enhance students' reading performance in groups rather than working individually.

The collected data set from the interview and coded results put an emphasis on how students exposed positive perceptions towards the use of CL in learning reading comprehension. These findings are in alignment with the study of Quyen (2023); Utami (2019); Kan Pivchai (2015); Bächtold, et al. (2022) about the acknowledgment of the positiveness of CL regarding the improvements in reading comprehension.

Being more confident and enjoying working with other members are aligned with a study by Slavin (1986); Tran and Lewis (2012), who indicated that the participants in experimental groups are in favor of sharing and discussing with others in terms of provoking their self-esteem and achieving more knowledge retention.

The majority of participants expressed their engagement in cooperating with their mates in terms of discussing and exchanging ideas, which promotes their self-directed learning mode and getting more involvement in addressing meaning-making tasks, which was equivalent to a study by Suh (2009).

In alignment with a study by Bolukbas et al. (2011), students indicated their positive attitudes toward receiving feedback and contributions from groupmates as well as proceeding to solve tasks' problems effectively together, as found and confirmed by the current product within the high mean score in the questionnaire.

In conclusion, these findings of the present study revealed that working in groups or implementing CL in learning offers multiple merits in terms of enhancing their self-esteem, achieving better academic results, and provoking positive attitudes towards reading comprehension. The majority of participants in tertiary education proved that CL should be applied in the long run in order to take advantage of it for students. Although students might encounter obstacles and challenges during the process of CL, the benefits still outweigh the disadvantages.

5. Conclusions

The independent-sample t-test was conducted with the participation of 54 learners to explore whether they have enhanced their reading comprehension in comparison with the traditional method. The t-test results showed a significantly higher mean score for the experimental group that applied CL during a specific period of time, proving that the implementation of CL in teaching reading comprehension to students noticeably brought benefits to students' reading comprehension.

In conjunction with the t-test, the author subsequently administered a questionnaire to gain a holistic picture of the students' perceptions of using CL for their reading comprehension. Understandably, the results were surprised by the sheer number of participants positively reacting to the CL. They specified the cutting-edge corners of using CL retained and advanced after individual activity.

It is strongly confirmed that the effectiveness of CL has gradually increased as a result of the persistence of pure principles in its implementation. As a matter of fact, educators and teachers, generally, are highly in-charge of ascertaining appropriate approaches to accelerate students' learning outcomes in learning English and specifically reading comprehension.

It is advisable that teachers be well-prepared for the implementation of CL in their teaching while conducting thorough research on this matter with a view to generating adequate CL techniques for students for the primary learning outcome.

Acknowledgments: We are very grateful to many people who have helped and supported us a lot to complete this study we'd like to thank all of the participants who worked so hard with us to create so many successful lessons. They agreed to participate in each activity with an honest attitude and cooperation, which provided us with useful data to answer our research questions.

Appendix A.

Questionnaire

No.	Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
A. Benefits of working on reading tasks in CL						
1.	Group discussion helps me grasp main ideas of text better.					
2.	Group discussion helps me remember new words.					
3.	Group discussion reminds me of neglected key points in the text.					
4.	CL helps me more active in reading.					
5.	CL helps me more confident in reading.					
B. Effectiveness on exams, tests, quizzes						
6.	I like shared grade on exams.					
7.	I like shared bonus points on exams.					
8.	I like individual grades on quizzes.					
9.	I like individual grades on exams.					

C. Effectiveness on in-class activities

- | | |
|-----|------------------------------------|
| 10. | I like peer reviews on tasks. |
| 11. | I like group problem solving. |
| 12. | I like sharing materials in class. |
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Appendix B

Semi-structured interview

1. Do you like to do reading comprehension task in group?
Yes: No:
2. Do you feel more confident when cooperating with your friends on reading comprehension tasks?
3. Do you like shared bonus points on exams with your friends?
4. Do you often discuss and give opinions when working in group?
5. Do you have any improvement in reading comprehension since working in group?
6. Do you meet any challenges when working in group?
7. What is the best thing of working in group?

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