

Interactional Scaffolding in EFL Reading Classrooms: A Classroom-Based Study of Cooperative Learning Practices

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how cooperative learning is implemented by an EFL teacher to support students' reading comprehension in a lower-secondary context at a school in Indonesia. Drawing on four classroom observations and a semi-structured teacher interview, the study investigates how cooperative learning functions as an interactional scaffold during reading instruction. Data were analyzed thematically using an interactive analytical approach. The findings reveal three interrelated ways in which cooperative learning fostered reading comprehension: (1) structuring peer-mediated reading through cooperative routines, (2) scaffolding comprehension through teacher-guided interaction, and (3) sustaining engagement through recognition and affective support. Cooperative learning was enacted through Jigsaw and Think-Pair-Share, which created structured opportunities for peer explanation, shared responsibility, and negotiation of meaning. Although students initially experienced confusion and hesitation, engagement increased as instructional routines stabilized and teacher mediation became more explicit. Instead of demonstrating causal learning gains, this study offers process-level, classroom-based insights into how cooperative learning supports EFL reading comprehension through interaction and pedagogical practices.

Keywords: Cooperative learning; EFL reading comprehension; interactional scaffolding

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension has long been recognised as a cornerstone of second and foreign language learning, particularly in educational contexts where English functions as a foreign language (EFL). Beyond decoding written symbols, reading comprehension involves complex cognitive and social processes, including meaning construction, inferencing, and the integration of prior knowledge with textual information (Paige, Rupley, & Ziglari, 2024). For adolescent EFL learners, these processes are often constrained by limited linguistic resources, insufficient exposure to authentic input, and classroom practices that privilege individual, teacher-centered instruction over interaction and negotiation of meaning. As a result, persistent difficulties in reading comprehension continue to be reported across EFL contexts, especially in secondary schools, where learners are expected to engage with increasingly complex texts

despite uneven language proficiency and limited strategic support (Grabe & Stoller, 2020; Jeon & Yamashita, 2014; Nation & Macalister, 2020).

In response to these challenges, educational research has increasingly shifted attention from individualistic models of learning toward socially mediated approaches that emphasize interaction, collaboration, and shared responsibility for learning. Within this broader paradigm, cooperative learning has been widely promoted as a pedagogical framework for promoting deeper engagement with texts through structured peer interaction. Rooted in social interdependence theory, cooperative learning views that learners achieve better outcomes when they work collaboratively toward shared goals, while remaining individually accountable for their learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). In language classrooms, cooperative structures such as Jigsaw and Think-Pair-Share have been shown to encourage learners to articulate ideas, clarify misunderstandings, and co-construct meaning, processes that are theoretically aligned with interactive models of reading comprehension (Gillies, 2016; Sato & Ballinger, 2016).

In the Indonesian EFL context, cooperative learning has been formally endorsed in curriculum documents and teacher education programs as a means of promoting active learning and student-centered instruction. Empirical studies conducted in Indonesian classrooms have reported positive learner responses to cooperative techniques, including increased participation and improved interpersonal skills (Mustamir, Jauhar, Sudarto, & Rachman, 2023; Pratolo, Bao, & Palaguna, 2025). Yet, these studies often rely on self-report data or short-term interventions, providing limited accounts of instructional continuity and pedagogical coherence across multiple lessons. Moreover, there is a tendency to conflate the presence of group work with effective cooperative learning, overlooking the qualitative dimensions of interaction that distinguish meaningful collaboration from superficial task completion (Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Widodo, 2016; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). As a result, teachers may adopt cooperative structures in form rather than in function, limiting their potential impact on reading comprehension.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on cooperative learning in EFL contexts by foregrounding the instructional processes through which cooperative learning is implemented in reading classrooms. Rather than measuring learning outcomes in isolation, this study adopts a classroom-based perspective to examine how cooperative learning strategies are enacted by an EFL teacher to support students' reading comprehension development. Drawing on empirical classroom observations of cooperative techniques such as Jigsaw and Think-Pair-Share, the study explores how collaborative tasks are structured, how peer interaction is facilitated, and how these processes align with reading comprehension objectives. By situating cooperative learning within the everyday realities of classroom practice, this study responds to recent calls in applied linguistics for more context-sensitive, process-oriented research that bridges pedagogy, interaction, and language learning outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sato, 2017).

METHOD

This study utilised a qualitative approach to examine how cooperative learning was enacted to support EFL students' reading comprehension. It was conducted in a lower-secondary public school in Gorontalo, Indonesia, where English is taught as a compulsory subject. Reading comprehension constitutes a core component of English instruction at this level. One English teacher voluntarily participated after being informed about the purpose and procedures of the study. The teacher had prior experience using cooperative learning techniques, particularly Jigsaw and Think-Pair-Share (TPS), as part of regular classroom practice. Ethical

considerations were observed throughout the study, including voluntary participation and anonymization of all identifying information.

Data were collected through classroom observations and a semi-structured interview to enable triangulation. Four classroom observations were conducted, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. The observations focused on how cooperative learning was implemented during reading instruction, including task organization, grouping procedures, teacher guidance, and student interaction. The researcher adopted a non-participant observer role to minimize disruption. Following the final observation, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the teacher to explore instructional intentions, perceptions of student engagement, and reflections on cooperative learning for reading comprehension.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Observation notes and interview transcripts were reviewed iteratively to identify recurring instructional patterns related to cooperative learning. The data were then organized thematically and interpreted in relation to cooperative learning theory and research on EFL reading.

FINDINGS

Three interrelated themes emerged from the data: structuring peer-mediated reading through cooperative routines, scaffolding comprehension through teacher-guided interaction, and sustaining engagement through recognition and affective support. Together, these themes explain how cooperative learning was implemented to support learners' reading development.

Theme 1: Structuring peer-mediated reading through cooperative routines

The first theme highlights how the teacher implemented cooperative learning by organizing reading activities around clearly structured cooperative routines, primarily through Jigsaw and Think-Pair-Share/TPS. Instead of assigning students to work in groups informally, the teacher carefully structured tasks so that students were required to read, interpret, and explain texts collaboratively.

During the Jigsaw lessons, students were assigned specific reading segments in expert groups before returning to their home groups to explain key information. This structure required each learner to take responsibility for understanding part of the text and communicating it to peers. Observation data showed that this routine redistributed reading responsibility from the teacher to students and encouraged learners to engage with texts more actively. Although some students initially struggled to explain their segments, repeated exposure to the routine led to clearer peer explanations and improved coordination within groups.

The TPS routine further refined peer-mediated reading by reducing group size and interactional pressure. Students were first asked to read individually, then discuss their understanding in pairs before sharing with the class. This sequence enabled students, particularly those who were less confident, to rehearse interpretations in a low-risk setting. As observed in later sessions, more students participated during the sharing phase, suggesting that cooperative routines supported comprehension by creating graduated opportunities for meaning-making.

Theme 2: Scaffolding reading comprehension through teacher-guided interaction

The second theme concerns the teacher's role in scaffolding reading comprehension within cooperative learning activities. Observations revealed that cooperative learning was consistently accompanied by explicit teacher mediation, including clarifying task goals, modeling procedures, monitoring group discussions, and prompting student participation. At the beginning of cooperative activities, the teacher clearly communicated lesson objectives and explained how students should work together. This was particularly important during early sessions, when students appeared confused or hesitant. The teacher acknowledged that students initially felt anxious about reading tasks and presentations.

“At the beginning, students were enthusiastic but also confused and scared... but over time they would get used to the learning model.” (Teacher interview)

During group work, the teacher actively circulated among groups, offering clarification, encouraging quieter students, and ensuring that discussions remained focused on the reading task. (Classroom observation)

The guidance helped students move beyond surface-level reading toward identifying key information and interpreting meaning. The teacher also adjusted her instructional approach when necessary, drawing on prior methods (e.g., discovery learning) to complement cooperative learning. Such flexibility indicates that cooperative learning was not applied rigidly, but adapted responsively to students' needs. Across sessions, this sustained mediation appeared to reduce students' fear of making mistakes and increased their willingness to engage with texts collaboratively. The data suggest that cooperative learning fostered reading comprehension not independently, but through teacher-supported interaction embedded within group routines.

Theme 3: Sustaining engagement through recognition and affective support

The third theme illustrates how the teacher used recognition and affective strategies to sustain student engagement in cooperative reading activities. Reading tasks initially generated boredom and disengagement among some students, particularly those with limited vocabulary knowledge. The teacher addressed this challenge by framing reading as a shared effort and by acknowledging students' collaborative achievements. The teacher frequently provided verbal encouragement and, at times, small rewards or additional points to groups that demonstrated effective collaboration.

Observation data showed that recognition motivated students to participate more actively, especially during presentations. Importantly, recognition was framed as collective rather than competitive, reinforcing the idea that success was achieved through cooperation. This approach contributed to a classroom climate where students felt supported and were more willing to engage with reading tasks, even when comprehension was challenging. By combining cooperative routines with affective support, the teacher helped students remain engaged with reading activities and reduced resistance toward English texts. The findings indicate that fostering reading comprehension involved not only cognitive engagement with texts, but also emotional and motivational support embedded in cooperative learning practices.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that cooperative learning supported EFL reading comprehension primarily through its function as an interactional scaffold, rather than merely as an organizational classroom strategy. Across the observed Jigsaw and Think-Pair-Share (TPS) lessons, reading comprehension was mediated through peer explanation, negotiation of meaning, and shared problem-solving. These practices reflect contemporary views of reading as an active, socially situated process in which comprehension emerges through interaction with texts, peers, and tasks (Grabe & Stoller, 2020; Nation, 2019). In particular, the Jigsaw routine required learners to reprocess textual information for communicative purposes when explaining content to peers, thereby deepening comprehension through reformulation and meaning clarification, processes central to social interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1991).

Beyond confirming the value of interaction, the findings also highlight that the effectiveness of cooperative learning depended on instructional orchestration and learner adaptation over time. Initial confusion and hesitation observed in early lessons indicate that cooperative learning is not inherently self-regulating. Students required repeated exposure, explicit explanation of procedures, and sustained teacher mediation to appropriate new interactional roles. This supports prior research cautioning against equating group work with genuine collaboration and emphasizing the teacher's role in shaping productive interactional norms (Gillies, 2016; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). As cooperative routines became familiar, students showed greater willingness to participate, suggesting that cooperative learning operates developmentally, with comprehension benefits emerging as expectations stabilize and participation norms are internalized.

The comparison between Jigsaw and TPS further illustrates how task structure and interactional scale shape learner engagement in EFL reading classrooms. While Jigsaw promoted distributed expertise and collective responsibility, it initially posed challenges for less confident learners who were required to explain content publicly. TPS, by contrast, reduced interactional pressure by limiting discussion to pairs, enabling learners to rehearse interpretations in a lower-risk setting before sharing with the class. This finding aligns with research indicating that smaller interactional units can reduce anxiety and increase opportunities for meaningful learner talk (Sato & Ballinger, 2016; Sato, 2017). Importantly, the teacher's use of recognition and encouragement functioned as affective scaffolding, sustaining engagement and framing collaboration as collective effort rather than competition.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how an EFL teacher implemented cooperative learning to support students' reading comprehension in a lower-secondary classroom. Drawing on classroom observations and interview data, the findings demonstrate that cooperative learning, enacted through Jigsaw and Think-Pair-Share, functioned as an interactional scaffold that enabled learners to engage more actively with texts through peer explanation, shared responsibility, and guided collaboration. Although students initially experienced uncertainty when cooperative routines were introduced, these challenges gradually diminished as instructional procedures became familiar and teacher mediation more explicit.

The findings suggest that the pedagogical value of cooperative learning for reading comprehension lies not in the techniques themselves, but in their consistent orchestration, including clear task design, structured interaction, ongoing monitoring of group work, and

affective support. Yet, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved a single teacher and school context, relied on qualitative data, and did not include systematic measurement of reading gains; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized or interpreted as causal evidence. Despite these limitations, the study contributes process-level, classroom-based insights into how cooperative learning operates in authentic EFL reading instruction.

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