

# FOSTERING COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE METHODOLOGY COURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA

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## Abstract

Cooperative learning is an established strategy designed to engage students actively in the teaching and learning process. It focuses not on individualistic or competitive efforts, but on group members' support and encouragement of each other's purposes to learn. Cooperative learning places emphasis on the belief that one member of the group cannot succeed unless the other members of the group succeed as well. Therefore cooperative learning is more than just placing students in groups to talk to each other on an assigned task as is normal practice in English language methodology courses, but a structured learning environment that is effective only if teacher educators understand that cooperation relies on the core principles of positive interdependence and individual accountability. This understanding is usually lacking in the type of group work given to English language student teachers. Therefore, despite the related merits of cooperative learning, effective implementation remains a challenge because of language educators' use of instructional methods that resemble cooperative learning, but reward individualistic and competitive efforts as opposed to group performance. In the light of the foregoing, this conceptual paper, drawing from social interdependence theory, seeks to motivate for effective application of cooperative learning strategy in the training and development of English language teachers at the University of Botswana. In employing cooperative learning, the basic tenets of social interdependence theory should be applied. Careful consideration of these elements would ensure that teachers acquire not only subject matter knowledge but interdependent and social skills through teacher professional development as espoused in various education and policy documents in Botswana.

**Key words:** cooperative learning, pre-service teachers, face-to-face verbal interaction, positive interdependence, social skills

## 1.0 Introduction

Johnson and Johnson (2017) maintain that the most suitable pedagogy for “socialising teachers into a community of practice, creating an identity as a teacher, building commitment to be an effective professional and accomplishing other important goals is cooperation” (p. 285). The authors contend that in a school set up, teachers might have to work cooperatively in order to achieve common objectives, promote the well-being of colleagues, master and employ social skills they need to work together in an effective way, as well as reflect on whether or not the processes learned are being properly implemented. Mendo-Lázaro, León-del-Barco, Felipe-

Castaño, Polo-del-Rio and Iglesias-Gallego (2018) also argue that there is a growing motivation towards cooperation in all educational, labour and social organisations as working in small groups is increasingly in demand as a way of improving productivity in the work place. Hence cooperation is a valued competence not only at different levels of education but also in the world of work and one held in high esteem by employers (OECD, 2015). In the light of the foregoing, this conceptual paper, drawing from social interdependence theory, seeks to motivate for effective application of cooperative learning strategy in the training and development of English language teachers at the University of Botswana. In employing cooperative learning, the basic tenets of social interdependence theory should be applied. Careful consideration of these elements would ensure that teachers acquire not only subject matter knowledge but interdependent and social skills through teacher professional development as espoused in various education and policy documents in Botswana.

## **2.0 Background**

Different policy documents in Botswana education system advocate for the use of learner-centred pedagogies in the teaching and learning process. The need for relevant teaching methods that would produce a graduate with requisite qualities as well as lifelong learning skills is described in both the University of Botswana's Strategy for Excellence (2008) as well as the Graduate Employability Strategy (2009). The policy documents, in describing the University of Botswana as a centre of academic excellence in Africa and the world, recognise the role of higher education in generating human capital and developing graduates with appropriate attributes for living, working and managing change (University of Botswana, 2008, 2009). One of the strategic goals of the University of Botswana described in Creating a Future for the Knowledge Generation (University of Botswana, 2020) also supports the view that the university should "produce quality graduates with the attributes that will meet their personal and career requirements and the needs of a modern society" (p. 24). This is also articulated in the Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (ETSSP) of Botswana which emphasises developing a work force with skills, competencies and attitudes including communication, cooperation, and team work adding that tertiary education should provide graduates with the opportunity to enrol and train at tertiary institutions in order to attain a global competitive edge (Republic of Botswana, 2015). This calls for English language teacher educators to use appropriate teaching methods that recognise the centrality of the learner as an active participant in teaching and learning. One such strategy is cooperative learning, which Davidson and Major (2014) maintain is now considered a versatile and significant instructional strategy in higher education.

The Learning and Teaching Policy of the University of Botswana stresses pedagogical strategies that encourage active learning and the development of self-directed, independent learners (University of Botswana, 2008). The Learning and Teaching Policy further articulates that graduates of the University should, among other things, display the following skills: critical

and creative thinking, problem-solving, communication, employability, teamwork, research, social responsibility, leadership as well as interpersonal skills. This is also emphasised by the University of Botswana Graduate Employability Strategy that “work-based” experience is necessary to make graduates employable (University of Botswana, 2009). This suggests that adopting teaching and learning strategies such as cooperative learning in the development of teachers of English can help fulfil University of Botswana policy requirements.

What the Learning and Teaching Policy prescribes agrees with recommendations made by the Ministry of Basic Education Curriculum Blueprints (Republic of Botswana, 1995, 2007) that a learner-centred approach that puts the learner at the centre of the learning and teaching process should be adopted at secondary school level. This is the level for which English language student teachers are being prepared. The National Curriculum and Assessment Framework (NCAF) also emphasises that “the most important skill a learner can acquire through school education is having learnt how to learn” (Republic of Botswana, 2016, p. 16) and that teachers have to create a rich learning environment and make sure learners learn effectively through the use of varied learning strategies suitable for diversity of learners found in Botswana schools. In line with this policy recommendation, the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) recommends that English language teachers undergoing training should be well versed with the communicative approach, which is the officially sanctioned approach (Republic of Botswana, 1994) at secondary school level that advocates the use of group work and interactive activities. The ETSSP which is Botswana’s five-year Sector Strategic Plan (Republic of Botswana, 2015) also advocates a transformation in teaching and learning and a “change in teaching strategies to be more learner-centred” (p. 41).

However, Sithole (2010) argues that despite recommendations made in various policy documents, teacher-centred pedagogy is still prevalent in Botswana classrooms, a challenge identified in the ETSSP as well. In such teacher-centred classrooms, not much is done to equip learners with the requisite skills, values, knowledge and competencies such as creative and critical thinking skills, communication and collaboration skills (Republic of Botswana, 2015; Solomon & Sithole, 2019). The University of Botswana Graduate Employability Strategy also expresses the view that the University has not fulfilled its mandate of providing its graduates, and by extension student teachers of English, with workplace knowledge (University of Botswana, 2009). This is despite the fact that efforts are made to engage student teachers of English in peer-teaching experiences as well as teaching practicum to develop such skills. The present paper therefore argues that principles of cooperative learning should be fostered in English language teacher education classroom for effective learning and social skill development to take place. Cooperative learning, from which communicative approach draws its principles, advocates for group work and student-to-student interaction. Hence, the aim of the present paper is to argue for cooperative learning strategy to be adopted in English language teacher education

so that pre-service teachers of English, working together cooperatively while still in training, will appreciate the role of cooperation and team work at school level once they enter the world of work. To provide structure and make group work more effective, they would incorporate principles of cooperative learning as they implement the communicative approach to maximize both social and academic outcomes. What seems to be lacking in the implementation of the communicative approach is teachers' lack of understanding that group work is more than physical proximity and discussing material with peers. Group work should be guided by theory-driven, principled implementation of cooperative learning elements of positive interdependence, individual accountability, group processing, social skill development, and face-to-face verbal interaction (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). If English language student teachers are taught to appreciate the core principles of cooperative learning such as individual accountability and positive interdependence, they will implement it appropriately at secondary school level. At present it appears that these principles are not being effectively implemented during teacher training and development and subsequently in the schools where these teachers are deployed.

### **3.0 Meanings of cooperative learning**

The many definitions of cooperative learning in the literature demonstrate the importance of construction of own knowledge by students and interdependence, hence this instructional method falls under constructivist thinking. Some scholars argue that there is a difference between cooperative learning and collaborative learning (cf. Rockwood, 1995). However, the present study uses the terms cooperative learning and collaborative learning interchangeably. Cohen (cited in Davidson & Major, 2014) defines it thus:

Cooperative learning will be defined as students working together in a group small enough that everyone can participate on a collective task that has been clearly assigned. Moreover, students are expected to carry out their task without direct and immediate supervision of the teacher. The study of cooperative learning should not be confused with small groups that teachers often compose for the purpose of intense, direct instruction-for example, reading groups (p. 3).

Cohen emphasises the need to work cooperatively to accomplish a given objective. Sharan and Sharan (1987) agree with Cohen's definition, also seeing cooperative learning as an instructional strategy that promotes the learning process through cooperation and communication. They further contend that the strategy allows students to assist each other in the learning of content, sharing of ideas (Slavin, 2008) and in planning together how they could accomplish an assigned task. According to Sharan and Sharan (1987) teachers do not have to prescribe to students how to structure their discussions but allow students under their supervision "varying degrees of choice" so that in the process they play an active and interactive role. This encourages equal contribution of group members and appreciation of each other's efforts while

the role of the course instructor is that of facilitator and guide. Kagan (cited in Davidson & Major, 2014) express the view that cooperative learning teaches students social skills, thus agreeing with Kaufman, Sutow and Dunn (1997) who also maintain that the main aim of cooperative learning and forming these sustained, active and effective groups is to develop social skills in individual members of the group. Citing Cuseo (1992), Kaufman, Sutow and Dunn (1997) further state that since the outcomes of cooperative learning are strongly dependent on detailed planning and implementation, cooperative learning is an “operationally well-defined and procedurally structured form of collaborative learning” (p. 38). Kaufman, Sutow and Dunn (1997) explain that:

Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's ideas and responding to others' reactions improves thinking and deepens understanding (p. 65).

The above definition emphasises the importance of cooperative as opposed to competitive and individualistic efforts and that cooperation helps students develop the requisite knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions to perform assigned tasks. Examples of skills students might acquire include but are not limited to verbal and non-verbal communication, decision making, leadership, creative and critical thinking as well as conflict resolution skills. Kaufman, Sutow and Dunn (1997) further maintain that elements of cooperative learning that distinguish it from other collaborative learning techniques include: positive interdependence, face-to-face verbal interaction, individual accountability, group processing and development of social skills which students need to experience, be aware of and reflect on if they are to succeed in working cooperatively. Johnson and Johnson (2002) postulate that these are the variables that mediate the effectiveness of cooperative efforts and bring about the outcomes of cooperation. They further maintain that most teachers believe that they are implementing cooperative learning when they are missing its essence, arguing further that putting students into groups to learn is not the same thing as structuring cooperation among them. Furthermore, cooperation is believed to be more than physical proximity and discussing material with peers, although such activities are crucial elements of cooperative learning. Cohen (1994) expresses the view that for the elements of cooperative learning to produce desired results then other factors must be taken into consideration such as group composition, group size and the learning task.

#### **4.0 Theoretical framework**

The philosophical roots of cooperative learning pedagogy originate from the epistemological and pedagogical positions as described in the work of scholars, who see learning as doing, as social participation, as environmentally and culturally located activity and as

interaction with peers (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, Turkonis & Bartlett, 2001). The present paper draws from social interdependence theory as proposed by Johnson and Johnson (2005). Agreeing with the authors above Johnson and Johnson (2005) maintain that social interdependence theory is based on the belief that the essence of a group is the interdependence among members, which results in the group being a dynamic whole so that a change in the state of any member of the group leads to a change of state in other members. Therefore, the basic premise of social interdependence theory according to Johnson and Johnson (2005) is that the ways in which participants' goals are structured determine how they interact, and the interaction pattern determines the outcomes of the situation (cf. Deutsch, 1949). The authors describe two types of interdependence: positive interdependence and negative interdependence. These researchers believe that positive interdependence exists when "individuals perceive that they can attain their goals if and only if, the other individuals with whom they are cooperatively linked attain their goals" (Johnson & Johnson, 2005, p. 288). Individuals therefore encourage each other's efforts to reach the objectives. Negative interdependence on the other hand exists when "individuals perceive that they can obtain their goals if and only if, the other individuals with whom they are competitively linked fail to obtain their goals" (Johnson & Johnson, 2005, p. 288). Individuals therefore hinder each other's efforts to reach the goals. These principles are relevant to English language teacher education classroom although positive interdependence is advocated for in the present study.

Johnson and Johnson (2005) express the view that the type of interdependence defines how individuals must interact to achieve their goals. These researchers point out that it is within the interaction that possibilities are opened to foster or impede others' accomplishment of the goal, further elucidating that positive interdependence leads to promotive interaction where the actions of members of a cooperative group increase the possibilities of each other's success in attaining their joint goals. Teamwork tendencies are nurtured through this type of interaction as well as feelings of mutual trust. On the other hand, negative interdependence exists when individuals engage in actions that reduce each other's likelihood of achieving their goals. In the latter scenario, individualistic tendencies dictate that tactics of threat, coercion, distrust, miscommunication, and conflict are employed to make other people unproductive (Johnson & Johnson, 1999 2005). Johnson and Johnson (1999, 2005) explain that to operationalise cooperative learning, the following basic tenets of social interdependence theory should be applied effectively: positive interdependence, face-to-face verbal interaction, individual accountability, group processing and development of social skills. These key features are relevant to the present study and will each be discussed below as well as suggestions on how to incorporate them in English language teacher education.

## **5.0 The place of elements of social interdependence theory in English language education**

### **5.1 Positive interdependence**

The element of positive interdependence is considered the defining quality and most important component of cooperative group work since all members of the team are expected to help the whole team to attain success (Kaufman, Sutow & Dunn, 1997; Walker & Johnson, 2018) and to believe, and act, as if they are in it together, and care about each other's learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1990). The reason why positive interdependence is considered the defining factor of cooperative learning is that when a task is assigned to a group of students, they are normally expected to share the task so that each member's contribution is essential to accomplishing the task. Stanne, Johnson and Johnson (1999) contend that knowing that one's performance affects the success of one's group generates forces of obligation that intensify one's efforts to achieve. Furthermore, Johnson and Johnson (cited in Gillies, 2016) argue that teachers can make this possible if they delegate different parts of the group task to each member of the group. English language teacher educators might give students tasks that have different component parts so that the students themselves divide the task amongst themselves. In this context course instructors could divide tasks amongst students based on the knowledge that positive interdependence can be divided into task interdependence where members of the group are each allocated a specific task that requires that they complete it for the group to succeed. Additionally, role interdependence would be realised through each member being assigned a role such as chair, monitor, recorder as well as reporter, the requirements of which they would be expected to fulfil. Finally, product interdependence would be achieved where groups must submit the assignment to the course lecturer culminating in reward interdependence where the course instructor would grade the assignment and allocate the same grade to all team members for their efforts. These different types of positive interdependence are relevant for English language teacher education classroom.

Positive interdependence could be developed in English language pre-service teachers at the University of Botswana. For example, the student teachers could be given portfolio assignment and required to research on the purpose of the portfolio, share their contributions with each other, synthesise their thoughts and come up with one quality product. In another example, they could work on the scheme of work for a selected topic. Since the scheme of work has different components such as objectives, suggested teaching strategies, teaching aids, suggested assessment strategies, the student teachers could divide the task amongst themselves hence fulfilling the requirement of task interdependence where unique contributions of group members are indispensable in completion of the task. For example, a scheme of work to qualify as such should have all required components. This means that each member of the group should understand that their contribution is essential for the construction of what will eventually be deciphered as a scheme of work. In sharing the task, each member would feel valued and when

the product is submitted for assessment, members of the group would be rewarded for their joint efforts.

## **5.2 Face-to-face verbal interaction**

Face-to-face verbal interaction is another feature of social interdependent theory in which students in a group are responsible, through face-to-face interaction, for explaining to each other the requirements of the assigned task (Kaufman, Sutow & Dunn, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 2002). In the process of making it possible to understand the task together, the students are active in the learning process by explaining, arguing, elaborating and linking the new learning material to previously learned facts and concepts. For face-to-face interaction to be successful group members should demonstrate willingness to encourage and facilitate each other's efforts to complete their tasks for the group to achieve its goal (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 1990). Gillies (2016) argues that promotive interaction is characterised by students assisting one another as needed in order for them to develop the same understanding of an issue, as well as using non-verbal communication prompts that encourage members to take the task seriously because they have to gain each other's respect. For prospective teachers, face-to-face verbal interaction is an advantage as teaching requires good communication and presentation skills which must be executed in classrooms where English is a second or foreign language for teachers as well as students.

In the context of English language teacher education, face-to-face interaction can occur at different phases of the teaching and learning process. For example, different groups of students could each agree on regular meetings for discussion of tasks they set for themselves. This could be done when sharing aspects of the portfolio such as *statement of expectations* where they could discuss what they expect of themselves as students to fulfil the requirements of the course, what they expect the course instructor to do in order to guide them towards such achievement or instructional resources that they might need in order to complete the task successfully.

## **5.3 Individual accountability**

Individual accountability is based on the belief that each member of the group is accountable and responsible in contributing to the success of the group and should therefore make sure to complete their share of the task. Johnson and Johnson (2002) are of the belief that students learn together so that they can subsequently perform better as individuals and work better with others. This means that, while the concept of cooperation entails students helping each other in a collaborative manner and being certain that others do their part, it is also important that no one 'rides' on the back of others. When students collaborate, they are strengthened by the knowledge that they are held individually accountable for the completion of a given task (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). Gillies (2016) argues that the more students realise that they are linked together, the more they feel personally responsible for contributing to the



collective effort of the group. On the same note, Johnson and Johnson (1990) contend that teachers can establish individual accountability in two ways: “firstly, by structuring positive interdependence among group members so they will feel responsible for facilitating others’ efforts. This means that the elements of interdependence and individual accountability are related, and one cannot happen without the other. Secondly, individual accountability holds students personally responsible for completing their part of the task and ensuring that their contributions can be clearly identified” (Gillies, 2016, p. 41).

In facilitating individual accountability English language student teachers could be encouraged, as part of portfolio assignment, to develop their own teaching philosophies outlining their beliefs about teaching and learning, the kind of product they would like to develop once in the classroom and the methods they would use to develop such a product. After each member develops a draft of their philosophies, they could ask for feedback from group members to make improvements. Assisting each other in improving their individual philosophies would encourage each member to work hard in other aspects of the portfolio in appreciation of the fact that they all need each other to succeed. Individual accountability can also be enhanced through apportionment of tasks, taking turns in making contributions and individual completion of parts of assigned tasks. A good example would be where student teachers are asked to work on different aspects of a lesson plan such as the rationale, content and teaching aids.

#### **5.4 Group processing**

Another important element of social interdependence that is relevant for the present study is group processing. Sutherland, Stuhr, Ressler, Smith and Wiggin (2019) argue that it is the primary vehicle to help group members reflect on behaviours that inhibit or support group work (cf. Johnson & Johnson, 1999). They further maintain that participating in group processing helps students to evaluate their own personal and social development as they recognise how they have worked together to overcome struggles and settle conflicts as well as develop a new understanding of their group members. Such understanding ensures successful and efficient completion of academic tasks (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 1990, 2009; Hung, 2019), as well as critical reflection that include questions such as: “What have we achieved? What do we still need to achieve? How might we do this?” (Gillies, 2016, p. 42)

To achieve group processing, student teachers could be engaged in reflection on a peer teaching experience before, during and after they peer teach it. The lesson plan used to guide the peer teaching experience would have been a team effort and decisions made in relation to lesson objectives, rationale for teaching such a lesson and its importance in the lives of students, the content that would be used, as well as activities and methods to be used at different stages of the lesson. At the end of the lesson the peer teachers would be given a chance first to process how well their group performed and each individual student within the group asked to make an

assessment of their own contribution as well as how effectively members of the group worked together. The criteria for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson would have been agreed to by all before the peer teaching exercise begins. At the end, the questions posed above would be answered.

### **5.6 Social skills development**

The last component of social interdependence involves development of social skills. Mendo-Lázaro et al. (2018) define social skills as behaviours through which individuals convey viewpoints, emotions, opinions, and maintain or improve their relationship with others, and solve and strengthen a social situation. Social skills are as important as other elements discussed above because “social skills are also needed to achieve mutual goals, therefore, the students must know and trust each other, communicate effectively, and support and encourage each other” (Ghufron & Ermawati, 2018, p. 658). Groups can function effectively if members acknowledge that they come to the task with different ideas, backgrounds, and experiences, influenced by their gender, ethnic as well as academic backgrounds.

Williams, Harris and Hayakawa (1995) argue that urban classrooms lend themselves to conflicts even though from a positive perspective they are fertile grounds for students to interact and learn with those who are different from themselves, thus turning negative interdependence into positive interdependence. They maintain that the conflicts develop because of miscommunication, differences in ideas and approaches to problem-solving, as well as differences in personality, stereotypes, and prejudices. Contrary to what Williams et al. (1995) say above, Kagan (1994) argues that in working together in cooperative groups students develop leadership, decision making, trust building and conflict resolution skills. This implies that being part of a cooperative group can teach student teachers how to resolve the challenges mentioned above and learn how to be open minded and receptive to multiple viewpoints. These views are important for English language student teachers who might be expected to work collaboratively in the world of work and therefore must be open-minded, assertive, confident, and demonstrate leadership abilities as well as emotional intelligence.

Activities suggested for other elements of cooperative learning above are relevant in developing the English language student teacher’s social skills. These activities would further enhance their cooperative learning efforts as well as develop skills such as communicative competence, good listening skills, confidence, and emotional intelligence skills they would need once they enter the world of work. As students listen to the course instructor and their peers providing them with feedback, they learn the skill of expressing the feedback in their own words once they are back in their groups and how to consolidate and incorporate their understandings to improve their submission. In the process, students learn the importance of seeing the world from the perspectives of others, appreciating in the process that since their group is constituted of

members with different ways of looking at the world, they are a microcosm of the whole class as well as the world outside the classroom. In reaching a consensus they learn conflict resolution skills and to “construe conflict as a chance to develop new knowledge” (Buchs & Butera, 2015, p. 3) and that conflict can lead to a better understanding of the task, and a better and deeper re-conceptualisation of the problem (Buchs & Butera, 2015).

## **6.0 Factors to consider when implementing cooperative learning**

When teachers apply cooperative learning in their classrooms, there are several factors they need to consider. These are group size and group formation as well as course instructor’s and students’ roles in facilitating cooperative learning.

### **6.1 Group size and group formation**

The number of students recommended for cooperative learning is typically small and range from two to five to allow for positive interdependence, face-to-face verbal interaction, individual accountability, group processing and development of social skills. Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991) recommend groups of two to four assigned by the course instructor, Cottell and Millis (1994) suggest four students per team who could either be self-assigned or chosen by the course instructor, while Gillies (2016) believes that a group should comprise two to five members to allow for effective cooperation. The authors believe that the small numbers suggested would motivate members to be more attentive and stay on task, and that they would not hide behind others as might happen in a larger group of about eight students. Cottell and Millis (1994) state that in a cooperative group of four, students can decide to work as pairs on the assigned task thus stimulating each other’s writing skills, critical thinking skills and academic achievement, and when one student is absent the remaining three would still work effectively together.

When applied to English language education, the number of students per group would normally be determined by the number enrolled in the course as well as the nature of the task given. The course instructor could decide on the number of students per group but allow the students to choose with whom they would like to work. For a group of 60 students they could be divided into groups of three or four for them to work cooperatively on the assigned tasks as well as in the peer teaching experience. This would ensure regular meetings with course instructor to re-emphasise procedures groups should use to assess how well collaborative and social skills are being employed.

### **6.2 Student and course instructor roles**

Ventimiglia (1994) asserts that the role of the course instructor includes providing direction, instructional resources, and course notes to enable students to work on their tasks successfully. Furthermore, Gillies (2016) argues that the course instructor plays a key role in

promoting positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, group processing, social skills development as well as individual accountability. Gillies further stipulates that the instructor is responsible for structuring the group tasks so that the students understand what they are expected to do and how they are expected to behave. In this context, teachers engage in dialogic teaching where they assist students to develop skills such as problem solving and questioning skills so they “learn how to talk and use talk to ask questions, to explain their thinking, to analyse and solve problems, explore and evaluate ideas, argue, reason and justify...” (p. 51). Cottell and Millis (1994) assert that while the instructor is responsible for structuring groups and monitoring students’ progress, their involvement should be non-intrusive so as to foster the spirit of teamwork and independence in students.

In the context of English language teacher education, the instructor could explain the task to the class and then schedule meetings with different cooperative groups by sharing with them consultation hours where they meet and discuss progress, concerns or ask questions on any issues related to the assigned task. The instructor could use the opportunity to explain the assignment more as well as share resources or suggest websites, library online databases relevant for the successful completion of the task. These activities are important because all tasks assigned would normally have a submission date that should be adhered to and periodic reports would necessitate completion of certain aspects of the assignment at a given point in time. Prior to giving students the assignment to work on independently outside class, the task and the concept of positive interdependence would be discussed, and the nature of interaction expected of groups explained as well as the importance of individual members’ contributions. In the process the course instructor could specify the criteria for success and explain the importance of the academic gains as well as social skills that would be developed through team effort.

If conducted well, cooperative groups could allow students to play a more active role in interacting with each other and discussing issues relevant to the task assigned. The instructor could encourage groups to meet regularly to give each other feedback and allow for the facilitation of all the elements of cooperative learning such as face-to-face interaction, positive interdependence, and development of social skills. The students should be given the responsibility of meeting regularly to report on progress, question, critique and share with each other. Cottell and Millis (1994) argue that to build team cohesion and raise self-esteem cooperative team members could assign each other roles such as: chair, monitor, recorder as well as reporter. The chair could ensure equal participation of team members, while the monitor could facilitate positive interdependence and be the timekeeper. Furthermore, the recorder could record contributions of members and record all group activities while the reporter could use the recorder’s notes to provide oral presentations to the class or course instructor when required to do so (Cottell & Millis, 1994).

## **7.0 Challenges of using cooperative learning**

While acknowledging that cooperative learning could effectively improve the quality of college English teaching, He (2019) expresses the view that there are certain challenges associated with this strategy. The author argues that one such challenge is uneven participation of team members caused by lack of communicative competence in the English language. This is because students who are better communicators speak more and provide their counterparts with assistance more, and in the long run the less outspoken students become more of passive listeners and are not given equal opportunity to think independently. In such cases cooperative learning is not beneficial to a certain group of students. Eventually when the group efforts are assessed everyone is allocated the same grade and this does not differentiate between those who cooperated and contributed more from those who contributed less. He (2019) further posits that in scenarios like this, it also means that students delegated the responsibility of team leadership failed to learn the skill to lead and manage activities effectively, posing this as yet another challenge. It becomes a challenge since the leader could not encourage the passive listeners to participate constructively as the role of the leader is to keep the team on task and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to learn, participate and in the process earn the respect of teammates (Cottell & Millis, 1994). He (2019) avers that “in the process of group cooperative learning, students should form a good relationship of mutual help and interaction, however, in group activities, the phenomenon of not being friendly, not listening and not sharing often occurs” (p. 1365). This is what Johnson and Johnson (2005) meant that in negative interdependence, individuals can hinder each other’s efforts to reach set goals.

This is attributed to selfishness and childishness and being too independent and therefore thinking that one might not need other peoples’ assistance. This is particularly true of students who are more outspoken and linguistically adept than others. Healy, Doran and McCutcheon (2018), while recognising the benefits of cooperative learning such as provision of an active learning experience that fosters the development of higher order thinking skills as well as social skills, acknowledge that it can also lead to conflict, undesirable behaviour, arguments, low academic performance, isolation and exclusion of individual group members. This is because students who make up these cooperative groups have different ideas, backgrounds, and experiences, are influenced by their gender, ethnic as well as academic backgrounds.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

This paper explored the feasibility of incorporating cooperative learning strategy in English language teacher education. Based on social interdependence theory and the literature on the point that working together to achieve a shared objective yields higher achievement and greater productivity than working alone, the conclusion reached is that the cooperative learning strategy is implementable if certain conditions are met. In view of this contention, the paper has established that the key elements of social interdependence theory that underpin successful

implementation of cooperative learning are positive interdependence, face-to-face verbal interaction, individual accountability, group processing and development of social skills. For the elements of cooperative learning to be effective it has also been established that other factors should be taken into consideration such as the role that the course instructor plays in establishing the context that students could exploit in their development of thinking and social skills, as well as taking into consideration group size and group formation. It is therefore concluded that cooperative learning is an important pedagogical strategy that is worth considering not only for English language education but also for other courses at the University of Botswana across departments and faculties. Of significance is that the type of product envisaged by English language teacher education is based on the type of graduate that various policy documents such as the Revised National Policy on Education (1994), Learning and Teaching Policy (University of Botswana, 2008), The Graduate Employability Strategy (University of Botswana, 2009), Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (2015), and Creating a Future for the Knowledge Generation (University of Botswana, 2020) describe and that all students are expected to achieve. It is believed that the best way to develop these skills in university students is through engaging in cooperative learning methodology.

Furthermore, English is as an official language in Botswana and a core subject as well as medium of instruction at various levels of the education system. It is therefore important that effective teaching strategies are employed in language teacher education to develop pre-service teachers' cooperative, communicative as well as social skills. Hence, language educators need to include social interdependence theory as a topic in their courses. In this regard, it is imperative to interrogate the intersections between positive interdependence and the communicative approach, as well as the nature of interaction that facilitates cooperation. If elements of interdependence are problematised, pre-service teachers would appreciate that while it is important to use group work in the teaching and learning process, it is equally critical to operationalise interdependence by paying close attention to group formation and group composition. This means interrogating factors such as: who is working together, how they are coping with group work, and the task they are working on (Johnson & Johnson, 2005). All in all, research needs to be conducted in various English language classrooms at different levels of the education system to investigate the aspects of cooperative learning that are integrated in the teaching and learning process as well as the extent to which teachers are competent in doing so.

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