

Students' Perceptions of Cooperative Learning Experiences in EFL Reading Classes

Nadiya Andriana¹, Pasca Kalisa²

^{1,2} Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

¹ arianadnadiya0320@students.unnes.ac.id, ² pasca.kalisa@mail.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

This study explores students' perceptions of cooperative learning in EFL reading classes at the secondary school level in Indonesia. It aims to examine students' engagement and social dynamics during cooperative learning activities. A case study design was employed, involving 35 students who completed a 14-item Likert-scale questionnaire assessing motivation, self-confidence, anxiety reduction, and peer support. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight students to gain deeper insights into their experiences. The results indicate that most students perceive cooperative learning positively. The quantitative data show that cooperative learning helps reduce students' anxiety and enhances peer support. The qualitative findings reveal that cooperative interaction facilitates students' understanding of complex reading texts; however, challenges such as unequal participation among group members were also identified. The effectiveness of cooperative learning appears to depend not only on group formation but also on strategies that ensure equitable participation, highlighting the importance of the teacher's active role in managing student interactions and the structuring of participation as a key component in cooperative learning models.

Keywords: *cooperative learning; EFL reading; peer interaction; student perception*

INTRODUCTION

Students' perceptions of cooperative learning experiences in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading classes have attracted significant scholarly attention, as cooperative learning is widely recognised as an effective approach for fostering a positive and supportive learning environment (Fauziah et al., 2022; Nikko & Salsabila, 2023). Cooperative learning (CL) is an instructional strategy in which learners work collaboratively in small groups to achieve shared learning goals, thereby enhancing both individual understanding and group achievement. (Laal & Laal, 2012).

In EFL contexts, reading is often considered one of the most challenging language skills due to learners' limited vocabulary, low motivation, and high levels of foreign language anxiety (Chen et al., 2022; Rianawati et al., 2024; Sarshogh et al., 2024). These challenges frequently hinder students' ability to comprehend texts effectively and participate actively in reading activities. Consequently, educators are increasingly encouraged to adopt student-centred instructional strategies, such as cooperative

learning, to address both cognitive and affective barriers in EFL reading classrooms. In relation to EFL reading contexts, Halima and Kalisa (2025) Highlight the importance of authentic reading materials in promoting meaningful learner engagement and real-world language use. Similarly, Yuliasri et al. (2023) suggest that collaborative instructional approaches, such as project-based learning, foster positive student responses through shared responsibility and active participation, which aligns with the core principles of cooperative learning.

A growing body of research has demonstrated that cooperative learning contributes positively to EFL students' reading comprehension. Several empirical studies report that the implementation of cooperative learning strategies significantly improves students' understanding of reading texts (Ahmed & AbdAlgane, 2024; Hayani et al., 2024; Nisa et al., 2025). Techniques such as Jigsaw, Think-Pair-Share, and Collaborative Strategic Reading facilitate active engagement, peer interaction, and shared responsibility for learning, which in turn enhance reading outcomes. Recent studies have also suggested that gamified learning can serve as an effective contemporary approach to increasing students' motivation and participation in higher education settings (Liu & Liu, 2025). Using game-based activities such as escape room tasks, Liu and Liu (2025) found that students became more actively involved in collaborative learning processes while also improving their reading and research skills.

Beyond academic performance, cooperative learning has also been shown to influence students' affective dimensions. Previous studies highlight that cooperative learning increases students' motivation, self-confidence, and sense of peer support, while simultaneously reducing anxiety levels (Bećirović, 2023; Gordani et al., 2021; Yousif, 2025). For instance, Sarshogh et al. (2024) found that collaborative strategic reading improved EFL learners' reading motivation, whereas Yeo (2022) reported higher class satisfaction and engagement among students taught through cooperative learning approaches.

Although numerous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of cooperative learning in enhancing EFL learners' academic achievement and affective outcomes, most existing research predominantly employs quantitative designs and focuses on measuring learning outcomes rather than exploring students' subjective experiences in depth (Hayani et al., 2024; Nikko & Salsabila, 2023). As a result, there remains a limited understanding of how students personally perceive cooperative learning practices, particularly in reading classes and in relation to multiple affective dimensions simultaneously.

Moreover, previous studies tend to examine motivation, confidence, or anxiety as separate constructs, while fewer studies investigate the interrelationship among these affective factors within a single learning context. This indicates a need for more qualitative and mixed-methods research that captures students' nuanced perspectives and provides a more holistic understanding of cooperative learning experiences in EFL reading classrooms.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore students' nuanced perceptions of cooperative learning experiences in an EFL reading classroom, with particular emphasis on motivation, confidence, anxiety reduction, and peer support. Specifically, this study investigates how cooperative learning influences these affective aspects as well as the challenges students face during its implementation. The contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on students' affective experiences in cooperative learning, a topic that has received relatively limited attention in the context of EFL reading instruction. By employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative survey data and

qualitative interview data, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how cooperative learning shapes student engagement at the affective level, and offers practical implications for teachers and curriculum designers in creating a more supportive and interactive reading learning environment.

Although cooperative learning has been widely studied, limited attention has been given to students' affective experiences in EFL reading classes, particularly in Indonesian secondary school contexts. Furthermore, prior research often examines these aspects in isolation and emphasizes learning outcomes, while the underlying affective dimensions of the learning process remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining students' motivation, self-confidence, anxiety, and peer support within cooperative learning settings.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' perceptions of cooperative learning in EFL reading classes, allowing for an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). The research was conducted at SMA Negeri 9 Kota Semarang, Indonesia, involving 35 eleventh-grade students aged 16–17 with English proficiency levels ranging from beginner to intermediate who had participated in cooperative learning activities in their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading classes. Eight students were then selected through purposive sampling based on several criteria, including active participation in cooperative learning activities, consistent attendance during the study, and willingness to participate in interviews. The selected participants also represented various levels of class participation and learning experiences to capture diverse perspectives on the implementation of cooperative learning in EFL reading classes.

Following the requirements for technical clarity, data were collected through two primary instruments. The first was a questionnaire consisting of 14 items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), which focused on four affective dimensions: motivation, confidence, anxiety reduction, and peer support. To gain deeper insights into the students' experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, with each session lasting approximately 15-20 minutes. The interview protocol covered students' attitudes toward English, their experiences with group work, and their emotional responses during collaborative reading tasks. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis followed a within-case approach. Questionnaire data were analysed descriptively to identify general tendencies, and interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis involving coding and categorisation into themes such as psychological safety and cognitive scaffolding, following the systematic phases of identifying and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the study employed methodological triangulation and member checking to verify the consistency of findings across different data sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study employed a case study approach to explore students' affective perceptions of cooperative learning (CL) in an EFL reading classroom. In line with the nature of case study research, data were collected from multiple sources, namely a questionnaire and

semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire functioned as a supplementary tool to capture general trends within the case, while the interviews provided deeper insights into students' actual learning experiences. The integration of both data sources allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how cooperative learning was perceived in this specific context (Fauziah et al., 2022; Yuheng et al., 2024).

The questionnaire results indicate that students' perceptions of cooperative learning were generally moderate to positive across the four affective dimensions: motivation, confidence, anxiety reduction, and peer support. As presented in Table 1, most items obtained mean scores ranging from 3.00 to 3.54, which fall within the neutral to positive categories.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Cooperative Learning (n=35)

Q ^a	Item Description	Mean	Interpretation
1	Enjoyment in reading English within groups	3.28	Neutral
2	Increased motivation in group work	3.28	Neutral
3	Confidence in discussing texts with peers	3.14	Neutral
4	Active participation in group settings	3.00	Neutral
5	Remembering new vocabulary through groups	3.34	Neutral
6	Comfort in sharing ideas during discussion	3.05	Neutral
7	Improved reading comprehension	3.42	Positive
8	Classroom atmosphere feels more alive/interesting	3.54	Positive
9	Preference for group work over individual tasks	2.97	Neutral
10	Assistance in understanding difficult parts of the text	3.51	Positive
11	Feeling calm and confident when reading together	3.22	Neutral
12	Peers help in explaining difficult text sections	3.54	Positive
13	Acquiring new strategies/skills from peers	3.28	Neutral
14	Overall interest in English reading classes	3.42	Positive

^aQ = Questionnaire Item Number

The highest mean scores were found in items related to peer support and classroom atmosphere. Specifically, "Classroom atmosphere feels more alive/interesting" (Q8) and "Peers help in explaining difficult text sections" (Q12) both obtained a mean score of 3.54, while "Assistance in understanding difficult parts of the text" (Q10) scored 3.51. These results suggest that cooperative learning plays a significant role in creating a more engaging classroom environment and facilitating students' understanding of reading texts. This finding is consistent with previous studies, which reported that cooperative learning enhances engagement and comprehension in EFL contexts (Fauziah et al., 2022; Huong et al., 2021; Yuheng et al., 2024).

The interview data strongly support these quantitative patterns, particularly in terms of peer interaction and cognitive scaffolding. One participant explained:

“If you do it alone, sometimes you can misunderstand [the text], but if the group [is there], we can explain to each other.” (Student 1)

This statement illustrates how cooperative learning enables students to clarify meaning and avoid misinterpretation through collective discussion. Within this case, cooperative learning functions as a form of cognitive scaffolding, where students rely on peers to process information that may be too challenging to handle individually. The group becomes a learning resource that supports comprehension, vocabulary development, and interpretation of ideas. This is also reflected in the positive mean score for “Improved reading comprehension” (Q7 = 3.42), suggesting that students perceive real cognitive benefits from group-based reading activities. Similar findings were reported by Nasim et al. (2024), Yuheng et al. (2024), and Zhong (2024), who found that cooperative learning facilitates reading comprehension by allowing learners to negotiate meaning collaboratively.

Rather than learning in isolation, students construct meaning together, which is particularly important in EFL contexts where learners often struggle with limited vocabulary and unfamiliar text structures (Yuheng et al., 2024). In this case study, cooperative learning helps students reduce the individual cognitive burden and approach texts more confidently through shared understanding (Fauziah et al., 2022, 2023).

In addition to cognitive support, the findings reveal important affective benefits of cooperative learning. The positive perception of the classroom atmosphere (Q8 = 3.54) indicates that students feel more comfortable and emotionally engaged when learning in groups. This was clearly expressed by another participant:

“If it's group work, the class feels more lively and not boring.” (Student 2)

This response suggests that cooperative learning helps reduce monotony and increases emotional involvement in reading lessons. Similar conclusions were drawn by (Zhong, 2024) and (Zheng & Zhou, 2022), who found that cooperative learning enhances enjoyment and engagement in EFL classrooms.

Moreover, cooperative learning appears to function as an emotional buffer, especially in reducing anxiety. One student stated:

“If you read together, the fear of being wrong is reduced.” (Student 3)

Although the mean scores for confidence-related items were mostly neutral (e.g., Q3 = 3.14; Q6 = 3.05), the interview data indicate that students experience lower psychological pressure in group settings. This implies that cooperative learning may not immediately produce strong self-confidence, but it effectively reduces emotional barriers such as fear and anxiety. This finding aligns with (Meilasari et al., 2023) and Wang et al. (2023), who reported that cooperative learning creates psychological safety and lowers anxiety, making students more willing to participate in learning activities.

Another important affective aspect concerns students' perception of learning load. One participant explained:

“If the group members are of the same frequency, the discussion is more ongoing, and the task becomes lighter.” (Student 4)

This statement indicates that cooperative learning helps distribute both cognitive and emotional demands among group members. When tasks are shared, students feel less overwhelmed and more willing to engage in reading activities. This shared responsibility contributes to psychological comfort and supports sustained participation. Similar observations were reported by Bai and Chen (2024), who found

that collaborative learning reduces perceived academic burden and increases students' emotional investment.

Despite these positive outcomes, the questionnaire data also reveal several challenges. The lowest mean scores were found in "Active participation in group settings" (Q4 = 3.00) and "Preference for group work over individual tasks" (Q9 = 2.97). These results suggest that not all students actively participate or genuinely prefer cooperative learning. This indicates the presence of unequal participation, where some students may contribute less and rely on more active group members.

Such conditions can reduce the effectiveness of cooperative learning, as the learning process becomes unbalanced. In this case study, cooperative learning is helpful, but not all students benefit equally from it. This phenomenon reflects what has been described in previous research as social loafing, where group members show varying levels of effort (Nikko & Salsabila, 2023; Tamimy et al., 2023).

These findings highlight that cooperative learning is not automatically effective simply by grouping students. Without a clear task structure, role distribution, and teacher monitoring, some students may become passive participants. Therefore, the success of cooperative learning depends heavily on how it is implemented in practice.

Taken together, the findings show that within this specific case, cooperative learning is perceived as a supportive, emotionally safe, and cognitively helpful learning approach in EFL reading (Fauziah et al., 2022, 2023; Yuheng et al., 2024). Students value group work mainly for peer assistance (Nikko & Salsabila, 2023; Yuheng et al., 2024), reduced anxiety (Meilasari et al., 2023), and improved classroom atmosphere (Zhong, 2024). However, motivational impact and active participation remain moderate (Tamimy et al., 2023; Zhong, 2024), indicating that cooperative learning still faces practical limitations.

This case study demonstrates that cooperative learning works best as a facilitator of understanding and emotional comfort, rather than as a strong driver of individual motivation or confidence (Fauziah et al., 2022, 2023). Its effectiveness is closely related to classroom dynamics and teacher facilitation, Tamimy et al. (2023), emphasising that cooperative learning must be carefully structured to ensure meaningful participation and equitable learning opportunities for all students.

The findings also indicate that collaborative learning approaches remain relevant in EFL reading instruction and may be further enhanced through more contemporary learning environments that promote active participation and engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study explores students' affective perceptions of cooperative learning in EFL reading classes through a case study approach. The findings indicate that cooperative learning is perceived as a supportive strategy, particularly in enhancing peer support, reducing anxiety, and creating a more positive classroom atmosphere.

Quantitative data reveal neutral to positive perceptions across the dimensions of motivation, self-confidence, anxiety reduction, and peer support, with the highest level of agreement regarding student interaction and engagement. These findings are supported by qualitative data, indicating that group interaction facilitates text comprehension, reduces anxiety, and enables students to share cognitive load during reading tasks. Overall, this study concludes that cooperative learning functions more effectively as a means of creating emotional comfort and cognitive scaffolding rather than as a direct driver of individual motivation or self-confidence. For cooperative learning to be maximally effective in EFL reading contexts, teachers need to implement

clear roles, structured tasks, and continuous monitoring to ensure meaningful participation and equitable learning opportunities for all students.

These findings underscore the importance of teachers' roles in designing structured group interactions and ensuring balanced participation among students. Cooperative learning requires not only the formation of groups but also active facilitation to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Therefore, teachers are advised to implement strategies that encourage equal participation and provide support throughout the group discussion process.

However, the findings also demonstrate that cooperative learning does not automatically lead to strong motivation or active participation for all learners. Some students remain passive and do not fully engage in group activities, indicating the presence of unequal participation and social loafing. This suggests that its effectiveness depends not only on group work itself but also on the quality of instructional design, task structure, and teacher facilitation.

Overall, cooperative learning appears to function more effectively as a means of promoting emotional comfort and cognitive support rather than as a direct driver of individual motivation or self-confidence. To maximise its effectiveness in EFL reading contexts, teachers should establish clear roles, design structured tasks, and actively monitor group interactions to ensure equitable participation and meaningful engagement.

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