

# Collaborative Learning in the EAP Classroom: Students' Perceptions

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## Abstract

*Based on interview and questionnaire administered on first year ESL students at the University of Botswana, this paper surveyed students' perceptions of Collaborative Learning (CL). The research was aimed at providing depth and detail on students' perceptions of what they have gained from the process and possibly indicate what areas might need to be improved or changed. Analyses of data revealed that most students claim to have derived academic benefits such as better comprehension and improved performance, and acquired generic skills – enhanced communication and problem-solving skills. About half of the respondents believe they gained social skills: they found CL enjoyable and made new friends. Most students agree that CL practices should be encouraged and continued. It was concluded that students' perception of CL at the University of Botswana is similar to findings in the stated literature. It was recommended that, in addition to focusing on academic benefits of CL, teachers should also be concerned with the social aspects of CL.*

## Introduction

There seems to be an increasing consensus in pedagogy worldwide about the need to shift from traditional, teacher-centred method of teaching (where the teacher does all the talking with students remaining passive); to a more student-centred approach (with learners actively involved in the learning process). One instructional method aimed at achieving this is collaborative learning (CL).

Collaborative learning (CL) is a technique designed to make learning a lively and successful process. It is also called cooperative learning or small group learning. Some linguists suggest that cooperative learning is a face-to-face, highly structured learning whereas collaborative learning assigns responsibility primarily to the students ( Nagata and Ronkowski 1998). Be that as it may, the terms are often used interchangeably.

Collaborative learning is aimed at producing academically stronger students. It is a pedagogical concept that has been widely researched, practised and endorsed by many professionals. In a world where being a ‘team player’ is often linked with business success, CL is a very useful and relevant tool. In the words of Ingleton (2000):

There is an upswing in demand by staff, students, and employers for students to graduate with good interpersonal skills, knowledge of group dynamics, the flexibility to work in teams, the ability to lead, to problem-solve and to communicate effectively. New curricula include a strong emphasis on generic skills, and we have the task of turning those emphases into actual graduate attributes. In the process, teachers’ roles are changing from imparting information to facilitating students’ acquisition of learning and generic skills (Ingleton 2000:2).

In CL practices teachers are facilitators and they guide students towards the attainment of such skills as stated above. The term has been severally defined. According to Gokhale (1995:1) collaborative learning is ‘an instructional method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups towards a common academic goal’. This definition appears to focus on the heterogeneous make-up of some groups while at the same time emphasising group efforts and achievement. The fact remains, however, that groups do not always comprise mixed ability students. Groups are sometimes homogeneous; it all depends on lesson objectives.

Bonwell and Eison (1991) see collaborative learning as a strategy “that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing”. They emphasize the active participation of learners, and bring to mind the Chinese Proverb: “Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand”.

Similarly, CL has been further defined as the learning that occurs as a result of interaction between peers engaged in the completion of a common task. Attention is on what students can do to initiate and manage their own learning through collaboration with others (Ingleton 2000). In addition, CL leads to the acquisition of social skills. It affords reticent freshmen the opportunity to make new friends thereby helping them adapt more easily to university education. This is more feasible where the teacher organises the groups instead of allowing students to self-select.

Collaborative Learning has also been elaborately investigated in terms of the collaboration between English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers and teachers in students’ disciplines (Barron 1992, 2002, Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998, Benesch 2001). Such collaboration is vital in EAP. However, that is not the focus of this research.

For the purposes of this study, the type of collaboration explored here is that between students.

Under collaborative learning, students are paired or grouped together and given specific tasks to perform. Each member is responsible for their own learning as well as those of other group members. Thus, students play vital roles in each other's learning. As Gokhale (1995:1) aptly puts it, "the success of one student helps other students to be successful". Thus, in a collaborative learning setting, learners have the opportunity to discuss with peers, present and defend ideas, exchange diverse beliefs, question other conceptual frameworks, and be actively engaged in the learning process. Thus, a goal of CL is to shift learning from a teacher-centered to a student-centric methodology. CL can take place in the classroom, laboratory, or online.

CL is a popular instructional method in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom. Keen interest in students' academic writing practices by researchers, linguists and teachers has led to emphasis on academic literacy. As O'Rourke (2003) puts it, "Whatever subject discipline we are located within – civil engineering, classics, child welfare or creative writing, to name four that begin with c – we have in common the medium of language. Whatever else we are doing, we are all doing language". An EAP Programme is indeed designed to meet the specific language needs of students in various academic disciplines. It seeks to equip students with the basic literacy skills they need to succeed in their chosen fields of specialization. It is in an attempt to achieve this goal that EAP teachers have found CL an effective and reliable partner.

## **Purpose of Research**

This study examined the practice of collaborative learning from the viewpoint of our students. This is based on the principle that through our students' feedback, we can assess a teaching methodology, our teaching, and learning effectiveness. Thus, it is in the light of this that this research explored the perspectives of students at the University of Botswana, who have been privileged to participate in collaborative learning.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions examined in this study were:

1. What are students' views on collaborative learning?
2. How comparable are students' views to stated advantages of CL?

## **Theoretical Consideration**

Proponents of collaborative learning claim that active exchange of ideas within small groups increases interest among participants and promotes critical thinking (Gokhale, 1995). Furthermore, Johnson & Johnson (1986) state that there is evidence that co-operative teams achieve higher levels of thought and retain information longer than students who work individually. According to Totten, Sills, Digby, and Russ (1991) shared learning gives students an opportunity to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their own learning and so become critical thinkers. Thus, research suggests that CL brings positive results such as deeper understanding of context, critical thinking, increased overall achievement in grades, improved self-esteem, and higher motivation to remain on task, more opportunities for personal feedback, celebration of diversity, group conflicts resolution and improved teamwork and social skills (Concept to Classroom, 2004).

It has been largely observed that first year students at the University of Botswana are very passive in class at the beginning of the first semester. This has been attributed to the principle of *Botho*, which influences the way students are educated. As Akindele and Trennepohl(2007) observe:

*Botho* is the Setswana word for respect, good manners and good character. This underscores the manner in which school children at the lower levels of education are brought up to uphold their culture and it affects their participation in class activities. They are passive and non-responsive even when they do not understand what is being taught, so they are afraid to ask questions. They come to the University of Botswana with the same attitudes, and are sometimes shocked and unpleasantly surprised when they are forced to participate in class (Akindele & Trennepohl 2007:3).

Consequently, at the University of Botswana, CL is a strategy also used for breaking students' culture of silence.

One contentious aspect of collaborative learning involves the composition of the small groups. Debates still occur on this topic. Researchers disagree mainly about whether to group students according to their ability, or to mix them so that stronger students can help the weaker ones learn and themselves learn from the experience of tutoring. The educational community has remained divided on this.

Some researchers suggest that gifted students are held back when grouped with weaker students. More researchers support diversity in small groups. Radencich and McKay (1995) conclude that grouping by ability does not usually benefit overall achievement and can lead to inequalities of achievement. They advocate the use of variety of grouping formats. With good argument on both sides, most teachers make choices based on their objectives. Also, many teachers simply alternate: sometimes they group according to the strengths or interests of students, and at other times they use other criteria so that students can learn to work with different types of people.

Just as experts differ on the make-up of groups, they also debate about the most effective size for small groups. Slavin (1987) claims that having two or three members per group produces higher achievement than groups with 4 or more members. Antil et al (1997) conclude that most teachers who use CL prefer pairs and small groups of three and four. Unquestionably, there seems to be a trend towards a maximum of four students in a group. Elbaum et al (1997) suggest that we have dialogues with students about their preferences for group composition and expected outcomes. This is very important if we actually are adopting a learner-centred approach.

In spite of the numerous benefits of CL earlier discussed, some critics have pointed out some drawbacks. Randall (1999) cautions against abuse and overuse of group work; she identifies one of its weakness as that of placing too much burden on some students. She argues that in mixed-ability groups, the result is often that stronger students are left to teach weaker students and do most of the work. Other critics claim that CL is detrimental to students who benefit more from learning alone. Yet others recommend that we negotiate more with students to determine how they learn best and apply these ideas to the way we structure classes. These are valid points that every committed teacher who uses CL must consider and address accordingly.

Contrary to what some critics have said - that teachers escape responsibility by avoiding teaching - in collaborative learning the teacher has to meticulously plan the lesson to ensure effectiveness. In fact, the teacher usually has a back-up plan (Plan B) in case there is need for it. Also, under CL methodology, the teacher spends time teaching and explaining concepts and then becomes less dominant as students become more active and dominant working in pairs or groups, and assuming more responsibility for their own learning. The teacher guides and facilitates learning at this point.

As a facilitator, the duties of the teacher include monitoring and intervening. These are done through such activities as:

- a. observing students to see that they work as a team
- b. monitoring each team's progress
- c. explaining concepts and tasks as the need arises
- d. mediating and teaching social skills in cases of conflicts among group members
- e. commending good group efforts and interactions

This goes beyond the classroom, for example, students consult the teacher in the office and in the e-learning (for example, SMART/ WEBCT) classroom.

There are theories on how collaborative learning improves the educational and psychological outcomes for students. These can be broadly described as cognitive, social constructivism, and motivational.

Cognitive approach states that for learners to retain and comprehend knowledge, it must be placed in a conceptual framework (Cooper and Robinson, 1998; Slavin, 1995). In the small group environment, the learner has the opportunity to review their understanding with others and to be exposed to other theoretical framework.

Social constructivism claims that for knowledge to be internalised and a framework established, a social communication must first take place. It is this discourse that leads to the conceptual framework in which to relate the new knowledge (Bruffee, 1992). As MacGregor states, "Knowledge is shaped, over time, by successive conversations, and by ever-changing social and political environments" (MacGregor, 1990).

The motivational theorists believe that the inherent structure of collaborative learning creates an environment which motivates learning. For instance, if group and individual performances are components of the final assessment, individuals are motivated not only to learn the material but also to encourage all group members to understand the fundamentals of the knowledge. Hence, there is a driving force to foster positive interdependent relationships between group members. In other words, collaborative learning creates a "One for all and all for one attitude" (Alexander Dumas).

## **Collaborative Learning and English for Academic Purposes (EAP)**

For almost three decades now, the use of small-group learning has greatly increased. CL became very popular in the early 1980s and has matured and evolved since. This is especially so in the English for Academic Purposes Programme. CL structures are conspicuously incorporated into EAP courses.

In all universities where English is the language of instruction, first year ESL students are required to take EAP courses which address the specific (English) language needs of students in specific disciplines. Thus, engineering, science, education, social sciences students - to mention a few - have different course materials designed and produced for each group of students. Academic literacy programme in tertiary institutions is aimed at providing this much needed language proficiency for higher education. The teaching of academic discourse is done in the context of students' disciplines (Dudley Evans, 1990).

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses dominate the academic literary programme in most tertiary institutions. In the words of Ferenz(2005:1) “Second language(L2) advanced academic literacy is a prerequisite for producing appropriate second language academic writing”.

Basically, EAP courses are designed to equip tertiary students with the language skills they need to adequately cope with studies in their areas of specialization. The goals of these EAP courses include the inculcation of life-long learning skills (e.g. communication skills, problem solving skills, critical thinking skills), in addition to equipping students with basic study skills. One of the important strategies adopted in order to realize these goals is collaborative learning.

English language teachers unreservedly agree that proficiency in the language of instruction is vital for students’ academic success (Minto, 2002, and Dudley-Evans, 1990). Research has shown that ESL students have problem with academic language as it requires skills for ‘comparing, classifying, inferring, problem solving and evaluating’ (Williams 2001). EAP Courses are aimed at helping students acquire the academic communicative competence they need to achieve success in their study.

Teaching strategies and course materials are designed to suit students’ disciplines. These have the advantage of sustaining relevance and motivation. Thus, an EAP programme must give credence to the ESP guiding principle: “Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need” (Hutchinson and Waters, 2004:8). Consequently, EAP courses no longer focus on general English, except for some cases of remediation. ESL students expect an EAP course to equip them with academic literacy skills they need to succeed in their disciplines.

In addition to adopting discipline-specific approach, EAP teachers have discovered that CL is a learner-centred method of instruction that leads to higher learning outcomes than the traditional lecture method. This is, perhaps, why Collaborative learning is now considered indispensable in the EAP classroom. CL, like Problem-Based Learning (PBL), emphasizes student-centred tasks and these help in the development of generic or lifelong learning skills.

At the University of Botswana, Collaborative learning is widely used in the EAP classroom. Students perform many tasks in pairs or groups. In fact, more practice exercises are done in pairs or groups than individually. An example is an investigative report writing project requiring students to work in groups of four. Each group investigated an environmental problem, such as over-crowding, litter, and pollution. Each group was asked to include in their report a section stating the sharing of duties/functions – a form of record of activities. Prior to submission of reports, groups made oral presentations with each member presenting an aspect of the report. Final continuous assessment marks are taken from pair/group project and individual writing tasks.

In this research, an attempt was made to investigate students’ views of CL. It is hoped that findings will assist teachers during future EAP course design and evaluation.

## **Methodology**

Quantitative data for this study was collected through questionnaire. It sought to identify students’ perspectives of collaborative learning by giving them a twenty-item questionnaire – adapted from Ingleton (2000) on their perceived experiences when they worked in pairs or groups while taking EAP course(s). All the items in the questionnaire were designed for a Likert scale response using a four-interval scale of “strongly agree”, “agree”, “disagree”, “strongly disagree”.

The content validity of the instrument was established by having the items evaluated by two EAP teachers and one lecturer in education.

300 first year students at the University of Botswana who had taken one EAP course during the first semester and one EAP course in the second semester were the subjects of the study. 50 respondents were randomly sampled from each of the 6 faculties: Science, Social Sciences, Humanities, Engineering, Business and Education. Students completed the questionnaire at the end of the second semester. Students were also asked to include their personal comments regarding CL, after responding to the twenty items. (See Appendix A)

In order to elicit more information from subjects, structured interview questions – similar to Ingleton (2000) – were used in informal situations to interview thirty students, equally distributed among the six faculties. (See Appendix B)

Data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using percentages and data from interviews are presented in figures. Results are presented in tables, charts and histogram.

## RESULTS

300 copies of the questionnaire were distributed but 260 completed copies were analysed. This was because of the inability to retrieve all and some were returned incomplete.

To find out students' views on CL, the following twenty items were analysed as shown in Table 1. Also, the responses were merged into two: strongly agree and agree for agree responses, and disagree and strongly disagree for disagree responses (Table 2).

**Table 1: Description of Students' Responses regarding Collaborative Learning**

|   | Working in pairs and groups                                 | 1<br>Strongly<br>Agree | 2<br>Agree     | 3<br>Disagree | 4<br>Strongly<br>Disagree |
|---|---|------------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| A | Helped understanding/comprehension                          | 68<br>(26.2%)          | 134<br>(51.5%) | 48<br>(18.5%) | 10<br>(3.8%)              |
| B | Fostered exchange of knowledge, information and experiences | 89<br>(34.2%)          | 111<br>(42.7%) | 40<br>(15.4%) | 20<br>(7.7%)              |
| C | Made problem-solving easier                                 | 53<br>(20.4%)          | 119<br>(45.8%) | 60<br>(23%)   | 28<br>(10.8%)             |
| D | Stimulated critical thinking                                | 58<br>(22.3%)          | 107<br>(41.2%) | 65<br>(25%)   | 30<br>(11.5%)             |
| E | More relaxed atmosphere                                     | 46<br>(17.7%)          | 90<br>(34.6%)  | 80<br>(30.8%) | 44<br>(16.9%)             |
| F | Received useful/helpful feedback                            | 53<br>(20.4%)          | 125<br>(48.1%) | 61<br>(23.4%) | 21<br>(8.1%)              |
| G | Got fresh insight   | 40<br>(15.4%)          | 129<br>(49.6%) | 71<br>(27.3%) | 20<br>(7.7%)              |
| H | Focused on collective efforts rather than individual effort | 95<br>(36.5%)          | 104<br>(40%)   | 35<br>(13.5%) | 26<br>(10%)               |
| I | Greater responsibility-for myself and the group             | 107<br>(41.1%)         | 91<br>(35%)    | 41<br>(15.8%) | 21<br>(8.1%)              |
| J | Enabled learners to help weaker learners in the group       | 70<br>(27%)            | 120<br>(46.1%) | 45<br>(17.3%) | 25<br>(9.6%)              |

|   |   |                |                |               |               |
|---|---|----------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| K | Enhanced communication skills                                   | 92<br>(35.4%)  | 105<br>(40.4%) | 45<br>(17.3%) | 18<br>(6.9%)  |
| L | Improved performance  | 62<br>(23.8%)  | 102<br>(39.2%) | 50<br>(19.2%) | 46<br>(17.8%) |
| M | Learners actively participated in the teaching/learning process | 55<br>(21.2%)  | 95<br>(36.5%)  | 76<br>(29.2%) | 34<br>(13.1%) |
| N | It was fun  | 72<br>(27.7%)  | 84<br>(32.3%)  | 50<br>(19.2%) | 54<br>(20.8%) |
| O | Made new friends  | 80<br>(30.8%)  | 76<br>(29.2%)  | 70<br>(26.9%) | 34<br>(13.1%) |
| P | Fostered team spirit  | 54<br>(20.8%)  | 110<br>(42.3%) | 63<br>(24.2%) | 33<br>(12.7%) |
| Q | Waste of time explaining things to others                       | 26<br>(10%)    | 47<br>(18%)    | 75<br>(29%)   | 112<br>(43%)  |
| R | Difficult getting members to actively participate in tasks      | 70<br>(27%)    | 90             | 60<br>(23%)   | 40<br>(15.4%) |
| S | (pair/group work) should be encouraged/continued                | 80<br>(30.8%)  | 120<br>(46.2%) | 10<br>(38%)   | 50<br>(19.2%) |
| T | Maximum group size should be four                               | 120<br>(46.2%) | 60<br>(23%)    | 35<br>(13.5%) | 45<br>(17.3%) |

- Percentages are indicated in brackets

**Table 2: Combined Students' Responses**

|   | Agree Responses | Disagree Responses |
|---|-----------------|--------------------|
| A | 202 (77.7%)     | 58 (22.3%)         |
| B | 200 (77%)       | 60 (23%)           |
| C | 172 (66.2%)     | 88 (33.8%)         |
| D | 165 (63.5%)     | 95 (36.5%)         |
| E | 136 (52.3%)     | 124 (47.7%)        |
| F | 178 (68.5%)     | 82 (31.5%)         |
| G | 169 (65%)       | 91 (35%)           |
| H | 199 (76.5%)     | 61 (23.5%)         |
| I | 198 (76.2%)     | 62 (23.8%)         |
| J | 190 (73%)       | 70 (27%)           |
| K | 197 (75.8%)     | 63 (24.2%)         |
| L | 164 (63%)       | 96 (37%)           |
| M | 150 (57.7%)     | 110 (42.3%)        |
| N | 156 (60%)       | 104 (40%)          |
| O | 156 (60%)       | 104 (40%)          |
| P | 164 (63%)       | 96 (37%)           |
| Q | 75 (28.8%)      | 185 (71.2%)        |
| R | 160 (61.5%)     | 100 (38.5%)        |
| S | 200 (77%)       | 60 (23%)           |
| T | 180 (69.2%)     | 80 (30.8%)         |

- Percentages are indicated in brackets

Results in Table 2 show the combined responses in figures and percentages. The “Agree” and “Strongly agree” responses are combined and presented here as “Agree” responses. Similarly, the “Disagree” and “Strongly disagree” responses are combined and presented as “Disagree” responses.

From the results obtained as shown in Table 1 and Table 2, it can be seen that the highest number – more than three-quarter – of respondents agree that CL helped understanding (77.7%); fostered exchange of knowledge ,information and experience (77%); and should be encouraged and continued (77%). Similarly, over three-quarter (76.5% & 76.2% respectively) agree that CL focused on collective effort and gave learners greater responsibility for their learning. Also, three-quarter of the students (75.8%) agree that CL enhanced communication skills.

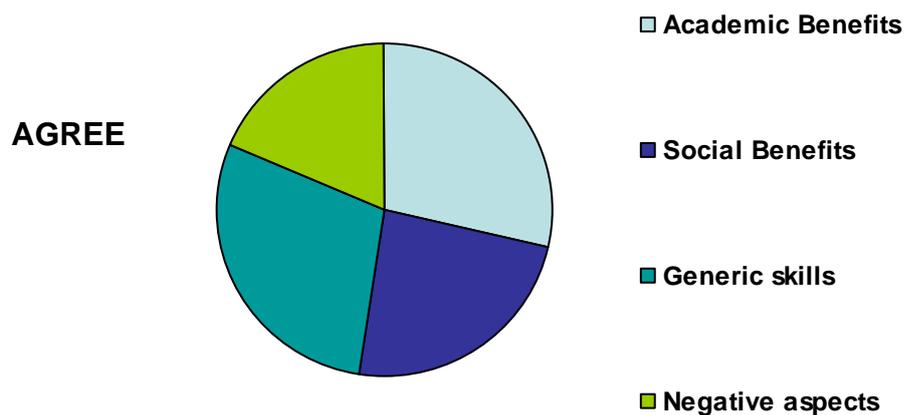
The least percentages of respondents agree that the atmosphere was relaxed (52%); learners actively participated (57.7%); it was fun (60%); and made new friends (60%).

Interestingly, 71.2% (almost three-quarter) believe it was not a waste of time explaining things to others.

For clarity of analysis, the items in the questionnaire (as shown in Table 1) were grouped into four categories: 1. academic benefits, 2. social benefits, 3. generic/ life long learning skills, and negative aspects of CL. Items A,B,F,G,J,L, and M represent academic benefits; items E,N, and O as social benefits; items C,D,H,I,K, and P as generic skills; and items Q and R represent negative aspects of CL. Items S and T were not included. Students’ responses by categories are displayed in percentages in Table 3.

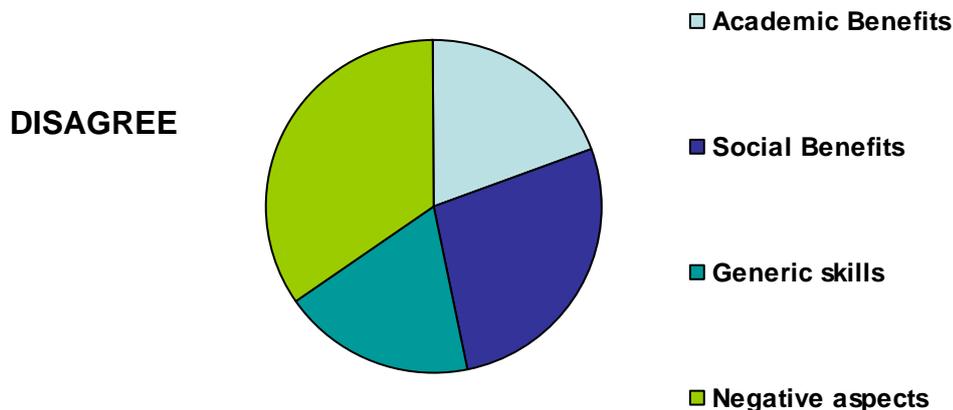
**Table 3: Percentage Combined Students’ Responses by Categories**

| CATEGORY          | AGREE | DISAGREE |
|-------------------|-------|----------|
| Academic benefits | 69%   | 31%      |
| Social benefits   | 57%   | 43%      |
| Generic skills    | 70%   | 30%      |
| Negative aspects  | 45%   | 55%      |



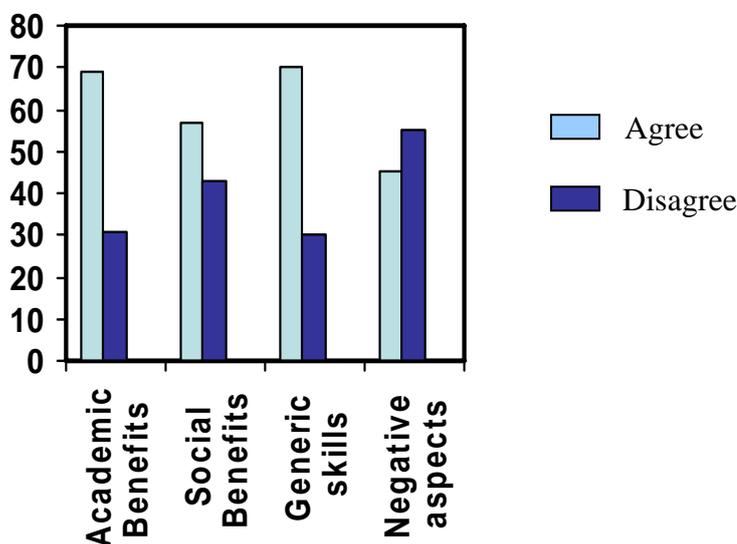
**Fig. 1: Percentage Combined Agree Responses by Categories**

From Fig. 1 above, it can be seen that more students agree that CL helps in the acquisition of life long learning skills and has academic benefits than they do social skills. The least number of respondents agree about the negative aspects of CL.



**Fig. 2: Percentage Combined Disagree Responses by Categories**

Fig. 2 shows that the highest number of students disagree that there are negative aspects to CL. This is followed by many students disagreeing that CL is fun. From the chart (Fig. 2) it can be seen that fewer respondents claim that CL has little or no academic benefits. The least number of students disagree that CL helped them acquire generic skills.



**Fig. 3: Agree and Disagree Responses by Categories in Percentage**

From the analysis of data obtained from the questionnaire, it can be seen that most students (70%) agree that CL enables students acquire generic skills. From Fig.3 it can be concluded that many students (69%) believe that CL has academic benefits. Interestingly, only about half of the respondents (57%) agree that CL has social benefits. Also, only about half of the students(55%) disagree regarding the negative aspects of CL. It should be pointed out that, in terms of the negative

aspects, most students(71.2%) disagree that it is a waste of time explaining things to others while many students (61.5%) agree that it is difficult getting members to actively participate in tasks. Thus, the latter largely accounts for why almost half of the students (45%) agree regarding the negative aspects of CL.

Structured questions numbered 1 – 10 (Interview) and open-ended written comments (questionnaire) were used to elicit more elaborate responses from students. Responses are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Categorised description of interview and written comments**

| INTERVIEW RESPONSES( in figures)   | WRITTEN COMMENTS ( in percentages)  |
|--|---|
| <p>1.Academic benefits Yes =30 No = 0</p> <p>2. Social benefits Yes = 21 No = 9</p> <p>3. Learned more when working in a group than individually Yes = 25 No = 5</p> <p>4. Group make-up</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Size : 2 – 4 = 23 , 5 – 8 = 7</li> <li>• Method of selection<br/>Self-select = 20<br/>Grouping done by teacher = 10</li> </ul> <p>5. Assigning of roles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher/group members assigned roles = 5</li> <li>• Members had equal status = 25</li> </ul> <p>6. Role of academic staff in preparing students for CL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educate students about CL and its benefits = 20</li> <li>• Inform students how marks will be awarded = 5</li> <li>• Give students guidelines on what to do and what not to do =5</li> </ul> <p>7. Negative aspects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult getting some members to work = 7</li> <li>• Too many in a group = 8</li> <li>• None = 15</li> </ul> <p>8. Changes you would make in your own behaviour in future CL situations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust group members more with responsibilities = 2</li> <li>• Participate more actively = 7</li> <li>• No changes = 21</li> </ul> | <p>1.Improved communication , critical thinking &amp; presentation skills = 80%</p> <p>2. Sharing of ideas/knowledge &amp; learning new things from others = 60%</p> <p>3. Reduce group size to 2 or 3= 75%</p> <p>4. Negative aspects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages laziness among students= 5%</li> <li>• Difficult getting together after classes = 20%</li> <li>• Some students leave the work for other group members to do = 38%</li> </ul> <p>5. It was fun &amp; interesting = 50%</p> <p>6. Learned to interact &amp; work with others/ learned interpersonal skills = 83%</p> <p>7. I prefer working alone = 5%</p> |

## DISCUSSION

The results obtained revealed that although students acknowledge the academic, social and generic benefits of CL, they admitted that there are negative aspects: mainly that some students leave all the work for other group members to do. For instance, some of the students say:

1. *Working in small groups is a good way to learn, quite exciting provided members cooperate. It is more interesting than lecture method. (Questionnaire comment)*
2. *Collaborative learning has helped my critical thinking and oral presentation skills; even though sometimes there are conflicts within the group. It also helps in learning to work with others hence helps in good interpersonal skills. ( Interview response)*
3. *It should be continued because it encourages team work and exchange of ideas. It gets us talking and we get to practise presentation before class presentation. ( Questionnaire comment)*
4. *It is okay but sometimes working in a group leads to people becoming lazy, as they feel the rest of the group will work because the mark is shared. (Interview response)*
5. *It was not fun. Some students chose their friends and behaved like their group is better than others.(Questionnaire comment)*

One of the objectives of CL is to make instruction learner centric. Nevertheless, this is not always easily achieved. If some students do not actively participate in the activities, as data in this study reveal, the efforts of the teacher will be undermined. The implication here is that the teacher should go the extra mile to see that every student is actively involved. This may require the teacher counseling ‘problem’ students individually to ensure equal participation. Also, regardless of the size of the groups, it is the duty of the teacher to make sure students know the consequences of not participating actively – rules should be clearly stated. Since the teacher monitors each group’s progress and checks their records of activities, it should be possible to enforce rules. It will be unfair to give group members uniform mark if it is clear that a group member defaulted.

From the interview responses, it was gathered that two-third of groups were organised using the self-select method. It goes without saying that if students are to self-select, they would always select their friends. This may partly account for the marginal level of social skills acquisition reported by students in the questionnaire. The implication is that there is need to alternate grouping method in order to accommodate objectives related to the acquisition of social skills. If a teacher is organising groups instead of allowing students to self-select, there is boundless opportunity for students to make new friends. When a teacher is grouping students during a class, it is good to remember that often, friends sit together in class; so, a teacher would do well to randomly group students, not according to proximity of seats. Another viable technique is for the teacher to organise the groups by using the class lists.

Findings in this research indicate that just over half of the respondents found CL enjoyable. This implies that almost half of the students found the class boring. How then can we make CL activities more fun? This is a question every practitioner of CL should answer. In answering this question, we must ensure that we set objectives that take care of this factor and get input from our students. Course materials should incorporate some fun activities in order to make lessons livelier.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

From the analysis of data, it is clear that collaborative learning definitely enhances learning in several ways. Students in this study acknowledged the many benefits they derived from the practice to include academic, social, among others. Findings indicate that students' responses are similar to stated literature that CL facilitates the acquisition of academic, social, and generic skills (Gokhale 1995; Totten et al 1991; Ingleton 2000; Radencich and McKay 1995; Slavin 1987; Antil et al 1997). However, there is need to improve certain aspects of CL practice to make it more enjoyable and interesting. Also, it may be concluded that CL breaks the pattern of silence among the students of the University of Botswana: 75.8% of the respondents claim CL enhanced their communication skills.

Based on the responses of the University of Botswana students, it is recommended that teachers be concerned with the social aspects of CL as much as with the academic and generic skills aspects. To my mind, the more interesting CL activities are, the more likely the acquisition of targeted skills. CL is designed to be a lively instructional method. It is important that monotony is removed from learning. Dornyei (2001) provides four techniques for making learning stimulating and enjoyable:

- \*Make tasks challenging,
- \*Make task content attractive by adapting it to the students' natural interests or by including novel, intriguing, humorous elements,
- \*Personalize learning tasks, and
- \*Select tasks that yield tangible finished products.

Also recommended are the following:

- Here at the University of Botswana where some classrooms have fixed seats which hinder mobility in CL, the teacher could reserve collaborative work for lessons held in classrooms with mobile seats. Better still, they could take students outside the classroom, and choose suitable location for lesson.
- Group size, make-up, and activities (to make CL more enjoyable and interesting) should be discussed with the students and if necessary, the teacher may modify aspects of the methodology.
- Group and individual performances should be made components of the final assessment. This will motivate students to actively participate in learning. Although uniform marks are generally given in group work, students should be alerted to the fact that lack of active participation in group project could lead to the award of lower mark for the individual. An awareness of this will increase the level of participation by members.
- Perhaps, we should begin to consider further reducing group size. Students could work in pairs or groups of not more than three. For some assignments individual work may be most efficient, while for others collaborative groups work best. Your choices should be determined by your objectives.
- The teacher's role is that of an instructor, guide and facilitator. Lectures are appropriate to disseminate information to a large number of people in a short period of time; present

concepts too difficult for students to process on their own; gather information from variety of sources that may take students a long time to gather; and to arouse interest in the subject. Teachers should always explain the purpose and usefulness of a task before students carry out the task. This will arouse the learners' interest.

- Individual accountability and personal responsibility are important in CL. To ensure members of the group contribute their fair share, each group must keep record of their activities – stating each member's role/activity participation and this is submitted along with the project. Before the submission of report, an oral presentation may be made. Here, each member presents a section of the project as agreed amongst members.
- It is important to pay close attention to group dynamics and maintain both general and focused observations as the groups work. To get groups to work productively, the teacher should appoint a group leader who will coordinate group activities and a secretary who will record transactions. A group leader could perform both tasks in very small groups. Roles could be rotated among group members if the group is to work together for sometime. Teachers could review each group's progress – checking the group's record of activities – to monitor participation and progress and intervene when the need arises.
- If students are allowed to self-select group members all the time, the tendency is for them to make choices based on such factors as gender, ability, and ethnicity; thus making the groups homogeneous rather than heterogeneous. This ultimately does not enhance learning as a whole. My take is that we vary our grouping techniques ( use class lists, organise groups randomly during class, mixed- ability, self-select, and so on) ; after all, variety eliminates boredom.
- Furthermore, it is important that teachers regularly obtain feedback from students on various aspects of the teaching-learning process. In fact, learner feedback is vital to CL. Practitioners should get formal and informal feedback from their students as often as is feasible. This research which explored learners' perceptions of CL at the end of two semesters of CL is an example. CL gives room for informal evaluation. Students should be asked for oral and written feedback during a project, or at the end of a lesson, group work, or project. Quickwrites can be used in CL – asking students questions such as: “What did you learn in class today?” and “What questions or concerns do you have?” A similar informal feedback strategy is in asking students the question: “What learning was clear today, and what would you like clarified?” ( Ingleton, 2000:40)
- It is not enough to receive feedback from our students; we must act on the feedback in order to sustain increased learning outcomes. CL takes time to be accepted by both students and staff. It needs to be carefully explained, structured, and the students well-prepared.
- Finally, this research confirms previous findings that CL has many benefits, such as improved learning skills, as well as some negative aspects, such as difficulty in getting some students to participate. The negative aspects can be successfully dealt with. Although, there is no 'the perfect methodology', CL is one instructional method that significantly facilitates the acquisition of academic, social and generic skills.

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