



Students' Experiences of Cooperative Learning in Developing English Reading Comprehension: Evidence from a Polytechnic Context

Sofyan Sukwara Akfan¹ Festo Andre Hardinsi² La Ode Achmad Suherman³

¹ Politeknik Negeri Fakfak, Fakfak, Indonesia.

² Politeknik Negeri Fakfak, Fakfak, Indonesia.

³ Universitas Muhammadiyah Buton, Baubau, Indonesia.

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of cooperative learning in supporting students' English reading comprehension at Politeknik Negeri Fakfak. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, the research involved 35 students from the D3 Mechanical Maintenance and Repair Engineering Study Program during a four-week learning period. Data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and were subsequently examined using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that cooperative learning enhanced students' reading comprehension by promoting peer scaffolding, collective interpretation of texts, and collaborative clarification of vocabulary and main ideas. In addition, group-based activities encouraged greater engagement, responsibility, and confidence, as students learned in a supportive environment that helped reduce anxiety during reading tasks. These findings suggest that cooperative learning contributes to both the cognitive and affective dimensions of reading comprehension. The study concludes that structured cooperative learning offers an effective pedagogical strategy for developing interactive and meaningful English reading instruction in vocational higher education.

Keywords: Cooperative learning; EFL reading comprehension; vocational education; student engagement; qualitative study

Introduction

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in English language learning, as it enables learners to understand and interpret authentic texts, which is essential for academic success and daily communication (Acosta et al., 2025). Cooperative learning has been widely recognized as an effective instructional approach that fosters peer interaction and shared meaning-making, thereby supporting students' comprehension of reading texts (Setiawan et al., 2025). In cooperative learning environments, learners work collaboratively in structured activities such as jigsaw, think-pair-share, and reciprocal teaching, which promote social interdependence and active engagement with reading

materials that are often difficult for individual learners to process alone (Carrillo et al., 2019).

Empirical evidence from EFL contexts shows that cooperative learning significantly enhances students' English reading comprehension outcomes compared to traditional instruction. For instance, Pan & Wu (2013) reported that EFL freshmen who received cooperative learning instruction outperformed their peers in reading comprehension achievement tests, indicating the pedagogical value of collaborative strategies in English classes. Similarly, Pochana (2022) found that cooperative techniques not only improved reading comprehension scores among secondary students but also positively influenced their attitudes toward reading tasks,

Email: sofyan@polinef.id

suggesting that affective factors can be strengthened through cooperative approaches.

However, little is known about how students in Indonesian polytechnics experience cooperative learning in reading comprehension, particularly in EFL settings with diverse academic backgrounds. In addition to comprehension gains, cooperative learning has been shown to increase students' interest and intrinsic motivation toward reading activities. Ugwu (2019) demonstrated that students participating in cooperative learning programs exhibited higher interest and better engagement in reading tasks than those in non-cooperative settings, thereby reinforcing the role of social interaction in motivating learners to engage meaningfully with texts. Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of implementing cooperative learning strategies to support English reading comprehension, particularly in EFL classrooms where learners face linguistic and cognitive challenges.

Based on the discussion above, this study focuses on students' experiences and interaction patterns during the implementation of cooperative learning in English reading activities. Therefore, this study is guided by two research questions: how do students experience cooperative learning in developing English reading comprehension, and what patterns of interaction emerge during cooperative reading activities?

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' experiences of cooperative learning in developing English reading comprehension and to identify patterns of interaction that emerged during cooperative reading activities. This design was considered appropriate because the study focused on describing students' learning experiences, peer interaction, and classroom dynamics in a natural instructional setting. The study utilizes in-depth observations, interviews, and document analysis to capture the complexity of learners' experiences and interactions in authentic classroom contexts (Mufida, 2021)

Participants

The participants of this study were 35 students from the D3 Mechanical Maintenance and Repair Engineering Study Program at Politeknik Negeri Fakfak and one English lecturer who taught the reading class. The participants were selected using purposive sampling because they were directly involved in cooperative reading activities during the English course. The students participated in the learning process for four

weeks during which cooperative learning strategies were implemented in reading comprehension activities.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted during the four-week implementation of cooperative learning to examine how students interacted, discussed reading texts, clarified vocabulary, and shared understanding within groups. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with selected students and the English lecturer to obtain deeper information about their experiences, perceptions, and challenges during cooperative reading activities. Qualitative data collection focused on observing student group work during cooperative reading activities and conducting semi-structured interviews with selected students and the course instructor to understand how peer collaboration contributed to comprehension of English texts, consistent with qualitative educational approaches aimed at interpreting lived learning processes rather than measuring outcomes numerically (Safitri et al., 2025)

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically. The analysis began with reading and reviewing observation notes, interview transcripts, and relevant documents repeatedly to gain a general understanding of the data. After that, important statements related to students' reading comprehension, peer support, vocabulary clarification, participation, and group interaction were coded. Similar codes were then grouped into subthemes and broader themes. The final themes were interpreted to answer the research questions concerning students' experiences and interaction patterns in cooperative reading activities.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. Member checking was used by confirming selected interview findings with participants to ensure that their responses were accurately represented. Peer debriefing was also conducted by discussing the coding process and emerging themes with colleagues to reduce researcher bias and improve the credibility of the findings. The use of cooperative learning as a central instructional strategy in qualitative research has been shown to reveal rich insights into participant engagement, social dynamics, and strategy use during reading tasks, making it well-

suiting for this study's purpose of capturing descriptive evidence of how cooperative interactions facilitate reading comprehension in the EFL classroom (Nasichah, 2023).

Result and Discussion

This section presents the results and discussion derived from qualitative data collected through classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis during the implementation of cooperative learning in English reading instruction. The findings are organized thematically to highlight key patterns emerging from students' and the lecturer's experiences. The discussion emphasizes the significance of the findings in the context of English language learning in vocational higher education, particularly at Politeknik Negeri Fakfak, without reiterating methodological procedures.

Before presenting the thematic findings, it is important to clarify the coding process used in this study. The codes were generated from multiple qualitative data sources, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and learning documents. Codes C1 and C2 were derived from classroom observations, particularly from students' group discussions and their collaborative efforts to clarify main ideas in reading texts. Codes V1 and V2 were obtained from student interview responses, which reflected their experiences in asking about unfamiliar vocabulary and receiving peer support during cooperative reading activities. Meanwhile, codes E1 and E2 were derived from both classroom observations and interview data. Code E1 reflected students' active participation during group reading tasks, as shown through increased discussion, questioning, and involvement in classroom activities. Code E2 represented students' individual accountability, particularly their responsibility to understand the text and explain it to their group members. This coding process helped identify recurring patterns related to reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and student engagement in the polytechnic English classroom context.

Table 1. Thematic Coding

Code	Quote	Subtheme	Main Theme
C1	Pemahaman teks lebih jelas setelah diskusi kelompok	Peer explanation	Reading comprehension

Code	Quote	Subtheme	Main Theme
C2	Klarifikasi ide utama melalui teman	Meaning negotiation	Reading comprehension
V1	Bertanya kosakata tanpa rasa takut	Vocabulary support	Vocabulary development
V2	Teman lebih cepat memahami arti kata	Peer scaffolding	Vocabulary development
E1	Kelas menjadi lebih aktif	Active participation	Student engagement
E2	Tanggung jawab menjelaskan ke kelompok	Individual accountability	Student engagement

a. Reading Comprehension

The thematic analysis indicates that cooperative learning supported deeper reading comprehension by enabling students to clarify main ideas and negotiate meaning through peer discussion. Collaborative explanation helped students overcome comprehension difficulties encountered during individual reading.

b. Vocabulary Development

Students experienced improved vocabulary understanding through peer support. The cooperative environment reduced anxiety and encouraged students to ask questions freely, which enhanced both vocabulary acquisition and reading confidence.

c. Student Engagement

Cooperative learning fostered higher student engagement by promoting active participation and individual accountability. Students became more responsible for understanding texts, as they were required to contribute meaningfully to group discussions.

The qualitative findings reveal that cooperative learning positively influenced students' English reading comprehension through three main themes: comprehension development, vocabulary support, and student engagement (Nguyen & Oanh, 2025). Group discussions enabled students to negotiate meaning and clarify main ideas collaboratively, resulting in deeper text understanding (Amumpuni et al., 2025). Vocabulary

development was facilitated through peer scaffolding, as students felt more confident asking questions and learning unfamiliar words in a supportive group environment (Homayouni, 2022). In addition, cooperative learning increased student engagement by encouraging active participation and individual accountability. Students demonstrated greater responsibility for understanding texts because they were required to explain content to their peers. Overall, the findings suggest that cooperative learning creates an interactive and supportive learning atmosphere that enhances reading comprehension in EFL classrooms at the tertiary level.

A critical point emerging from these findings is that cooperative learning did not merely improve students' reading comprehension as a final learning outcome, but also shaped the process through which comprehension was gradually constructed. Unlike Pan & Wu (2013), who measured the effects of cooperative learning on reading comprehension and motivation quantitatively, this study reveals how peer scaffolding occurred during group interaction. The findings show that students with lower reading proficiency benefited not only from receiving correct answers from their peers, but also from repeated explanations, simplified language, vocabulary clarification, and opportunities to ask questions without fear. In this sense, cooperative learning functioned as a social and cognitive support system in which stronger students assisted weaker students in negotiating meaning and understanding the text more deeply. This indicates that the value of cooperative reading activities in a polytechnic EFL context lies not only in improving comprehension, but also in creating an interactive process that supports gradual understanding, confidence, and learner participation.

Interview Excerpts and Participant Quotations

The interview findings indicate that the implementation of cooperative learning contributed meaningfully to students' English reading comprehension. Students reported that group discussions enabled them to better understand main ideas and text content that were difficult to comprehend individually. To provide clearer context for the interview excerpts, each participant is briefly identified using a student code and a general reading proficiency profile based on classroom observation and lecturer input. For example, Student 1, who was categorized as having an intermediate reading level, emphasized that cooperative reading encouraged greater responsibility during group work. Student 1 stated, *"Group reading makes the class more active. I have to read seriously because I need to explain the text to my group, not just listen to the lecturer."*

Student 3, who was categorized as having a lower-intermediate reading level, highlighted the importance of peer explanation in understanding difficult texts. Student 3 stated, *"When I read the text alone, I often do not understand it clearly, but during group discussion, my friends explain it using simpler words, and the text becomes clearer."*

Student 7, who was categorized as having an intermediate reading level, described how the cooperative learning environment helped reduce anxiety when asking about unfamiliar vocabulary. Student 7 stated, *"I am not afraid to ask about difficult vocabulary because we learn together in a group, and sometimes my friends understand the meaning faster than I do."*

The findings also reveal increased student engagement and active participation in cooperative reading sessions. Students felt responsible for contributing to their groups, which motivated them to read more carefully:

The lecturer also observed a clear change in students' reading behavior during the implementation of cooperative learning. The lecturer stated:

"Previously, students tended to wait for the lecturer's explanation when they did not understand the text. Through cooperative reading activities, they became more active in asking questions, sharing vocabulary knowledge, and explaining the content to their peers. This showed that they were gradually becoming more responsible and confident readers." (Lecturer).

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted in only one polytechnic context, namely Politeknik Negeri Fakfak, involving 35 second-semester students from the D3 Mechanical Maintenance and Repair Engineering Study Program and one English lecturer. Therefore, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all EFL or vocational higher education contexts. Second, the implementation of cooperative learning was limited to four meetings, which may not fully capture long-term changes in students' reading comprehension development. However, the findings may be transferable to similar polytechnic or vocational higher education settings, particularly where students learn English as a foreign language and require collaborative support in reading comprehension activities.

Conclusion

This qualitative study demonstrates that cooperative learning supports students' English reading comprehension in a polytechnic EFL context by promoting peer scaffolding, shared interpretation, vocabulary clarification, and active participation. The

findings indicate that students' comprehension developed not only through individual reading, but also through social interaction, repeated peer explanations, and collaborative meaning negotiation during group reading activities. These processes helped students become more confident, responsible, and engaged in understanding English texts.

Practically, English lecturers in vocational higher education should design structured cooperative tasks, such as Jigsaw, Reciprocal Teaching, or role-based group reading, rather than merely assigning students to work in groups. Clear roles, guided reading questions, individual accountability, and opportunities for peer explanation are important to ensure that all students participate meaningfully and benefit from cooperative reading activities. Future research could compare cooperative learning with other collaborative approaches, such as peer tutoring or collaborative strategic reading, to examine which strategies are most effective in different EFL classroom contexts. Further studies may also use mixed-methods designs to measure students' reading comprehension gains quantitatively while still exploring their learning experiences qualitatively.

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