Cooperative Learning Pedagogy:
A Response to an Urgent Need in the Iranian EFL
Reading Comprehension Context

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Abstract

While the advantages of cooperative learning activities have been extensively acknowledged in L2 literature, this type of pedagogy has not received due attention in the Iranian EFL context. Indeed, the traditional reading method still dominates in most Iranian EFL university classes even though it fails to meet its main objective which is training competent EFL readers. In an attempt to address this challenge, the current case study incorporated cooperative learning pedagogy into two EFL reading comprehension classes in a medium size university in Iran and sought learners' behaviors and reflections toward the student-centered activities they engaged in during an academic semester. To serve that end, two volunteer cohorts of learners (less and more experienced) from two EFL reading comprehension classes were recruited. Class observation field notes along with focus group interviews comprised the data collection instruments of the study. While the learners' behaviors and activities were recorded in observation field notes throughout the semester, the two focus groups were interviewed right after the course had finished. Data analyses indicated that the learners expressed favorable attitudes toward the new approach they were involved in, even though some issues were raised by the interviewees. Some pedagogical implications and recommendations are proposed for efficient incorporation of cooperative learning activities in EFL reading comprehension classes which have traditionally been dominated by teachers based on the findings of the current study.

Keywords: cooperative learning, student-centered pedagogy, reading comprehension, EFL learners' reflections, university students

In educational contexts like Iran, where English is taught as a foreign language, improving L2 learners' academic reading skills plays a significant role (Birjandi & Noroozi, 2008). However, Iranian EFL learners are largely inefficient readers (Karbalaei, 2011) since, in most Iranian EFL university classes, the traditional reading method still prevails and as research reveals, this approach fails to equip students with the strategies required for comprehending the text they read (Zoghi, Mustafa & Maasum, 2010). In a typical EFL reading course, lecturers dominate the class, assume all the responsibilities for performing the tasks, define what to be learned, identify the activities and readings which students need to perform, and determine how student performance will be evaluated (Weaver & Qi, 2005). This hierarchical structure limits the students' active roles in reading as well as their chances to engage in interactive learning and treats them as passive recipients of teaching rather than active learners. (Rocca, 2010; Zou 2011). To overcome this problem, it seems necessary for the teachers to modify the traditional paradigm of knowledge transmission by removing themselves from center stage and arranging for students to work together, converse with, and coach one another.

However, it has been argued that cooperative learning could be a possible instructional approach that provides learners with opportunities to engage more deeply and actively in the learning process and to share responsibility in their small groups to reach a common goal (Gaith, 2003b; Tuan, 2010). Indeed, interactions among group members encourage active student participation and promote self-learning processes (AbuSeileek, 2012). Cooperative learning is derived from cognitive and sociocultural theories proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky, respectively (Zou, 2011). It is claimed to improve learners' cognitive growth (Shabban & Gaith, 2005), reinforce their motivation (Gaith, 2003a; Pan & Wu, 2013), and maximize their meaningful interactions (Gaith, 2003b; Shaaban, 2006). To move beyond the conventional teacher-centered instruction and address the inefficiency of this method, the present study incorporated cooperative learning pedagogy in EFL reading comprehension courses and sought students' reflections.

Literature Review

In recent years, the significance of cooperative learning pedagogy and its efficiency have been widely acknowledged in ESL/EFL reading programs. This instruction is grounded in social interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) that suggests social interdependence positively influences individual interaction with a given situation, which subsequently affects the outcomes of the interaction (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998). Such positive interdependence is assumed to boost promotive interaction in which students encourage and assist each other to reach their goals, provide each other with feedback, challenge each other and take multiple perspectives. Promotive interaction, in turn, is expected to lead to higher academic achievement (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). In L2 learning contexts, research also has suggested that students' reading competence can be enhanced if this approach is efficiently implemented (Guthrie et al., 2000; Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005). However, as Oxford (1997) states, cooperative learning is different from collaborative learning and is characterized as

> group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others (Olsen & Kagan, 1992, p. 8).

Hence, it includes a set of student-centered, highly structured techniques designed by teachers during which a small group of students work together to accomplish a shared learning goal (Oxford, 1997).

As Slavin (1996) stresses, teamwork and team goals are the essential elements of cooperative learning. However, Johnson and Johnson (1999) maintain that collaborative learning is much more than merely placing students in groups and telling them to work together. It is only when groups are structured so that students understand what they are expected to do and how they are expected to work together that the potential for cooperation and learning is maximized (Ning, 2011). In fact, the following elements are crucial to structured and effective cooperative learning: (a) positive interdependence; each member's contribution is required for group

success, (b) individual accountability; all students in a group need to be assessed for contributing their share of the work and mastering all of the material, (c) face-to-face promotive interaction; individuals use each other's strengths, encourage, praise, and facilitate each other's efforts to accomplish the group's goals, (d) interpersonal and small group skills; appropriate use of social, interpersonal, collaborative and small-group skills such as leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills are encouraged for cooperative efforts to be successful, and (e) group processing; team members should evaluate how effectively members are working together and make changes to function more efficiently in the future (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

According to Johnson and Johnson, cooperative learning is a flexible procedure and can be used for a variety of purposes. Collaborative learning groups may be used to teach specific content, to ensure active cognitive processing of information during a lecture or demonstration, and to provide long-term support and assistance for academic progress (1999, p. 68). Several studies have documented that cooperative learning benefits students by getting them more actively involved (Herrmann, 2013; Peterson & Miller, 2004), increasing their self-esteem and autonomy (Johnson et al., 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 1999, 2009), boosting their motivation (Liang, 2002; Pan & Wu, 2013; Shaaban, 2006), creating greater social support (Johnson et al., 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 1999), and encouraging creative thinking and transfer of learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Moreover, some researchers have reported positive effects of using cooperative learning activities in EFL classroom as it improves students' language proficiency, learning motivation, as well as their communication, cooperation, and study skills (Antil, Jenkins, Wayne & Vadasy, 1998; McCafferty, S. G., Jacobs & DaSilva Iddings, 2006; Liang, 2002; Ning, 2011; Pan & Wu, 2013; Shaaban, 2006). Several studies have also demonstrated that cooperative learning activities can improve reading competence as well (Olsen & Kagan, 1992; Tuan, 2010). More precisely, it not only can stimulate students' motivation, self-concept, and self-esteem (Dornyei 1997; Guthrie et al., 2004), but also can boost learners' higher order reading skills such as autonomy, critical thinking, and

comprehension of the texts (Finlay & Faulkner, 2005; Gaith, 2003b; Guthrie et al., 2004; Law 2011; Pan & Wu, 2013).

Considering the importance of cooperative group work, it seems that cooperative learning pedagogy has remained under-explored in reading instruction programs in Iran where reading and understanding of English texts play a significant role in students' further learning. Besides, although cooperative learning pedagogy is widely studied and favored by ESL/EFL researchers and practitioners, L2 learners' attitudes towards their experience of participating in such activities have remained mostly unexplored so far. Consequently, the purpose of the present study is to elicit L2 students' reflections on the incorporation of cooperative learning instruction in a university-level EFL reading comprehension program in Iran. The researchers hope that the findings address the challenges in existing traditional reading approaches in Iran and similar contexts. It should be noted that in this research cooperative learning is viewed as a general term for an instructional approach that emphasizes interactive learning and EFL students' involvement in their own reading skills progress as they work together in small heterogeneous groups following the principles of positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, and group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Method

Design of the Study

An exploratory case study approach was adopted for the present study. We elicited volunteer EFL learners' reflections engaged in cooperative learning activities in the naturalistic settings of two Reading Comprehension classes taught by one of the researchers. Both classes were involved in cooperative learning activities throughout the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017 for about four months. Lecturer/researcher's observation field notes also supplemented the post-interview data. The aim of the research was to evaluate the efficiency of the program, and the following questions guided the study:

1. What are the EFL students' perceptions of engaging in cooperative learning activities in an English reading comprehension course?
2. To what extent do more experienced English readers' attitudes towards cooperative learning activities differ from their less experienced counterparts?

Participants and Setting

This study was conducted in two simultaneous but separate English reading comprehension courses entitled 'Reading Comprehension 1' (RC1) and 'Reading Comprehension 2' (RC2) at a large private university in Iran. English Reading Comprehension course series (1, 2, and 3), lasting one semester each, are offered at Iranian universities for English Translation majors in their first, second, and third academic semesters consecutively. Hence, the students must pass the lower level reading course to be eligible to enroll in the higher level ones. The courses meet twice a week for 15 weeks with each class session lasting 90 minutes. The objectives of the course series are to help students develop academic reading abilities. The textbooks covered for Reading Comprehension 1 and two courses are 'Inside Reading 1' and 'Inside Reading 2' respectively.

The participants of this study comprised two groups of 12 EFL English Translation students. All participants in the research were volunteers recruited at the outset of both reading comprehension courses after the aim of the project had been explained to them. They were invited to form self-selected groups of four members. They were all Persian speakers, using English only for academic studies and seldom used English outside classrooms. Their average age was 22, and the majority came from middle-class families. In general, while all had studied English as a foreign language for seven years at high school, a few also had the chance to attend private English language institutes to improve their English further. However, none of the participants had participated in cooperative learning activities before this course. Concerning proficiency, the students were heterogeneous, and their English abilities ranged from elementary to intermediate level. RC2 learners, however, were considered more experienced English readers as they had successfully passed RC1 final

exam to become eligible to register for the RC2 module. While RC1 students barely knew each other at the beginning of the course, RC2 learners had known each other at least for a semester.

There were 40 students in the RC1 class, and 28 in RC2 class. In each class, 12 volunteer participants were recruited, and they were asked to form their self-selected groups of four members. Apart from one RC2 group being solely a female group, all other groups included mixed genders (three females, one male). Overall, 19 female and five male students participated in the study which reflected the demographic distribution of the classes.

Instruments

This study utilized two sources of data: Focus group interviews and classroom observations. The first data set comprised two semi-structured interview sessions with the focus groups held the day after the last session of the course.

Overall, the interviews lasted for two hours and 45 minutes and addressed several aspects of cooperative learning activities performed in the reading comprehension classes including (a) students' perceptions of engaging in the tasks, (b) participants' perceived advantages and disadvantages of cooperative learning activities, (c) and interviewees' attitudes towards class atmosphere in terms of stress, motivation, interaction, participation, and stimulation.

The students were also observed by one of the researchers while preparing and teaching in classrooms. The lead researcher took a non-participant observation role and used field notes to record how the students approached the cooperative learning tasks during the course.

Data Collection and Analysis

During the first session, the course structure and objectives were explained, and some relevant issues, such as course requirements, class participation, attendance and scoring policies were highlighted (see Appendix). The tasks students engaged in during the course can be summarized in the following figure:
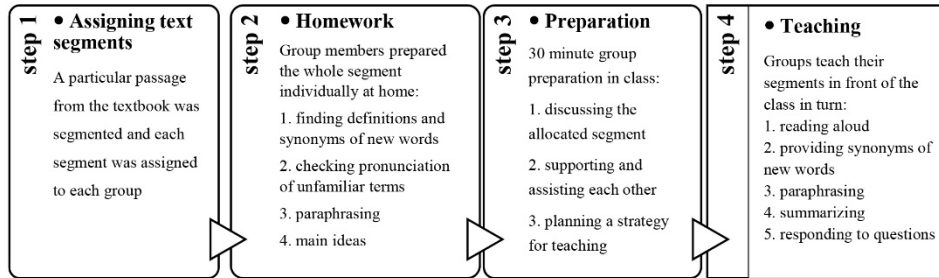
| step 1 | ● **Assigning text segments**

A particular passage from the textbook was segmented and each segment was assigned to each group | step 2 | ● **Homework**
Group members prepared the whole segment individually at home:
1. finding definitions and synonyms of new words
2. checking pronunciation of unfamiliar terms
3. paraphrasing
4. main ideas | step 3 | ● **Preparation**
30 minute group preparation in class:
1. discussing the allocated segment
2. supporting and assisting each other
3. planning a strategy for teaching | step 4 | ● **Teaching**
Groups teach their segments in front of the class in turn:
1. reading aloud
2. providing synonyms of new words
3. paraphrasing
4. summarizing
5. responding to questions |

Figure 1. Activities students performed during the course

Step 1: Choosing a passage. The lecturer/researcher chose a passage from the textbook and assigned segments of nearly the same length to each group to prepare.

Step 2: Homework. The group members prepared their assigned paragraphs individually at home before meeting in class and discussing and organizing them for presentation. Their tasks included finding synonyms for unfamiliar words, checking the pronunciation of the new words, paraphrasing complicated structures and expressions, and seeing the main ideas of the assigned paragraphs.

Step 3: Preparation. Group members started working together for 30 minutes. During this time, they discussed their segment and developed a strategy for teaching the material to other students in front of the class. It was the responsibility of each group to make sure that all of its members had gained a thorough understanding of the assigned paragraphs and were ready to teach their segments. Whenever a problem arose, group members had to find their solution before seeking help from the lecturer. In general, the groups were required to plan how to present the material to the whole class in a clear and concise way so that all students in the other groups could learn from them. The lecturer observed each group's preparation process and addressed the queries and intervened if groups had any problems.

Step 4: Teaching. Each group taught their segments to the whole class in turn. Typical teaching included the group reading the text to the class, providing synonyms for new vocabulary, paraphrasing and explaining sentence structures and grammatical points, and summarizing the main

ideas and answering any questions raised by their classmates. The rest of the class actively listened to, engaged, participated in the teaching-learning process, and asked questions for clarification. The lecturer acted as a facilitator, monitored the teaching process, offered assistance whenever required, and provided feedback on how well the groups performed and what to continue or change for the following time. By the time all groups had finished teaching their assigned segments, all the students comprehended not only their designated paragraph but also the whole passage as well. Upon completion of the first passage, a new reading was assigned, and steps 1-4 were repeated over and over again until the end of the semester.

After the course had finished, the focus groups were interviewed. Persian was used so the interviewees could express their opinions without experiencing any unnecessary pressure that might be caused by using L2. The interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the interviewees. To minimize any possible impact of the lecturer/researcher on students' perceptions, the participants were assured that their responses would not affect their 'end of term' marks. They were also made aware that data elicited from them would be treated in the strictest confidence and any information gathered would be used for research purposes only. Finally, all participants were reassured of their anonymity and confidentiality. Thus, in reporting the findings, pseudonyms are used. During the interviews, the students responded to the questions openly and straightforwardly, and we believe that potential teacher impact on student interview responses, if any, was kept to a minimum.

To analyze the interview data, first, the interview recordings were transcribed and translated into English by one of the researchers. Coding procedures for the interview data involved open coding (theme identification) and axial coding proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). During the open coding phase, the translations were read recursively, and the data were broken down, examined, compared so that patterns and significant themes could be identified. After this, the data were categorized around the issues. Axial coding, on the other hand, involved putting the data back together in new ways after open coding by making connections

between a category and its sub-categories. Further, the types were verified by sharing the data with the co-researcher. The inter-coder reliability was measured as 0.79. Disagreements in coding were resolved through discussion, and the preliminary set of coding categories was further refined.

The field notes taken by the researcher through his non-participant observation role provided important insights into how the students approached the cooperative learning tasks. They were also used as cues for the formulation of interview questions and provided further insights into the understanding of the issues which emerged during the interviews.

Findings

Analysis of the students' interview data generated six major themes: (a) early familiarity with cooperation merits, (b) peer scaffolding formation, (c) learning by teaching opportunity, (d) class atmosphere value, (e) group structure mechanism, and (f) training prerequisite. In the subsequent sub-sections, evidence to support the findings will be provided by using original, critical quotations from respondents.

(A) Early familiarity with cooperation merits. Iran educational system adopts a teacher-led whole-class approach, with little group activities during courses. Hence, the students usually are not familiar with cooperative learning activities. All of the participants expressed favorable attitudes towards cooperative activities and stressed that the earlier exposure to this pedagogy would be beneficial. They highlighted some of its effective advantages concerning boosting their motivation, fostering their self-confidence, and encouraging positive competition among peers. The following comments are excerpts from their interviews:

> *The longer we attend traditional teacher-centered approach, the harder it would be for us to cope with cooperative learning pedagogy. I think this method enhances students' confidence as they notice the lecturer values them and encourages them to take a more active role in their learning. (Mitra)*

Or

> *As more experienced students are used to conventional solitary-oriented reading instruction, they resist the change. This method requires students to study hard. At first, I found it very demanding, but later I felt that it improved my motivation. I came to class with enthusiasm. I am so happy being engaged in this method. (Atena)*

Or

> *The method was exciting and challenging. It encouraged a healthy competition among the groups. All of us studied hard and used all our potentials to teach our segments in the best possible way. (Rozita)*

Observation field notes also confirmed some of the participants' viewpoints. It was evident that the more experienced readers (RC2) were more resistant to the new method compared to their novice counterparts (RC1). Some even asked the lecturer to stop executing cooperative learning activities in their class and revert to the traditional method. However, as the RC1 group was new to the university atmosphere, they could cope with changes more naturally and such challenges did not occur in their class.

(B) Peer scaffolding formation. The majority of the interviewees also valued the supportive relationships they established with their peers. They claimed that the activities helped them learn from each other, share their experiences, and complement each other's strengths, weaknesses, and skills. Some also maintained that to accomplish a common goal; all students were responsible for their learning as well as the group learning. As Farhad noted:

> *Each group member had particular strength, and we tried to use this opportunity to support each other. During the preparation time, we checked and reviewed everything including each member's responsibilities. If there were any problems, we tried to solve them and get ready for teaching our part. It was beneficial.*

A similar reaction was shared by Siamak:

Group members' efforts were interdependent. While we were preparing our segments, we checked each other's understanding, discussed concepts, and shared our knowledge. Sometimes we realized that one of our peers was not ready enough to teach his/her share. Hence, we tried to support him/her in a friendly atmosphere. At times it didn't work, and we had to change roles and responsibilities at the last minute in order to fulfill our assigned section and not to be considered as an inexperienced team.

(C) Learning by teaching opportunity. More than half of the students asserted that cooperative learning activities enhanced their learning as it allowed them to actively participate in the learning process and take greater control over their learning. For example, Shirin remarked:

One of the best ways to learn is to teach. To teach a particular material, you need to be competent not only on that particular issue but also have a grasp of other aspects which are relevant to that core subject. That makes teaching more difficult than learning. So, both individually and in our groups, we worked hard to meet the required standards for teaching our segments and to respond to the random questions which might be raised by our classmates.

Besides, they pointed out that cooperative learning approach provided them with an interactive learning environment, which also facilitated their interpersonal skills such as organization, decision-making, and communication skills. As Amir expressed:

I found this course very inspiring and informative. Group members actively engaged in class activities and worked together even outside of class. This helped us improve our reading skills as well as our vocabulary knowledge and study skills.

Several other students endorsed Amir's views. For example, Setareh commented:

As we work together in our groups and teach in front of the class, we not only internalize our lessons more profoundly and improve our

reading skills, but also develop other skills. We learn to be patient and control our stress. We learn to be tactful and respect our peers. We learn to make decisions under pressure, to solve our conflicts in a wise manner, and several other things.

However, a few students (three individuals) felt that sufficient time was needed for the learners to acquire cooperative learning skills. For instance, Maryam argued:

Our adjustment process with the new method was prolonged at the beginning. We gradually learned team working and teaching skills. As soon as we became familiar with the tasks expectations and realized how to manage the tasks, the course was over.

The observations also revealed that while their pace was slow at the beginning, the learners gradually got competent and relaxed, developed social skills, and could get along with the course requirements over a more extended period.

(D) Class atmosphere value. Great care should be taken regarding classroom atmosphere as it considerably contributes to the success or failure of any program including EFL reading comprehension courses. Nearly all of the students felt pleased with their experience of attending a reading course with a relaxed learning-teaching environment. As Kiana put it:

The class atmosphere was lovely and enjoyable… we didn't notice how the time passed as we very deeply engaged in the activities.

Shahram also stressed:

We were noted at the beginning of the course. However, as time went on and our confidence grew, we found the class atmosphere attractive, pleasant, and friendly. We were keen not to miss our reading class.

The participants also valued the relationships that they had established with their lecturer and appreciated the way they had been treated in class. Neda, for example, reported:

> *Our lecturer was very energetic. He was friendly and cared about the students. During the preparation period, he observed the process and assisted. When the groups were teaching, he supported them, clarified the ambiguities and offered constructive feedback so the groups could improve their teaching quality for the next practice.*

(E) Group structure mechanism. Group formation can contribute to the learners' experience with the cooperative pedagogy. As noted earlier, this pedagogy was incorporated into two separate EFL reading comprehension courses, one with less experienced readers (RC1) and the other with more experienced readers (RC2). As RC1 students barely knew each other at the beginning of the course, the unfamiliarity with their classmates prompted some issues. For example, Mina stated that:

> *The lecturer had better assign the group members himself. Allowing the students to select their group mates was not suitable. The groups were not balanced regarding their language proficiency; some were very strong, whereas some were very weak. This caused demotivation. Weaker groups worked even harder, but their performance was not good enough. If all groups were composed of heterogeneous learners, teammates could better support each other.*

Sima also noted:

> *The groups shouldn't be assigned randomly. The passivity of one member negatively affected the performance of the whole group. Some members didn't fulfill their assigned tasks, and other peers had to carry their burden in order not to lose a mark.*

The lecturer also noticed that while RC2 formed their teams quickly, it was not the case for RC1 students. The education system also counts. Since the primary and secondary school education system is segregated in Iran, the newly admitted students to the university were not sure if they

could form mixed group members and looked shy – despite their interest-expecting the lecturer to take the initiative and create mixed gender groups.

(F) Training prerequisite. The significance of training in the success of cooperative learning activities was the last theme which emerged from the interviewees' comments. Before executing this method, all students in both classes received a handout which highlighted a series of guidelines related to group formation, preparation, presentation, and course scoring policy. Apart from that, no training or modeling was provided by the lecturer. However, at least five students stressed the value of training in cooperative learning activities. For example, Samira argued:

This technique was novel. We had no prior experience of working in groups and performing such operations. I think it would be more efficient and productive if we had received some instructions before engaging in these new tasks.

Group observations also confirmed the necessity of prior training in performing cooperative learning tasks. During the first few weeks, the learners were not familiar with group work dynamics and task expectations. For example, they did not know how to paraphrase, find the main point, etc. of their assigned segments. Hence, the lecturer spent some time in each group explaining these concepts and practically showing them how to do the tasks as well as clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each member. In essence, all groups had a chance to understand the procedures by the modeling the lecturer provided.

Discussion

Evaluation of the interview accounts along with class observations indicated that these participants were positive about the use of cooperative learning activities in the reading comprehension course. Hence, the researchers postulate that university-level EFL students have a high preference for interactive and collaborative activities and consider this pedagogy attractive, motivating, and supportive which can enhance their reading competence. As it was noted above, cooperative learning

pedagogy is an appealing approach, and it offers possibilities for achieving multiple educational goals (Antil et al., 1998). It is built on social interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) which assigns a pivotal role to peer interaction and relationships in socialization and learning. The link among group members creates a feeling of responsibility and boosts their motivation to contribute and satisfy group norms. The participants of this study expressed similar sentiments and reported that cooperation and communication with their group mates was a pleasant and an encouraging experience. They did not feel bored in class and performed their assigned tasks energetically. Working together and facing the task challenges collectively also enhanced their self-confidence as they noticed they were valued as group members. Nevertheless, as this study and several others state, great care should be taken in structuring groups to increase chances of group cohesiveness efficiency (Ning, 2011; Olsen & Kagan, 1992). Depending on the contexts where a cooperative model is implemented, factors such as gender, race, age, socio-economic status, cultural and language background, as well as proficiency level of the learners may play a key role in the success or failure of instructional goals.

Besides, social interdependence theory considers groups as dynamic wholes in which members share common goals, and the performance of the members are affected by their own and other's actions (Johnson et al., 1998). This theory is compatible with social, cultural theory of learning which proposes that learning is intertwined with the context within which it occurs, and knowledge is constructed through a process of interaction, collaboration, and communication among members of the society (Nassaji & Swain, 2000). Both theories encourage cooperative learning pedagogy and increased dialogue among students (Antil et al., 1998). Students interviewed in this study highlighted that cooperative activities made them aware that their performance concerned the success of their group mates, so they increased their efforts and took more active roles to accomplish group goals. This positive interdependence established promotive interactions between learners, and as they noted, they supported each other, complemented their strengths/weaknesses and shared expertise and skills to improve their performance of assigned tasks. Even more

importantly, they emphasized that cooperative learning pedagogy established an atmosphere in which students could learn from their peers and benefited from the scaffolding they received from their group mates.

Further, the findings of this study revealed a potential connection between cooperative learning pedagogy and experiential learning. Experiential learning emphasizes the significance of reflection and experimentation in learning (Kolb, 1984). Learning by doing highlighted by the participants suggests that cooperative pedagogy provides a space and context for students to reflect upon their actions and thinking, and experiment with new ideas. Reflection thus is a key element in learning. However, thinking does not happen automatically within learners. Only when reflection is carefully designed and integrated into cooperative learning pedagogy, learners can benefit from the 'doing' or 'experiencing.' Even though this research sheds lights on the importance of experiencing in cooperative learning pedagogy, further research in this area is needed with particular attention to the role of reflection.

Finally, Cooperative learning pedagogy is appropriate in EFL contexts as well (Jacobs & McCafferty 2006; Ning, 2011). Research suggests that cooperative learning activities in EFL classroom can improve students' language proficiency particularly speaking, listening, and reading as well as their learning motivation, communication, and cooperation skills (McCafferty et al., 2006; Ning, 2011; Olsen & Kagan, 1992). Students in this study also claimed that cooperative activities improved their reading skill, vocabulary knowledge, and study skills. They could even apply their skills to other courses such as their conversation class. However, more research is required to investigate the effect of cooperative activities on EFL learners' performance in different skills and contexts. Indeed, in societies where competitive and individualistic work prevails or teacher-centered pedagogy is dominant, independent learning and learner autonomy are not traditionally advocated. Hence, students do not understand how to work cooperatively with others and expect faculty to lecture. In such settings, the practitioners should pay full attention to prepare the learners psychologically and academically by explaining the philosophy of cooperative learning pedagogy and its practical procedures.

Conclusion and Implications

This study was an attempt to examine how EFL students reacted to the incorporation of cooperative learning model in two reading comprehension classes. Based on the findings of the present study, the following potentially necessary implications on the efficient integration of cooperative learning activities in EFL reading classes are proposed. It should be noted that these recommendations are not meant to be exhaustive, but they are based on the experience we gained from conducting this exploratory study and reviewing the relevant literature.

Learners' early familiarity with cooperative learning approach. The shift from teacher-centered instruction to cooperative learning pedagogy should happen at early stages of learners' education. One of the main causes of students' resistance against cooperative learning instruction is their long-standing exposure to the traditional teacher-led approach. This barrier can be minimized by introducing this approach at earlier stages of the learning process. Justifying the philosophy of employing this method to students can also help alleviate this problem. Providing different forms of cooperative learning activities and doing something cooperative regularly helps build a habit of cooperation.

Classroom atmosphere. In the traditional teacher-centered classroom, students are often passive. One of the primary goals of incorporating cooperative learning activities in classes is enhancing learners' motivation to actively contribute to their learning process. Hence, it seems quite necessary to create a relaxing and harmonious classroom atmosphere. The stress-free, friendly, and supportive atmosphere will improve learners' motivation and interest, which will, in turn, enhance their involvement and learning. Emphasizing collaboration rather than competition, providing constructive feedback on learners' performance, valuing students and their efforts, and proper training is some of the techniques which can establish a comfortable classroom environment.

Group structure. Assigning groups and maintaining them is a sensitive issue. Some learners wish to select their partners themselves, whereas there are others who prefer their teachers do it on their behalves which reflects their views towards the teachers' authoritative role in their

educational system. In general, students had better decide on their grouping. However, in contexts where the learners are not familiar with group mechanism, the teachers may need to intervene to make sure that all groups are homogeneous (between-group homogeneity), but are composed of heterogeneous members (within-group heterogeneity) regarding their English language proficiency level. This guarantees a fair distribution of more able and less able learners in all groups, can establish a more supportive atmosphere in groups and prevents demotivation feeling which may be formed in weaker groups due to uneven distribution of abilities in groups. The teachers should also supervise the group activities to ensure group functioning and may need to intervene if any group is having trouble such as a member being dominating, unhelpful or disruptive.

Learners' English proficiency level. Cooperative learning activities are claimed to promote learning. However, novice learners may find it hard to deal with more cognitively demanding learning materials independently. Hence, great care should be taken by teachers to select reading tasks which are suitable for the learners' capabilities. Novice learners also need both explicit and implicit support from teachers to cope with the challenges of preparing new learning materials and teaching them to their classmates particularly at the earlier stages of their exposure to cooperative learning activities; otherwise, they may suffer from cognitive overload. Besides, reading comprehension courses should be long enough so that the students have a chance to learn cooperative task dynamics gradually and cope with the expectations of such tasks without being rushed.

Teachers' role. Teachers play a crucial role in supervising group activities and performance. Indeed, in cooperative learning pedagogy, teachers are more learning facilitators than class authorities. They should encourage the students to take greater control over their learning by becoming actively involved in class. More precisely, they should choose appropriate learning material and design cooperative tasks; provide a clear cooperative context for the groups as well as a friendly environment for performing cooperative activities; monitor group work and cooperative learning process; facilitate students' interaction, assist students in

completing the tasks accurately and in working together effectively; and offer constructive feedback to the learners so that they eventually become independent readers.

Training. It is essential to recognize that learners need to get prepared mentally and technically to efficiently engage in new pedagogical techniques. First, teachers should thoroughly explain the philosophy of adopting cooperative learning activities to their students, develop students' awareness, and make them understand that cooperation with peers and sharing their knowledge will help them improve their academic reading skills effectively. Second, they need to define the tasks and procedures, teach/model the key concepts and strategies, emphasize the positive interdependence and individual accountability, give the criteria for success, and highlight the expected interpersonal and teamwork skills needed to facilitate group work. Finally, they should continuously support the students step-by-step during the process to smoothly shift from over-dependence on their teachers to autonomous state by adequately participating in cooperative activities. It should be noted that sufficient group activities take time and adequate training to make them work, particularly at lower proficiency levels or with those students who have had little experience with cooperative tasks.

In this small-scale study, we collected our data from volunteer participants. Hence, the results should be verified in other educational contexts. However, the pedagogical suggestions may shed light on the incorporation of cooperative learning activities in EFL reading comprehension courses in similar settings. It should be stressed that practitioners may need to modify the cooperative tasks based on their students' various sorts of pedagogical needs and the conditions of their educational settings. There is no one-size-fits-all pedagogy to teach reading. What is hoped for, then, is that EFL academicians come to believe that such approaches as cooperative learning are available and can produce more promising results compared to traditional teacher-centered reading comprehension methods? It should also be noted that since the participants were interviewed before their final exam, they might have expressed strong interest in cooperative learning to impress their lecturer. Thus, the

results of the current study should be interpreted with caution. Finally, this study reported students' perceptions on the efficiency of cooperative learning tasks in EFL reading comprehension courses. Further research with different data sets such as students' reading performance can help illuminate this issue.

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Appendix
Cooperative Reading Instructions

1. Form self-selected groups of 4 students (week 1).
2. Select and introduce a speaker/representative and a name for your group (week 1).
3. Each group is required to read, paraphrase, summarize, and provide synonyms for key/new words of a specific segment of the text book (All groups are recommended to review the whole text in order to have an overview of it).
4. First, individual students work at home on the assigned section and prepare before the groups meet. Then, up to 30 minutes of the class time is set aside, and the group members are allowed to work together. During this time, you should discuss the reading (your selected section) and develop a strategy for teaching the material to other students in front of the class. It is the responsibility of each group to make sure that all of its members understand the selected text and are ready to teach it. Whenever a problem arises, students should try to find their solution before seeking help from the lecturer.
5. Group mates may talk softly and use quiet voices. In addition to their regular responsibilities, one member can be a coordinator keeping the group on task. Another student can keep track of time. The third member can check for the group members' comprehension of material to be taught and discussed. The last member can take notes. In general, the groups have to plan how to present the material to the whole class in a clear and concise way so that all the students in the other groups can learn from them.
6. During your in-class preparations and discussions, your lecturer will join each group to make sure that all members are actively participating and the teams are on the right track.
7. When all groups are ready, each group will then teach the assigned section to the rest of the class in turn and share their knowledge (expertise) with the whole class. For example, one member of the group reads the text. The other provides synonyms to the new words. A third student paraphrases difficult words, concepts, and structures

and makes clarifications, and the last student summarizes/retells the key ideas and answers the questions raised by their classmates (the group members should change their roles during the term). The rest of the class should actively listen, engage, and participate in the teaching-learning process like usual lecturing sessions.

8. Your lecturer will also monitor the process/ class activities and provides assistance and feedback whenever required.

9. In the end, the whole class is allowed some time to do the exercises in their groups which then will be revisited and double-checked by the lecturer.

10. Marks will be allocated to the class activities. The scores will be given to the groups (not the individual students). Apparently, the remaining ten marks will be given to the end of the course final exam.