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Exploring Cooperative Learning Strategies and Group Work Dynamics in Primary EFL Ecuadorian classrooms

Explorando estrategias de aprendizaje cooperativo y dinámicas de trabajo grupal en aulas ecuatorianas de inglés como lengua extranjera en educación primaria

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Abstract

Collaborative work is widely used in English classes, but students do not always actively participate or use the English language during activities. This research examined the influence of two cooperative strategies, Numbered Heads Together and Jigsaw on group work, students' perceptions and student group dynamics in fourth-grade English as a foreign language classroom in Ecuador. This study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design involving 78 students from a primary school. The data were collected through a survey administered to the students and through class observations during the application of the two strategies. Overall, the students had benefited from collaborative learning, and that collaboration not only encouraged learners to participate but also let them assist peers and made lessons fun. The observations supported that both strategies lead to active engagement and orderly group work. However, with the implementation of the Jigsaw strategy, students used less English language, indicating that the increased communication demands of this strategy may have rendered additional linguistic support necessary. These findings emphasize the usefulness of well-organized cooperative learning in primary education EFL classrooms and simultaneously highlighting that effective collaboration should be aligned with appropriate scaffolding to encourage meaningful use of the target language.

Keywords: cooperative learning; group collaboration; EFL classroom; student interaction; convergent parallel mixed-methods.

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Resumen

El trabajo colaborativo es ampliamente utilizado en las clases de inglés; sin embargo, los estudiantes no siempre participan activamente ni utilizan la lengua meta durante las actividades grupales. Esta investigación examinó la influencia de dos estrategias de aprendizaje cooperativo, Numbered Heads Together y Jigsaw, en el trabajo grupal, las percepciones de los estudiantes y la dinámica de grupo en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en cuarto año de educación básica en Ecuador. El estudio empleó un diseño mixto convergente paralelo con la participación de 78 estudiantes de una escuela primaria. Los datos se recopilaron mediante una encuesta a los estudiantes y observaciones de clase realizadas durante la implementación de ambas estrategias. Los resultados mostraron que, en general, los estudiantes se beneficiaron del aprendizaje cooperativo, ya que este favoreció su participación, les permitió apoyarse entre compañeros y contribuyó a generar clases más dinámicas y agradables. Las observaciones también evidenciaron que ambas estrategias promovieron una participación activa y una organización adecuada del trabajo grupal. Sin embargo, durante la implementación de Jigsaw, se observó un menor uso del inglés, lo que sugiere que las mayores demandas comunicativas de esta estrategia podrían requerir un mayor apoyo lingüístico. Estos hallazgos resaltan la utilidad del aprendizaje cooperativo cuando se implementa de manera estructurada en las aulas de inglés de educación primaria. Asimismo, destacan la importancia de acompañar las actividades colaborativas con un andamiaje lingüístico adecuado para promover un uso más significativo de la lengua meta.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje cooperativo; colaboración grupal; aula de EFL; interacción estudiantil; método mixto convergente paralelo.

Introduction

When learning English as a second language, the training emphasizes individual work: completing exercises, memorizing vocabulary, and practicing grammatical rules. However, these activities may also be inevitable since learning other languages is considered a social process that relies on the interactions and communication of speakers with each other. According to Chen (2021), cooperative learning has been one of the most pedagogical methods employed by teachers in classrooms for the last few years since cooperative learning is widely used in this XXI century classroom. That's because it shifts practicing the language away from students working through thought exercises to using English as a tool or instrument that they immerse themselves in their daily lives, not just something they're learning.

Moreover, simply being in a group does not guarantee effective collaboration as a team. The imbalance is not limited to reflective students; some students may feel vulnerable while participating, while others dominate the activity and others are passive and attend regularly. This also occurs outside of English classes. For instance, in the Indonesian math classrooms, Harianja and Permatasari (2022), described similar trends. Due to their disorganization, students participated less with the group's activities and tasks were not performed with a reflection on what they have learned until Think-Pair-Share strategy emerged. Without a clear structure and guide, the collaborative work may not produce the expected positive results, regardless of the subject taught. Hence, the present study considers cooperative learning not as something that happens automatically

when students work together, but as a strategy that requires careful design and active guidance from the teacher.

In English classrooms, Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and Social Interdependence Theory (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 1999) are posited as complementary frameworks to explain that mechanism of learning in small groups. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs fundamentally through social communication, but this knowledge is then internalized by the individual. The main principle of this theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which states that students can demonstrate a higher level of performance if guided by a person with more knowledge (More Knowledgeable Other). This means students learn in a forum where they share the discussion, ideas are exchanged, results are negotiated and knowledge co-constructed as opposed to learning alone. Thus viewed, cooperative learning serves not as a strategy for classroom management but rather as a resource for language growth from social interaction.

However, interacting with others does not guarantee effective collaboration. Therefore, Social Interdependence Theory will further help to explain how the way that group goals are organized shapes students' actions and interactions with others (Deutsch, 1949). Johnson and Johnson (1999) expanded this perspective that effective cooperative learning involves more than placing students in groups; it requires meaningful interaction and opportunities for groups to reflect on how they worked together.

Some theories of collaborative learning highlight important aspects having to do with collective learning problems, while students may also struggle with personal tensions such as confidence and motivation, anxiety, or unequal participation. This restriction is also evident in empirical analysis. That was supported by the statement of Fallatah (2026), who stated that despite EFL university students had demonstrated a positive perspective towards cooperative learning emphasizing benefits such as building critical thinking, writing ideas and self-confidence they also experienced domination, lack of engagement and fear. A similar trend was observed by Ramos Mendoza and Zambrano Vera (2024) in a secondary school in Ecuador. Cooperative learning was viewed positively, but several participants reported frustration with group members who did not contribute as expected or complete their assigned tasks, which sometimes affected the output from groups. This finding adds to the Ecuadorian stance since it shows that unequal participation is an obstacle teachers may face in doing everyday practice, especially in a contextual setting like the context explored here.

Cooperative learning is regarded as a positive approach in the educational field, but studies indicate that group interaction can create challenges. Filippou et al. (2021), found that existing differences in participation and control over activities are replicated even within cooperative groups. Furthermore, the authors observed that the positive relationship between self-transcendence

values and favorable attitudes toward cooperative methods disappears when self-enhancement values are strongly emphasized in the learning context. In this line of thought the current study does not assume that simply grouping students will work best. Rather, it examines the influence of particularly designed cooperative learning strategies on how students interact and perceive each other in a primary EFL class. Combining the notions of mediated cognition and interdependence of goals, the research considers cooperative learning as an instrument of language development along with a social phenomenon espoused by communicative EFL settings.

The theoretical underpinnings of this work, however, have been administered across countless EFL research studies. While the volume of studies in this area has increased over the years, current literature presents a more refined view on both its benefits and drawbacks. Cooperative learning is not merely about academic success, it encourages working as a team while developing both individual accountability and mutual respect (Rahmatika et al., 2025). In the same way, Naranjo Proaño (2025) contributes sound evidence from an Ecuadorian EFL setting. In her mixed-methods research with tenth-grade students, she reported that Jigsaw, role-playing, and Think-Pair-Share not only provided interaction but also reduced speaking anxiety and increased learners' motivation and oral performance. These findings imply that the socioemotional rewards of collaborative learning may have an academic outcome equivalent, at least in EFL classrooms where confidence can be seen as a critical obstacle to language use.

Conversely, the study results of Bećirović (2023) indicated that the impact of cooperative learning was not always positive, increased motivation and cultural intelligence for students did not necessarily result in enhanced EFL academic performance. This result contradicts the widespread belief that higher motivation naturally translates into measurable academic benefits. If examined alongside the work of Rahmatika et al. (2023) and Naranjo Proaño et al. (2022), the authors propose that in practice, cooperative learning may be most useful for fostering equity, cultural diversity, and engagement rather than providing short-term educational performance gains.

However, the effectiveness of cooperative learning also depends on classroom implementation. While the approach always focuses on promoting student engagement and higher-order thinking, more exploration is needed into how closely teachers adhere to its core principles in daily classroom implementation (Gillies et al., 2023). This concern is supported by Tamimy et al. (2023), who showed that although many teachers expressed their positive attitudes toward cooperative learning, the implementation of these practices in EFL classrooms was not always consistent because of a lack of preparation and other practical limitations. Their findings shift attention from whether cooperative learning is effective in theory to how its success depends on effective classroom implementation.

Another issue that has emerged from recent research concerns the cognitive demands of cooperative tasks. Not all cooperative learning activities are equally challenging, which may influence

the learning outcomes they produce. Silva et al. (2022) provides particularly useful evidence because they examined the development of critical thinking skills such as observation, inference, interpretation, analysis, and argumentation, rather than focusing only on students' attitudes or overall academic outcomes. Their study with fourth-grade students demonstrates the potential of cooperative learning to promote higher-order thinking at the primary level. It is also one of the few studies focusing specifically on young EFL learners, a population that remains underrepresented in comparison with secondary and university students. Nevertheless, as in many studies in this field, the limited length of the intervention means that it is unclear whether these benefits would continue over a longer period of time.

In addition to its cognitive benefits, cooperative learning offers valuable opportunities for students to develop their social and emotional competencies. Collaborative learning has been linked to improvements in both academic achievement and the development of social skills. (Shamseddin Pour, 2021), while encouraging learners to exchange ideas, reflect on their learning, and construct knowledge collectively rather than individually. Likewise, Carrasco-Huamán (2022) argues that cooperative activities should be designed to develop cognitive and interpersonal competencies simultaneously, an idea that aligns closely with the present study's emphasis on both group dynamics and students' perceptions about the collaborative learning process.

Although previous research has provided valuable insights into cooperative learning as a whole, less attention has been given to the specific strategies implemented in this study. That said, this research applied Jigsaw and Numbered Heads Together (NHT) strategies, and the results related to these two approaches deserve particular attention. Research on Jigsaw has generally shown encouraging results in EFL reading classrooms, although some studies have identified limitations that should also be considered. Adib and Hakimi (2025) found that an eight-week intervention using the Jigsaw strategy, significantly improved intermediate Afghan EFL learners' reading comprehension, reporting a very large effect size (Cohen's d = 1.38), which suggests that carefully structured implementation can produce meaningful learning gains. Abu Sayma (2024) reported similar improvements among fourth-grade students in Gaza, particularly in literal and inferential reading comprehension. Despite these positive results, no significant gains were found in critical and appreciative reading, which suggests that Jigsaw may be more effective in supporting basic comprehension than more complex reading skills, particularly in short-term implementations.

The differences expand even more when comparing Jigsaw and Numbered Heads Together directly. Jarwanto et al. (2022) report no advantages for either strategy in improving reading comprehension among students with different levels of critical thinking. The shortened instructional time due to the COVID-19 pandemic might have restricted both strategies from having a larger impact, they added. In the same way Munawwaroh and Gumiandari (2025), in comparative literary review, concluded that each strategy has its own pedagogical advantages. While Jigsaw promotes deeper comprehension by making pupils responsible for learning and explaining specific

content, Numbered Heads Together keeps students actively involved through guided discussion and shared responsibility. Instead of pinpointing one strategy as superior for all situations, they suggest teachers choose or combine these methods based on the goals of instruction and the qualities learners possess. Taken together, these findings highlight the potential of both Jigsaw and Numbered Heads Together as cooperative learning strategies.

However, despite the fact that cooperative learning has been widely studied, as shown in the literature review, there is not much published research on it in the Ecuadorian context in particular within primary EFL classrooms. Consequently, the current research aims to explore the use of cooperative learning strategies and their influence on group work dynamics among fourth-grade EFL students at San Vicente de Paul School in Riobamba, Ecuador. Data were collected through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. One survey was designed to collect students' perceptions, and a classroom observation sheet was used in order to register students' behavior from group interaction. Based on these objectives, the following research questions guided the study:

- How do cooperative learning strategies influence group collaboration in EFL classrooms?
- How do deliberate collaborative learning strategies impact students' group work dynamics in the EFL classroom?
- What are the perceptions of students towards group work in the EFL classroom?

Methodology

Study Design

This study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. As explained by Creswell & Creswell (2018), this design uses mixed methods with a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to have a better understanding of the research problem. Qualitative data were derived from classroom observation, and quantitative data were collected using a student survey. The data obtained from both instruments were compared to see how the cooperative learning strategies utilized by teachers affected the participation, interaction, and cooperation of students while working together during small group work in fourth-grade English classes.

Participants

The participants were selected through a convenience sampling technique. Convenience sampling is referred to as a sampling process of participants who are easy for the researcher to

access (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study included 78 fourth-grade students, including Fourth Grade "A" (n=25), Fourth Grade "B" (n=28), and Fourth Grade "C" (n=25). All were aged between 8-9 years, with an A1 level of English according to the CEFR, and followed the same English curriculum during that academic year.

The sample consisted of 54% female and 46% male students. These classes were selected because of their accessibility, as the researcher was also their English teacher at the time of the study. Fourth-grade students were considered an appropriate population for the implementation of cooperative learning strategies. Their age, their level of classroom participation, and the larger number of students available compared to the other grade levels taught by the researcher offered a more robust context for observation. To ensure consistency throughout the intervention, the same cooperative learning strategies were implemented across all three classes under identical classroom conditions

To protect the participants, ethical principles were observed throughout the research process, following the ethical guidelines for research involving human participants described by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Prior to collecting data, the researcher obtained a formal approval from the school principal. Before the study began a written informed consent was obtained from parents because the participants were minors, and the nature of the study was explained directly to the students in age-appropriate language.

Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were informed that their responses would have no impact on their academic grades or classroom standing. Since Spanish is the students' first language, the survey was administered in Spanish to ensure that all participants clearly understood the survey items. Participants' privacy was protected by ensuring that no personal information was collected or reported at any stage of the study. All responses were coded using numerical identifiers, which guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality during data collection and analysis. The information gathered was used exclusively for research purposes.

Instruments

Mixed methods research combines quantitative and qualitative instruments to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hernández--Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). In line with this approach, two instruments were used in this study: a student survey and a classroom observation sheet. The first instrument was a survey that included 10 closed-ended questions and a commentary section for the students to express their opinions, The open-ended comments were analyzed thematically according to recurring ideas and grouped into broader themes (see Annex 1). It was designed to gather quantitative data from students' perceptions regarding cooperative learning in the EFL classroom. The instrument aimed to

identify whether students felt supported by their peers and if collaborative activities helped them feel more comfortable using English in class. In particular, it measured how group work influenced students' participation and engagement, collaboration and peer support, perceived learning, and confidence and language use.

To make the instrument more child-friendly and easier to understand, emojis were used for the responses, and a simple three-point Likert scale was used: "strongly agree," "more or less," and "disagree." There was a pilot test for this particular instrument with a group of students of the same level from a different course; after applying the pilot test to this group of students, nothing particular was found that was out of the ordinary to change the questions. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha was used as an internal consistency measure and assessed by the software Jamovi, the instrument showed great reliability (α =. 963), indicating a high degree of consistency among the questionnaire items (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). In addition, the item-rest correlations were between .771 to .921, indicating that all items added to the total scale and all questionnaire items were retained for data analysis. However, because the questionnaire comprises four conceptually distinct dimensions, this coefficient should be interpreted cautiously as an indicator of overall item consistency rather than evidence of a single underlying construct.

The second instrument was a classroom observation sheet (see Annex 2), which was used to collect qualitative data. It was used to observe students' participation and interaction during cooperative learning activities in the English class. This instrument was completed through direct classroom observation while students worked with the strategies Numbered Heads Together and Jigsaw. The checklist was organized into different sections that evaluated classroom organization, students' active participation, use of English, cooperative learning strategies, and social skills. In addition, it included three options to respond: "Yes," "Sometimes," and "No."

Both instruments were assessed using a content validation process to determine appropriateness and clarity before data collection. The survey and the classroom observation sheet were evaluated by four EFL teachers who had experience teaching at the primary level; the reviewers deemed the survey items to be clear and suitable for the students' level; hence, no changes were made. On the classroom observation sheet, it was suggested to add a response option "Sometimes," include more items for teacher observation, replace one cooperative learning strategy, and remove items that pertained to teaching. Following those recommendations, the necessary modifications were made to improve the observation instrument before its implementation.

Procedure

This study was done over three weeks, for one hour during each day taken from the fourth graders' English classes, taught in regular classroom time (4th A, 4th B, and 4th C).

In the first two weeks, the two activities were done. The first week consisted of using NHT in a single English lesson with each class, and the second week, Jigsaw strategy was followed by identical instructional procedures in each of the three classes. In the third week, the students completed the survey (in Spanish) to gather their perceptions about cooperative learning, group work, and participation and interaction after the implementation of the strategies. The researcher also completed the classroom observation sheets during the actual implementation of both strategies to monitor students' participation, interaction, collaboration, use of English, and group dynamics.

The duration of each cooperative learning session was 40 minutes. All strategies targeted the same language objectives, which meant that the students could be observed using (and practicing) English in similar instructional settings. This was their initial experience using these cooperative learning strategies, so researchers read students detailed instructions on how both of the approaches would be implemented before class began. The teacher described the grouping process and emphasized expectations for working together collaboratively, stating that all members would need to be active participants in each of their activities. Before each activity, students were explicitly told to listen respectfully to their classmates, share ideas, support each other during group tasks, and use English whenever possible during group discussions.

Students worked in groups of four, and all materials required for the intervention, including flashcards and numbered cards used to organize the groups, were prepared and provided by the researcher. At the end of each cooperative learning session, a brief feedback discussion was conducted to review the language content covered and to allow students to reflect on their collaborative work and classroom participation.

Numbered Heads Together (NHT) is a cooperative learning strategy designed to promote active participation and individual accountability within small groups. In this strategy, each student was assigned a number and worked collaboratively with their teammates to discuss and answer questions related to the lesson topic. Students were encouraged to ensure that every group member understood and could explain the group's responses, since any student could be selected to answer on behalf of the group.

Jigsaw is a cooperative learning strategy in which students become responsible for learning and sharing specific information with their peers. During the activities, each student was assigned part of the lesson content and collaborated with classmates to understand and discuss the information before sharing it with the members of their original group. This process required students to rely on one another to complete the collaborative tasks successfully, reinforcing shared responsibility within the group.

Results

The results obtained from the questionnaire and classroom observations are reported in this section. The results are organized according to the two instruments used in the study. First, the survey findings describe students' perceptions of cooperative learning and group work in the EFL classroom by dimensions. Then, the results of classroom observations are reported in terms of students' participation, interaction, collaboration, and use of English during the implementation of the cooperative learning strategies.

The results revealed that most students showed a positive attitude toward cooperative learning activities. Many participants expressed that they enjoyed working in groups because it allowed them to share ideas, receive support from classmates, and feel more comfortable during English lessons. However, despite these positive perceptions, 19 students reported some difficulties related to understanding instructions and communicating in English during group activities as well as personal comments were given.

Quantitative Results

Descriptive Statistics by dimensions

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the results for Fourth grades A, B and C by dimensions in relation to the questions. The first dimension is Participation and engagement which integrates questions 1, 3, 6 and 10. The second dimension is Collaboration and Peer Support which integrates questions 5 and 8. The third dimension is Perceived Learning which integrates questions 2 and 9. And the fourth dimension is Confidence and Language Use which integrates questions 4 and 7.

Table 1. Fourth grade A results by dimensions

Dimension	N	Most Frequent Response	Mean	Median	SD
Participation and Engagement	100	Strongly Agree (68%)	2.61	3.00	0.62
Collaboration and Peer Support	50	Strongly Agree (74%)	2.60	3.00	0.73
Perceived Learning	50	Strongly Agree (50%)	2.26	2.50	0.83
Confidence and Language Use	50	More or Less (38%)	2.06	2.00	0.79

Source: authors' own data.

Note. N represents the total number of responses included in each dimension. Participation and Engagement consisted of four items, whereas the remaining dimensions consisted of two items.

Results for Fourth Grade A show a high level of agreement for the first two dimensions. For Participation and Engagement 68% strongly agree, with a mean of 2.61 and the SD is relatively low with 0.62, which means the answers were quite similar, and that there was a general consensus among the students. Collaboration and Peer Support had the highest percentage of strong agreement (74%) a mean of 2.60 and SD of 0.73, again indicating strong but somewhat more varied perceptions.

Perceived Learning was more mixed, 50% strongly agreed, with a mean of 2.26, and the SD is higher with 0.83, so variation here was greater. That is, some students were convinced of clear learning gains and some were not. The most uncertain dimension was Confidence and Language Use, 38% More or Less as the most frequent response, with a mean of 2.06 and the SD of 0.79 shows that there was a lot of variation in the students' experiences with confidence and language use.

Table 2. Fourth grade B results by dimensions

Dimension	N	Most Frequent Response	Mean	Median	SD
Participation and Engagement	112	Strongly Agree (84.8%)	2.84	3.00	0.39
Collaboration and Peer Support	56	Strongly Agree (69.6%)	2.57	3.00	0.71
Perceived Learning	56	Strongly Agree (55.4%)	2.45	3.00	0.69
Confidence and Language Use	56	Strongly Agree (48.2%)	2.39	2.00	0.65

Source: authors' own data.

Note. N represents the total number of responses included in each dimension. Participation and Engagement consisted of four items, whereas the remaining dimensions consisted of two items.

Results for Fourth Grade B show that the first two dimensions had the highest percentage of strong agreement. For Participation and Engagement 84.8% strongly agree, with a mean of 2.84 and the SD is pretty low with 0.39, indicating that students shared very similar perceptions. Collaboration and Peer Support had 69.6% percentage of strong agreement, a mean of 2.57 and SD of 0.71, suggesting generally positive perceptions, although with slightly greater variation among students.

Perceived Learning showed 55.4% of strong agreement, with a mean of 2.45 and an SD of 0.69 indicates moderate variation in responses. Confidence and Language Use had the lowest percentage of strong agreement (48.2%), with a mean of 2.39 and an SD of 0.65.

Table 3. Fourth grade C results by dimensions

Dimension	N	Most Frequent Response	Mean	Median	SD
Participation and Engagement	100	Strongly Agree (75%)	2.69	3.00	0.58
Collaboration and Peer Support	50	Strongly Agree (60%)	2.56	3.00	0.58
Perceived Learning	50	More or Less and Strongly Agree (44% each)	2.32	2.00	0.68
Confidence and Language Use	50	Strongly Agree (56%)	2.46	3.00	0.68

Source: authors' own data.

Note. N represents the total number of responses included in each dimension. Participation and Engagement consisted of four items, whereas the remaining dimensions consisted of two items.

Across the four dimensions, results for Fourth Grade C show positive perceptions. Participation and Engagement obtained 75% of strong agreement, with a mean of 2.69 and an SD 0.58, indicating at least moderate agreement among students. Collaboration and Peer Support was also positively rated with 60% strongly agreeing, a mean of 2.56 and an SD of 0.58 all indicating that the majority of students felt supported by their peers.

Perceived Learning was more contentious, with both Strongly Agree and More or Less making up 44% of responses, with a mean of 2.32 and the SD of 0.68 indicates moderate variation in students' perceptions about cooperative learning. For Confidence and Language Use, 56% reported strong agreement, with a mean of 2.46 and the SD of 0.68. Results showed that the students have a positive perception on all dimensions, yet the differences between perceptions of learning and confidence, from perceptions of participation and peer support were more reasonable.

Qualitative Results

Observation Checklist: Numbered Heads Together Strategy

Table 4 presents the consolidated classroom observation results for the Numbered Heads Together strategy across the three fourth-grade classes.

Table 4. Observation Checklist: Numbered Heads Together Strategy

Criteria	Yes	Sometimes	No
***Classroom organization criteria*:**			
Students work in groups or pairs	3		

Criteria	Yes	Sometimes	No
Group roles are assigned (leader, speaker, etc.)	3		
The teacher gives instructions before the activity	3		
The activity is well organized	1	1	1
Students' participation criteria:			
Students actively participate in group tasks	2	1	
All students are involved in the activity	3		
Students share ideas with their peers	1	2	
Students listen to each other respectfully		3	
***Use of English criteria*:**			
Students use English to communicate in groups		3	
Students try to express ideas even with limited vocabulary	2	1	
Students ask questions in English			3
Students respond to their classmates in English		2	1
Cooperative strategy criteria:			
The cooperative strategy is correctly implemented	1	2	
Students collaborate to complete the task	3		
Students help each other understand the task		3	
***Social and collaborative skills criteria*:**			
Students respect turn-taking	1	2	
Students show positive attitudes toward teamwork	3		
Students solve problems together	2	1	
Students stay on task during group work	2	1	

Source: authors' own data.

Note. The numbers in each column represent how many of the three classes received that rating for each criterion.

Classroom Organization

Classroom organization represented the strongest area of the NHT implementation. Basic structural conditions as group formation, role assignment, and prior instructions were fully met

across all three classes. Overall lesson organization, however, showed variation, with only one class maintaining consistent structure throughout the session.

Use of English

Across all classes, English use was the most limited area. Asking questions in English was absent in all three classes, and responding to classmates in English was only partially observed. Students showed some effort to express ideas despite limited vocabulary, though this was inconsistent across groups.

Students' Participation

Student involvement was observed across all three classes; however, active participation and idea-sharing were less consistent, with sharing ideas observed fully in only one class and only at times in two others. Respectful listening occurred only at times in all three classes.

Cooperative Strategy

Collaboration to complete the task was fully observed in all three classes. Correct implementation of the strategy and peer support in understanding the task, but it was only partially observed across the groups.

Social and Collaborative Skills

In all three classes, positive attitudes toward teamwork were consistently presented. Turn--taking showed the greatest variation, observed fully in only one class. Problem-solving together and staying on task were observed consistently in two classes and only at times in one.

Observation Checklist: Jigsaw Strategy

Table 5 presents the consolidated classroom observation results for the Jigsaw strategy, following the same format as Table 4.

Table 5. Observation Checklist: Jigsaw Strategy

Criteria	Yes	Sometimes	No
Classroom organization criteria:			
Students work in groups or pairs	3		
Group roles are assigned (leader, speaker, etc.)	3		
The teacher gives instructions before the activity	3		
The activity is well organized	2	1	
Students' participation criteria:			
Students actively participate in group tasks	2	1	
All students are involved in the activity	2	1	
Students share ideas with their peers	2	1	
Students listen to each other respectfully		3	
Use of English criteria:			
Students use English to communicate in groups			3
Students try to express ideas even with limited vocabulary		3	
Students ask questions in English			3
Students respond to their classmates in English		1	2
Cooperative strategy criteria:			
The cooperative strategy is correctly implemented	2	1	
Students collaborate to complete the task	2	1	
Students help each other understand the task		3	
Social and collaborative skills criteria:			
Students respect turn-taking	3		
Students show positive attitudes toward teamwork	2	1	
Students solve problems together		3	
Students stay on task during group work	1	2	

Source: authors' own data.

Note. The numbers in each column represent how many of the three classes received that rating for each criterion.

Classroom Organization

Classroom organization was well established across all three classes. Group formation, role assignment, and prior instructions were fully met without exception. Overall lesson organization was maintained consistently in two classes and only at times in one.

Use of English

English use was the most restricted area of the Jigsaw implementation. Neither English communication in groups nor questions in English were observed in any of the three classes. Responding to classmates in English was absent in two classes and only partially observed in one. Attempts to express ideas despite limited vocabulary occurred only at times across all three classes.

Students' Participation

Active participation and student involvement were observed consistently in two classes and only at times in one. Idea-sharing followed the same pattern. Respectful listening occurred only at times in all three classes.

Cooperative Strategy

Correct implementation of the strategy and collaboration to complete the task were observed consistently in two classes and only at times in one. Peer support in understanding the task was only partially observed across all three classes.

Social and Collaborative Skills

Turn-taking was the strongest indicator in this category, it was observed consistently across all three classes. Positive attitudes toward teamwork were present in two classes and only at times in one. Only at times in all three classes problem-solving together occurred, and staying on task was observed consistently in one class and only at times in two.

Open-ended comment section

Since the survey included an open-ended comment section, some students wrote additional comments about their group experiences. Though the sample size is limited, they reveal some issues students will run into as they work cooperatively. Because the students had a basic level of English (A1) and the survey was applied in their mother tongue, Spanish, their responses were translated, their comments were coded, and three main themes were identified as presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Students´ comments

Themes	Fourth A	Fourth B	Fourth C
Insecurity and discomfort	*"I feel insecure" "I prefer to work alone" "I am afraid of making mistakes"*	*"I do not know what to say"*	*"I am uncomfortable"*
Students' behavior	*"My members of my group talk a lot"*	*"My classmates are annoying" "My group is too noisy"*	*"My classmates are playing, not studying"*
Participation	*"I would like to make crafts in groups"*	*"Someone in my group do not work"*	*"They are doing another activity"*

Source: authors' own data.

Discussion

Regarding the first research question "How do cooperative learning strategies influence group collaboration in EFL classrooms?", these findings suggest that through cooperative learning, a positive environment was found in the classroom among EFL learners at a fourth-grade level. Students discussed positive views of participation, collaboration, and peer support in the written comments while classroom observations indicated Numbered Heads Together and Jigsaw were well-conducted across lessons observed. This information indicates that cooperative learning can offer areas for meaningful interaction and joint responsibility when tasks are being carefully planned. On the other hand, those aspects of collaborative learning laid out in items that dealt with students' confidence and their usage of English were not equally consistent.

The observations showed that classroom organization and collaboration as well as positive social interaction were constant features of the implementation of both methods of cooperative learning. In addition, participants scored all of the observation indicators concerning their experiences with class organization, the roles to which they were assigned, teacher' directions, and peer collaborations positively across classes. These results align with the social constructivism principle that learning is constructed through social interaction and are also supported by the Social Interdependence Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), which states that positive learning outcomes occur when members in a group have shared responsibility for task completion. The results are also consistent with those of Gillies et al. (2023), who found that the success of cooperative learning is determined to a large extent by how the strategies are implemented in class.

Addressing the research question "How do deliberate collaborative learning strategies impact students' group work dynamics in the EFL classroom?", one of the most significant revelations that was reached is the different trends in students' use of English in two cooperative learning strategies. While Numbered Heads Together and Jigsaw both encouraged collaborative work, classroom observations indicated that English was employed more uniformly at certain points during Num-

bered Heads Together than it was in Jigsaw, particularly when students were asked to explain ideas or respond spontaneously to their peers. One possible reason is that Jigsaw asks learners to make sense of information, reorganize it, and convey it to their peers, which creates more demanding communication for A1-level students. The variations between the two strategies seem to be dependent on a type of required interaction rather than the strategies themselves.

These results are in line with prior research but also extend these findings to a primary EFL context. Similar to Munawwaroh and Gumiandari (2025), who stated that both Jigsaw and Numbered Heads Together have varied teaching advantages according to the purpose of learning. In a similar vein, Tronch (2025) adopts a constructivist framework to demonstrate how these structured techniques concurrently promote communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. However, Jarwanto et al. (2022) could not achieve consistently better learning outcomes with either strategy across educational contexts. Likewise, the present study indicated that both strategies facilitated collaborative activity among students while differing in oral language use during classroom interaction. The current finding builds on these works by suggesting that students' willingness to communicate all things being equal may be influenced differently depending of the type of cooperative learning strategies adopted, especially in the case of early learners with low English language proficiency.

In response to the last research question "What are the perceptions of students towards group work in the EFL classroom?", the results revealed that student perceptions of participation and collaboration were more consistent than their perception of learning and confidence in using English. Most students reported enjoying group work and supporting their peers reinforcing the idea that language acquisition is deeply enhanced through meaningful social interaction (Panigel et al., 2025). However, the dimensions of Perceived Learning, Confidence, and Language Use were more variable in the results of each survey. Likewise, classroom observations showed that students replying to classmates in English and sharing ideas with limited vocabulary were less stable than other collaborative behaviors. These results indicate that positive dispositions towards cooperative learning occur but do not cover to equally strong confidence regarding target language use.

Although the comments were not very numerous, the students expressed these findings in writing. Specifically, the learners primarily addressed their feelings of vulnerability when speaking English, the unequal participation of group members, and their peers' behavior during group work. This feedback is consistent with previous studies which also reported similar challenges. Cooperative learning increased students' confidence and willingness to share ideas but did not alleviate participation and language anxiety concerns (Fallatah, 2026). Additionally, Ramos Mendoza and Zambrano Vera (2024) claimed that student participation in Ecuadorian EFL classrooms was still unequal in spite of the benefits to teaching performed by cooperative learning. This underscores that cooperative learning is not a universal solution and requires continuous adaptation to respond to the needs of individual learners (Navas Chachapoya et al., 2024), particularly

when dealing with behavioral challenges, whereby even structured collaboration-based learning has been demonstrated to improve conduct and emotional well-being (León del Barco et al., 2026; Haryanto & Pujaningsih, 2025). The current findings extend these studies by demonstrating that collaborative learning fostered more positive classroom environments while some interactional challenges continued to be observed during group work.

Taken together, the combined quantitative and qualitative findings provide a rich description of how cooperative learning impacted students' willingness to work in groups on its own. Survey data collected indicated positive attitudes of participation, collaboration and peer support, the classroom observation confirmed that students were actively engaged during cooperative learning exercises shifting the classroom from a traditional model toward a participatory, student-centered environment (Acharya et al., 2024). On the other hand, the study also demonstrated that while oral interaction was a relatively stable aspect of cooperative learning, students' confidence using English fluctuated more. These results add to the existing literature by reinforcing the relevance of contextual factors in a primary EFL scenario in Ecuador and suggest that cooperative learning can be feasible for cooperation enhancement when implemented carefully considering necessary linguistic demands.

Conclusions

The results of this study show that cooperative learning helped students be more likely to do group work in the primary EFL classroom. Evidence from both quantitative and qualitative sources indicated that Numbered Heads Together and Jigsaw promoted collaborative participation, peer support, and active engagement in English lessons. The study also showed that it was not just the strategy that made cooperative learning effective; learners' interaction patterns, confidence in using English and implementation of cooperative activities played a role.

Another conclusion is that cooperative learning strategies helped foster collaboration by means of various types of interaction. Though the two collaborative learning strategies, Numbered Heads Together and Jigsaw, both encouraged students to work towards a common goal, classroom observations showed their English use during group tasks were not as homogeneous. Thus, these findings imply that the type of cooperative learning strategy selected should take into account not only the instructional goal but also learners' productive language proficiency and the amount of linguistic support necessary to actively participate in classroom interaction.

Survey data, classroom observations and written comments from students gave an overview of students' experiences in cooperative learning. While views on collaborative work were largely positive overall, they also revealed that confidence in using English and equal participation were not as sustained as peer collaboration or participation. These findings are important lessons that

show that simply putting kids into groups is not enough for successful cooperative learning structured tasks, clear roles for group members, individual accountability and constant monitoring from the teacher pushing all kids to participate meaningfully are also essential.

This study provides evidence, from a pedagogical perspective, that cooperative learning is an appropriate way to enhance interaction and participation in primary EFL classes. To maximize these benefits, teachers must organize their cooperative learning activities based on the language competence level of learners and classroom dynamics while providing targeted scaffolding that enables students to communicate more confidently in English during group work. In summary, this study highlights the potential advantages of well-planned cooperative strategies that extend beyond the development of collaborative skills, fostering a more stimulating and participatory learning environment.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations of this research that need to be considered when interpreting the findings. First, this study adopted a single educational institution as the site of research and convenience sampling technique, which restricts transferring findings to other educational settings. Second, only two cooperative learning strategies were used and the intervention lasted 3 weeks. Different patterns of participation and language use may be produced through a longer intervention or by incorporating additional cooperative learning techniques. Because the researcher was also the classroom teacher and observer, observer expectancy and researcher positionality may have influenced the interpretation of classroom behaviors. Lastly, all participants were 4th graders with an A1 proficiency of English; thus, findings should not be transferred to learners of different ages or greater progress.

Future research needs to investigate the long-term impact of cooperative learning on English language development, compare a broader range of cooperative learning strategies, and utilize different educational levels and instructional contexts as warranted. Further studies can also test variables such as motivation, classroom behavior, or English proficiency as conditional moderators of the effectiveness of cooperative learning. Further research into these areas would provide a greater understanding of how collaborative learning can effectively be applied in different EFL settings improving the knowledge about collaborative language learning across various contexts.

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