

Improving Seventh Grade EFL Reading Comprehension Through Cooperative Learning: Classrom Action Research

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Abstract: *This classroom action research examined whether structured cooperative learning could improve seventh-grade students' English reading comprehension. The study involved 22 students in Class 7.1 at SMP Darma Patria Bekasi and was conducted from July to August 2024. Following the Kemmis and McTaggart cycle, the intervention comprised planning, action and observation, and reflection across two cycles. Cooperative activities included pair reading, heterogeneous group discussion, sentence reconstruction, round-table brainstorming, numbered heads together, and individual quizzes. Quantitative data were obtained from a 20-item descriptive-text reading test administered before the intervention and after each cycle, while observation notes and teacher collaboration provided qualitative evidence. The mean score increased from 64.77 in the pretest to 73.18 in Cycle 1 and 80.23 in Cycle 2. The proportion of students meeting the minimum mastery criterion of 75 rose from 31.8% to 50.0% and then to 86.4%, exceeding the predetermined 75% success criterion. Classroom observations also indicated stronger participation, peer support, confidence, and attention. These findings suggest that cooperative learning, when combined with individual accountability and reflective instructional adjustment, can improve reading comprehension and classroom engagement in a junior secondary EFL context.*

Keywords: *Classroom Action Research, Cooperative Learning, Descriptive Text, English as a foreign language, Reading Comprehension*

Abstrak: Penelitian tindakan kelas ini menguji apakah pembelajaran kooperatif terstruktur dapat meningkatkan pemahaman membaca bahasa Inggris siswa kelas tujuh. Penelitian ini melibatkan 22 siswa Kelas 7.1 di SMP Darma Patria Bekasi dan dilaksanakan dari bulan Juli hingga Agustus 2024. Mengikuti siklus Kemmis dan McTaggart, intervensi ini terdiri dari perencanaan, tindakan dan pengamatan, serta refleksi dalam dua siklus. Kegiatan kooperatif meliputi membaca berpasangan, diskusi kelompok heterogen, penyusunan kembali kalimat, curah pendapat meja bundar (round-table brainstorming), numbered heads together, dan kuis individu. Data kuantitatif diperoleh dari tes membaca teks deskriptif sebanyak 20 soal yang diberikan sebelum intervensi dan setelah setiap siklus, sedangkan catatan pengamatan dan kolaborasi guru memberikan bukti kualitatif. Nilai rata-rata meningkat dari 64,77 pada pratest menjadi 73,18 pada Siklus 1 dan 80,23 pada Siklus 2. Proporsi siswa yang memenuhi Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal (KKM) sebesar 75 meningkat dari 31,8% menjadi 50,0% dan kemudian menjadi 86,4%, melampaui kriteria keberhasilan yang telah ditetapkan sebesar 75%. Pengamatan di kelas juga menunjukkan partisipasi, dukungan sebaya, rasa percaya diri, dan perhatian yang lebih kuat. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran kooperatif, jika digabungkan dengan tanggung jawab individu dan penyesuaian pembelajaran yang reflektif, dapat meningkatkan pemahaman membaca dan keterlibatan kelas dalam konteks bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) di sekolah menengah pertama.

Kata Kunci: Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing, Pemahaman Membaca, Pembelajaran Kooperatif, Penelitian Tindakan Kelas, Teks Deskriptif

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a central component of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning because it enables learners to obtain information, develop academic knowledge, and interact with written language beyond the classroom. Comprehension is not a single skill. It requires readers to recognize words, connect ideas across sentences, identify relevant information, integrate prior knowledge, and monitor whether the emerging interpretation is coherent. The Reading Systems Framework positions word knowledge as a major connection point between word identification and higher-level comprehension processes (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). Similarly, Klingner et al. (2007) describe comprehension as a multicomponent process in which readers coordinate linguistic knowledge, strategic processing, and text-level understanding. For beginning and lower-intermediate EFL learners, weaknesses in vocabulary, sentence processing, and strategy use can therefore accumulate and make even short classroom texts difficult to understand.

Preliminary observation in Class 7.1 of SMP Darma Patria Bekasi revealed several interconnected problems. Many students had difficulty understanding English words, phrases, and sentences; identifying the main idea; and locating detailed information in descriptive texts. Reading practice was limited, and students tended to become passive when lessons emphasized teacher explanation, translation, and individual testing. The English teacher also reported that the class was heterogeneous: some students could comprehend a text relatively well, whereas others needed substantial peer or teacher support. The pretest confirmed this instructional problem. The class mean was 64.77, and only seven of 22 students achieved the school's minimum mastery criterion (Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal, KKM) of 75. These conditions indicated a need for an instructional strategy that would increase both comprehension support and active participation.



Cooperative learning offers a relevant response because it organizes students into small groups that work toward shared academic goals while remaining individually responsible for learning. Its effectiveness depends on more than seating students together. Productive cooperative learning requires positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal skills, and reflection on group processes (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Slavin (1995) likewise emphasizes group goals and individual learning as essential conditions: students should help one another, but each member must still demonstrate personal understanding. In reading lessons, these principles can be realized through pair reading, peer explanation, group reconstruction of text, shared questioning, numbered responses, and individual follow-up assessment.

Cooperative interaction may support reading comprehension through several mechanisms. First, peer explanation makes comprehension strategies visible. Students hear how classmates identify a topic sentence, infer meaning from context, connect pronouns with referents, or distinguish central ideas from details. Second, discussion creates opportunities to negotiate meaning and repair misunderstandings before students submit an individual response. Third, heterogeneous grouping allows more proficient readers to model strategies while less proficient readers contribute observations, vocabulary knowledge, or questions. Fourth, individual accountability discourages passive dependence on high-achieving group members. These mechanisms are especially relevant for descriptive texts, in which learners must identify a described person or object, recognize attributes, understand present-tense constructions, and organize details around a central identification.

Previous research generally supports cooperative approaches to EFL reading. Aslan Berzener and Deneme (2021) reported that high school students taught through Student Teams Achievement Divisions outperformed students receiving direct instruction. Babapour et al. (2019) found that collaborative strategic reading improved EFL learners' comprehension across proficiency levels. In a more recent study, Ibrahim et al. (2023) showed that collaborative learning combined with scaffolding and self-assessment improved reading comprehension and motivation while reducing reading anxiety. Topalov (2023) found that cooperative grouping particularly supported skills requiring global text processing, such as summarizing and recognizing relationships across a text. In the Indonesian context, Mahdahera and Ridwan (2023) documented behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement during Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition activities. Earlier work by Law (2011) also showed that cooperative learning can strengthen reading proficiency and autonomous motivation among school-age learners.

Despite this evidence, two practical gaps remain. First, many studies use experimental or quasi-experimental designs that compare a fixed cooperative technique with conventional instruction. Such designs provide valuable evidence of effectiveness but offer less detail about how a teacher can revise cooperative structures in response to classroom difficulties. Second, evidence from Indonesian junior secondary classrooms is still limited, particularly for short descriptive texts and for an intervention that combines several cooperative structures rather than relying on a single technique. Classroom action research is useful in this situation because planning, implementation, observation, and reflection can be repeated until the instructional process meets locally defined success criteria (Burns, 1999; Kemmis et al., 2014).

This study therefore aimed to improve the reading comprehension of seventh-grade students through cooperative learning and to document how reflective adjustments between cycles influenced the teaching and learning process. The study contributes a practice-based account of how pair reading, heterogeneous group work, round-table brainstorming, numbered heads together, and individual quizzes can be sequenced in a junior secondary EFL classroom. The research question was: How can cooperative learning improve the reading comprehension of seventh-grade students at SMP Dharma Patria Bekasi?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The study employed collaborative classroom action research. The researcher taught the lessons, while the English teacher and a collaborator observed the implementation and participated in reflection. The design followed the recurring cycle of planning, action and observation, and reflection associated with Kemmis and McTaggart. Action research was selected because the purpose was to improve an identified classroom practice rather than to estimate a population-level treatment effect. Reflection after Cycle 1 was used to revise classroom management, group organization, teacher monitoring, and the balance between group support and individual accountability in Cycle 2.

Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in Class 7.1 at SMP Dharma Patria Bekasi, West Java, Indonesia, during July and August 2024. The class consisted of 22 seventh-grade students with heterogeneous English proficiency. The instructional focus was reading comprehension of descriptive texts. A preliminary observation and pretest were conducted on 31 July 2024. The detailed implementation records documented two meetings in Cycle 1 and two meetings in Cycle 2, followed by reflection after each cycle. The school's English KKM was 75.



Intervention Procedures

Planning was conducted with the English teacher and collaborator. Lesson plans, descriptive-text materials, worksheets, observation sheets, field notes, and reading tests were prepared before the action. Students were placed in small heterogeneous groups, generally consisting of three or four members. The intervention was designed around two connected principles: group members should support one another during comprehension tasks, and every student should remain accountable for an individual response. Table 1 summarizes the instructional sequence.

Table 1. Intervention Sequence and Cooperative Learning Activities

Phase/Date	Cooperative Activities	Accountability	Instructional Focus
Preliminary 31 Jul 2024	Observation and 20-item pretest	Individual test	Diagnose difficulties and establish baseline.
Cycle 1/M1 3 Aug 2024	Pair reading; heterogeneous groups; jumbled-sentence reconstruction	Pair and group response	Introduce cooperative routines and text structure.
Cycle 1/M2 7 Aug 2024	Picture-based discussion and group presentation	Individual post-test	Develop ideas and assess comprehension.
Cycle 2/M1 14 Aug 2024	Round-table brainstorming; numbered heads together	Each member contributes; random response	Increase participation, attention, and responsibility.
Cycle 2/M2 21 Aug 2024	Pair-to-group reading; discussion; quiz	Individual quiz and post-test	Consolidate strategies and verify mastery.

Cycle-specific Adjustments

Cycle 1 emphasized the establishment of cooperative routines. Students first read in pairs and discussed answers before joining a larger group. Groups then arranged jumbled sentences and developed a descriptive paragraph. During the second meeting, pictures were used to stimulate vocabulary and ideas, and groups presented their work to the class. Reflection showed improvement, but several students still made noise, relied on more proficient peers, or did not participate consistently. The Cycle 1 mean also remained below the KKM.

Cycle 2 retained peer support while strengthening classroom management and individual accountability. The seating arrangement was adjusted, the teacher monitored groups more closely, and instructions were delivered more slowly and explicitly. Round-table brainstorming required each student to contribute an idea. In numbered heads together, every group member had to be prepared because the teacher selected a number at random to answer. Pair reading was followed by whole-group comparison, and each lesson concluded with an individual quiz or post-test. These changes were intended to ensure that cooperative interaction resulted in learning by every student rather than task completion by only a few members.

Data Collection and Instruments

Quantitative data were collected through a researcher-developed reading comprehension test consisting of 20 multiple-choice questions about descriptive texts. The test assessed understanding of vocabulary and sentences, main ideas, supporting details, communicative purpose, generic structure, and language features. A pretest was administered before the intervention, Post-test 1 at the end of Cycle 1, and Post-test 2 at the end of Cycle 2. Scores were converted to a 0-100 scale.

Qualitative data were collected through classroom observation, observation checklists, collaborator field notes, teacher discussion, and interviews conducted around the action research process. Observation focused on attention, participation, interaction with peers and the teacher, willingness to read, contribution to group work, and ability to express an answer. These sources were used to explain changes in the test scores and to guide reflection between cycles.

Validity, Triangulation, and Success Criteria

The test and classroom procedures were reviewed through face validity and critical reflection with the collaborating English teacher. Trustworthiness of the process data was supported through time triangulation, because evidence was collected across the preliminary stage and two cycles, and investigator triangulation, because the researcher, English teacher, and collaborator observed and discussed the implementation. The study used two success criteria. For the product criterion, at least 75% of students were expected to obtain a score of 75 or higher. For the process criterion, observation was expected to show stronger participation, interaction, attention, and understanding during reading activities.



Data Analysis

Test data were analyzed descriptively. The class mean was calculated by dividing the sum of all student scores by the number of students. Mastery was calculated as the number of students scoring at least 75 divided by 22 and multiplied by 100. Changes were examined across the pretest, Post-test 1, and Post-test 2. Observation notes and reflection records were organized by recurring themes related to engagement, peer support, classroom management, confidence, and individual accountability. Because the study did not include a control group or inferential analysis, the results are interpreted as classroom improvement associated with the implemented action rather than as a definitive causal estimate.

RESULTS

Preliminary Condition

The preliminary observation showed that the reading lesson was largely teacher-centered. Students frequently waited for translation or teacher confirmation, and several were reluctant to read when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary. Difficulty identifying the main idea and detailed information was evident in class responses. The pretest mean was 64.77. Seven students (31.8%) met the KKM, while 15 students (68.2%) scored below 75. The baseline therefore did not meet the study's product criterion.

Cycle 1

During Cycle 1, pair reading and small-group tasks created more opportunities for students to ask questions and compare interpretations. Students were generally enthusiastic when arranging jumbled sentences and constructing a descriptive paragraph with their group. Picture-based discussion also helped students generate vocabulary and descriptive details. Nevertheless, participation was uneven. Some students allowed more proficient peers to dominate, and a small number became noisy during group work. Post-test 1 produced a mean of 73.18, an increase of 8.41 points from the pretest. Eleven students (50.0%) achieved the KKM. Although the result indicated improvement, the mean remained below 75 and the percentage of mastery remained below the 75% success criterion. Cycle 2 was therefore required.

Cycle 2

Cycle 2 incorporated the reflective changes described in the method. Round-table brainstorming required each student to write and contribute an idea, reducing the possibility that one student would complete the task for the group. Numbered heads together increased attention because any member could be selected to answer. The teacher's closer monitoring and revised seating arrangement reduced off-task behavior. In the pair-to-group sequence, students first developed an interpretation with one partner and then checked it with the larger group before completing an individual quiz.

Classroom observations indicated that students were more willing to read, ask for clarification, and explain answers. Students who had previously been passive prepared themselves because they could be called to represent their group. Peer assistance was also more focused: students discussed the meaning of vocabulary, checked the order of information, and compared answers rather than merely copying a response. Post-test 2 produced a mean of 80.23. Nineteen students (86.4%) achieved the KKM, and three students remained below it. Both the class mean and the mastery percentage met the product criterion, while observation supported achievement of the process criterion.

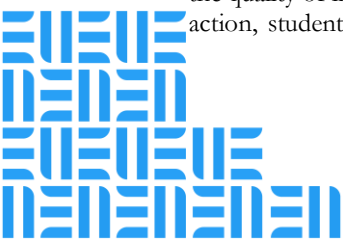
Table 2. Development of Reading Comprehension Achievement Across the Action Research

Assessment	Mean score	Students reaching KKM	Mastery percentage	Mean gain from pretest
Pretest	64.77	7 of 22	31.8%	-
Post-test 1 (Cycle 1)	73.18	11 of 22	50.0%	8.41
Post-test 2 (Cycle 2)	80.23	19 of 22	86.4%	15.46

Across the full intervention, the class mean increased by 15.46 points, from 64.77 to 80.23. The mastery percentage increased by 54.6 percentage points, from 31.8% to 86.4%. The largest instructional change between cycles was not the abandonment of cooperative learning but its more structured implementation: clearer roles, closer monitoring, a contribution requirement, random individual response, and an individual assessment after group support.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that cooperative learning was associated with improvement in both reading achievement and classroom participation. The progression from 64.77 to 73.18 and then to 80.23 was accompanied by a change in the quality of interaction. At baseline, students tended to depend on teacher translation and confirmation. During the action, students increasingly obtained support from peers, verbalized their interpretations, compared answers, and



prepared to explain a response. The improvement was therefore not simply a change in grouping arrangement; it reflected the gradual development of a learning structure in which comprehension was socially supported and individually checked.

The score pattern is consistent with prior research. Aslan Berzener and Deneme (2021) found that an STAD-based cooperative intervention produced stronger reading outcomes than direct instruction among EFL high school students. The present study used a different design and several cooperative structures, but both studies support the importance of shared goals and individual assessment. The finding also aligns with Babapour et al. (2019), who reported benefits of collaborative strategic reading across proficiency levels, and with Topalov (2023), who linked cooperative discussion with stronger processing of global text information. In the present classroom, students repeatedly identified the main idea, organized details, and reconstructed text order through discussion. These activities plausibly supported the macro-level processing needed to understand descriptive texts.

The qualitative findings also correspond with research on engagement and affect. Mahdahera and Ridwan (2023) identified behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in cooperative reading activities. Similar patterns were observed here: students followed instructions and contributed to tasks, expressed greater enjoyment and confidence, and tried different ways to solve comprehension problems. Ibrahim et al. (2023) found that collaborative learning combined with scaffolding and self-assessment improved comprehension and motivation and reduced anxiety. Although the present study did not administer motivation or anxiety scales, observation suggested that students were more willing to take risks when they could first discuss a text with peers. The pair-to-group sequence functioned as a form of immediate scaffolding before an individual answer was required.

The role of vocabulary and peer explanation is also important. Perfetti and Stafura (2014) place word knowledge at the center of reading comprehension because lexical quality affects sentence interpretation and integration. Students in the present study frequently stopped when they encountered unfamiliar words. Cooperative tasks enabled them to pool partial knowledge, infer meaning from context, and check whether a word fit the topic of the description. Peer explanation did not replace teacher instruction, but it increased the number of opportunities to process vocabulary and sentence meaning. In this sense, cooperative learning served as an interactional context for comprehension processes rather than as a stand-alone reading strategy.

The difference between Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 highlights the importance of structure. In Cycle 1, group work increased activity, yet some students remained dependent or off task. This problem is common when cooperation is interpreted as unrestricted group discussion. Johnson and Johnson (2009) argue that positive interdependence must be combined with individual accountability and promotive interaction. The Cycle 2 revisions directly addressed these conditions. Round-table brainstorming required a contribution from every member. Numbered heads together made all students responsible for knowing the group answer. Individual quizzes checked whether learning had occurred beyond the shared product. As participation became more evenly distributed, the mastery percentage rose from 50.0% to 86.4%.

The action research design made this instructional refinement visible. A fixed intervention might have concluded that cooperative learning was only moderately successful after Cycle 1. Reflection instead showed that the underlying approach remained promising but required better management and accountability. Consistent with Burns (1999) and Kemmis et al. (2014), the cycle of action, observation, and reflection allowed local evidence to inform the next plan. The study therefore contributes not only an outcome but also a practical implementation lesson: teachers should begin with simple pair and group routines, observe who participates, and then add structures that require every student to prepare and respond.

The findings have several pedagogical implications. First, cooperative reading should be organized around a clear comprehension target, such as identifying the main idea, locating details, interpreting vocabulary, or recognizing text structure. Second, heterogeneous grouping can be useful, but group composition alone does not guarantee equitable learning. Teachers need contribution rules, rotating or random response procedures, and individual follow-up assessment. Third, visual prompts and sentence-reconstruction tasks can reduce the initial language burden and provide a concrete focus for discussion. Fourth, teacher monitoring remains essential. Cooperative learning changes the teacher's role from the sole source of answers to a designer, observer, and provider of targeted scaffolding; it does not eliminate teacher guidance.

The study also has limitations. It involved one class of 22 students at one private junior secondary school, used a short intervention, and did not include a comparison group. The reading test was developed for the classroom context, and the thesis reported face validity and collaborative review rather than a full psychometric evaluation. Participation and motivation were documented through observation and reflection but were not measured with standardized scales. Repeated exposure to descriptive texts and testing may also have contributed to score gains. Consequently, the results should be understood as evidence of successful local improvement rather than proof that the intervention will produce the same effect in every setting. Future research should use validated comprehension measures, longer interventions, systematic engagement instruments, and multi-class or quasi-experimental designs. It would also be valuable to compare individual cooperative structures and examine whether gains transfer to narrative, recount, and expository texts.



CONCLUSIONS

Cooperative learning improved the reading comprehension performance of the seventh-grade students involved in this classroom action research. The class mean increased from 64.77 in the pretest to 73.18 after Cycle 1 and 80.23 after Cycle 2. The proportion of students meeting the KKM of 75 increased from 31.8% to 50.0% and then to 86.4%, exceeding the predetermined success criterion. Observation also showed stronger attention, participation, peer support, confidence, and willingness to explain answers. The most effective implementation combined collaborative support with individual accountability through pair reading, heterogeneous group discussion, round-table brainstorming, numbered heads together, and individual quizzes. For classroom practice, teachers should not treat group work as sufficient by itself; they should structure contributions, monitor interaction, and verify individual understanding. Because the study was limited to one class and a short descriptive-text unit, broader causal generalization is not warranted. Further studies should test the approach across schools, text genres, and longer instructional periods using validated measures and comparison groups.

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STATEMENT OF COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAR: Classroom Action Research; EFL: English as a Foreign Language; KKM: Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal (minimum mastery criterion); STAD: Student Teams Achievement Divisions.

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