

Cooperative Learning and Comprehension of Geography: Challenges Teachers Face in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon

**Nkemngong Atemnkeng¹, Esonwo Emeaka Francisca²,
Alvine Joso Bih³, Eyombo Marie Ndzege⁴**

¹ Educationist/Researcher, National Centre for Education (CNE), Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation, Cameroon.

² Researcher National Centre for Education (CNE), Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation, Cameroon.

³ Lecturer, Cameroon Christian University Institute, Bamenda.

⁴ Lecturer, Biaka University Institute of Buea.

Abstract:

With the need to quell pressure from educational stakeholders to improve the performance of geography learners at certification examinations in Cameroon, teachers have delved into the use of cooperative learning which has been proven by research to be efficient in increasing performance and facilitating skills acquisition. This study investigated the challenges geography teachers face in using cooperative learning to facilitate the comprehension of geography in secondary schools in the Fako and Meme divisions of the South West region and Mezam division of the North West region. The descriptive survey was adopted for the study. A sample size of 138 geography teachers was used. Questionnaire and interview guide were the instruments for data collection with reliability of 0.897 coefficient Cronbach alpha. The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Data were entered using EpiData version 3.1 and exported to SPSS version 25.0. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical tools while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis approach. Findings indicated that, 21.93% geography teachers used cooperative learning while 78.93% teachers used traditional teaching methods such as brain storming, lecture, discussion and fieldtrip. 63.22% of teachers faced challenges implementing cooperative learning in teaching geography. It is therefore highly recommended that training seminars and workshops be organized for in-service teachers and a training course be introduced in

teacher training colleges on cooperative learning. Teachers should also read about cooperative learning and constantly practice the teaching method.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, Comprehension of geography, Teachers' challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Geography as a subject area in Cameroon remains a core subject in all the sectors of education. It is compulsory from primary school right up to form 3 in the secondary school where learners are expected to make decisions about their choice of study, they wish to continue with. Statistics have shown that more than 80% of students in the secondary school continue with the study of geography and take the examination at the CGCE (Cameroon General Certificate of Education). The curriculum of geography in Cameroon's secondary schools, is aimed at promoting the national development of Cameroon both in the present and in the future as learners gain skills in physical, economic, and human geography. Specifically in Cameroon, the study of geography helps students to understand the country's diversity, resources, and environmental challenges. Skill acquisition in geography, avail learners the opportunity of gaining live-long skills such as reading, speaking, listening, writing, computing and problem solving. This facilitates the opportunity of gaining employment in areas such as; schools, government offices, private companies and non-profit organizations thus facilitating the easy navigation of adulthood.

With the above core aim and advantages of geography studies in Cameroon, the relevance of the subject cannot be undermined because it helps learners understand the world in which they live in, that is the physical, cultural and economic aspects hence making geography a necessary subject for all. Hearly & Hammond (2024) say that, education is an integral part of geography and in universities and schools, students and learners should be engaged in geography content, knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable them to understand the human-environment-society processes in the world. There is a dire need therefore, to ensure the improvement of geography and acquisition of geographical skills for growth in industrialization and food security purposes. It is even more relevant today because of the prevalence and effects of climate change which has changed the dynamics of our living.

The importance of geography globally necessitates the urgent need for classroom teaching strategies to improve geographical skills acquisition and reduce the devastating consequences that come with ignorance of the subject matter. Cooperative learning (CL) is a strategy involving small groups of students working together to achieve a common learning goal. CL enhances language proficiency (Namaziandost et al., 2020) and allows for meaningful disciplinary integration and teaching (Li et al., 2022). Binti & Binti (2024) points out that, 21st century geography teaching and learning should focus on active, creative and technology-based learning. CL over the years stands out as one of the teaching strategies that have been proven by research to have the inherent potential of acquiring 21st century geographical skills. CL helps to boost students' critical and creative thinking (Silva et al., 2022) and practice may foster an inclusive and revolutionary educational environment (Munoz-Martinez et al., 2020).

Teachers are crucial in CL because they are the implementers and serve as agents to help students solve problems (Mopara & Sanrattana, 2023). Over the years, Geography teachers in Cameroon have made use of traditional teaching methods such as lecture, demonstration and field trips. This is due to teachers' inability to properly implement cooperative learning because of the challenges they experience in terms of resources and knowhow. As the saying goes "we cannot give what we don't have", teachers insufficient knowledge, insufficient training from teacher training colleges in CL, limited research in CL strategy in the teaching of geography, and resource availability impede the proper execution of CL in teaching geography. These strains have led to an observation where

students work individually than cooperatively while studying geographical facts, concepts, procedures and field trips.

Statement of the problem

Cooperative learning has been extensively recognised as an efficient method of improving students' academic achievement and promote comprehension of geography. However, its implementation in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon remains limited as many teachers continue to rely on traditional lecture method which does not encourage collaboration and active participation of the students. The classroom nature marked by overcrowded classrooms and limited instructional materials, makes it difficult for the teachers to organise, follow-up and practice cooperative learning activities. Individual learning differences, preferences and behaviours further complicate the use of cooperative learning.

With these difficulties, students usually struggle to understand geographical concepts, hence indicating a gap between the teaching methods used and the deep comprehension of geographical concepts. This goes a long way to affect the quality of geographical learning outcomes especially in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. There is therefore a need to investigate the specific challenges teachers face in implementing cooperative learning in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon, so as to be able to improve the use of cooperative learning and guide teachers in using it and enhance students' learning experience in geography.

Objective of the Study

This work sought to investigate:

- The teaching methods used by teachers in facilitating the comprehension of geography in secondary schools in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon.
- The difficulties teachers encounter in using cooperative learning in facilitating comprehension of geography in secondary Schools in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon.

Research question

- What are the teaching methods used by teachers in facilitating the comprehension of geography in secondary schools in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon?
- What are the difficulties geography teachers encounter in using cooperative learning in teaching geography in Secondary Schools in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon?

Research Method

This study made use of the descriptive survey design. The quantitative method was used to collect data. The population of the study comprised of 138 geography teachers in secondary schools in the Fako and Meme divisions of the South West region of Cameroon and Mezam in the North West region of Cameroon. The sample of the study comprised of teachers teaching form 4, 5, lower and upper sixth. The participants were teachers who had taught geography for more than one year. The respondents were purposively sampled from 36 schools.

Instrumentation and Analysis

The researcher designed a questionnaire which served as the main tool for data collection and distributed to the respondents. The instrument was made up of three open-ended questions and one-closed ended question. Eight items were based on a likert scale from 1-5 with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. Data were entered using EpiData version 3.1(EpiData Association, Odense Denmark, 2008). The quantitative data were analyzed using the descriptive and inferential statistical tools. The descriptive statistical tools used were percentages and multiple responses set which aimed at calculating the summary of findings. The qualitative data derived from open ended questions were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach with the aid of themes,

groundings/frequency and quotations. This process was facilitated using Atlasti 3.0 which is a statistical tool/software designed for the management of huge qualitative data, pictures, videos and audio files.

Results and Discussions

Teaching methods used by teachers in facilitating the comprehension of geography in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon

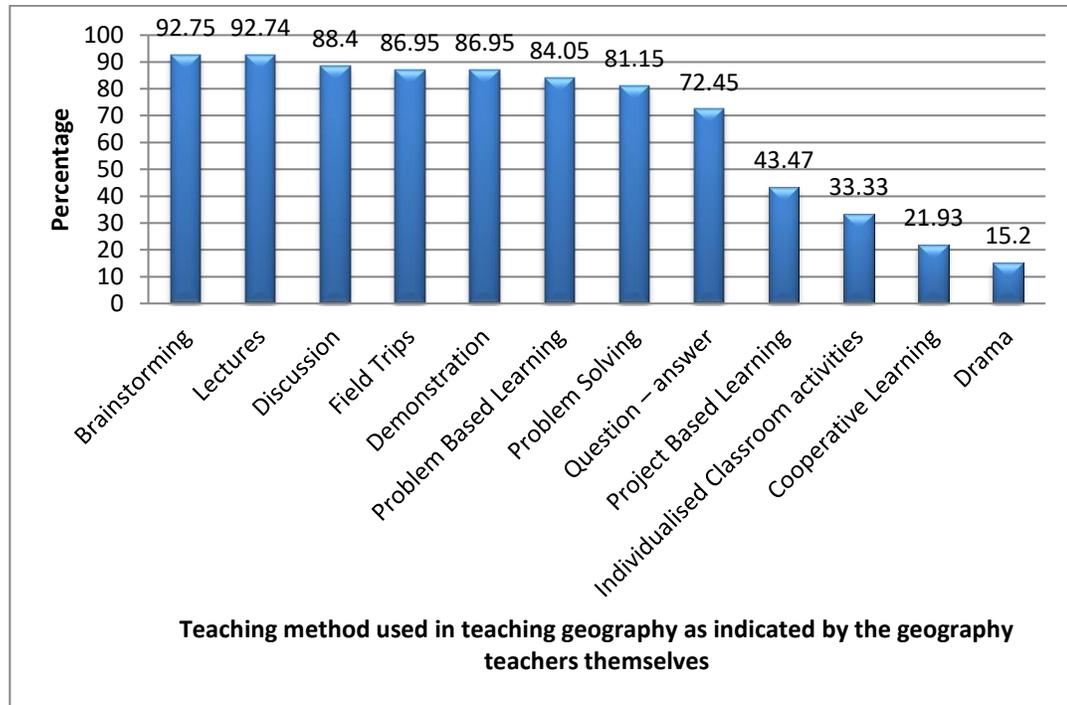


Figure 1: Methods geography teachers mostly use in teaching geography

Source: Fieldwork (2021)

Figure 1 above shows the methods geography teachers mostly use in teaching geography in their respective schools. Based on the geography teachers' opinion on teaching methods used in teaching geography, findings showed that, brainstorming, discussion, lecture, demonstration, problem-based learning, problem solving, question and answer are mostly used by geography teachers in facilitating comprehension while, the least used teaching methods are cooperative learning and drama. Cooperative learning being an important teaching method which has been proven relevant in improving the comprehension of geography is been used by very few teachers (21.93%) and this could be a reason for the low comprehension of geography. It is therefore necessary for teachers to engage in the use of cooperative learning so that students can better comprehend the subject and improve their performance in geography through acquisition of geographical skills.

What are the difficulties geography teachers encounter in using cooperative learning in teaching geography in secondary schools in the North west and South West regions of Cameroon?

Table 1: Difficulties Face by Geography Teachers in Using Cooperative Learning

No	Difficulties	Strongly Agree/Agree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree
1	Locus of responsibility and authority	112 (81.16%)	26 (18.84%)
2	Teachers' role as facilitator	46 (33.33%)	92 (66.67%)

3	Students' role to cooperate	66 (47.82%)	72 (52.17%)
4	Organizing peer interactions	67 (48.55%)	71 (51.44%)
5	Adjusting the curriculum	114 (82.61%)	24 (17.39%)
6	Evaluating the cooperative learning groups	108 (78.26%)	30 (21.73%)
7	Physical resources available to practice cooperative learning	90 (65.21%)	48 (34.78%)
8	Class and preparation time	95 (68.84%)	43 (31.15%)
Multiple Response Set (MRS)		698 (63.22%)	406 (36.78%)

Table 1 above shows that teachers encounter multiple challenges while implementing cooperative learning in teaching geography. Baseline data from this study indicate that, the greatest challenge expressed by respondents was 'adjusting the curriculum as indicated by 82.61% (114) of the teachers. This was followed by 81.16% (112) of the teachers who also agreed that locus of responsibility and authority' is a major challenge they face while implementing cooperative learning in teaching geography. Evaluating cooperative learning groups is a challenge to a majority of the teachers as well. This was indicated by 78.36% (108) teachers. The lack of resources to enhance cooperative learning is another challenge as accepted by 65.21% (90) teachers. Class and preparation time is also another frequent challenge as accepted by 68.84% (95) of the teachers. Many teachers however did not face a challenge in the following roles: Playing the role of a facilitator, 66.5% (92) teachers said they did not face a challenge with this area. The teachers 52.17% (72) also indicated that, they did not have a challenge with organizing students to cooperate. It is also worth mentioning that, most of the teachers 51.44% (90) did not have a challenge with organizing peer interaction.

Table 2: Teachers' Perception about the Implementation of Cooperative Learning

Response option	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Easy to implement	58	42.03%
Difficult to implement	80	57.97%
Total	138	100%

Table 2 above presented findings on teachers' perception about implementation of cooperative learning. The majority of teachers 57.97% (80) were of the opinion that, cooperative learning is difficult implementing in teaching geography while 42.03% (58) held that cooperative learning is easy to implement in teaching geography.

Respondents who held that cooperative learning is difficult to implement had several reasons to support their choice of response some of which included; the time factor as held by this respondent '*it is basically a new idea but due to limited time, it is difficult to set resources and groups in a large classroom within the limited time to realise the targeted goals*'. Others pointed to lack of resources, large classroom sizes, inadequate training in implementing cooperative learning as some of the reasons that make cooperative learning difficult to implement. Another respondent revealed that "*the heterogeneous nature of students makes it difficult to arrive at consensus at the group level*". Some respondents also pointed to the fact that, there are a lot of outdoor activities in geography and this makes cooperative learning difficult to implement with the large classroom sizes

that they have. As seen by this respondent, “stake holders (parents and government) have diverse opinions with regards to cooperative learning especially when the learners are to sacrifice financially... not all teachers have been trained to use cooperative learning methods. This makes them shy away or poorly execute it which may offset the targeted goals”.

On the other hand, respondents who expressed that cooperative learning is easy to implement gave their views to support their opinions. Some of the views are expressed in the following statements from some respondents; “it facilitates teaching because a teacher attends to groups instead of individual student”, “good for large classroom sizes in particular” thus it is easy to monitor groups than individual students. Others held that when the learners have mastered, it is easy to diagnose their academic problems, hence integrate them in different groups. Others held that most of the time students prefer to study in groups and as such weak students can be offered assistance by their peers.

Other Challenges Teachers face in Implementing Cooperative Learning

Numerous challenges were however highlighted by respondents patterning to cooperative learning in geography classrooms. Some of these challenges included acquisition of required quantity of didactic materials, dealing with students with disabilities especially the slow learners, time factor, large classroom sizes in terms of student to teacher ratio, lack of resources and extra time needed to implement is not previewed by school authorities. Others pointed to the fact that it requires collaboration from other colleagues who may not want to cooperate. Some pointed to indiscipline and inadequate classroom management as potential challenges while others held that it is challenging financially as a lot of finances are required by stake holders (parents and the government) to acquire the required material needed in a broad field as geography in order to meet the targeted goals

Proposed Recommendations on the Acquisition of Skills in Cooperative Learning

This question was generally asked in an open interview to participants who took part in the study in the form of group interview. This was meant to elicit reasonable ideas on proposed recommendations through which teachers could acquire skills in cooperative learning and better improve on the teaching learning process thus enhancing the success of students. The responses from the field saw 98 teachers responding that seminars/workshops should be organized, so that the geography teachers and teachers of other subjects can be trained on the proper implementation of cooperative learning.

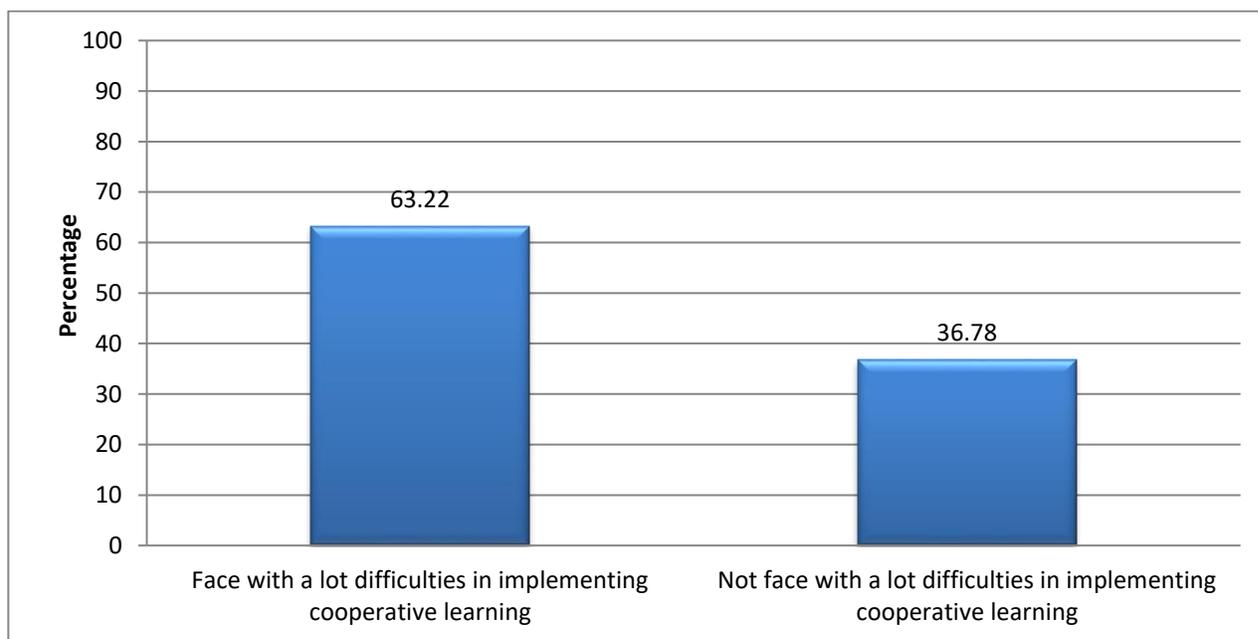


Figure 2: Difficulties Faced by Geography Teachers in Using Cooperative Learning

Figure 2 above shows that, overall, majority of the teachers 63.22% are faced with a lot of difficulties in implementing cooperative learning while 36.78% of them have little difficulties.

Discussion and conclusion

Majority of teachers made use of traditional teaching methods such as lecture, demonstration and discussion. Very few geography teachers in Cameroon are aware and make use of the cooperative learning method. A few teachers understand the relevance of cooperative learning and make efforts at implementing it in their classroom in order to increase the comprehension of geography and improve the performance of students. These few who implement cooperative learning as seen in the diagram above, in most cases, ignorantly disregard the rubrics of cooperative learning at the level of implementing the different cooperative learning techniques, making-up the groups, follow-up and assessment of learners within the cooperative learning groups thereby misusing the instructional strategy. There is therefore need for research so that, cooperative learning can be properly introduced within our educational system for improvement of the quality.

Teachers faced many difficulties using cooperative learning and this limited them from implementing the teaching strategy. The greatest challenges were in adjusting the curriculum, locus of responsibility and authority, dealing with learners with disabilities, difficulties in evaluating the cooperative learning groups, limited class and preparation time and problems with the physical resources to practice cooperative learning. Other problems were insufficient resources, large classroom sizes and inadequate training in implementing cooperative learning. The time given to teachers to teach a period is limited and cooperative learning as a teaching method needs a lot of time to set the groups in a large class. Teachers faced very little difficulties acting as facilitators, organizing peer interactions and motivating students to cooperate.

The heterogeneous nature of students makes it difficult for students to agree in the group. The many outdoor activities in geography makes implementation of cooperative learning difficult coupled with the large classroom sizes. However, cooperative learning is easy to implement because a teacher attends to many students at the same time instead of individuals. Cooperative learning helps teachers to diagnose the academic problems of students through the group works. More so, the weaker students learn from the stronger ones.

The fear of some teachers not collaborating makes it difficult to use this method. Students are undisciplined and due to the large class size, it is difficult to manage the class. In order to gain adequate skills in using cooperative learning, teachers requested for seminars and workshops. Bearing in mind the subsequent findings in the review section of this study, indicating teachers had a positive attitude towards cooperative learning but had insufficient knowledge to execute the method, the responses of the greater majority showed proof of their positivity and desire to gain more skills and improve on themselves and teaching in order to achieve better results from their students.

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