

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**EFL Teachers' Conceptions and Attitudes of Peer-Assisted Learning in English Classes****Betegiorgis Mamo¹ and Abiy Yigzaw²****Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine EFL teachers' conceptions and attitudes of peer-assisted learning in English language classes. A questionnaire and interview were used to gather data. The study revealed that the majority participant teachers had limited understanding of peer-assisted learning (PAL). The interviews indicated that some of the teachers were less enthusiastic about implementing PAL because of large class size and lack of time. Finally, it was unraveled that the majority participant teachers conceived PAL differently than DBU expected it to be. Many of the participant teachers had negative attitudes toward PAL as they had incredulity in the benefits and effectiveness of its newly introduced structure. Based on the findings and the conclusions made, it was recommended that training be given to teachers on the structure, implementation and benefits of PAL.

Keywords: *Peer-Assisted Learning; EFL Teachers; Conceptions of learning; Attitudes; Debre-Berhan University*

INTRODUCTION

The issue of student-centred learning is of paramount importance and remains central to teachers' pedagogical practices. Powell and Powell (2010) point out that effective teachers use student-centred learning methods that engage students actively in the learning process and encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning

through guided instruction and self-management. Cooperative learning is one of the student-centred instructional approaches that allow students to work together in small peer groups where group members have specific roles and responsibilities to practice group-based activities (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

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In this regard, peers are students who are status equals or matched companions from similar social groupings to help each other enhance their academic performance via cooperative learning (Topping, 2005). Pedagogical practices such as making learning more hands-on, involving students in cooperative learning and peer assistance provide them with opportunities for participating actively in their learning (Benard *et al.*, 2007). To this end, organizing students into a peer-learning group is so vital that it facilitates their interactions on task performance through peer assistance, leading to academic, social and cognitive benefits (Ashman & Gillies, 2003).

The Ethiopian Ministry of Education (2014) has recently embarked on a new teaching-learning process in which students at all education levels in the country should be structured as a “cooperative learning team” so that students can work together in peer learning groups and assist one another. Of course, advocating peer learning as a significant means to enhance student success in the Ethiopian university education, especially in the English courses, is not a new idea, as cooperative learning through pairs or groups is recommended as a major mode of instruction (Atkins *et al.*, 1996; MoE, 2009). However, what is special about the new pedagogical practice initiated by MoE (2014) is that students in a class are put into a team of five members (commonly called “one-to-five” peer grouping) in which high, medium and low achievers learn together being led and assisted by high-achieving students. In a similar vein, and from the pedagogical point of view, Wilkinson and Fung (2003) recommend that in heterogeneous peer-led cooperative groups, higher-ability peers can be used as resources to support the learning of students with lower and medium ability. Especially, such heterogeneous mix of

students as high, medium and low achievers in the language classroom promotes peer-led learning among students of different languages and academic levels toward wearing down barriers and encouraging on-task behaviour (Dunlap & Weisman, 2007; Richards, 2002).

In Debre-Berhan University, which is one of the higher public educational institutions in Ethiopia and the focus area of this study, first year students are placed into a team of five members based on their grades on the University Entrance Examination, while the senior ones are organized based on their university academic performances (DBU, 2014). Such instructional process (group organization) is synonymously recognized as peer-led team learning (Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2008), peer-assisted learning (Topping, 2005), or peer mediation (Ashman & Gillies, 2005) as all are forms of cooperative learning in small groups that basically allow collaboration, coaching and assistance among the students to develop their social, emotional and comprehension skills (Topping, 2005). In this study, however, the term ‘peer-assisted learning’ and the other synonyms are used to refer to the “cooperative team learning” which has been launched in all academic programmes at Debre-Berhan University. Therefore, all the aforementioned forms of cooperative learning are interchangeably used hereafter.

Research studies have shown that peer-assisted learning (PAL) increases English students’ academic engagement time and opportunity to respond, facilitates their immediate corrective feedback, offers them social support and encouragement, and improves their English language competence (Fuchs *et al.*, 1997; Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007). In the Ethiopian higher education context, studies have also suggested that collaborative peer learning enhances students’ English

interaction and their proficiency in English skills (Anto *et al.*, 2012; Tessema *et al.*, 2012). However, these studies call on English instructors for more efforts to increased use of cooperative learning in university English classes than their current practices to improve students' English communication skills and to build up their confidence to use the language in social interaction. Similarly, Mulu's (2012) study has reported that cooperative learning is crucial to improve the quality of education in the Ethiopian universities, students' academic performance, and their low level of English proficiency.

Moreover, an assessment report by Debre-Berhan University (2014) has indicated that though the cooperative team learning has been launched since 2013 as a new university-wide programme, the result achieved remains unsatisfactory. This is especially because teachers did not implement the programme based on clarity beyond structuring students in "one-to-five" cooperative learning teams. In connection to this, Falchikov (2002) opines that lecturers need to be clear and convinced of the benefits of educational practices such as cooperative peer learning and teaching before they introduce it into their own teaching programmes. The assessment report indicated that structuring students in cooperative learning teams has been fully implemented across all undergraduate programmes in the University, but teachers' understandings and attitudes toward the benefits and implementation of cooperative learning have remained challenges (DBU, 2014). This can lead to pose a question about a shift in teacher-centred teaching to student-centred learning. Tütüniş (2011), for example, argues that although the literature in language teaching emphasizes a shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches, in reality many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes are still

teacher-centred perhaps due to teachers' dispositions and values about teaching approaches.

Therefore, this calls for transformation from teacher-centred instructional approach to student-centred learning. Richardson (2005) maintains that if institutions of higher education want their teachers to adopt a more student-focused approach to teaching, they need to ensure that their teachers hold a commensurate conception of teaching. Specifically, it is noted that peer-led team learning (PLTL) program demands a number of changes in teachers' attitudes about the benefits of the program as worth contributing to the students' learning (Gafney & Varman-Nelson, 2008). Thus, research on teachers' conceptions and attitudes of PAL/PLTL is indispensable in order to ensure its effective implementation and its benefits to students' learning.

This study, therefore, aimed at examining EFL teachers' conceptions about and attitudes towards PAL/PLTL in English classes at Debre-Berhan University. By so doing, it attempts to provide suggestions and implications for improving the PAL/PLTL programme being launched in the University. To this end, the researchers formulated the following research questions:

1. What are EFL teachers' conceptions about peer-assisted learning in English classes?
2. What are EFL teachers' attitudes toward peer-assisted learning in English classes?

Literature Review

Peer-Assisted Learning

Peer-assisted learning is defined as a cooperative learning situation where learners are acculturated into knowledge communities through engagement with

'more capable others' such as peers who provide assistance and guidance to enhance their partners' performance and academic achievement (Topping, 2005). Adopting such a learning approach is important as it strongly encourages students to learn from each other, and the more able students assist less able ones to learn (Exley & Dennick, 2004).

The notion of learning through peer cooperation and assistance derives its conceptual foundation largely from the social interactional perspective described by Vygotsky (Ashman & Gillies, 2003). From the Vygotskian perspective of social interactionism (constructivism), peer interaction and support is a natural part of the social classroom in which more capable peers scaffold or mediate learning by providing the language and strategies necessary for problem-solving so that students stuck for learning are able to complete tasks they could not do alone (Ashman & Gillies, 2003; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). In practice, there will always be a number of students in every class who learn very quickly and some who do not; so to maximize the learning of the latter, peer mediation, in which a student assists a group of peers on difficult tasks, is found as an effective way (Ashman & Gillies, 2003). Overall, peer-assisted learning has been adopted by many institutes of higher learning worldwide (Dobbie & Joyce, 2008), and has been increasingly implemented with success and verifiable benefits to students in a wide range of course areas taught in higher learning institutions (Falchikov, 2002; Topping, 2005; Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2008).

Benefits of Peer Assisted Learning

Academic Benefits

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning expounds the academic effects of peer-assisted learning, in which

development and learning occur as individuals internalize new information and skills, which are within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the difference between what a learner can accomplish alone and what she / he can do with assistance from a more capable peer in the learning process (Martin-Kniep and Picone-Zocchia, 2009). Assistance is provided by a more capable peer in social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Research studies have shown a variety of positive effects of peer-assisted learning on students' learning. The effects include encouraging interactive learning, integrating student experiences into the classroom (Castañeda, 2005); imparting the required information (Dangwal & Kapur, 2009) and conceptual understanding, academic achievement and interdependent work ethics (Wells, 2012).

Affective Role of Peer-Assisted Learning

The affective component of peer-assisted learning proves so powerful that a trusting relationship with a peer facilitates self-disclosure of ignorance and misconception, enabling subsequent diagnosis and correction to learning practice of the peer group (Topping, 2005). The affective component involves motivational, emotional and attitudinal factors that contribute to the learner's involvement actively in the instructional process (Falchikov, 2002). For example, it has motivational importance in that learning in cooperative peer group is strongly mediated by the cohesiveness of the group, helping one another to succeed (Slavin, 2004). In the context of language learning in particular, peer support affects learners' motivation about language learning (Law, 2011); that is, working in small peer groups tends to increase students' motivation through interaction (Wrench et.al. 2009).

The Role of PAL in Language Learning

From the social interactionists' point of view, language learning relies heavily on meaningful social interactions within social and cognitive support (Dunlap & Weisman, 2007). This perspective of learning rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory of mediated learning and cognitive learning which emphasize the crucial role of interacting with significant others (such as more capable peers) assisting one another. Thus, allowing peers to do English language learning activities in a cooperative peer group provides a social structure that is highly beneficial for English learners to communicate and support each other. It is also beneficial for learners to improve their language and conceptual understanding (Dunlap & Weisman, 2007). Peer group structure has been proved so useful in language learning that it is easier to get learners to use the foreign language directly with a partner or in a group as it is less threatening than speaking up in class (Dam, 2011). In other words, the peer support helps learners cope with language anxiety, build confidence and retain feedback from peer partners (Hurd & Lewis, 2008).

In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), which Mengzi (2005) [See also Nguyen, 2013] describes as an environment in which students' exposure to the target language is largely in the classroom, peers appear to be an important source of learning. In the foreign language classroom, more capable peers take a primary support role which may include a variety of communicative techniques such as clarifying instructions, ideas, prompts, hints, practical demonstrations, asking comprehension questions, modifying learning activities, reviewing work and providing praise to increase the participation of less capable

students in the learning process (Gauvain, 2005; Carter & Kennedy, 2006).

A number of studies have shown that peer-assisted student learning resulted in enhanced achievements in English language skills and affective components such as oral communication (Hucrng, 2004); reading (Rahimi & Tahmasebi, 2010; Pishghadam, 2011; Tesfamichael, 2011); providing an interactive and motivating structure (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn (2007); and creating a safe, friendly and comfortable learning environment (Nguyen, 2013). To this end, Dunlap and Weisman (2007) underscore that language teachers need to recognize the values of peers as models and promote social interaction in small cooperative peer group to provide opportunities for students to work with peer partners on social and academic language skills.

Factors influencing the use of PAL

There are a number of factors that can be attributed to influence teachers' pedagogical role in the adoption of PAL for classroom teaching-learning process. Teachers' conceptions and attitudes of PAL are the two factors, among others, to be discussed subsequently for the purpose of this study.

Teachers' conceptions regarding the use of peer-assisted learning are among the factors which influence their implementation of PAL in the classroom teaching-learning process. This is because teaching is a complex process that can be conceptualized in a number of different ways (Richards & Lockhart, 2007). In other words, teachers may hold different conceptions or understandings of how to conduct classroom instructional processes. According to Pecher and Zwaan (2005), conceptions are one of the key issues in cognitive psychology that are concerned with how people represent knowledge

about different objects. Barsalou (1999), cited in Borghi (2005), defines conceptions as residuals of perceptual experience, from which it is possible to extract object knowledge and action information that are relevant to the current situation or situated actions. Accordingly, pertaining to PAL and for the purpose of this study, conceptions are operationally described as teachers' conceptual knowledge and understandings about the use as well as practices of PAL to students' learning in English classes.

Regarding conceptions of pedagogical practices, Watkins, Carnell and Lodge (2007) state that conceptions are inherent teachers' beliefs and theories about how people learn and thus effectiveness of teaching is bound to the security of such conceptions of learning. There are three major types of conceptions of learning, each of which carries different assumptions and implications for teaching and leading learning (Richards, 2002; Watkins, 2005; Watkins, Carnell & Lodge, 2007). These include a mechanical view of learning that leaves the learners out of the picture, considering them as a passive recipient of knowledge and information being transmitted by the teacher. This conception of learning neglects emotional and social aspects of learners. The second conception of learning is concerned with the learner's construction of meaning through discussion, discovery, open-ended learning, and making connections. The third conception of learning is to do with the learner's construction of knowledge as well as meaning through interaction and collaboration with others, especially through dialogue with peers in small groups. This view of learning is a more learner-centred approach which recognizes social and emotional dimensions of the learners as well as the social contexts in which learning communities are built for the crucial role of the learner, language and

conversation in the construction of knowledge and shared meaning (Richards, 2002).

Consequently, creating a classroom environment in which the teacher facilitates students' activities in cooperative peer group, which assists each other to learn together by themselves, is considered as a more modern conception of learning, (Falchikov, 2002; Topping, 2005). Peer learning process often involves between five and eight group members (Exley & Dennick, 2004).

The process of collaborative and student-led learning in small peer groups can become dysfunctional for a variety of reasons such as from poor facilitation and organization or actions of individual team members (Exley & Dennick, 2004). In spite of the above mentioned problems ascribed to peer-assisted learning, a shift in authority from the teacher-as-lecturer to the teacher-as-facilitator is desirable regarding the implementation of peer-assisted learning in the classroom, though this can be disconcerting for many teachers of higher education (McWhaw et. al., 2003). This can, thus, bring teachers' conceptions of learning into question because a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning is dependent principally on teachers' conceptions of student learning.

According to Entwistle et al. (2002), university teachers' conceptions of teaching have their origins in their prior experiences and beliefs, and these conceptions affect their current decisions about how to teach in the classroom. In language teaching in particular, the teachers' prior language learning experiences as pupils and in teacher education are major influences on the teachers' conceptions which ultimately affect their current teaching approach

(Mokiwal & Msila, 2013). For example, research findings on various instructional approaches such as the use of inquiry-based practices (Lotter et.al 2007) and the constructivist model of teaching (Shumba, 2011) have revealed that teachers' conceptions of teaching have played a major role in shaping their instructional practices in classroom contexts. This indicates that teachers' conceptions of teaching constitute an indispensable part of their instructional and student learning processes in the classroom.

Teachers' Attitudes toward PAL

Teachers have a key role in the instructional process for which their attitudes are regarded as central to this process.. Basically, attitude is defined as a state of mind or disposition which deals with how an individual expresses his/her feelings and how he/she assesses the value of things (Derewianka, 2007). An individual's attitude, that is, likes and dislikes play an important role in deciding what he/she will do and what he/she won't (Dörnyei, 2001). For instance, research by Gervase (2005) revealed that teachers' attitudes are influential on their belief that an instructional approach or programme aides learning and produces positive results. Ashman and Gillies (2003) state that the teacher's attitudes toward the manner in which instruction is provided are crucial for informed decision and successful student learning

Jones (2005) maintains that foreign language teachers' attitudes may have an impact on making provision for less able pupils through more able students. Gafney and Varma-Nelson (2008), for instance, indicate that despite the fact that a more able student as a peer leader can assist students in problem-solving skills and in their conceptual development, those teachers involved with peer-led team learning have been heard of expressing

reluctance and negative feelings about the mistakes that the peer leaders might make when explaining material to other students. However, Brown (2007) argues that learning in general and second or foreign language learning in particular is fundamentally a process that involves the making of mistakes, and such process will be impeded if students do not commit mistakes and then benefit from various forms of feedback on those mistakes during language practice. Sustaining peer feedback is beneficial because there are fewer barriers of status and authority between peers and can promote a number of generic learning outcomes associated with working together such as communicating orally and in writing, negotiation skills, group planning and teamwork (Falchikov, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

This case study used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine EFL teachers' conceptions and attitudes of PAL. Percentage and qualitative terms were used to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data about conceptions and attitudes of PAL, respectively.

Participants

This study involved EFL teachers (n=16) at Debre-Berhan University who are currently teaching different common and major area English courses. The study group was selected from the teaching staff of the University because they were the ones to implement PAL in their English classes.

Instruments

The instruments used for the study were questionnaire and interview, and they are explained as follows.

Questionnaire

To elicit teachers' conceptions about PAL in English classes, this study adapted and employed a questionnaire originally designed by Benard *et al.* (2007) to allow teachers to reflect on and help them improve their classroom teaching based on small groups of students via cooperative learning (peer-assisted learning). The questionnaire consists of eleven items which ask teachers to reflect on them using the alternatives, "I do this a lot", "I do this a little", or "I haven't done this" regarding how often they practice different activities related to small cooperative peer group learning in the classroom. Regarding data gathering procedure, the adapted version of the questionnaire was first given to four EFL teachers who did not take part in the actual study for the clarity of items in the questionnaire, its content validity and applicability to the context of the study. By so doing, some minor revisions were made thereto. For instance, two of the items of the original questionnaire developed by Bernard *et al.* (2007) were adapted to suit our objective and one more item that states about 'teachers' support of students' independent learning' was added. The findings were analyzed using percentage.

Interview

EFL teachers were interviewed based on seven structured interview questions to explore their attitudes toward PAL in English classes. The questions were prepared according to discussions given in the literature review of this study regarding attitudes towards PAL. After data was gathered through questionnaire on teachers' conceptions of PAL, one of the researchers interviewed four teachers who were randomly selected from among the total participant EFL teachers (n=16). The interview questions mainly included PAL's implementation related issues, viz. teachers' motivation, beliefs and benefits of PAL. The interviewer (one of the researchers) took notes while the interviewee instructors responded to the questions. The findings were analyzed using verbal descriptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

As indicated in the 'Methodology' section of this paper, eleven items were used to assess teachers' engagement in peer-assisted teaching/learning. The results of the study are summarized in the following table.

Table: Teachers' engagement towards peer-assisted teaching/learning

Item	I do this a lot	I do this a little	I haven't done this
Teachers engagement with/in: Establishing peer assisted teams of students	5(31.25%)	10(62.5%)	1 (6.25%)
facilitation of peer-assisted communication	5(31.25%)	8(50.0%)	3(18.75)
Structuring classroom norms and activities	9(56.25%)	7(43.75%)	-
varying student grouping for interaction	4(25.0%)	10(62.5%)	2(12.50%)
developing students' academic language	9(56.25%)	5(31.25%)	2(12.50%)
building positive(caring) relationships	4 (25.0%)	7(43.75%)	5 (31.25%)
developing student-centred instructional activities	10(62.5%)	6(37.5%)	-
helping students involve in problem-solving activities	5 (31.25%)	7(43.75%)	4 (25.0%)
helping students become independent learners	4(25.0%)	12(75.0%)	-
helping students communicate a sense of future	6(37.50%)	9(56.25%)	1 (6.25%)
the quality and quantity work of students	2 (12.50%)	12(75.0%)	2 (12.50%)

A total of sixteen EFL teachers filled in the questionnaire. Of these, ten teachers, i.e., 62.5% did little with peer-assisted teams of students on a regular basis in their English classes, while only 31.25% of the teachers did a lot. A teacher responded that he had not implemented peer-assisted learning at all. In addition, over 50% of the teachers had a little practice of facilitating peer-assisted conversations that had instructional goals in their English classes. Only 31.25% of the instructors engaged in facilitating peer-assisted conversations. One of the reasons for not implementing PAL frequently was they had only little understanding about it and they did not trust its effectiveness much away from the ordinary group tasks they have experienced. From the figures indicated above, it can be seen that a large number of

teachers did not use to implement PAL sufficiently though the instructional programme adopted by the University required teachers to do so. In relation to this, Gafney and Varma-Nelson (2008) stress that with changes in teaching assignments, it is critical that teachers take responsibility for a peer-led team learning. They need to recognize the benefits of such a learning process and be committed to its implementation.

The results also revealed that 56.25% of the teachers did a lot in relation to structuring the class norms and activities in order to build trusting and caring relationships among students while 43.75% of the teachers did a little. Although the majority structured the students, even the rest 43.75% are not negligible for

effectiveness. Dörnyei, (1997), however, argued that peer relationships and learning norms based on peer cooperation is worth doing as it tends to produce a group structure and a motivational basis that provide excellent conditions for L₂ learning. It was found that 62.5% of the teachers varied ways of grouping students to promote interaction and participation a little, while 12.5% of them did not use varied ways at all. This indicates that the majority instructors did astray from the purpose and structuring system of one-to-five. This may suggest that they perceived the one-to-five structuring system 'wrongly'. According to Watkins (2005), the social structure of the classroom is both a major achievement and a major missed opportunity because the way in which it is structured is what makes the major contribution to students' interaction and participation in the learning process. The results also showed that 56.25% of the teachers did a lot with regard to organizing instruction that assisted in the development of students' academic language, but 31.25% and 12.5% of the teachers did a little and hadn't done at all, respectively. Similarly, 43.75% of the teachers had a little practice in building positive, caring relationships with their students by acting as a role-model, nurturer, mentor, or friend.

The results further indicated that while 62.5% of the teachers did a lot in relation to developing instructional activities that valued students' experiences and abilities, 37.5% of the teachers did a little. Similarly, 43.75% of the teachers did a little toward making most of their instructional activities support students to develop problem-solving skills. This seems to indicate that a learning process in which problem-solving skills prevailed among the students was not an issue at the centre of teachers' pedagogical practices. However, Gafney and Varma-Nelson (2008)

maintain that students develop problem-solving skills when they are provided with instructional support in which a more able can assist less able students in their learning and conceptual development. Providing an opportunity for students to learn independently was a little practiced by the majority of teachers as reflected by 75% of the teachers. Moreover, 56.25% did a little as regards helping students communicate a sense of future by having them understand the purpose and rationale for the lessons and set goals for their own learning. One teacher replied that he had not done this. The result also shows that 75% of the teachers did a little as to holding high expectations for their students in quality and quantity of work, work habits and work procedures, classroom norms, and interpersonal behaviour. Overall, these findings appear to indicate that a student-centred learning is not in practice though cooperative team learning in the structure of "one-to-five" student grouping has been adopted as a student-centred instructional approach by the University.

Generally, the teachers' responses towards their engagement in supporting students in many of the different peer-assisted learning dimensions were very little. They participated a lot only in three of the dimensions: in structuring classroom norms and activities, in developing students' academic language and in fostering student-centred instructional activities.

Teachers' practices are reflections of their conceptions, and their conceptions originate from their prior experiences and beliefs (Entwistle et. al., 2002). From the findings, it seems that many of the participant teachers had the conception that students learn through discussion and to some extent considered the emotional and social aspects of learners (Richards, 2002;

Watkins, 2005; Watkins, Carnell & Lodge, 2007), but this was not practiced in line with DBU's structure for PAL. Therefore, it is possible to infer that PAL was conceived and practiced in a different way than DBU expected it to be structured and implemented.

As regards the interview results on teachers' attitudes toward PAL, four teachers were asked about their general attitudes toward "one-to-five" student grouping for peer-assisted learning how much they were motivated and what made them use it in English classes. Three of the four teachers (T₁, T₃ & T₄) responded that they had generally a positive attitude toward peer-assisted learning. Two (T₁ & T₃) of the three teachers further mentioned that they were very much motivated to use peer-led learning structure adopted by the University. But the other two teachers (T₂ & T₄) said that they were hesitant to use the peer learning approach because they felt students may not participate equally and effectively in the learning process. In this connection, one of the teachers said "Although, in principle, cooperative team learning is useful and may contribute a lot to the students' English language development, I have a reservation that its application may not be a reality in the classroom because of students' reluctance in taking part in discussions" (T₄). In a further remark, one teacher (T₂) indicated that he was not much interested to implement peer-led learning because of factors such as students' lack of motivation to peer-assisted learning, their bad perception about it and lack of time to use it in the classroom. Similarly, the other teacher (T₄) said that he became hesitant to use PAL due to large class size which in effect took much time and made it a bit difficult to manage students while working in peer groups. Therefore, the results from the interviews show that though two of the four teachers very much liked doing PAL

in English classes, there is still reluctance on the part of the other two teachers toward implementing it due to the aforementioned factors. Gafney and Varma-Nelson (2008) state that teachers often object to sharing learning responsibilities with students due to lack of rethinking the processes of teaching-learning and based on the belief that students' understanding of the subject matter is incomplete and, thus, the teacher is the best source of imparting knowledge and information to the students.

Teachers were also asked if they believed peer-assisted team learning in the structure of "one-to-five" student grouping had contributions to students' learning in English classes. One of the teachers (T₃) said that PAL encouraged students to learn together, develop social life, and a feeling of cooperation to solve problems together and transfer and share knowledge among themselves. Another teacher (T₁) indicated that PAL offered students the freedom to elicit ideas one another and minimizes shyness or fear to talk each other. The other two teachers (T₂ & T₄) mentioned simply that PAL gave an opportunity for low achievers to learn from high achievers and helped both the teachers as well as the students. In response to a related interview question on whether or not they believed the peer-assisted team learning program could help students improve their English language skills, all the four teachers thought that if PAL was well organized based on students' academic performance and clear criteria as well as related problems such as class size and students' wrong perceptions about PAL were alleviated, it could be useful to develop students' communicative skills in English. Especially, one teacher (T₃) said that PAL is student-centred because learning tasks are conducted by the students themselves so that students practice their language skills with group members in real life

situations as ascribed by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). While asked whether they thought high achieving students could share teaching responsibilities and be used as potential resource in helping less performing students in English classes, all the four teachers believed there are clever and bright students who can teach and assist slow learners by clarifying learning points on the part of the classroom teacher. However, one teacher (T₂) voiced concern about such a learning approach saying that though PAL is theoretically and scientifically acceptable, this is not practical in the current “one-to-five” student grouping being implemented at Debre-Berhan University, because students are not well-organized in a peer learning group based on clear criteria taking into account their interest and academic performance. Regarding teachers’ role in peer-assisted team learning in the structure of “one-to-five” student grouping in English classes, one teacher (T₃) clearly articulated that he played facilitative roles such as explaining objectives of the lessons, encouraging students to fully participate in the learning process and explaining questions. Two teachers (T₁ & T₄) simply mentioned that their role in PAL was that facilitation by providing different supports when students were working in peer groups. The fourth teacher (T₂) did not clearly address the question. This may stem from dispositions which Gallagher (2011) describes as attitudes of English language teachers toward second language pedagogy impact teachers own classroom instruction.

The interviewees were asked if an awareness-raising orientation (training) could help them to successfully apply PAL, and three of them (T₁, T₃ & T₄) have responded positively. They professed that there are many challenges and gaps in its implementation. All the teachers said that

they did not have any training at all. Of course, two of them (T₁ & T₃) said that they got little orientation which was totally insufficient for application. In sum, the findings of the interview highlighted problems related to teachers’ attitudes toward PAL, gaps in understanding its benefits, and lack of exposure on its implementation.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined EFL teachers’ conceptions and attitudes of PAL in English classes. The findings of the study reveal that the participant teachers had different conceptions of PAL from what DBU expected it to be structured and implemented; and the majority of the teachers reflected that it was little practiced. Some of the teachers did not also have positive attitudes toward PAL as they had incredulity on the benefits and effectiveness of the current structure of students in cooperative learning groups. It can also be concluded that teachers did not have positive conceptions and attitudes towards PAL as a result of lack of practice and adequate training in its implementation. In line with the findings, as teachers had little chance of getting training in PAL, the study suggests that the University arrange adequate training for teachers on the benefits of PAL and its implementation. It has been suggested that a short-term training will not be sufficient if institutions of higher education want their teachers to adopt a more student-focused approach to teaching (Richardson, 2005). Finally, it is recommended that there should also be changes in teachers’ attitudes toward PAL through training.

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