Original Research   **Open Access**

The effects of student teams' achievement division on Ethiopian EFL secondary school students' reading comprehension and social skills development

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Abstract

This paper aimed at investigating the effects of the Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD) technique on improving reading comprehension and social skills among eleventh grade EFL students. In the study, a quasi- experimental design was employed by involving two intact groups which were randomly selected from 13 grade 11 sections at Kobbo Senior Secondary School, and were, gain, randomly assigned into experimental and control groups. The experimental group received reading skills instruction using the STAD technique over an eight-week period while the control group was taught the skills by following the conventional instructional methods as presented in the students; textbook. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, along with pre- and post-intervention social skills questionnaires. Results of the post-test and post-intervention questionnaire revealed that students in the experimental group exhibited significantly higher reading comprehension skills (in terms of making predictions, scanning, making inferences, guessing meanings of unfamiliar words, identification of antonyms and synonyms, and identifying main ideas) and improved social skills (in the skills of leadership, decision making, trust building, turn taking, active listening and conflict management skills) compared to their peers in the comparison group. These findings suggest useful implications for EFL curriculum design and teacher training.

Citation: Asres N. Mekonnen. (2025). The effects of student teams' achievement division on Ethiopian EFL secondary school students' reading comprehension and social skills development, *EJLCC.10*(2).374-388.

DOI 10.20372/ejlcc.v10i2.3063

Introduction

Working in collaboration has been advocated by different scholars as a better way to acquire and/or learn languages. Students are believed to learn languages more effectively and naturally when they are given the opportunities to interact in different communicative environments. Supporting this view, Long (1981), in his Interaction Hypotheses, suggests that language acquisition is enhanced through interaction, particularly when learners negotiate meaning during communicative tasks. Similarly, Krashen (1985) argues that foreign language learners who are made to interact in small group activities are very likely to have the opportunities to receive comprehensible input from their peers. When students are working in groups of differing abilities, there are chances that better-positioned students explain issues for their group members. In other words, when learners are provided with activities to work in groups, they could have the opportunities to negotiate meaning, clarify unfamiliar issues, and there by, to have better comprehension. Another support for the application of cooperative learning approaches in language learning settings comes from the social constructivism view which emphasizes that learning is a social process and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others (Vigotsky, 1978). In general, scholars seem to unanimously agree that language, as a social construct, is better learnt through activities that are based on collaboration between and among learners.

As a result of the wider acknowledgement of the benefits of interactive approaches of language learning, many researchers have taken cooperative language learning (CLL) as a major area of investigation. Surveys and case studies have been conducted on topics like perceptions, practices and challenges of implementing cooperative learning. Besides, there have been quasi-experimental studies on the effectiveness of CLL on students' achievement in the different language skills (Eslit, 2023; Chukwuyenum et al., 2014;Al-Mubireek, 2021). Finally, a few studies have examined the effectiveness of specific formats of CLL, like the STAD, on language achievement (Basyah et al, 2021). The present study attempted to investigate the effects of student teams' achievement divisions (STAD), a less-studied area, on Ethiopian senior secondary school students' reading comprehension and social skills.

Social skills encompass a wide range of skills which are essential for human beings to lead smooth and successful lives. For example, communication skills, a major component of social skills, enable humans to express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas effectively while understanding and responding to others. Communication and success go together (Hragie & Dickson, 2004). Besides, listening skills, especially active ones, are crucial in maintaining healthy relationships and avoiding misunderstandings by paying attention to the speaker,

nodding, asking questions for clarification etc. (Brownell, 2012). Empathy is another vital social skill which involves the ability to understand and share the feelings of others (Golemanm, 1995). It involves recognizing emotions in others, considering their perspective, and responding with care and concern. The skill of working effectively and smoothly in teams is another crucial social skill, especially in professional and academic environments which demand leading, cooperation, communication and problem-solving (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Other important social skills include adaptability to changing social situations (Pulakos et al.. 2000), emotional regulation- the ability to manage one's emotions (Gross, 2002), leadership skills which encompasses qualities like the ability to inspire, motivate, and guide others toward achieving a common goal (Northouse, 2018), assertiveness ,i.e., the ability to express one's thoughts, needs, and feelings openly and honestly while respecting the rights of others (Alberti & Emmons, 2017), and problem-solving that involves identifying problems, generating solutions, evaluating options, and implementing a resolution that works for all parties involved (Fisher &Ury, 1991) .

As indicated above, different sources suggest that these social skills could be better developed by English as Foreign Language (EFL) students when they are given the opportunities to work collaboratively on activities in pairs or small groups. Brown (2001) notes that cooperative learning is a teaching/learning approach that involves students to work together in pairs or groups and share information. In the same way, Johnson & Johnson (2014) state that cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. Members of the teams work together for common goals. In a sense, each member of the group is accountable for the success or failure of the group i.e., it is a question of swim or sink together, As Richards and Rogers (2001, 192) note, "cooperative learning is a group of systematic learning activity which depends on the information exchange between the learners in the groups in which each learner is given responsibility for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others." By implementing cooperative learning, small teams with different levels of ability (heterogeneity), can use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a certain subject (Gillies, 2016; Slavin, 1995).

For cooperative language learning (CLL) to be successful, it should fulfill five key elements (Johnson &Johnson, 2014). The first crucial element for cooperative learning activities to be effective is positive interdependence between members of a group. Students should be convinced in the principle that they "sink" or "swim" together, i.e., the perception that the success of one depends on the success of other. Face-to-face interaction which maximizes the opportunities for students to help, support, encourage and praise each other by

asking and answering questions about each other is the second important element. The third essential element of cooperative learning is the assignment of individual and group accountability through which individual and group performance is assessed. Another crucial element of cooperative learning is that members of teams should be equipped with the key social skills like conflict management, communication, and decision-making. Finally, cooperative learning activities should be designed in such a way that the teams are provided with reasonably enough time for group processing of the issue under discussion.

The Students Teams Achievement Division (STAD) technique is a specific form of cooperative learning in which students are assigned to small, heterogeneous learning teams and work collaboratively to master academic content, with individual accountability and team-based recognition of achievements serving as the foundation for fostering both academic and social skill development. To indicate that the STAD is a sub-set of cooperative learning, some researchers used a combined acronym STAD CL. (e.g., see Syafiq & Rahmawati, 2017).

Although CL and STAD are similar in many of their characteristics, they have some clear differences in scope (CL is an umbrella term which includes the STAD), in their objectives, in their emphasis as well as types of assessment, in their structuring (the STAD is more rigid than the CL), in teachers' roles (in the STAD, the teacher is engaged in structured direct instruction, while in CL, the teacher is more of a facilitator), in the amount of emphasis they give for competition, in their area of focus of achievement etc. (Slavin, 2011; Johnson & Johnson, 2014; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

A STAD technique is very likely to be effective if it follows certain basic principles (Slavin, 2011). First and foremost, there must be positive interdependence between members of a team. The overall success of a team is determined by the success of each member of the team. This principle fosters cooperation and accountability within teams. Second, each member of the team has to carry individual accountability. To this effect, students are assessed individually to ensure that each member understands the material and can perform independently. The third principle is that each member of a team should have equal opportunity for success. As students individually take quizzes, their improvements in subsequent quizzes are awarded, i.e., improvement rather than static ability is appreciated. Finally, there must be team recognition. Group rewards and positive feedback have the power to reinforce teamwork and motivate students to support each other.

According to Slavin (2011), the STAD technique has to strictly follow five-steps which are:

Teacher Presentation: At the beginning, the teacher introduces the new material to the entire class, providing the foundational knowledge necessary for the team tasks. Presentations may involve direct instruction, multimedia resources, or interactive discussions.

A Team Study Session: Students work in small, heterogeneous teams to discuss, review, and study the material. These teams are typically mixed in terms of academic ability, gender, and backgrounds.

Individual Quizzes: Each student completes a quiz or an individual assessment without assistance. This step is crucial as it helps to assess each student's understanding independently of the group, maintaining individual accountability. The result of this quiz will be used as a base to see whether the student has brought improvements after some time.

Individual Improvement Scores: Students' quiz scores are compared to their previous performance. Points are awarded based on individual improvement, encouraging each student to work toward personal growth rather than just team success.

Team Recognition: Teams earn recognition (e.g., certificates, rewards in the form of positive feedback) based on the collective improvement of team members' scores. This promotes a supportive team environment and positive interdependence, where each team member's improvement is valued.

In the implementation of these steps of the STAD, the teacher plays a central role by presenting material, facilitating team dynamics, and monitoring progress. Teachers also manage quizzes, calculate improvement scores, and offer team rewards. They might also adapt instructional methods as needed while activities are going on. Moreover, as the success of CLL activities depends on students possessing basic social skills, teachers should realize the presence of these skills, and if needed, these skills should be taught. As a person does not simply wake up possessing the skill to work well with others, scholars like Johnson & Johnson (2009) recommend teaching students a few skills that may be useful before starting the work. These social skills include leadership skills, decision making, turn taking, active listening, and conflict management.

Despite the presence of reports that the STAD can be an effective instructional technique in fostering language achievement and social skills development, there is a paucity of empirical evidence targeting this technique. There are only a few studies conducted on the effectiveness of the STAD (Syafiq & Rahmawati, 2017) on reading comprehension achievement and social skills development. The results of the current study could contribute to the accumulation of empirical evidences in the area. This study tried to give answers to the following questions.

Q1: How effective is the STAD technique in developing eleventh grade EFL students' reading comprehension   skills?

Q2: What is the impact of the STAD technique on the development of social skills of eleventh grade EFL students who are engaged in reading comprehension skills activities?

Methodology

The research design employed in this study was a quasi-experimental, specifically a non-randomized control group design. This design was selected because of its appropriateness to be employed in intact classroom situations where 100% randomization was not possible and desirable.

The study involved two sections of grade eleven students randomly selected from a population of 13 sections. These sections were assigned to either the experimental or the control group, with the experimental section receiving reading comprehension skills instruction through the STAD technique while the control group continued to be taught the reading skills using the conventional instructional methods. The students in the experimental group were, then, systematically divided into 8 teams, each consisting of 5 students, of heterogeneous abilities based on their pre-test results.

Data for this study were collected using a pre- and post-tests, along with a pre- and post-intervention social skills questionnaire. Both the pre and post-tests were pilot-tested on students of same grade level at another secondary school and their reliability (difficulty level and internal consistency) and validity thoroughly checked before they were administered to the main study. To check the internal consistency of items both in the reading comprehension test and the social skills questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha was computed by using SPSS version 21. Suggestions were also sought from experts in the field and improvements made accordingly.

The pre-test assessed students' initial reading comprehension skills and social skills, establishing a baseline for later comparison. Following an 8-weeks' intervention period, a reading comprehension post-test and post-intervention social skills questionnaire were administered to measure changes in reading comprehension and social skills, if any.

Intervention

During the intervention, the experimental group was engaged in reading instruction using the structured STAD technique, which involved collaborative learning activities designed to enhance comprehension through peer interaction. The control group, on the other hand, received conventional instructional methods involving mostly individual learning activities. To control interference

of different teacher-related extraneous variables, the co-author himself (with more than 20 years of teaching experience at senior secondary schools) taught both the groups. During the study period, both the control and experimental group students were taught same subject (English for Ethiopia, Grade 11), by same EFL teacher. The only difference between the two groups was the implementation of the STAD technique in the experimental class during the teaching of reading comprehension skills.

Teacher Activity (Experimental Class)

During (and before) the intervention period, the teacher:
- ➢ Made a thorough reading of the literature on how to implement the STAD and how to conduct experiments in a STAD classroom, i.e., made the necessary preparation to conduct the intervention,
- ➢ Prepared two versions of weekly lesson plans for the control and experimental classes (with major differences in how reading skills sessions were dealt with). Reading skills sessions of the experimental group were planned and implemented based on the principles of the STAD,
- ➢ Conducted the intervention by implementing the different steps of the STAD..

Student Activity (Experimental)

Students in the experimental group were made to be engaged in the following activities collaboratively.
- ➢ Coming together to their teams (and they had already given names to their teams)
- ➢ Brainstorming and sharing experiences with their peers,
- ➢ ,Reading texts individually and mastering what the text is about,
- ➢ Doing work sheets in pairs, quizzing each other when appropriate,
- ➢ Making sure that all their teammates have successfully done the quiz,
- ➢ Checking their team's answer sheet, and each other's,
- ➢ Explaining their answers to each other,
- ➢ If they have questions, asking their teammates for solutions rather than asking the teacher,
- ➢ Completing quizzes individually,
- ➢ Working hard for the success of their teams.

Methods of Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using statistical methods (grand means, independent samples t-tests and Eta squares) to determine the significance of the differences between pre-test and post-test scores in both groups. This analysis aimed to ascertain whether the STAD technique resulted in statistically significant improvements in reading comprehension and social skills.

Results and Discussion

Results Regarding the Reading Comprehension Skills Achievement

This section ties to answer the first question of the research, i.e., to check the effects of the STAD on the reading comprehension skills of the target EFL learners. To do that, first, the students' reading comprehension skills achievements were tested (i.e., pre-tested) so that we could have baseline data. The results of the pre-test are summarized in table 1 below.

Table1

Summary of the pre-test reading comprehension skills results of both the experimental and control groups

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Value	Significance (2-tailed)	Significance Level
Experimental Group	40	15.325	3.16542	0.984	0.328	Not significant
Control Group	40	14.525	4.05088			

As the information in the table depicts, during the pre-test, there was no significant difference in reading comprehension skills scores between the experimental group (M = 15.325, SD = 3.16542) and the control group (M = 14.525, SD = 4.05088), with a t-value of 0.984 which was not significant at p =0.05level.

Results from the Reading Comprehension Post-Test

As indicated earlier, the experiment in this study took 8 week during which the experimental group was taught reading comprehension skills by using the STAD technique, while the control group continued to learn reading comprehension by following the conventional approaches in the students' text book. To check the effect of the STAD, a post-test was given for both groups after 8 weeks. The results of the post-test are given in table 2 below.

Table 2

Summary of the post-test reading comprehension test of both the experimental and control groups

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Value	Significance (2-tailed)	Significance Level
Experimental Group	40	26.9750	1.95445	18.163	0.000	Significant
Control Group	40	18.7750	2.08151			

As we could see from the information in table 2, the post-test results indicated a significant improvement in the reading comprehension skills achievement of the students in the experimental group (M = 26.9750, SD = 1.95445) compared to their counterparts in the control group (M = 18.7750, SD = 2.08151), with a t-value of 18.163 which is significant at p = 0.01.

To see the effect of the STAD on each sub-reading comprehension skill category of the students in the experimental group, an effect size was calculated, and the results are provided in table 3 below.

Table 3

Effect Size Analysis of the Effect of the STAD Technique on the Different Reading Comprehension Sub-Skills (Experimental Group)

Skill	t-value	Eta Squared	Effect Size
Prediction	4.624	0.215	Large
Identify Main Idea	2.170	0.054	Moderate
Scanning	12.069	0.651	Large
Determine Ideas (True/False)	3.348	0.125	Large
Deduce Words' Meaning	12.881	0.680	Large
Find Out Synonyms & Antonyms	5.090	0.249	Large
Make Inferences	10.534	0.587	Large
Total	18.163	0.587	Large

As the information in the above table shows, the STAD technique of teaching reading comprehension had a large effect on the reading comprehension skills overall (Eta squared = 0.587) and across most sub-skills, with particularly

large effects observed in "Deducing Word Meanings" (Eta squared = 0.680) and "Scanning" (Eta squared = 0.651).

Results from the Pre-Intervention Social Skills Questionnaire

A pre-intervention social skills questionnaire was administered to have baseline data. The data gathered from this questionnaire is summarized in table 4 below.

Table 4

Summary of results from pre-intervention social skills questionnaire

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Value	Sig.	Significance Level
Experimental Group	40	78.90	14.52	0.273	0.785	Not significant
Control Group	40	78.05	13.29			

As the information in the above table shows, the pre-intervention questionnaire results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences (at p=0.05 level) in social skills between the experimental and control group students, suggesting both groups had similar social skills levels prior to the intervention.

Results from the Post-Intervention Social Skills Questionnaire

This section answers one of the major questions of the study by examining whether the STAD technique had brought differences in the experimental group students' social skills development. To this effect, the social skills questionnaire was re-administered to the students in both groups after 8 weeks. The results of the post-intervention social skills questionnaire are summarized in the following table.

Table 5

Summary of the post-intervention social skills questionnaire results

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Value	Sig.	Significance Level
Experimental Group	40	4.1521	0.18346	13.539	0.000	Highly significant
Control Group	40	3.6688	0.13165			

The post-intervention social skills questionnaire results revealed that the students in the experimental group demonstrated a significantly higher mean score in their social skills compared to their counterparts in the control group, indicating the effectiveness of the STAD intervention with t= 13.539, significant at p = 001 level.

Effect Size of the STAD on the Different Social Skills

In this section, the effects of the STAD technique on each social skill domains were tested. The following table summarizes the effect sizes for various social skill domains following the STAD intervention.

Table 6

Summary of the pre-intervention social skills questionnaire (experimental group)

Domain	t-value	Eta Square	Effect Size Category
Leadership	4.439	0.201	Large
Decision Making	9.023	0.510	Large
Trust Building	11.824	0.641	Large
Turn Taking	6.474	0.349	Large
Active Listening	4.724	0.222	Large
Conflict Management	3.174	0.114	Large
Average	4.664	0.218	Large

The effect sizes observed across the various social skills domains were consistently large, indicating that the STAD intervention accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in students' social skills scores, with the intervention having a significant impact on the their development.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the effectiveness of the Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD) technique on enhancing both reading comprehension and social skills among eleventh grade EFL learners in Ethiopia. The substantial improvement in reading comprehension scores for the experimental group, as evidenced by the post-test results, suggests that cooperative learning strategies like STAD can facilitate deeper engagement with texts. Put another way, this approach was very likely to encourage students to work collaboratively, fostering an environment where they can share ideas and strategies, which is crucial for language acquisition.

Moreover, the strong effect sizes across various reading comprehension sub-skills indicate that STAD not only improved overall comprehension but also enhanced specific skills such as deducing word meanings and making inferences. These skills are essential for academic success in EFL settings, as they contribute to students' abilities to understand and analyze complex texts. These findings go in line with the findings of similar studies in other contexts (Deswarni, 2018; Yanti & Helmi, 2023: Jalilifar, 2010; Syafiq & Rahmawati, 2017).

In terms of social skills, the significant improvements observed in the experimental group's post-intervention social skills questionnaire results suggest that STAD fosters the development of essential interpersonal skills such as leadership, decision-making, and active listening which are vital for effective communication and collaboration in different academic environments and elsewhere. Although there is a paucity of research reports in this line, the findings of the present study concur with those reported by Madhawa and Sanai (2018). In other words, the interactive nature of the STAD activities, the positive interdependence between members of teams, and the individual accountability as well as the provision of equal opportunities for each team member in such activities promote a more holistic learning experience that prepares students not only academically but also socially.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study reports compelling evidence for the effectiveness of the Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD) technique in enhancing both reading comprehension and social skills among eleventh grade EFL learners in Ethiopia. The significant improvements observed in the experimental group's post-test scores underscore the value of specific cooperative learning strategies in fostering academic achievement.

The findings indicate that STAD not only bolsters overall reading comprehension but also specifically enhances critical sub-skills such as deducing word meanings and making inferences, which are essential for academic success in language learning. Furthermore, it could be concluded that the technique promotes the development of social skills, including leadership, decision-making, and active listening, thereby, preparing students for collaborative interactions in diverse settings.

Moving forward, we recommend future studies to explore the long-term effects and broader applicability of the STAD technique across different educational settings and populations. Other studies could focus on investigating the role of teacher training and professional development on effectively implementing the STAD.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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