

# Collaborative Learning in A Private Secondary School in Windhoek: Teachers' Perceptions and Challenges Faced

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explores teachers' perceptions and the contextual challenges they encounter in fostering inclusive and effective learning environments. Grounded in Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, the research positions learning as a socially mediated process shaped by cultural and linguistic diversity. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers from urban schools serving multilingual and multicultural learner populations. Thematic analysis revealed three overarching themes: perceptions of collaborative learning, strategies for implementation, and challenges in facilitation. Teachers consistently viewed CL as a powerful tool for promoting learner engagement, inclusion, and intercultural understanding. Strategic group formation, multilingual scaffolding, culturally responsive materials, and role assignment emerged as key strategies for adapting CL to diverse classrooms. However, participants also identified persistent challenges, including language proficiency gaps, cultural resistance, unequal group participation, and time constraints imposed by curriculum demands. These findings highlight the need for context-sensitive pedagogical approaches and professional development that equip teachers to navigate the complexities of intercultural education. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive pedagogy in Southern Africa and underscores the importance of collaborative learning as both a method and a philosophy for equitable education. Implications are drawn for curriculum design, teacher training, and policy reform aimed at strengthening intercultural competence and learner-centred practice in Namibian schools.

**Keywords:** Collaborative learning, collaborative learning strategies, private secondary school, multicultural classrooms, Windhoek; Namibia

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Namibia is a culturally diverse nation, with more than 11 ethnic groups and multiple languages represented in its education system. In urban centres like Windhoek, private secondary schools often serve multicultural learner populations, requiring teachers to navigate complex cultural dynamics. Hence, the ability to interact appropriately and effectively across cultures—intercultural competence—is increasingly vital for educators. At the same time, collaborative learning strategies (CLS) such as peer mentoring, team teaching, and professional learning communities have gained prominence as tools for teacher development and pedagogical innovation.

These strategies not only promote professional growth but also hold potential for enhancing teachers' intercultural competence by fostering shared reflection, empathy, and inclusive practice. However, the

extent to which CLS influence teachers' intercultural competence remains underexplored in the Namibian context, particularly within private secondary schools that serve as hubs of intercultural interaction. The increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in classrooms epitomises education in the 21st century and marks a shift in pedagogical leadership that capitalises on diversity as a resource for learning. Collaborative learning strategies are widely advocated for engaging culturally diverse classrooms, aiming to enhance academic achievement and develop intercultural competencies such as empathy, perspective taking, and plurality (Volet & Vauras, 2021; Baker & Fang, 2021). This pedagogical shift redefines the teacher's role from a knowledge transmitter to a facilitator of complex social and cognitive processes (Cheng, 2021; Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Yet, despite the theoretical promise of CLS, teachers' intercultural competence in Namibia remains underdeveloped (Witbeen & Woldemariam, 2020). Hence, posing a significant challenge.

Namibia's learner-centred education philosophy, rooted in post-independence goals of inclusion and unity (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993), inherently promotes collaborative and participatory methods. However, a persistent gap exists between policy aspirations and classroom realities (Amakali, 2017; Kandjeo-Marenga & Ilukena, 2023). In Windhoek's private schools, this gap is compounded by the microcosmic cultural diversity of learners and the limited intercultural readiness of teachers. While literature affirms the influence of culture on learning (Ramburuth & Tani, 2009), the challenges of CLS (Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Popov et al., 2012), and the importance of intercultural communication (Hofstede, 1986; Zhu, 2013), there remains a critical gap in empirical research on the real impact of CLS in multicultural classrooms in Namibia. This knowledge gap poses the risk of overlooking key dimensions of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Therefore, this study explores how teachers perceive and implement collaborative learning strategies in intercultural classrooms and examines the contextual challenges they encounter in fostering inclusive and effective learning environments. By exploring this phenomenon in Windhoek's private secondary schools, the study aims to generate insights that inform teacher development, curriculum reform, and national strategies for social cohesion and educational equity.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This study uses Vygotsky's social constructivism theory as a theoretical construct to examine the complex interplay of social and cognitive processes of collaborative learning (CL) in intercultural classrooms. Vygotsky's social constructivism emphasizes that learning is fundamentally a social process, shaped by interaction with more knowledgeable people (teachers and peers) and mediated by cultural factors such as language. The concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is at the centre of this theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD defines the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. In collaborative learning environments, support provided by peers or teachers (scaffolding) enables learners to progress through their ZPD. Vygotsky also viewed language as a critical cognitive tool, evolving from external dialogue to internal thought, thereby facilitating problem-solving and self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978).

In intercultural classrooms, Vygotsky's framework provides a compelling rationale for collaborative learning (CL). Learners from diverse cultural backgrounds bring unique perspectives and cognitive tools, enriching group interactions and co-construction of knowledge. Through dialogue and shared tasks, learners not only learn content but also develop inclusive thinking (Main, 2021). Collaborative learning fosters mutual respect, distributed expertise, and multilingual scaffolding. Thus, Vygotsky's theory

supports CL as both a pedagogical strategy and a means of affirming learners' cultural identities (Palincsar, 1998; Daniels, 2001).

In classrooms, teachers and peers are powerful models for learners. Learners learn academic content, problem-solving strategies, and appropriate social behaviour by observing others (Bandura, 1977; O'Rourke, 2006; Lawal & Obebe, 2011). Vygotsky focuses on how learners construct knowledge through social interaction and cultural mediation, especially within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). He emphasizes scaffolding (support from more knowledgeable others) and the central role of language (culture) as a cognitive tool (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism shows how individuals internalize knowledge through interaction. Thus, offering an understanding of learning in educational settings.

The study explores how teachers perceive and implement collaborative learning strategies (CLS) in intercultural classrooms and examines the contextual challenges they encounter in fostering inclusive and effective learning environments. This study poses the following questions:

1. How do teachers perceive the role of collaborative learning in promoting engagement and inclusion in intercultural classrooms?
2. What strategies do teachers use to implement collaborative learning in culturally diverse settings?
3. What challenges do teachers face when facilitating collaborative learning in intercultural classrooms?

### **3. Literature Review**

This study reviews the literature related to collaborative learning (CL) and focuses on CL in intercultural settings and teachers' influence. The article begins by discussing CL as a pedagogical approach, followed by a discussion on teachers' perception of CLS and the difficulties of implementing them.

#### **3.1. The nature and principles of collaborative learning**

Collaborative learning is broadly defined as "a pedagogical approach that allows groups of learners to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product" (Laal & Laal, 2012, p. 491). Similarly, Le, Janssen, & Wubbels, (2018) describe it simply as a set of strategies that facilitates learner collaboration in small groups to maximize both individual and collective learning. Essentially, CL is a pedagogical approach that turns away from teacher-centred instruction towards a learner-centred approach focused on active participation, social interaction, and shared cognitive responsibility (Acharya, Sigdel, & Poudel, 2024; Qureshi et al., 2023). CL positions teachers as facilitators not a presenters of knowledge. It allows them to create the learning environment, lead and support the group process, and assist learners in collaborating with one another (Muganga & Ssenkusu, 2019; Nuñez-Enriquez & Oliver, 2021).

Collaboration does not simply happen by putting learners in a group; it must have a structure that defines the interaction among them and has to include positive interdependence and individual accountability (Keiler, 2018). The process requires higher-order thinking skills, including analysis, synthesis, and compromise, as learners must communicate effectively and negotiate to achieve shared outcomes (Astiswijaya, Kusnandi, & Juandi, 2023; Brindley, Blaschke, & Walti, 2009). When structured well, CL acts as a potent driver of critical thinking and complex problem-solving skills for the 21st century (Loes, Henderickx, & De Laet, 2021). When learners actively engage with content and one another, they construct ownership of their learning, which has been shown to improve motivation and the overall depth of their learning (Lee & Hannafin, 2016).

#### **3.2. Teachers' perceptions of collaborative learning in intercultural contexts**

Although teachers often indicate a positive stance towards CL, their perceptions become increasingly nuanced when applied to intercultural classrooms. Teachers' beliefs are important because they impact

teachers' openness to adapting their practices based on the need to create an inclusive environment based on principles such as intercultural humility (Punti & Dingel, 2023). In a study of English as First Language (EFL) teachers, Alzubi, Nazim, and Ahmad (2024) found an overwhelmingly positive perception of implementing CL. Nevertheless, limited implications or informants from other factors (e.g., teaching experience and gender) were significant, resulting in a general acceptance of the inherent value of the pedagogy.

However, other studies indicate considerable variability. Gao's (2020) study of teachers of Chinese in Australia indicated inconsistent perceptions of effective intercultural strategies were moderated by teacher experience and educational setting. Punti and Dingel (2023) further identified specific obstacles to facilitating CL - a lack of skills for collaborative learning, personal attitudes, and behaviours to focus on learning, effective communication, and goal setting. Alt and Raichel (2021) highlighted the pedagogical challenges teachers face in designing and facilitating CL in Culturally Linguistic Diverse (CLD) classes. In this context, it was found that teachers did not have the translingual skills and culturally relevant knowledge to facilitate learners' collaborative teamwork. Hergott et al. (2020) described it succinctly when they noted there is a significant need for teachers to have a collaborative stance. In fact, teachers can impede intercultural CL as they hold particular culturally relevant knowledge that could help scaffold discussions among learners or suggest communicative strategies. However, feedback provided by a teacher in a CL context may not shift the learners' interactions (Hergott et al., 2020).

Rethinking collaborative learning across diverse cultures reveals a complex landscape of pedagogical, linguistic, and socio-cultural barriers (Navisotschnig, 2024; Kyriakidis, Koikas, & Elbahwashy, 2024). All of these conditions had to be taken into consideration in the domains that learners operate and navigate. To help develop an understanding of learning, collaborative pedagogies seek to enhance group planning around knowledge construction for learners. These actions are potentially difficult to implement in practice, which highlights the importance of pedagogically preparing interventionist educators. When viewing interventions as an ongoing transformation for practice, these suggestions require professional partnerships, reflective thinking, continual learning, critical insights for developing practice, and engagement with a clearer sense of collective purpose across several initiatives (York-Barr, et al., 2006). When teachers believed they could manage, intervene, and connect the discussions made in practice, and observe the transformation of students from Lesotho for their own development, it produced a marked change (Mofolo, 2017). These takeaway messages are significant and capture the sentiment in a quantitative study undertaken by Quintero, García, and Peña, (2021). In a study that used survey data to examine how CL influences student engagement, satisfaction, and group cohesion, it was found that well-structured collaborative environments significantly enhance learner motivation and interpersonal trust—especially in culturally diverse settings (Quintero, García, and Peña, 2021). Acharya, Sigdel and Poudel (2024) also noted several practical issues facing teachers, including a diversity of language levels, cultural variances of communication, equitable participation, and too little time and space. In this cluster of studies, the authors divided their findings into categories that suggest that low-quality professional development and a lack of professional development are major recurring issues that further complicate other challenges. This means that they are doing their best but are not finding systematic ways to address the demands of the intercultural classroom (Tran & Seepho, 2022).

### **3.3. Synthesis and identifying the research gap**

The literature affirms that CL is a viable and sustainable pedagogy. However, CL, like any pedagogy, in intercultural contexts is deeply reliant on the capacity of the teacher to navigate the surrounding challenges

associated with learners' skillsets, group work dynamics, and cultural differences. Therefore, while the research has generally characterised teachers' perceptions and documented varying levels of implementation challenges, there are two marked gaps in the literature. First, there is a geographic and contextual gap. There is some interesting research from other African contexts (Molla & Muche, 2023), however, most of it comes from Asia, Europe, or North America. While some research has focused on some of these dynamics in the specific socio-historical and educational context of Southern Africa, particularly Namibia, a gap remains. Second, while prior research has identified the challenges, there is comparatively less research that has employed in-depth qualitative approaches to understand how educators perceive and live these challenges. In particular, understanding how teachers perceive CL's impact on intercultural relationships and the challenges that remain most salient to them as educators is important for generating contextually relevant solutions. This study aims to address these gaps by utilising a qualitative approach to understand how teachers perceive CL in a multicultural private school in Windhoek. Ultimately, this study provides a deep understanding that is lacking in the current academic literature.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

This study is grounded in interpretivist epistemology, which posits that meaning is constructed through lived experience and social interaction. Interpretivists seek to understand phenomena by exploring the subjective perceptions and contextual realities of participants (Geduld & Sikwanga, 2020). Accordingly, this research employs a qualitative methodology to investigate how teachers perceive and implement collaborative learning strategies (CLS) in intercultural classrooms, and to uncover the challenges they face in facilitating CL among culturally diverse learners. The interpretivist lens enables a nuanced understanding of how teachers make sense of their practice within complex cultural dynamics, and how these experiences shape their pedagogical decisions.

##### **4.1. Participants**

Six out of ten teachers from a small private school in Windhoek participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 23 to 45 years old. There were three females and three males. Three teachers were Namibians and three were Zimbabweans. All teachers use English as the medium of instruction, which is the language of instruction in the country. Learners at the private school are culturally diverse, hailing from all parts of the country and beyond.

##### **4.2. Sampling strategy**

This study employed a purposive sampling method, selected for its capacity to identify participants who possess specific characteristics critical to addressing the research objectives. Purposive sampling is particularly well-suited to qualitative research, where the aim is to generate rich, contextually grounded insights rather than to generalize findings to a broader population (Creswell, 2014). In this case, the focus was on teachers with direct experience implementing collaborative learning (CL) in intercultural classroom settings.

From a total pool of ten eligible teachers, six were purposefully selected based on their demonstrated engagement with CL practices in culturally and linguistically diverse environments. The diversity of cultural backgrounds among both teachers and learners added a layer of pedagogical complexity, necessitating participants who were familiar with the nuances of facilitating inclusive, collaborative learning. This sampling approach also allowed for flexibility in refining participant criteria as the study progressed (an essential feature in exploratory research seeking to uncover emergent themes and lived

experiences).

#### **4.3. Procedures**

Following formal approval from the school principal, the study was conducted with six teachers who voluntarily agreed to participate. These participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience with collaborative learning in intercultural classroom settings. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both consistency and flexibility in exploring individual perspectives.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was scheduled at a time and location convenient to the participant, ensuring comfort and minimizing disruption to their professional responsibilities. The interview questions were developed by the researcher and refined through a pilot exercise involving two teachers. Feedback from the pilot helped sharpen the clarity and relevance of the questions, thereby enhancing the instrument's validity and reliability. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, and the recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The sessions were conducted in a relaxed and conversational manner to foster openness and authentic reflection.

#### **4.4. Data analysis techniques**

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed for a systematic exploration of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and strategies related to collaborative learning in culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) settings.

Following transcription of the recorded interviews, the researcher engaged in a multi-phase coding process. First, initial codes were generated by reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify recurring ideas and concepts. These codes were then organized into broader themes that reflected the research questions, such as perceptions of engagement and inclusion, implementation strategies, and challenges encountered. Throughout the process, constant comparison was used to refine categories and ensure consistency across data sources. To enhance credibility, the researcher maintained an audit trail and engaged in peer debriefing with two colleagues familiar with qualitative research. The final themes were interpreted in relation to existing literature and the study's conceptual framework, providing a nuanced understanding of collaborative learning in intercultural classrooms.

#### **4.5. Ethical considerations and reliability**

Prior to data collection, formal approval to conduct the study was obtained from the school authorities. Ethical principles were rigorously upheld throughout the research process, in accordance with established qualitative research standards (Maree, 2016). All participants were provided with clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Identifying details were removed from transcripts and reports to protect participant privacy.

To ensure reliability, a consistent and systematic approach was applied across all semi-structured interview sessions. The same interview protocol was used with each participant, and interviews were conducted under comparable conditions to minimize procedural variation. This uniformity in data collection enhanced the dependability of the findings. Additionally, the researcher maintained detailed records and an audit trail to support transparency and replicability.

## 5. Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview data yielded three overarching themes that are closely aligned with the study's research questions. The themes reflect the multifaceted experiences of teachers working within intercultural classrooms and offer insight into both the pedagogical and relational dimensions of collaborative learning (CL). The first theme, perceptions of collaborative learning, captures how teachers conceptualise CL as a vehicle for promoting learner engagement, fostering inclusion, and building intercultural understanding. The second theme, strategies for implementation, highlights the diverse approaches teachers employ to adapt CL to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) settings, including group structuring, scaffolding techniques, and the integration of culturally responsive content. The third theme, challenges in facilitation, reveals the practical and interpersonal difficulties teachers face when attempting to create equitable and effective collaborative environments.

Each theme is supported by a set of subthemes that emerged inductively from the data, offering a more granular view of teacher practice and perception. These subthemes are illustrated with direct quotations from participants, which serve to ground the analysis in authentic classroom experience and enrich the interpretive depth of the findings. Together, the themes provide a coherent narrative of how collaborative learning unfolds in intercultural classrooms, shaped by both pedagogical intent and the lived realities of diversity.

### 5.1 Perceptions of collaborative learning in intercultural classrooms

Participants consistently viewed CL as a powerful tool for promoting learner engagement and inclusion. All participants described how group activities encouraged participation among learners who might otherwise remain passive, particularly those from marginalised linguistic or cultural backgrounds. Participant Mboti (not real name) noted that: "When learners work together, they feel more confident to speak, even if their English is not perfect." The inclusive nature of CL was seen as fostering mutual respect and intercultural understanding. Participant Iyaloo (not real name) put it this way: "I've seen learners who were shy or isolated begin to open up when they're placed in supportive groups. It's not just about learning content. It's about learning to listen, respect, and value each other's differences." She emphasised that CL created a space where learners could build confidence through peer interaction, especially when cultural and linguistic diversity was acknowledged as an asset rather than a barrier.

**Increased learner engagement through peer interaction.** All participants shared the notion that peer interaction in CL settings can unlock participation and confidence. Participant Kati (not real name) put it this way: "I've noticed that some learners who rarely speak during whole-class discussions become surprisingly active in small groups. They feel safer, and they're more willing to take risks when they're learning alongside peers." She emphasised that CL created a more inclusive and dynamic environment, where learners were motivated not just by the task, but by the relationships and mutual support within their groups. Furthermore, participants were of the view that CL created opportunities for friendship formation among learners in the school.

**Enhanced inclusion of linguistically diverse learners.** The majority of participants were of the view that CL was widely perceived as a mechanism for fostering inclusion among linguistically diverse learners. Participants noted that CL activities allowed students with varying language proficiencies to participate meaningfully, often through peer scaffolding and non-verbal communication. Participant Taimo (not real name) observed, "Collaborative learning gives my multilingual learners a chance to shine in ways that traditional assessments don't. Some of them struggle with written English, but in group work, they contribute ideas, explain concepts in their home language, and help others understand." He emphasised

that CL created a more inclusive space where learners' linguistic diversity was not a limitation but a resource. Peer interaction in CL allows learners to engage meaningfully and build confidence. Many participants acknowledged that this inclusive dynamic was particularly evident when learners were encouraged to draw on their home languages or cultural knowledge as part of the collaborative process, thereby validating their identities within the learning space.

**Positive shifts in classroom dynamics and learner confidence.** Participants reported noticeable improvements in classroom atmosphere and learner confidence as a result of sustained collaborative learning practices. The shift from teacher-centred instruction to learner-centred interaction cultivated a more democratic and empathetic classroom culture. Participant Mbotu (not real name) reflected, "Once learners realise their ideas matter in the group, they start to believe in themselves more. You can see it in how they speak, how they sit, how they take initiative." He stressed that these shifts were not only behavioural but also emotional, as learners began to feel a sense of belonging and ownership over their learning journey. All participants agreed that this is particularly important in classrooms marked by cultural and linguistic diversity.

### 5.2 Strategies for implementing collaborative learning

Participants employed a range of strategies to adapt CL to their culturally diverse classrooms. These included structured group roles, multilingual scaffolding, and culturally responsive content. The majority of the participants emphasised the importance of intentional group composition to balance language proficiency and cultural representation. Participant Chilinda (not real name) put it this way: "I mix learners carefully so that each group has someone who can help others without dominating." Participants were of the view that using a variety of CLS in the classroom requires teachers to be fully aware of the importance of cultural sensitivity.

**Strategic group formation.** All participants stated the importance of intentional group composition to ensure balanced participation and intercultural exchange. According to participants strategic grouping was used to mix learners by language proficiency, cultural background, and learning style. Participant Iyaloo (not real name) put it this way: "I don't just let learners choose their own groups. I mix them so that each group has someone who can guide, someone who needs support, and someone who brings a different perspective. This approach helped mitigate dominance by more vocal students and encouraged peer support." Many participants echoed the sentiment that the deliberate structuring fostered inclusive dialogue and reduced social clustering along cultural lines.

**Use of multilingual support tools.** To accommodate linguistic diversity, teachers incorporated multilingual scaffolding strategies such as bilingual glossaries, translation apps, and peer interpretation. Participant Taimo (not real name) shared, "Sometimes I allow learners to discuss in their home language first, then present in English. It helps them process ideas without the pressure of perfect grammar." According to participants, multilingual support tools enabled learners with limited English proficiency to engage more confidently in collaborative tasks. All participants shared the view that such practices validated learners' linguistic identities and promoted deeper conceptual understanding.

**Integration of culturally relevant materials.** Participants reported that embedding culturally familiar content into collaborative tasks enhanced learner motivation and intercultural awareness. Half of the participants stated that they used materials reflecting local traditions, languages, and social issues to spark discussion and bridge cultural gaps. Participant Kati (not real name) noted, "When I use examples from learners' own communities, they engage more. They feel seen, and they bring their own stories into the group work." Participants stressed that this strategy not only enriched the learning experience but also

positioned diversity as a pedagogical asset.

**Role assignment to promote equitable participation.** All participants agreed that assigning specific roles within groups (such as facilitator, note-taker, timekeeper, or presenter) was a common strategy to ensure that all learners contributed meaningfully. They found that role clarity reduced passive participation and empowered quieter students. Participant Chisheko (not real name) remarked, “Giving each learner a role helps balance the group. Even the shy ones know what’s expected, and they step up. The cultural minorities also are free to share their unique experiences.” According to participants, the role assignment approach fostered accountability and cultivated collaborative skills across diverse learner profiles.

### 5.3 Challenges in facilitating collaborative learning

Despite its benefits, teachers reported several challenges in implementing CL. Participants expressed that language barriers, uneven participation, and cultural misunderstandings were common among learners in the school. Several participants said that some learners struggled to collaborate due to differing communication styles or reluctance to engage with peers from unfamiliar backgrounds. Participant Kati explained that: “Some learners prefer to work alone because they don’t feel comfortable sharing ideas with others who speak a different language from theirs”.

**Language proficiency gaps.** One of the most frequently cited challenges by participants was the disparity in learners’ language proficiency, which often hindered effective communication and participation during collaborative tasks. Participants noted that learners with limited English struggled to express ideas or follow group discussions, leading to frustration or withdrawal. Participant Mboto (not real name) explained, “Some learners have brilliant ideas, but they can’t say them clearly in English. They end up staying quiet, and the group misses out.” Participants agreed that language proficiency gap not only affected individual confidence but also disrupted group cohesion and task completion.

**Cultural resistance or discomfort.** Participants observed that cultural differences sometimes led to resistance or discomfort among learners, particularly when collaboration required open dialogue or shared decision-making. Certain learners were hesitant to engage with peers from unfamiliar backgrounds due to ingrained social norms or past experiences. Participant Iyaloo (not real name) shared, “I’ve had learners who refuse to work with others just because they come from a different tribe or speak a different language. It’s painful, but it’s real.” Participants observed that cultural resistance required sensitive facilitation and deliberate efforts to foster mutual respect and understanding.

**Unequal contribution within groups.** Uneven participation was another recurring challenge identified by participants. Some learners dominate discussions while others remain passive during CL activities. Participants noted that without clear structures or accountability, group work could reinforce existing hierarchies rather than promote equity. Participant Taimo (not real name) remarked, “There’s always that one learner who does everything, while others just sit back. It’s hard to make sure everyone pulls their weight.” Most participants stressed that the unequal contribution within groups often led to frustration among more active learners and limited the learning opportunities for quieter ones.

**Time constraints and curriculum pressure.** Despite recognising the value of collaborative learning, participants struggled to implement it consistently due to time limitations and curriculum demands. The pressure to cover prescribed content within tight schedules often left little room for extended group activities. Participant Chilinda (not real name) noted, “Collaborative learning takes time (time to plan, time to manage, time to reflect). But with the syllabus we have, it’s a luxury we can’t always afford.” This tension between pedagogical ideals and systemic constraints was a common theme across interviews.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Perceptions of Collaborative Learning in Intercultural Classrooms

The findings of this study affirm that teachers perceive collaborative learning (CL) as a transformative pedagogical approach in intercultural classrooms. Collaborative learning enhances learner engagement, inclusion, and confidence. These perceptions resonate strongly with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which posits that learning is inherently a social process, mediated through interaction, language, and shared cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Peer Interaction and Engagement.** Participants consistently highlighted the role of peer interaction in unlocking learner engagement. This aligns with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), wherein learners achieve higher levels of understanding through guided interaction with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Participants' observation that learners feel safe and are willing to take risks in small groups reflects the scaffolding effect of CL, where social support enables learners to stretch beyond their current capabilities (Palincsar, 1998). The formation of friendships and mutual support networks further reinforces the idea that learning is not only cognitive but also relational.

**Inclusion of linguistically diverse learners.** The inclusive nature of CL was particularly evident in its capacity to engage linguistically diverse learners. Teachers described how multilingual students contributed meaningfully through home language use, peer scaffolding, and non-verbal communication. This supports Vygotsky's emphasis on language as a cultural tool for meaning-making and development (Vygotsky, 1986). The reflection that CL gives multilingual learners a chance to be heard illustrates how collaborative settings validate diverse linguistic repertoires, transforming them from perceived deficits into assets. Such practices echo Cummins' (2000) notion of identity affirmation, where learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds are leveraged to foster deeper engagement and academic success.

**Shifts in Classroom Dynamics and Learner Confidence.** The shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred interaction was seen to cultivate a more democratic and empathetic classroom culture. This transformation aligns with Vygotsky's view that learning is co-constructed through dialogue and shared activity, rather than transmitted unilaterally by the teacher (Mercer, 2000). Participants' observation that learners believe in themselves more when their ideas are valued reflects the empowering nature of CL, where learners gain agency and confidence through participation. These emotional and behavioural shifts are particularly significant in intercultural classrooms.

### 6.2 Strategies for Implementing Collaborative Learning

The strategies employed by teachers to implement collaborative learning (CL) in culturally diverse classrooms reflect a nuanced understanding of the social and cognitive dimensions of learning. These strategies (intentional group formation, multilingual scaffolding, culturally responsive materials, and role assignment) are deeply aligned with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which emphasises the centrality of social interaction, cultural tools, and mediated learning in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Strategic group formation.** Participants consistently emphasised the importance of deliberate group composition to foster balanced participation and intercultural exchange. This practice resonates with Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners benefit from interaction with more capable peers who can scaffold their learning (Vygotsky, 1978). By mixing learners based on language proficiency, cultural background, and learning style, teachers created heterogeneous groups that encouraged mutual support and reduced dominance by more vocal students. Participants' strategy of scaffolding illustrates the intentional structuring of peer dynamics to optimise learning potential. Grouping

practices also reflect Rogoff's (2003) concept of guided participation, where learning occurs through shared engagement in culturally meaningful activities.

**Use of multilingual support tools.** The integration of multilingual scaffolding tools such as translation apps and peer interpretation demonstrates a commitment to linguistic inclusivity. Vygotsky viewed language as both a cultural tool and a medium of thought, arguing that learning is mediated through the linguistic resources available to the learner (Vygotsky, 1986). The practice of allowing learners to discuss in their home language first exemplifies how teachers leveraged learners' linguistic repertoires to deepen understanding and reduce cognitive load. This approach aligns with Cummins' (2000) theory of linguistic interdependence, which posits that proficiency in the home language can support academic development in the second language when both are valued in the classroom.

**Integration of culturally relevant materials.** Embedding culturally familiar content into collaborative tasks was seen as a strategy to enhance learner motivation and intercultural awareness. This practice reflects Vygotsky's emphasis on cultural mediation, where learning is shaped by the tools, symbols, and narratives of the learner's sociocultural context (Vygotsky, 1978). Participants' observation that learners recognised when their communities are represented in classroom materials underscores the role of cultural relevance in fostering engagement. Gay (2010) argues that culturally responsive pedagogy affirms learners' identities and promotes equity by integrating their lived experiences into the curriculum. In this study, such practices positioned diversity not as a challenge but as a pedagogical resource.

**Role Assignment to Promote Equitable Participation.** Assigning specific roles within collaborative groups was a widely used strategy to ensure equitable participation and accountability. This aligns with Vygotsky's view that social roles and structured interaction facilitate cognitive development by organising participation and clarifying expectations (Vygotsky, 1978). Participants' view that even the shy learners step up illustrates how role clarity empowers learners who might otherwise remain passive. Moreover, the inclusion of cultural minorities in leadership or expressive roles supports the development of voice and agency, key constructs in sociocultural learning theory (Mercer, 2000). Role assignment thus becomes a tool for democratising classroom discourse and cultivating collaborative competencies.

### 6.3 Challenges in Facilitating Collaborative Learning

While collaborative learning (CL) offers significant pedagogical benefits, its implementation in intercultural classrooms is not without challenges. The findings of this study reveal that teachers encounter persistent barriers such as language proficiency gaps, cultural resistance, unequal participation, and systemic constraints. These challenges are best understood through the lens of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which emphasises the role of social interaction, cultural mediation, and scaffolding in learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Language proficiency gaps.** The disparity in learners' language proficiency emerged as a major impediment to effective collaboration in culturally diverse classrooms. Vygotsky (1986) viewed language as the primary tool of thought and communication. Language is essential for mediating learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). When learners lack sufficient linguistic resources, their ability to engage in meaningful dialogue and co-construct knowledge is compromised. Participants' observation that learners stay quiet despite having brilliant ideas underscores how linguistic limitations can silence valuable contributions and impede group cohesion. This finding aligns with Mercer's (2000) argument that dialogic teaching requires shared language competence to facilitate joint reasoning and understanding.

**Cultural resistance or discomfort.** Cultural discomfort and resistance to collaboration were also prominent challenges in the findings. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that learning is culturally situated, and

that social norms and values shape how learners interact. In intercultural classrooms, differing communication styles, tribal affiliations, and historical tensions can inhibit open dialogue and mutual engagement (Banks, 2006, Gay, 2010). Participants' observation of learners refusing to work with peers from different tribes illustrates how sociocultural boundaries can obstruct collaborative processes. This echoes Rogoff's (2003) notion that guided participation must be culturally sensitive, requiring educators to mediate not only cognitive but also relational dynamics within diverse learning communities.

**Unequal contribution within groups.** The issue of uneven participation reflects the challenge of maintaining equity in collaborative settings. Without structured roles or accountability mechanisms, group work can reinforce existing hierarchies, allowing dominant voices to prevail while marginalising quieter learners. Vygotsky's theory suggests that learning is optimised through reciprocal interaction, where each participant contributes within their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). Participants' concern that one learner can do everything highlights the need for intentional scaffolding and role distribution to ensure balanced engagement. This finding supports Gillies' (2016) assertion that effective CL requires explicit norms and structures to promote inclusive participation.

**Time constraints and curriculum pressure.** Systemic constraints such as limited instructional time and rigid curriculum demands were identified as barriers to sustained CL implementation. Although Vygotsky advocated for process-oriented learning, where time is allocated for exploration and dialogue, the realities of schooling often prioritise content coverage over collaborative depth. Participants' observation that CL is a luxury they cannot always afford reflects the tension between pedagogical ideals and institutional expectations. This challenge is echoed in Daniels' (2001) critique of educational systems that undervalue the social dimensions of learning in favour of standardised outcomes.

## 7. Conclusion, implications and recommendations

Framing these findings within Vygotsky's social constructivism underscores the pedagogical value of CL in fostering inclusive, dialogic, and culturally responsive learning environments. The study illustrates how peer interaction, shared meaning-making, and scaffolded support can bridge linguistic and cultural divides, enabling all learners to participate actively in their educational journey. In this sense, collaborative learning becomes not only a strategy but a philosophy of education rooted in equity, empathy, and collective growth.

Vygotsky's social constructivism lens highlights the importance of intentional social design in collaborative learning. Teachers in this study did not merely facilitate group work; they orchestrated learning environments that leveraged cultural and linguistic diversity as assets. Through structured interaction, scaffolded support, and culturally responsive content, they created spaces where learners could co-construct knowledge, develop confidence, and engage meaningfully across difference. These findings underscore the pedagogical power of CL when grounded in sociocultural awareness and dialogic practice. Finally, this study reveals that effective collaborative learning requires more than grouping learners (it demands intentional mediation of linguistic, cultural, and structural factors). Teachers must act as cultural brokers and facilitators. They should design learning environments that support equitable dialogue, scaffold participation, and navigate systemic constraints. The study findings underscore the need for context-sensitive professional development, curriculum flexibility, and policy support to realize the full potential of CL in diverse classrooms.

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