

Public School Students' Performance in an EFL Cooperative Work Environment

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For two years we worked with public school teachers in the PROFILE¹ program at Universidad Nacional de Colombia to support them in developing their theoretical and practical knowledge to implement cooperative learning methodologies. Their opinions, which were gathered by means of interviews, reports and surveys as they participated in this teacher development program, have been the sources for this study. The data collected informed us how these EFL educators perceived their students' performances and attitudes towards cooperative experiences in public schools. Our findings report how students grew at a personal and group level and how they undertook their learning of English by means of this methodology.

Key words: Cooperative learning, teacher development programs, methods for the teaching of English, public school students' English learning

Durante dos años, trabajamos con profesores de colegios públicos en el programa PROFILE de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia, apoyándolos en el desarrollo de conocimiento teórico y práctico que les permitiera implementar metodologías del aprendizaje cooperativo. A través de entrevistas, reportes y encuestas reunimos sus voces mientras participaban en este programa de desarrollo profesional para docentes. Los datos recolectados nos mostraron cómo estos profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera percibieron el trabajo y las actitudes de sus estudiantes hacia el aprendizaje cooperativo

1 The PROFILE program has supported the professional development of English teachers in Colombia since 1995. Some of these programs have been financed by the SED (Secretaría de Educación Distrital).

en los colegios públicos. Nuestros hallazgos informan como los estudiantes crecieron a nivel personal y grupal y como asumieron el aprendizaje del inglés al involucrarse en esta metodología.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje cooperativo, programas de desarrollo docente, metodologías para la enseñanza del inglés, aprendizaje de inglés en estudiantes de colegios públicos

Introduction

Popular knowledge around the world conveyed by means of various proverbs such as “*United we stand, divided we fall*” (U.S.A) or “*Drops that gather one by one finally become a sea*” (China) have reminded us for decades that the chances of getting where we want to go might be higher if we are not alone. Nevertheless, it seems that at this time in history, the message becomes stronger. Not only do countries come together to form powerful economic blocks, but also institutions encourage and reward their members to unite in different kinds of formal associations. Words such as *community*, *group* or *globalization* reveal a clear world tendency to join efforts with our neighbors or more distant people in achieving common goals.

Influential theories in education have not been separated from a constant concern in providing the means to understand and support students’ development of skills to work with others as part of a growing need in daily life. To begin with, when Winters (cited in Cárdenas, 2001) looked at the studies on learning styles, he categorized one of them as “playing with socializing”. Another area of research emerges from the field of social learning strategies, in which authors such Oxford (1990), by means of her influential work, have remarked how cooperation influences pupils’ learning. Additionally, in his innovative theory about multiple intelligences, Gardner (1993) describes the “interpersonal intelligence”. Finally, the role that ICT (Information, Communication and Technology) plays today, has had a strong influence on the development of strategies for working as teams, especially in the use of WIKIS (Websites designed to facilitate additions or editions of a topic created in collaboration). In their case study of narrative construction, Ang, Zaphiris & Wilson (2005) identify collaborative activities with massive multiplayer online role playing games that engage people in problem solving situations. In their paper, they highlight how Wiki technologies can be used to facilitate language learning among youth through game playing as a social activity. We understand that nowadays the teaching field uses technology to enhance cooperation in our society.

Having a growing need and a substantial theoretical background to undertake the task of educating our students in cooperation might seem enough; nevertheless, we keep finding cases in which our students or we ourselves find it hard to understand and experience the value of cooperation. In some situations one realizes, for example, that it might be difficult to believe in the abilities of others or individuals might ignore how to interact in groups. Our work with public school teachers on the issue of cooperative work reminded us once again of the importance of considering contextual factors when planning pedagogical strategies. Public school teachers, our participants in this study, constantly remarked how cooperation was not easy for students in this setting.

Our desire to gain substantial knowledge about public school students' performance in their cooperative work led us to explore their teachers' views on this issue. Thus, we posed a research question in relation to how a group of educators who participated in a Teachers Development Program (TDP) perceived their students' performances and attitudes while they implemented Cooperative Learning in their settings. During 2004 and 2005, we worked in the TDP PROFILE at Universidad Nacional in Bogotá. Approximately 300 teachers from public schools in different zones of the city attended the program and took workshops in pedagogy, language and research to improve their teaching qualifications. We were two of the tutors who supported the programs which lasted about a year.

Cooperative Learning: A Rainbow of Studies

Cooperative learning, cooperative work or CLL (cooperative language learning) are the names given to the pedagogical approach in which students work in groups. However, though organizing learners in groups might be a main feature of this approach, it is not the only relevant aspect required. Several authors, among them Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., and Holubec (1999), Kagan (1994) and Slavin (1988), agree on the fact that minimal principles are required to enhance Cooperative Learning in students. In regard to this, Kagan mentions *positive interdependence, individual accountability, simultaneous interaction and equal participation*.

Students' awareness of the fact that there is a mutual need to count on the contribution of each member of the group to reach the expected objective, *positive interdependence*, can be structured several ways. This principle is related to the goal a team has, how group members share resources, and the way they interact through their roles to reinforce this interdependence. Individual accountability implies

preparing students so they work not only to develop the sense of a team, but also a sense of personal ethics. Furthermore, a learner's work on a team should reflect his/her commitment to others and his/her effort to succeed on his/her own.

The principles Kagan called *simultaneous interaction* and *equal participation* have been described under other names by different authors. For example, Johnson, D.W. and Johnson, R.T. (1999) refer to *Face to face promotive interaction* as well as *Interpersonal and Small-Group Skills*. They explain that conditions set for cooperative learning need to account for an individual's willingness to participate by supporting each other's endeavors and building attitudes to work efficiently in teams. Moreover, *Group Processing* is included as a condition to keep in mind regarding the importance of constant reflection on cooperation.

Recent studies in cooperative learning reveal educators' continuous interest in understanding its various facets. Allen (2006), Gillies (2002), Meza and Pérez (2001), and Vaughan (2002), have looked at the effects of cooperative learning on students' development of academic competencies, attitudes and values. Gillies concluded that a group of 5th grade children, who had been trained in cooperative learning skills for several weeks in different primary grades, kept their learning and cooperative behaviors for 2 years after their initial training took place. Vaughan studied 5th grade students of color in their mathematics lessons in Bermuda. He found that cooperative learning positively supported these students' academic learning and positive attitudes. Allen pointed to the implementation of a specific type of cooperative learning project called group investigation in her article. The project was based on Slavin's (1988) six stage model of group investigation, which may serve as a model to investigate aspects of L2 cultures. The author concluded that using this approach encourages intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes toward learning.

Specifically in the area of EFL/ESL, Aldana (2005), Cuestas (2006), González (2001), Obando and Hidalgo (2001), and Porto (2001) have established a strong connection between the values and abilities that students acquire as members of a team with their improvement in their abilities to communicate in the foreign language. Aldana and Porto's research in relation to learners' involvement in writing skills by means of cooperative strategies highlight a maximization of processes vs. product approaches in students' learning. Aldana also commented on the role of cooperative learning in the dynamism and curiosity of learners which required high levels of responsibility in her pupils. In her study, Cuestas integrated the use of songs and cooperative learning to support her students' oral production. She found that

learners working in small groups mixed their use of English and Spanish to prepare activities which were supported by a relaxed atmosphere that this approach facilitated. Finally, González's research focused on seventh graders' oral interaction in cooperative groups. The results of her study revealed that oral interaction was greater since they spoke more of both English and Spanish supported by their peers in a freer and more social environment. Additionally, vocabulary building and language comprehension were perceived as achievements in the learners' process.

Some researchers, as the ones mentioned in the following lines, have also contributed to determining how students learn in whole-large-group teaching as compared to cooperative learning settings. Peterson and Miller (2004) involved undergraduate students attending a psychology course in a study in which the students' experiences at the cognitive, emotional and motivational levels were contrasted while they worked in cooperative learning in comparison with a traditional whole class environment. At the end, they concluded that "cooperative learning led to a greater cognitive involvement, somewhat greater activation and higher levels of motivation, including higher engagement, greater perceived importance of the tasks and more optimal levels of challenge in relation to skill" (p.132).

Research Methodology

Approach

This research was carried out under a qualitative approach; it concentrated on characterizing the various features of cooperative learning that a group of educators perceived based on their students' performances and attitudes in EFL classrooms. It was centered on what happened to the phenomena studied under natural conditions. What was stated in previous lines also implies that reality was approached as a "multi-layered, interactive and shared social experience that can be studied from the participants' perspective" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 179).

This study is framed within what Clandinin and Connelly (1994) call *narratives* since, as investigators, we accounted for teachers' events and perceptions as they worked with their students in cooperative learning. Additionally, we gathered, analyzed and reported their narratives of experiences. Similarly, we can also relate *accounts*, as defined by Cohen and Manion (1980, p. 204), as written or spoken descriptions to share with others our experiences of something that happened. These

accounts can involve the specifications of events, behaviors, actions which were observed by participants of this research study.

Context, Population and Participants

This article reports a second set of findings of a study carried out in the TDP PROFILE. The first part was published in Profile Journal N° 8 at Universidad Nacional. It described how public school teachers viewed themselves as they implemented cooperative learning. Educators' roles as well as concerns when they organized their classrooms to set up this method were analyzed. Moreover, participants' self encouragement for professional development during this experience was discussed.

We counted on the participation of seventy teachers, twenty males and fifty females, as participants in this study. Their ages ranged between the early twenties and the fifties. All of them had undergraduate degrees which helped to license them to work in the area of English Language Teaching. They were secondary teachers who worked in 34 public schools in Bogotá. Cooperative learning was a new experience for most of them. Based on a survey they took (see Appendix), it was determined that only 15% of the participants had used cooperative learning, though not systematically.

In their schools, these educators worked with groups of from 40 to 50 students. They constantly referred to the social and economic conditions of their learners since many of the neighborhoods in which these schools were located seemed not to be safe; and authorities reported that the crime rate was high. Furthermore, in many cases their students did not seem to have a suitable environment at home to help them cope with scholastic demands.

Family disintegration, alcoholism, drug abuse and early pregnancy were difficult situations that they faced every day. Precarious economic conditions at home moved these young men and women to start working in informal jobs at an early age to support their families. Our visits to specific schools in these problematic zones enabled us to evidence the powerful indicators of all these situations.

Instruments

In order to answer our research question, *How do a group of educators, who participated in a TDP, perceive their students' performances and attitudes towards cooperative experiences in*

public schools?, we used suitable instruments to work on this qualitative research. Surveys, teachers' reports and interviews were the primary sources of information while field notes were the secondary ones.

Surveys

This instrument helped us elicit useful information to characterize the features of cooperative learning that participants perceived in relation to their students' involvement in this methodology. Seventy teachers were asked to fill in a survey at the end of the program. All the questions were open. The survey started by asking participants about their favorite methodology during the TDP program. Then other questions about their implementation, such as reasons for their preferences, duration, their acquaintance with that methodology and results in their lessons, along with their recommendations for other teachers who might try to use it, gave an overall picture of the approach teachers followed (see Appendix).

Teachers' Reports

We might associate this type of instrument to what Hubbard and Power (1993) call students' artifacts. Educators were asked to write a report on the implementation of this methodology in their classes. These reports not only helped to identify the features of cooperative learning in students, but also to illuminate our views on participants' planning and implementation of cooperative learning while their students became acquainted with this approach. The information found in their reports provided us with some useful data that enabled us to see public school students through their teachers' eyes. They described what they had observed during their implementation in relation to theirs and their students' experiences, feelings and opinions of this approach. We analyzed 32 reports from teachers in 2004 and 2005. These reports were not expected to be graded as such since teachers self-evaluated their participation in workshops.

Interviews

Their purpose was the same as the one mentioned above for surveys. A semi-structured interview was used to explore teachers' implementations of cooperative learning in their lessons. The base questions for the interview were basically the same ones used in the survey plus the ones that emerged during the

process which provided an opportunity to expand their comments. Twenty-one teachers were interviewed. They volunteered to answer and their responses were recorded on cassette.

Field Notes

This instrument was a secondary source to support our analysis. We used field notes to record teachers' comments in the feedback session in which they shared with their peers their implementation of cooperative learning. They voluntarily decided to tell their stories. We took notes each session, recording as much as possible of what they said. These records represent the oral version of their written reports. Since audio recordings were not available to use for the direct transcriptions of teachers' accounts, we resorted to field notes. We acknowledge the previous fact as a possible limitation of these specific data for analysis.

The data analysis in this study was based on a grounded approach. This approach invites the researcher to read the data several times to look for similar themes or patterns (Freeman, 1998). We examined information from surveys, teachers' reports, interviews and field notes to identify and understand how it was related to the question in this study. We codified data by means of color to help ourselves group what was common in the information. We followed techniques such as making comparisons and questioning initial findings to establish patterns which we then labeled.

After this initial organization and identification of data, we engaged in grouping the concepts which had emerged into categories according to their commonalities. As we carried out the grouping and regrouping of concepts using comparisons and questioning, we took notes of our reflection on specific features we could see in the findings. The next step involved was defining and naming categories in terms of their characteristics. At the end, we explored the relations among categories to finally present what we found in a meaningful manner.

In order to ensure trustworthiness, we used techniques from qualitative approaches to provide validity for our study. Based on Burns (1999), the principles of triangulation can be used for this purpose. To begin with, methodological triangulation was considered in this study, (Denzin, 1970, p.301; Merriam, 1988, p.69); we collected data by means of interviews, surveys, teachers' reports and field notes. Secondly, since our study involved "the used of several researchers" (Janesick, 1994, p.215); we took into consideration investigator/researcher triangulation. Each

one of us analyzed data on his/her own based on the method mentioned above. After that, we contrasted our views to come to final conclusions in regards to results.

How the Profile Program Supported EFL Public School Teachers' Implementation of Cooperative Learning in their Schools

As part of the pedagogical module that teachers studied in the TDP PROFILE, there was a workshop² in cooperative learning. In these spaces, the two tutor-researchers involved participants in analyzing the principles of cooperative learning as they experienced the approach.

To begin with, a warm-up activity was designed to explore participants' previous knowledge about cooperative learning in connection with their teaching situations. Then, based on Kagan's (1994) principles, teachers reflected upon the essential elements in this pedagogical strategy and discussed key issues, such as the differences between traditional group work and cooperative learning. After that, educators were asked to carry out a task. In order to do so, they assumed specific roles to achieve their objective. In teams, they were expected to discuss some other theoretical aspects of cooperative learning. While doing that, they summarized the information and wrote those facts on a petal of a flower they would decorate. As they worked on teams, tutors had the role of guides and moved from group to group exemplifying possible ways to support educators in building a cooperative structure in their groups.

Specific techniques to fuel interaction kept a suitable cooperative working atmosphere and helped participants' to monitor their own labor and distribute resources as well as duties. The first workshop resulted in having groups of teachers reporting to the others and adding their petal to the others to create a flower. To close, a general discussion allowed people to comment on their impressions, feelings and perceptions in regard to the activity. Educators were encouraged to implement the approach in their schools and to produce a written report about it. They had the tutors' support since their lesson plans and project were usually returned with feedback, thus they improve their practices at schools.

2 More details about how this workshop took place and how teachers implemented cooperative work in their schools can be found in (López & Viáfara, 2007).

The final phase of this workshop in cooperative learning took place weeks later when most of the participants had already implemented the approach in their institutions. They gave an oral report in that session about what happened as they worked with their students using cooperative learning. Tutors and colleagues participated by asking questions and discussing points of view about the results. Experiences were contrasted and provided reassurance when positive outcomes were revealed or encouragement to keep on trying when negative experiences were narrated. Educators, their peers and tutors also contributed with advice and examples to help others understand various issues.

Teachers' reports about their experiences in implementing cooperative learning in their classes allowed us to determine the procedures they used. Teachers' frequency of implementation in using this approach went from once to most of their classes during a semester. On average, the participants implemented it for approximately two months. We concluded that there was no fixed pattern in the way they arranged their proposals to involve students in cooperative work. They applied this methodology in basically all secondary school grades. Using project work, developing language skills, learning vocabulary or just initiating groups were the general goals participants had for involving their pupils in this approach.

Teachers organized their students by groups to carry out cooperative learning activities in several ways. Most groups were composed of 4 or 5 students. To build these teams, a significant number of educators allowed students to choose their peers freely; other teachers selected group members based on their judgment and a few discussed with their students the assignment of members to groups. Sometimes teachers assigned students to groups at random by means of numbers, kinds of tasks, previous group arrangements or a combination of weak and strong students; other times their pupils chose their group members by taking into account friendship, popularity and a perception of their peers' responsibility.

When educators selected the roles of team participants, they took into account the requirements of tasks, the perception of students' skills and the division of reading texts since they assigned specific chapters of documents to each group. Not all the educators allotted roles to learners in each group. In some cases, their students were the ones who frequently decided the specific role each member would have. The criteria pupils followed to allot roles were influenced by the prestige of having a role such as monitor, the perception of their abilities and skills, the needs of the group and the leader's decisions.

Analyzing Teachers' Views of their Students' Performances in an EFL Cooperative Environment

This section refers to a general picture that teachers drew of their students when they implemented cooperative learning in their classes. As teachers introduced this methodology in their lessons, their students assumed different attitudes and expressed their thoughts about this pedagogical strategy.

The participants and their students' journey through cooperative learning began with their involvement in organizing groups. These dynamics and the way students related to each other on their teams provided the largest amount of information we obtained as researchers. Teachers' accounts in regards to their learners' participation in this experience fell into three main groups: personal growth, group growth and English learning as an appealing endeavor.

Students' Personal Growth in Cooperative Learning

Though the main issue being described in this study relates to learners' skills to work with others, data analysis informed us that they adopted attitudes at an individual level to fit into their groups. This was similar to the musicians who listen to the sound of their own instruments and tune them to blend with the orchestra. The previous findings match the conclusions of Guerrero, Alarcón, Collazos, Fuller and Pino (2000) in their study about group indicators for cooperative work in which they underline the influence that each team member's personal attitude and styles have on their group. Figure number one summarizes which specific features in learners' personal growth could be established for the case of public school students. Each one of them will be discussed in the following lines.

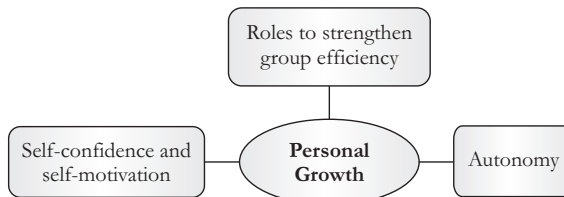


Figure 1. Specific features of students' personal growth.

Self-confidence and self-motivation

When teachers worked in their cooperative classes, they noticed that their students seemed to have more confidence in themselves, in their skills and ideas than on previous occasions. We related this attitude on the part of students with their possible development of self-esteem. Crandall (1999, p. 234) mentions Slavin and Edwards's studies which underline the role of group interdependence in the development of students' self-confidence and self-esteem. The security learners gained while working with their peers might have inspired them to be more self-motivated. On the one hand, teachers noticed that their students' knowledge and skills were valued by their group and this was a specific aspect that influenced learners' self-motivation. On the other hand, educators reported that students felt much more relaxed without having the teacher hanging over them all the time. This might have contributed to building the students' self-confidence and the reduction of anxiety. Lucia, an 11th grade teacher, reported that cooperative learning was "*an enjoyable and relaxing experience which helped students to throw off their inhibitions when speaking, so that they felt more freedom to speak, to express what they felt, leaving aside their inferiority complexes*" (Personal communication).³ Although teachers reported the previous positive tendencies, some of them also referred to laziness and lack of interest as perceptible behaviors noticed in specific students.

Autonomy

Based on teachers' comments, autonomy was evident in different students' attitudes. To begin with, educators remarked that students tried to be responsible for their own process. Martin, a tenth grade teacher who worked with two of his colleagues in the program, commented that he perceived, in regards to his students' involvement in cooperative learning, the following: "*I want to talk about my pupils' responsibility and concerns. Students thought that their own effort would have an effect on teamwork, therefore, they had to do their best*" (Personal communication). As activities became much more challenging, these tasks encouraged more active and dynamic work in students. Therefore, learners had better participation and attendance. Furthermore, students worked at their own pace. Since the teacher was not always directing the learners,

3 The teachers' quotes included from page 17 to page 25 were originally produced by participants in Spanish, but were translated by the authors of this article.

individual students on the teams could regulate their own rhythm in relation to their group and they reached certain agreements about making their own decisions. Finally, students looked for their own strategies to adapt to this new way of learning. As an instance of the previous feature, students showed more openness to asking questions in order to clarify their doubts.

Similar to the previous findings and while mentioning the benefits of cooperative learning, Crandall (1999) highlights the opportunity that students have to move from interdependence to independence by means of this approach: "They gain autonomy, self-control and less dependency upon outside authority" (p. 239).

Individual growth in cooperative work was closely related to group growth; apparently, a mutual relationship between these two took place. This might be related to the fact that efforts an individual makes to excel enrich his/her group, and the group's achievements enhance an individual member's willingness to keep on working. A clear example of the learners' constant transition between their individual work and their labor in the group involved their assumption of roles. In this case, individuals were responsible for their own roles to support their group and as the group progressed, they were encouraged because of positive results or mutual support.

Roles to strengthen group efficiency

From the experience, learners developed a sense of group belonging because they identified themselves by means of the new roles they were assigned. They believed they could create their own character and perform their functions as their groups expected them to. Students seemed to understand the relevance of performing specific roles. The following excerpt reveals what Maria, a participant, observed about this aspect in her students: "*They became involved in their function and their work was more productive... at this point it was not so important who did the job, but that each one was responsible for the role he/ she had been assigned*" (Personal communication). By means of this educator's comment, it can be established that role assignment in group work started to change. As teachers participated in this experience, they revealed that learners were less dependant on the ones with higher skills to master specific tasks.

Another example comes from a 6th grade teacher whose class worked for a couple of months to prepare a fashion show project. She said, "*When they started to check their abilities in order to do a good job in the group, it was easy for them to assume roles. They*

decided among themselves who would be the general monitor, the materials monitor, the secretary..." (Personal communication).

Role assumption sometimes meant a challenge for educators. They remarked how several learners preferred certain roles because of the prestige or power they implied. Being a monitor, for instance, was the favorite. Another issue was that students who might have revealed specific skills for a role in their daily interaction surprisingly did not assume that role on their teams. Finally, it was found that the roles that students enthusiastically took on at the beginning, eventually faded as the experience progressed. The previous section focused on learners' individual behaviors and attitudes to build work relations with their peers in cooperative learning. The next section describes those work relations as students adjusted to groups.

Group Growth in Cooperative Learning

Figure 2 displays the elements that could be identified as features in learners' interpersonal ability to grow on a team. In spite of the fact that working in groups within a cooperative learning philosophy caused educators and their students a lot of difficulties and frustrations, it could be established that the benefits surpassed hardships.

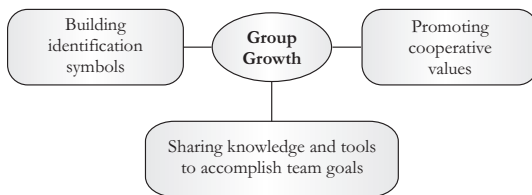


Figure 2. Group Growth features.

Building identification symbols

Forming groups implied a series of tasks for teachers and students in this experience. In order to establish these groups, members' identification with their teams seemed to emerge as part of the process. Students proposed a series of slogans and signs that revealed their sense of belonging to a team. We have taken some examples of expressions that students used as they formed their groups. These are

“winners”, “dreamers” or “conquerors.” As can be seen, most of the names referred to students' feelings of success. Apart from the previous expressions, some other learners resorted to a series of slogans; for instance, “*When you act, be yourself*” (Taken from teachers' reports).

Sharing knowledge and tools to accomplish team goals

Apparently in cooperative classes, students had the chance to contribute to making problem solving easier. A more participatory performance from the learners' side took place since they were the ones who searched for specific information to be used in the activities. Throughout this type of practice, teachers could see that students shared materials, tasks, and their knowledge of English, which increased their chances of gaining equal access to the same information. As a result, sharing facilitated the learning process since students learned not only from teachers, but also from their own peers. Finally, evidence showed that students discovered knowledge and abilities they were unaware they had. Marisol, a teacher in a technical public school, expressed what participants experienced in the following lines:

“We are in a school which is very expensive for a public institution. It is technical... I have children that don't eat lunch so they can buy the materials. Cooperative work is a way...I have something that can benefit you and you have something that can benefit me....let's try to get something out of it together,... it represents a balance for the students' uneven conditions” (Personal communication).

However, not all the cooperative dynamics were ideal. Students went through times of disagreement about what they wanted to share with others or their interests in individual tasks. Selfishness appeared as part of what educators reported they saw in several students. Likewise, complaints from learners who felt that they were left alone to do the entire job were detected.

Promoting cooperative values

Students seemed to be much more tolerant with this type of group activity since it involved working in heterogeneous groups. For instance, active and passive learners participated in the same groups. The above situation stimulated a democratic environment; students felt committed and worked on teams while respecting each other's views as well as characters. Moreover, opportunities to participate equally were generated. For instance, they assumed specific responsibilities, shared power

and control over decisions made in groups. Moving beyond respect, students showed solidarity. The case of learners who had a high level of English and helped students with lower levels exemplified this value. Many times leaders or other team members supported the ones who had difficulties with the language. This promotion of values was seen by educators as a potential generator of social change which is urgently needed in their students' communities. As a whole, teachers thought that cooperative learning enhanced positive relations among students, decreased conflicts and improved their characters.

Martin, a teacher who worked for a complete semester with cooperative learning in an area of the city called Meusa, commented as follows:

"The fact itself that the children reinforced some values such as solidarity, their own cooperation, respect for the word of another...one can see that, individually, they are very selfish, but in the group, since the work is for everyone, then some students said 'Here, take this pen',... 'Who'll lend me an eraser?'. They are responsible because of their concern that their work will affect the work of the group...it was not 100%, but it was generally true" (Personal communication).

In contrast to the above, we identified cases of a lack of values, which were part of the non-cooperative students' attitudes. Evidence in the teachers' reports, surveys and interviews informed us that in some situations learners lacked consideration for others. For instance, when students were regarded as the ones who did not usually work but caused trouble, their peers sometimes did not accept them as part of the team. Learners regarded by their peers as "slow" were sometimes looked down on. Additionally, educators wondered if some students might have worked because they felt forced to do so by their partners and that that was not always positive. These situations eventually caused disagreements and fights. To close, it is relevant to mention that competitiveness was a tendency in several cases. Rivalry took place, especially among groups. We identified, by means of participants' comments, how their pupils strongly believed that showing themselves as the best team was very important for them. So far, the features of public school students' individual and group involvement in cooperative learning were discussed. To close the discussion of findings, we will expound on what participants highlighted in terms of their student's learning of English.

Learning English as an Appealing Endeavor

In addition to the development of the previous interpersonal skills, teachers also noticed certain aspects in regard to English learning in their cooperative classes. At

this point, it is important to mention that communication in both languages, Spanish and English, facilitated carrying out the tasks in classrooms. This matches Cuestas (2006) findings expounded upon on page 6. Teachers remarked that their pupils had the chance to learn to listen to others for reaching a consensus and solving problems. They made judgments and this allowed them to discuss their opinions and beliefs. Although this kind of interaction was mainly carried out in Spanish, learners tried to communicate in English by drawing on past experiences as well as knowledge and by developing vocabulary and grammar. The following figure accounts for the specific features in students' learning of English.

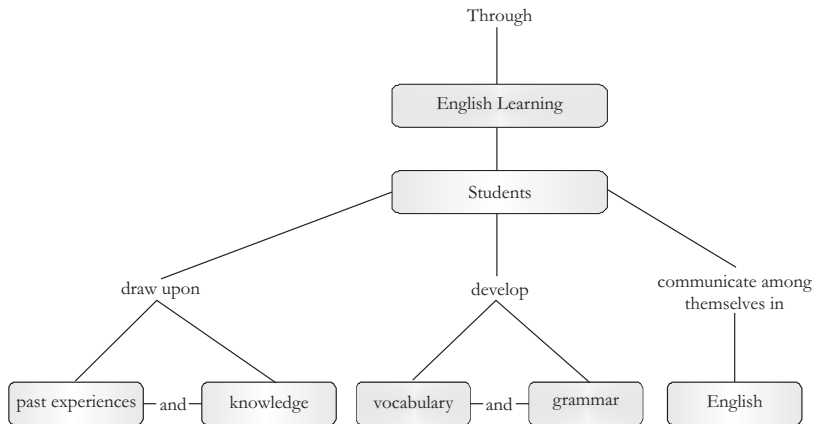


Figure 3. Features of learning English.

Assuming a different attitude in the learning of English

In this study, a recurrent topic of conversation brought up by educators was related to their students' lack of motivation towards learning the foreign language in the public sector. It seems that pupils' distance from English in their daily context caused a lack of enthusiasm about learning it. For example, some of these students might be thinking about working in professions which might not require the use of a foreign language so they feel that acquiring one does not seem to be relevant. The majority of the students had rejected English by acting indifferently, avoiding any commitment to study and laughing at others who had tried to use the language.

Educators emphasized that by means of this experience, a large number of students started to modify their perception towards the English language. Martin, a teacher who worked with two of his colleagues in the program, planned and implemented a project in 10th grade. The following excerpt contains what he expressed about his experience:

“The students had a completely different attitude towards English. Before, they said ‘how boring this is’... What struck me was a girl in particular because her totally negative attitude changed to a totally positive one and I had to tell her that I was impressed and the reason was that strategy (the cooperative work)” (Personal communication).

This educator, just as other participants, emphasized how a different atmosphere was perceived in English classes. Students showed more willingness to undertake the various tasks while learning English.

Using the target language to communicate

Students did not only seem more interested in understanding what the teacher told them in English, but also tried to overcome their barriers to speak in the foreign language. A teacher commented, “At the beginning, they did not understand and I had to translate, but later I would tell them, ‘let us make an effort to speak in English’. They tried and succeeded.” Another educator remarked as follows:

“At the very beginning they mostly used English in writing. It was difficult for them to accept that our intention was to guide them to speak too. We were concerned at the very beginning, but at this point in October, I can say we are reaching our goal of having students speak English...at least a little bit...” (Personal communication).

Educators reported that the cooperative learning environment in their classes contributed to their students’ efforts to ignore the stigmatization they felt from others if they tried to speak English. Their new strategy created a natural situation to use the language. Besides having the chance to communicate with a group of peers, there were several academic and real life purposes for attempting to use the foreign language.

It seemed that preparation for communication also required that students work on their grammar and vocabulary. Using strategies such as their retrieval of previous knowledge as well as peer and self-correction, learners worked on improving their structural knowledge of the language. Specific aspects in basic grammar and handling spelling patterns were underlined as examples of the previous feature by teachers.

Conclusions

Public school students at the level of individual and group relationships seemed to have matured from their involvement in cooperative learning. Notwithstanding, several challenges appeared to remind us of the importance of continuous research in this field to prepare more meaningful learning experiences.

The dynamics of working cooperatively in class led to teachers identifying the development of students' interpersonal skills that contributed to a more complete performance in order to cope with the cooperative world today. Learners' personal growth is among the positive aspects that emerged from this experience. Teachers claimed that their students seemed to start gaining self-confidence, self-esteem and self-motivation. In regards to the previous attitudes, it was possible to establish that learners felt much more relaxed since their anxiety was reduced and they enjoyed and felt encouraged to learn. Additionally, educators understood that students developed some attitudes of respect.

Students also had the chance to work independently since the teacher's control in class was reduced. They worked at their own pace and adapted easily to this new method. It seemed that learners' understanding of the relevance of having specific roles was a key element for their positive attitude during the experience. Educators expressed that they started to perceive a change in students' roles; learners assumed responsibility for this new job in class, increased their level of participation as well as attendance and were dynamically involved.

Listening to and reading teachers' opinions showed it was positive to know that group growth created a great impact in class dynamics. It was much more substantial to create a product in which everybody participated. The combination of forces, materials, and attitudes as well as knowledge enriched the experience making team members feel much more confident. Learners perceived they were important for each group and they were valued by peers. Cooperative work also supported the promotion of values. Learners discovered many aspects and abilities that they did not know they had. The previous attitudes were regarded by educators as possible generators of social change. They noticed that their pupils exhibited more positive relationships; they were less conflictive and improved their characters.

The work dynamics established in connection with cooperative work contributed to students' learning English. They made an effort to use the target language, which they combined with the use of Spanish to discuss and become involved in preparing as well as solving tasks. Opportunities for interaction and participation in terms of

English production increased; this method encouraged communication in English. During these exchanges, learners got support from their peers because they corrected their English and explained the right answers to one another. Along with this, past experiences and knowledge were valued and learners' improvement in grammar and vocabulary was also achieved.

Various aspects in students' attitudes challenged educators' efforts to implement cooperative learning. There were cases in which their pupils' lack of interest or social skills caused conflicts on teams. The following pedagogical implications discussed these limitations, among other issues.

Pedagogical Implications

The implementation of cooperative learning needs to involve a constant and sustained effort from teachers and learners since the gains that can be obtained might be affected by certain drawbacks. To begin with, students who do not like working on a team or in groups may affect the cooperative learning atmosphere. For instance, students might not enjoy working on a team for a long time. Providing alternative ways of team organization can prevent students' feelings of being obliged to work in groups. This could happen because of pressure being imposed by teachers.

Educators should create a relaxing and motivating atmosphere where learners enjoy what they do. If students are not well taught by means of a series of clear procedures and instructions, a feeling of dissatisfaction may emerge because individuality will dominate class work dynamics; the previous situation might lead learners to engage in different activities from the ones carried out by their team which means a loss of interest.

Another issue which requires teachers' close attention is how labor is distributed on teams. For instance, teachers need to guide the participation of team members when all of them want to be the leaders or when there are learners who assume roles without fulfilling requirements. Students can have the freedom to organize themselves provided that their interaction as well as learning tasks are properly structured. Additionally, frequent reflection in relation to what cooperation really implies needs to be encouraged so that chaotic situations might be avoided.

Other educators think that if there is no identity in each team or group, some students might be excluded or teams' objectives might not be reached. We, as educators, need to be attentive to provide meaningful activities to generate a sense of belonging to groups and a clear structure which fosters cooperation.

Bearing in mind the variation in the distribution of classroom duties, obligations and the power to make decisions as a dynamic process in cooperative learning settings, this approach can be regarded as a step forward to more autonomous EFL learning. This indicates the need to be aware of what working cooperatively might imply.

Finally, cooperative learning being an ideal setting to encourage communication, educators can open to students' spontaneous use of their first and foreign language interchangeably. This requires teachers to understand that students' increase in their use of English will happen progressively as their knowledge and confidence increase.

Further Research

An emerging feature we were able to identify, in relation to students' learning of English, was their apparent use of meta-cognitive strategies in groups to organize their language learning. Teachers claimed that by means of their involvement in this kind of methodology, their students developed an understanding of steps in a process. Unfortunately, this feature could not be developed as a complete investigation topic since the information collected was not sufficient at this stage of our study. Therefore, its exploration could be the subject of another study.

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Appendix

Survey about Cooperative Learning

Dear teacher, the following survey is to explore the experience that has been carried out with you in the pedagogy module of the PROFILE program. We are interested in studying the generated processes from the work done throughout the semester. Beforehand I thank you for your contribution answering the questions, action that will improve work in the area.

1. Did any of the methodologies or approaches studied in the course call your attention?
2. If so, justify your answer; which methodology?
3. Why did it call your attention?
4. Have you implemented this method or approach in your class while you were part of this course?
5. How long did the implementation take? Or how many classes did you take?
6. Have you heard of this method or approach before joining PFPD PROFILE Program?
7. Have you used it before?
8. What happened while the implementation took place in your class throughout the Program?
9. What would you say for teachers who would like to use this method or approach to keep in mind?