The Impact of Cooperative Learning in the Oral Production of 4th Grade Students

Yisela Bolívar Gallego

Universidad de Antioquia

Thesis, Research and Practicum Advisor

Juan Fernando Yepes

Medellin

November, 2017

**Abstract**

This action research project was developed to understand the impact of the implementation of Cooperative Learning Techniques in the oral production of beginner learners. The project was focused on students of fourth grade in a public institution in Medellin.  The data collection was done through the teacher-researcher journal, two interviews to the Cooperator Teacher, recordings of class activities, and a focus group.

After analyzing the gathered data, the findings and interpretations process revealed that the implementation of the CL Techniques to impact students' oral production was affected by external interferences such as reduction of teaching hours, missed classes, and discipline. Additionally, some issues connected to students' knowledge of the target language became highly relevant, particularly knowledge linked with speaking skills, which conflicted with some theory about the benefits of the CL techniques.

*Key words:* oral production, cooperative learning, cooperative learning techniques

**Degree Requirement**

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

**Acknowledgments**

**Table of Contents**

**Preface**

This report gives an account of my experience during the teaching practicum and the development of the action research project in Institución Educativa Francisco Miranda, a public school located in Medellin, Antioquia. As a pre-service teacher of the Foreign Language Teaching program, I had to develop during the first semester of my practicum an action research proposal for a fourth grade in the aforementioned institution.

After observing some classes, I became aware of two situations; first, the group was pretty large for a foreign language class. Second, students learning process was more focused on grammar translation than on skills such as listening and speaking which are absolutely decisive in the teaching-learning process of a foreign language. Besides, issues related to oral production have always interested me since I have found that students in general struggle with expressing orally in English, even when they master the other skills. These situations motivated me to review theory related to large groups and oral production, and one educational approach frequently appeared in this literature review, Cooperative Learning. The decision of working with Cooperative learning was taken because it presented techniques that could answer to issues related to large groups, and foster oral production in students.

Finally, I consider that this action research report presents an opportunity to see the significance of the speaking and listening skills in primary school students. Even more important, to acknowledge many of the hard conditions that English teachers have to face every day in public institutions in Colombia, particularly when they try to promote oral production.

**Description of the Context**

Although Colombia's government has tried to implement an official foreign language education policy since the 1980, it has been the current century that has witnessed the most relevant bilingualism programs. The last proposal, named Colombia Very Well! 2015-2025, is expected to achieve what former bilingualism programs did not reach, high schools' graduates with an intermediate English level. According to this goal, programs have always focused on secondary school, disregarding the importance of teaching a foreign language in elementary school. It is just recently that the Colombian Ministry of Education has initiated different policies for teaching English in primary school. However, teachers and students of public schools are still struggling to have an appropriate English education, situation evidenced in the I.E. Francisco Miranda in the commune 4 of Medellin.

The public institution Francisco Miranda offers pre-school, primary and secondary education for around 2500 children and adolescents. Its philosophy considers the learner as an integral being with attitudes, aptitudes, abilities and skills. Therefore, it offers an education based on a pedagogical model called Humanist social integrator. Analyzing the three words of the pedagogical model separately, the word social represents the school as a change agent; the word humanist stands for the education of the human being, and finally the word integrator is a combination between the conceptual basis and context reality. Additionally, Francisco Miranda's pedagogical model favors several aspects such as: learning, research, an active position of students in constructing their own knowledge, and a mediator role of teachers without discarding the explanatory model.

The class where this action research took place is one of the five fourth grades that are in the I.E. Francisco Miranda during the afternoon. There are forty seven students, twenty boys and

twenty girls. The curriculum indicates that they should attend two-English hours per week. However, their English teacher, Carolina Restrepo Mira, a physical education teacher from Universidad de Antioquia, spends about half an hour dealing with issues related to the classroom size such as taking attendance, class management and discipline. As a result, English language teaching moves toward grammar-translation activities, overlooking oral communication activities which are highly important during primary school.

Taking into account the aforementioned issues affecting the development of oral production in this class, the present project has as a main purpose to determine the impact of Cooperative Learning in the oral production of these fourth grade beginner students.

### Statement of the Problem

Two aspects closely associated in our context were taken into account to draw a problem for this action research study. The first aspect that was considered is related to communicative competence, principally oral communication. As it is stated in a new document for the government's program "Colombia Bilingüe" (Pedagogical principles and guidelines suggested English curriculum – Transition to $5^{th}$ grade) "the emphasis of the curriculum for these grades is to develop oral skills, listening and speaking, aware that children are just starting to read and write in their mother tongue" (p. 38).

However, observations made in the public educational institution Francisco Miranda have demonstrated that students' oral skills are not being developed in elementary school classes. Even this situation could have many causes, one found in grade 4°3 is the great number of students in the classroom. Here is the second aspect considered, the influence of large classes in students' performance in English, particularly in oral communication.

Although there is no an ideal number of students per classroom, Davies and Pearse (2000) affirm "the basic principles of teaching English are the same for groups of fourteen, forty, fifty, or sixty learners. But, it is obviously much more difficult to achieve good results in very large groups" (p. 129). As a consequence, an EFL teacher of a large class like group 4°3 has trouble encouraging students' oral skills. The same aspect was pointed out by the Cooperator Teacher during the interview when she said "Las clases de inglés en salones numerosos son complicadas, particularmente la realización de actividades de producción oral" *(Cooperator Teacher's Interview, May 3rd, 2017).*

During the observations in group 4°3, activities proposed by the teacher demonstrated the lack of oral production activities, as the following excerpts from the journal clearly exemplify them.

"The teacher gave students 3 minutes to think of their name's spelling in silence" *(Journal entry #2, February 22nd, 2017).*

Another example of this issue is the next extract:

"The teacher wrote on the white board: Activity – escriba las características de los siguientes objetos:

1. The door is _____ (amarilla)… 2. The table is _____ (café)…" *(Journal entry #8, March 1st, 2017)*

The first excerpt illustrates how an activity that should be used to promote oral production was done silently. In this case, only two students had the opportunity to spell their names verbally. The second excerpt is an example of the activities that are generally done by the students, indicating again the lack of oral production activities within a class.

Taking into account the main issue affecting oral production in group 4°3, and the literature review done, the present action research project proposed the use of Cooperative Learning techniques to impact students' oral production. According to Slavin (1995) Cooperative learning "refers to a variety of teaching methods in which students work in small groups to help one another learn academic content. In cooperative classrooms, students are expected to help each other, to discuss and argue with each other, to assess each other's current knowledge and fill in gaps in each other's understanding" (p. *2).*

Considering the previous theory, Cooperative Learning could promote oral interaction among students in the target language since they will need to use it to accomplish lesson objectives proposed by the teacher. In addition, students could have feedback from group mates, so the teacher will have some help in a large group that cannot be easily covered. Finally, each student will have different opportunities to speak in the target language; therefore, their oral production will be impacted.

## Theoretical Background

To develop this action research project, three key concepts were defined: large classes, oral production and Cooperative Learning. The latter concept also includes the description of three CL techniques that would be used during the project.

**Large class**

In literature the definition of what a large class is has many interpretations depending on the context. As Hayes (1997) stated "there is no numerical determination of what shape a large class as teachers' perceptions of large classes differs from one context to another" (p.31). In Colombia, the Decree 3020 of 10 December 2002 established that as general rule there must be

32 students per teacher in urban areas. However, other official documents have mentioned

quantities between 30 and 40 students. Taking into account the previous circumstances, this

research project considers the following explanation given by Bahanshal (2013):

> Large classes are those with a specific number of students that teachers cannot handle and
>
> resources are not enough to facilitate the teaching and learning process, and that pose
>
> insurmountable problems for both teachers and students. (p. 52)

**Oral production**

To define the second term relevant for this action research, it is considered O'Malley &

Valdez (1996) definition of oral production in which they state it is the way people share

information about things they are familiar with taking into consideration the conversations'

context. Nevertheless, it was decided that the best definition for this study was given by Byrne

(1991, as cited in Peña & Onatra, 2009) oral tasks involve the productive skill of speaking and

the receptive skill of understanding. It means that learners must develop not only their speaking

but also their listening skills.

**Cooperative Learning**

Finally, the last concept crucial to this action research project is Cooperative Learning.

According to Johnson & Johnson (2014) Cooperative learning:

> CL is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize
>
> everyone's learning. Within Cooperative Learning groups, students discuss the material to
>
> be learned with one another, help one another to understand it, and encourage one another
>
> to work hard". (p.451)

> There are four principles that Kagan & Kagan (2009) recognize as the most important for

the success of Cooperative Learning in the classroom. These principles are: Positive

Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Equal Participation and Simultaneous Interaction. Each of these principles works on different issues inside the classroom:

> Positive interdependence creates mutual support among students, Individual accountability dramatically increases student participation and motivation to achieve, Equal participation makes students who otherwise would not participate or who would participate very more engaged, and Simultaneous Interaction increases the amount of participation per student. (p. 82)

Cooperative Learning can be exploited in a foreign language class in many ways. Considering the context and purpose of this project, three techniques were chosen to develop the actions and determine the impact of it in the students. Brown (2001) gives a definition of technique that summarize different names this concept has had through time: "any of a wide variety of exercises, activities, or tasks used in the language classroom for realizing lesson objectives." The following techniques were found in the Cooperative Learning Handbook and Cooperative Learning book by Kagan as having an impact in speaking.

The first technique called Think-Pair-Share was invented by Dr. Frank Lyman in 1981. As explained in the Cooperative Learning Handbook, this technique is developed in three stages: firstly, each member of the group (or pair) alone will think about the question or topic proposed by the teacher, then each student will exchange their responses with a partner, and finally they will share the pair answers to another pair or to the whole class (p. 58). The second CL structure or technique would be Three Step Interview. Kagan & Kagan (2009) assures that this technique encourages oral communication development and gives each student the opportunity to speak and listen (p. 3.6). This technique allows students to ask, reply and report information. The last technique called Jigsaw was created by the American psychologist Elliot Aronson in 1978.

According to the CL Handbook (2010), Jigsaw consists in a division of a team of students and each member goes to work in expert groups to gather specific information or complete a portion of a task (p. 34).

## Research Questions

How can Cooperative Learning impact the Oral Production of 4th grade students in a large class of a public school in Medellin?

**General Objective**

To determine the impact of cooperative learning in the oral production of 4th grade beginner students.

**Specific Objectives**

1. To characterize oral production in a large class of $4^{th}$ graders.

2. To propose cooperative learning techniques to improve oral production in $4^{th}$ grade students.

3. To evaluate the impact of CL in the oral production of $4^{th}$ graders.

## Action Plan

The present Project was carried out following the qualitative paradigm principles, specifically the methods and procedures of action research. Coghlan & Brannick (2005) describe action research as a cycle in which after a pre-step named context and purpose, four essential steps are used: diagnosing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating (p. 21). Therefore, the first month of the project was focused on class observations in which the main purpose was to diagnose issues that influence the EFL teaching-learning process in the educational institution

and in class 4°3. In order to keep record of these observations, a journal was written during the classes observed.

At the same time, some aspects mentioned by Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & B. S. (2007) about what a researcher must analyze to find a starting point were considered. These aspects included an interest of the researcher, a difficulty of the research target, and an unclear situation present in the field (Dadds. 1985 as cited in Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & B. S. 2007) . After considering this, a starting point was found based on the teacher-researcher own interests and a problematic issue seen in the registered observations.

In addition to the teacher-researcher journal as a source of data, a semi-structured interview with the cooperator teacher was done. According to Cohen & Crabtree (2006) the use of this instrument permits informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms and provide reliable, comparable qualitative data. In the process of this project, the semi-structured interview not only allowed the teacher-researcher to be informed about the CT's insights related to the issues already found in the observations, but it was also possible to point out the main ideas of the  research project. The journal and the semi-structured interview were the only instruments put into action during this first stage since the oral production level of the students was already analyzed using the aforementioned instruments.

The second part of the project would be focused on the development of three Cooperative Learning Techniques to impact the oral production of the students. Based on the work of authors like Kagan and Slavin who have studied CL for many years, this research project introduces different methods that can be applied during in a CL class. For the purpose of this research project, the chosen techniques would be: Think-Pair-Share, Three Step Interview

and Jigsaw. These techniques would be used to teach topics included in the syllabus for fourth grade, but they would target mostly students' oral production skills.

The first technique called Think-Pair-Share would be used in three lessons (one per class) to talk about daily routines and time. During the first lesson, the teacher-researcher would present the topics and work related vocabulary, thus students could use it while doing the activity. The second lesson would start revising students' homework and correcting mistakes with the whole class. After that, the teacher would give a little introduction on how to say the time in English and examples of these structures. Then the teacher would begin the activity by showing a video in which a person talks about daily activities and time, and she would show a photo at the end with the question and answer structures students can follow. After, the teacher would explain the technique and its rules. First, students would have five minutes to think quietly what activities they do in different times of the day. Next, they would share what they thought in pairs while the teacher-researcher would pay attention they try to do it in English, even if they mispronounce or say some grammatically incorrect sentences. Finally, students would share some of the activities they said in pairs with other teams. The last lesson of Think-Pair-Share technique would be used to close the topic and evaluate students.

The second CL structure, Three Step Interview, would be used in three lessons for the topics family members and occupations since it allows students to ask, to reply and report information. Following the previous technique process, the first lesson would be for introducing the vocabulary related to the topic. At the beginning of the second lesson, the teacher would explain the Three Step Interview technique, also pointing out rules students must follow. Then the teacher would show a video in which two characters are developing the technique using the topics. After watching the video, students would think of questions they would ask their partner

in the interview (they could use the ones on the video). After that, students would get in pairs and would start interviewing each other. They should take notes about their partners' answers as they would need to report this during the last lesson of Three Step Interview technique.

The last technique called Jigsaw would be developed in teaching lessons involving speech to talk about actions at the moment. One difference in the development of this technique is that students would learn how to use present continuous by explaining to their classmates.

Throughout the implementation and evaluation process, three collecting data methods would be applied. First, there would be a class observation, using the teacher-researcher journal as an instrument. The journal is an essential instrument that allows the teacher-researcher not only a continuous registration of class development, but also methodology self reflections and evidence to analyze (Bouchon, 2009, p. 33). The second method would be students' work. As the main purpose of the project is to impact their oral production, some of their performances during the activities would be recorded. Before doing this, the teacher-researcher would ask the consent of students' parents. The last method would be a focus group in which the teacher-researcher would have the opportunity to listen to students insights about the project and observe closely the impact of the project (Bouchon, 2009, p. 75).

## Development of Actions

As mentioned before, three Cooperative Learning Techniques were used during this action research project. The three techniques were mainly taken from the Cooperative Learning book by Kagan & Kagan (2009). Before implementing each technique, some tasks were included to boost students' vocabulary and teach some grammar points needed to develop the

techniques. The grammar points and vocabulary which were taken from the syllabus of fourth grade were divided according to the purpose of each technique.

The first technique Think-Pair-Share started with a lesson in which the students watched a video of a person's daily routines to encourage them to say their own daily activities. After writing in English all the daily routines in their notebooks, students repeated the daily activities after the teacher researcher pronounced them. Then, there was an explanation about the "s" at the end of verbs in sentences for third person singular. As homework, they had to write the daily routine of someone in their family, taking into account the explanation about the conjugation of verbs in simple present for third person singular. This class only lasted one hour since there was parents' meeting during the last hour.

The first hour of the second lesson was allotted for explaining how to tell the time in English. First, students draw a clock that had some words and expressions used when telling the time. Then, they did a match activity in which they had to connect six clocks with hours marked to six written hours. After finishing that, students were asked to pronounce the hours in the activity. However, they needed to listen first how to say them as they were mispronouncing. During the second part of the class, students watched a video of a boy talking about his daily routine and at what time he did each activity. After watching twice the video, the activity was explained showing images with questions and answers to talk about the time in which someone does a daily activity. Before getting in pairs to start the activity, they were shown how to pronounce with some examples of questions and answers. Finally, students got in pairs to do the activity. Even though it was a speaking activity, some students wrote what they had to say. Some of these interactions were recorded. The last lesson planned to evaluate could not be done since students did not attend to class two Wednesdays in a row.

During the first lesson of the second technique called Three Step Interview, some activities were done to activate previous vocabulary related to family members and occupations. After brainstorming this vocabulary, students wrote that on their notebooks and had oral repetitions from the teacher-student, so they could learn how to pronounce correctly. The second lesson started with a video about a song that asked what they wanted to be when they were older, showing many occupations represented by cartoons. Then, they saw a video of two children asking each other the occupations of their parents. After watching these videos, students got in pairs, and then they had to write at least 3 questions to ask their partners. However, most of the students took exactly the same questions from the videos. Afterwards, students in pairs started to ask each other some of the questions, and some of the pairs were recorded. That class lasted only one hour, for this reason, they could not finish the last part of the technique.

The last technique named Jigsaw needed some modifications due to time constraints. It was developed to learn and practice the Present Continuous Tense. For this reason, the first lesson started with a review of the Simple Present of verb "be" which is an essential element of the Present Continuous structure. After reviewing this, students watched two videos: one describing what a person was doing with affirmative sentences in third person singular, and then, a second video in which they could see and listen to the question "What are you doing?" and after that, they listened to some affirmative answers in first person singular. Then, there was an activity at the end of the video in which the same question was asked and students needed to answer according to a picture that was shown. To built vocabulary, students had as homework to look up in the dictionary a list of twenty four action verbs which they said in their native language to the pre-service teacher.

The second lesson of the last technique was going to be for forming the first groups to explain the different structures in Present Continuous Tense. Unfortunately, students just attended to twenty minutes of class due to a parents meeting and an earthquake simulation. As a consequence, the technique had to be modified. The following class, students saw four pictures on the TV screen which explained the components needed to express something in Present Continuous Tense. Then, students said in English some examples according to the structures they had just written on their notebooks, using the verbs from the last homework. Finally, a short quiz was done to select the experts for the jigsaw technique. For this, students had to describe what some people were doing in a picture shown on the TV screen.

Before explaining the activity of the last lesson, it is pertinent to mention that many students missed class that day due to a recreational activity they were attending. The lesson started with the formation of groups of four students according to the quiz scores. First, students needed to choose a place from a series of images shown by the pre-service teacher. Each image represented a public place: a street, a library, a public pool, a playground, a mall, etc. After that, they had to draw this image in their notebooks and give their names to the people in it. Then, students were asked to create sentences in Present Continuous Tense to describe what the people in the image were doing. The idea was that the students who showed a good understanding of the topic in the quiz helped the other members of the group. However, as some of these students did not attend class that day, some groups did not have an expert, and to do the activity they relied on the teacher's help. As a consequence, the last part of the activity in which students were going to form other groups to talk about their images and ask questions about the images of the other members, was unachievable.

**Findings and Interpretations**

The two vital instruments used to collect data were the journal kept by the teacher-researcher and the audio recordings of students' interactions. Therefore, the first part of data analysis was focused on the information originated from these instruments. The initial process was done through two steps using software: the first step was to categorize these instruments into codes, and the second step was to group these codes in families. During this initial process, three essential families were identified: student's obstacles for Oral Production, external issues affecting Oral Production and effects of Oral Production activities. For a better understanding of these grouped families, they would be explained immediately after.

Into the first category denominated Student's Obstacles for Oral Production were included all the drawbacks perceived by the teacher-researcher that affected students oral performance. The aforementioned analysis was done principally through the recordings done during the activities in which students evidenced issues such as mispronunciation, lack of fluency, grammar inaccuracy and word order. Although the latter issues, grammar accuracy and word order, are aspects constantly worked by teachers in English classes in the school, students are not familiarized yet with topics they should know according to the institution syllabus. Additionally, students manifested some psychological aspects like nervousness, shyness and anxiety when they expressed orally, especially if they did not have anything written to support their performance.

The issues covering language aspects closely linked with the speaking skill were mispronunciation and lack of fluency. Their origin in this group was connected principally with the approach that had been used to teach English not only in this elementary school, but also in most elementary public institutions in Colombia.  As it was described in the statement of the

problem, English classes in this institution usually disregard teaching elements that encourage and developed speaking skills. As a result, students used to listen to or speak in their native language during English classes.  Richards & Rodgers indicate (1986) in grammar translation "the student's native language is the medium of instruction. It is used to explain new items and to enable comparisons to be made between the foreign language and the student's native language." (p. 4). For this reason, the use of English in the class by the pre-service teacher was highly shocking for most students, and several were inclined to translate every activity that was proposed.

> "A group of students came to show me the sentences they were doing to describe the image, but these sentences were in Spanish. Then I had to instruct again that the sentences had to be done in English." (Journal entry #35)

When examining the language sub-skill of pronunciation, two conditions were seeing throughout the activities that hampered students' appropriate pronunciation of English. In his article about factors affecting oral communication, Khan (2007) mentions first the influence of the native language on the pronunciation of the target language, and second, the tendency of students to produce pronunciation following English spelling patterns (p. 7). The last condition was the most frequent among the group 4°3, especially in words with mute "e" at the end. For example words such as take */take/*, home */home/*, time */time/*, does */does/*, etc.

The absence of these language aspects caused the emergence of several psychological issues that affect students' oral production. As they did not feel confident enough with their knowledge, their performances were doubtful and full of nervousness. The next recording transcription shows how a student was pronouncing and asking a question somewhat correctly, but she felt insecure at some point which made her stop her speech two times.

- Student V: What time do you take… ay no no no

- Teacher: Go ahead

- Student V: What time do you… ay no! (Class recording 012)

Furthermore, some students did not participate in the speaking activities due to shyness or fear to speak in English.

Student 3: a mí me da nervios porque hay veces que uno habla y todos lo miran,

entonces… y se ríen. (Focus group)

Student 4: me da nervios porque casi no sé hablar inglés. (Focus group)

However, many of them were eager to speak in English during the activities when they were going to be recorded. Even some who had evidenced signs of nervousness and shyness were interested in participating when the teacher-researcher recorded their performances.

"I told them that their interactions would be recorded with my phone, and some of them

got excited and asked me to show them how to pronounce so they could be recorded."

(Journal entry #29)

The category determined as External Issues Affecting Oral Production was constituted by a wide range of complications related to students' behavior, class management due to quantity of students, reduction of class hours, and loss of classes. As one of the essential problems found throughout context analysis, issues that were connected to large classes had a special spotlight in the data analysis. However, other obstacles came to light during the implementation of the actions, particularly cancelled classes during this period. The research target group had a great quantity of classes cancelled due to school obligations; teachers' meetings, parents' meetings, or the absence of the Cooperator Teacher.

Even though the great quantity of students in the classroom was a problem already foreseen during the observation phase, and the study aimed to mitigate with the use of CL, results indicated that class management of this large group was still a problem. These findings differs to some extent from those of Jacobs & Loh (2003) when they express that group activities, when organized according to concepts and techniques from Cooperative Learning, help teachers cope better with large classes (p. 1). Although the use of pairs or groups encouraged some students to help their peers during the activities, most of them only relied on the teacher's assistance which did not benefit the reduction of issues related to class management.

Another condition that affected the implementation of the actions was the number of class missed by the group. It is well known that this situation happens often in public educational institutions, and group fourth three is a great example of it since in several occasions they did not attend to class two Wednesdays in a row, or they just had one hour of the two they must attend a week. Circumstances that sometimes made impossible to have a continuity of the lessons, especially in pair or work activities. Furthermore, the CL techniques had to be shortened or done without the proper input for the students, and reducing their chances to share with the rest of the group and the teacher what they had worked on during the techniques.

The last family included codes connected to the implementation of the three Cooperative Learning techniques, the side tasks needed to develop these CL activities, and the effects of these in the students.  First of all, the CL lessons reaffirmed an issue that had been already stated by the Cooperator Teacher, not only fourth grade students, but also most of learners in the institution need a written support of what they are going to say. This means that a spontaneous individual oral production or an interaction with their classmates was not likely to happen.

However, some interactions between students in the second technique indicated an advance in doing speaking activities without a written support. In those cases, students learnt their utterances, questions or answers by heart. On the contrary, spontaneous interaction of students in the target language was not seen during the implementation of the techniques.

Another aspect noticed during the implementation of the techniques was that students needed many repetitions of the correct pronunciation of words and sentences they were going to say. Although Kagan states that "the most frequent use of CL structures is to have students reflect on or review ideas presented in direct instruction or to practice skills presented in direct instruction" (p.22), this study found out that beginner students needed a constant support from their teacher to be able to perform a speaking activity. An example of this phenomenon is how they asked many times the pre-service teacher to do pronunciation drills before doing any of the CL techniques. Consequently, questions and answers they used were most of the time the same since they took only the examples done by the teacher.

This situation did not allow spontaneous oral production during the techniques, and as it was mentioned before, students needed "scripts", teacher repetitions or sentences learned from memory to produce something orally. The following transcriptions from two of the recordings done during the activities demonstrate this situation:

- Student K: What do you want to be… want to be when you're older?

- Student C: Want to be soccer player.

- Teacher: What do you want to be when you're older?

- Student K: Hey profe, yo esa no la sé. (Class recording 045)

- Student Y: What do you want to be…? Profe, la otra parte no me la sé, solo me la sé hasta ahí. (Class recording 046)

Students' listening skills were also encouraged in the course of the implementation since this skill had an important role in the concept of oral production of this action research. The first action was the used of English by the teacher researcher in a great part of the class, even if a translation was needed afterwards. Then, other secondary tasks such as learning new vocabulary, grammar points or expressions related to the topics of the techniques made used of audios and videos to foster students listening skills. Although these activities allowed an input task for the students, in most of the activities they did not attempt to repeat or imitate the pronunciation of the words they listen to, but to translate them.

Interviewer: ¿Qué sentían cuando les hablaba en inglés?

Student 2: pues que nos tradujera.

Student 3: yo sentía como si el inglés nunca se hubiera podido aprender. (Focus group)

Concerning group formation in Cooperative Learning, two factors were found during the implementation of the CL techniques. First, students of this fourth grade were still learning how to work with their classmates, especially when they had to interact with more than one classmate. Second, forming heterogeneous groups was not an easy task when there are a few students who performed well in a very large group. Additionally, most of the students with better language proficiency wanted to work only with classmates in their same level. Taking into account ideas from Jacob & Loh (2003) about young children, this study began with pair work, moving to work in slightly larger groups when they have improved their collaborative skills (p. 9).

In this action research project, two Cooperative Learning techniques were done allowing students to choose their teammates, named in CL student-selected teams. On the one hand, findings identified throughout the activities done with this kind of teams showed that a few pairs or groups worked well together, partially confirming what Kagan (2009) stated about those types

of teams; "as friends often share similar interests and perspectives, these can promote productivity and positive classroom environment" (p. 113). On the other hand, most of the teams confirmed another perception said by Kagan (2009) about the potential pitfalls of student-selected teams in which friends often share interests beyond the classroom content, which can easily lead to off task behavior (p. 113). This kind of off task behavior in student-selected teams was evident inside the classroom in the form of misconduct and indiscipline.

> Student 6: hacíamos mucho desorden… cuando me hacía con todas mis amiguitas, no hacíamos nada.
>
> Student 1: me desconcentraba con ellos. (Focus group)

Finally, outcomes related to the impact on the oral production of the students after putting into action the Cooperative Learning techniques suggested that learners of group fourth three were encouraged to use the target language during the activities, mainly when they worked in pairs. These findings were consistent with Kagan's work (as cited in Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006) who called this boost in production the simultaneity principle since with group activities, potentially at least one person per group is speaking, and at the same time (p. 12). The simultaneity principle was mostly seen when students worked in pairs as they had to interact directly to each other. Moreover, the few students with better academic performance could help their peers, and also learn from them.

> Student 6: (acerca de trabajar en grupo) me gustaba porque aprendía hablar más en inglés y cuando viniera gente de otro lado podía aprender a hablar con ellos en inglés. ¡Uy! Como hoy hablé con un muchacho en inglés, pero ahí…
>
> Interviewer: por ejemplo, si ustedes saben algo, y ustedes pueden ayudar a sus compañeros ¿A ustedes les gustaría hacerlo?

Student 2: yo sí porque a mí me gustaba estar mucho con C… porque yo le enseñaba y él

me enseñaba a mí. (Focus group)

The insights expressed by these students about working with their classmates

demonstrated a change in their attitude towards English, specifically towards speaking it. Even

though it cannot be said it is an improvement or a full extent impact, there was an acceptable

advance in certain students about the willingness to use English in the classroom.

## Conclusions

The process of data analysis has led to conclude that students have more opportunities to

use English language orally while doing Cooperative Learning techniques. Likewise, the side

tasks before or after the techniques allowed them to have a greater input in the target language.

Notwithstanding, the context in which the CL approach is put into action can be considerably

determinant for its impact on the teaching-learning process. Throughout the implementation of

this action research project, certain conditions of the group context made it difficult to carry out

all the actions proposed in the study. As a consequence, the impact in the oral production of the

students was not the one expected by this action research.

Nevertheless, behavior and attitude of some students while performing the techniques

evidenced a decrease in the level of reluctance of students to listen, speak and interact in the

target language during the English class. Additionally, some students that at the beginning had a

low academic performance evidenced a progress in general while working with their classmates.

Although the improvement was not totally related to oral production, it was an advancement of

their learning process in which they might be able to have a better approach to English.

Lastly, this action research project developed the Cooperative Learning approach while facing conditions that should be studied thoroughly such as the reduction of English hours, missed classes, students' misbehavior and reluctance to English, and general conduct issues in the public educational institutions. A deeper study of these issues could determine if the impact of CL techniques in the oral production of students is higher when some of them are overcome, or if they do not influence the students' performance due to other reasons.

## Reflections

Throughout this year as a teacher-researcher and pre-service teacher, there were not only challenging but also eye-opening experiences which at some point became inevitably the same. In the first place, challenging experiences had mostly external causes that could not be controlled by a pre-service teacher. All of these situations contributed to generate even more challenges than the ones pre-service teachers face while doing the practicum. Besides, the development of the action research project in the middle of these conditions needed more time and energy than normal, and sometimes it was too much for just one person to tackle.

In the second place, the eye-opening experiences came from self-expectancies and beliefs I have throughout my studies. Even though our preparation for teaching gives us many theoretical possible situations inside the classroom, the practice brings to light problematic situations that turn your perfect teaching-learning world upside down. For example, a personal eye-opening experience came to pass when some students in the target group seemed disappointed because the noise of their classmates did not allow the class to continue, and activities such as explaining a topic, doing an exercise or playing a game had to be stopped. Most

of these students demonstrated an enormous potential to learn English, but unfortunately the

conditions in which they are learning do not favor their full development.

Finally, it is worth to mention a reflection that has always been floating around since I

started studying teaching foreign languages almost seven years ago which is the misguided

system our country operates for teaching foreign languages. A system that concentrates most of

its resources on teaching English to high school students, neglecting the importance of teaching

it during primary school, considering that it has been demonstrated by studies throughout the last

decades that children in their early years posses more effective and profitable conditions to learn

a foreign language than later in life. As a pre-service teacher and teacher researcher in an

elementary public school for the last ten months, I could state that focusing educational efforts

and resources on this part of the education system is the path to follow towards a better teaching-

learning process of foreign languages in our country.

## References

Altrichter, H., Feldman, A., Posch, P., B. S. (2007). *Teachers Investigate Their Work: An introduction to action research across the professions* (2 edition). Routledge.

Bahanshal, D. A. (2013). The Effect of Large Classes on English Teaching and Learning in Saudi Secondary Schools. *English Language Teaching*, *6*, 49–59. http://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n11p49

Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Bouchon, M. (2009). *Collecte de données: Méthodologies qualitatives*. Service Technique d'Appui aux Opérations (STAO ), Médecins du Monde.

Coghlan, D., & Brannick, T. (2005). *Doing action research in your own organization.* London: Sage Publications.

Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006) Qualitative Research Guidelines Project. http://www.qualres.org/HomeSemi-3629.htm

Daniels, C., Miller, P., Hale, A., Perkins, S., & Hummel, M. (2010). *Cooperative Learning Handbook*. (J. Wisner, Ed.). Succes for All Foundation.

Davies, P. and Pearse, E. (2000). *Success in English Teaching. Oxford: Oxford* University Press

Hayes, U. (1997). Helping teachers to cope with large classes. *ELT Journal*, 1, 31–38.

Jacobs, G. M., & Loh, W. I. (2003). Using cooperative learning in large classes. In M. Cherian & R. Mau (Eds.), *Large classes* (pp. 142-157). Singapore: McGraw-Hill.

Jacobs, G. M., & McCafferty, S. G. (2006). Connections between cooperative learning and second language teaching and learning. In S. G. McCafferty, G. M. Jacobs, & Iddings, C. (Eds.), *Cooperative learning and second language teaching* (pp. 18-29). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Johnson, D., & Johnson, F. (2014). *Joining Together Group Theory and Group Skills*. (Pearson, Ed.). Pearson New International Edition

Kagan, S. (1989). *The structural approach to cooperative learning*. Educational Leadership.

Kagan, S., & Kagan, M. (2009). *Kagan Cooperative Learning*. San Clemente, California: Kagan Publishing.

Khan, H. R. (2007). Problems of Oral Communication in English among Bangladeshi Students. *East West University Journal*, 1, 1–18. Retrieved from http://www.ewubd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Vol_1_2007.pdf

Ministerio de Educación Nacional. (2016). *Pedagogical principles and guidelines*. Ministerio de Educación Nacional (2016). Retrieved from www.colombiaaprende.edu.co/colombiabilingue

Ministerio de Educación Nacional. (2014). *Programa Nacional de Inglés 2015-2025: Colombia Very Well* [Documento de socialización]. Retrieved from http://www.colombiaaprende.edu.co/html/micrositios/1752/articles-343287_recurso_1.pdf

O'Malley, J. & Valdez, P. (1996). *Authentic Assessment for English Language Learners*. USA: Longman.

Peña, M., & Onatra, A. (2009). Promoting Oral Production through the Task-Based Learning Approach: A Study in a Public Secondary School in Colombia. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development,* 11(2), 11-26. Retrieved from https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/11438/36792

Presidente, E., Art, C., & General, S. (2002). Ministerio de Educación Nacional, (1), 6–8. Retrieved from http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/article-104848.html

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching: A*

    *description and analysis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Slavin, R. E. (1995). *Cooperative learning: Theory, research, and practice*. Boston: Allyn &

    Bacon.