UNIVERSIDAD DE ANTIOQUIA

Trabajo de investigación presentado como requisito
parcial para optar al título de:

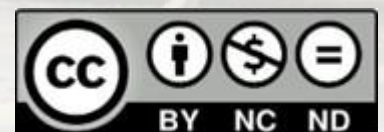**Licenciado en Lenguas Extranjeras**

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2022

Creating Opportunities for Group Work and Speaking Skills through Cooperative Learning in

an EFL Classroom

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Medellín

2022

Abstract

This paper is concerned with an action research study conducted by a developing teacher at a Colombian high school. It was intended to explore the usefulness of cooperative learning to promote English oral production in an EFL class. Through teacher and student journals, learners' products, and a focus group interview, data were collected and subsequently analyzed following an inductive analysis model. This showed that cooperative learning considerably enhanced opportunities for the learners to speak the target language thanks to conditions suitable for oral production set by cooperation such as shared responsibility, peer support, and self-directed learning.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, group work, oral production, student interaction, interdependence.

Título del proyecto en español: Creando oportunidades para trabajo grupal y habilidades para hablar a través del aprendizaje cooperativo en un salón de inglés como lengua extranjera.

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.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to those who were directly and indirectly involved in the development of this piece of hard work.

I am deeply indebted to my family for showing me the way to become the person who I am, and especially to my mother for her lesson on resilience.

Moreover, I could not have taken this journey without the support and guidance provided by my research advisor and my seminar classmates whose perspectives of teaching and learning complemented mine.

Words cannot express my gratitude to Centro Formativo de Antioquia for opening its doors for me to carry out my teaching practicum, as well as to my cooperating teacher for mentoring me.

Last but not least, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to "10° Informática" students whose involvement and kindness made this experience enjoyable and worthwhile.

Table of Contents

Preface

As students, we tend to get together with our classmates to make school time fun, interesting, and even manageable. I regard this as a coping mechanism inherently found in most people; however, it seems to me that there is also a tendency in school to classify learners into performance categories in which individual work is valued more than collective efforts. For this reason, as I embarked upon my teaching career, I decided to look into the prospects of cooperation as a way for learning to take place in a classroom atmosphere where the need for togetherness is met and individual responsibilities become essential contributions to group achievements.

Description of the Context

The Centro Formativo de Antioquia (hereafter referred to in this text as CEFA) is a public all-girls high school located in downtown Medellin. Because of its central location, the high school welcomes about 2.250 students from all across the city and its neighboring towns. Known for its 87-year tradition, CEFA offers secondary and high school education as well as technical training programs starting from 10th grade with the aim of educating students in light of a citizen culture to prepare them for higher education and work life. This educational proposal also draws on diverse values and attitudes, among which are honesty, responsibility, discipline, tolerance, and punctuality; and respectful communication, authenticity, sense of belonging, excellence, and ethics (CEFA, 2022). As a result, CEFA intends to stand out as one of the best educational options available in Medellin.

In regard to the school's facilities, it comprises 33 classrooms ranging from traditional ones with only chairs and whiteboards to classrooms with special equipment for the technical training programs such as computer and chemistry laboratories. Moreover, CEFA features varied sports facilities, a two-story library, and a staff office building. This variety of multipurpose facilities highlights the school's focus on developing all the dimensions of the girls in an optimum and engaging environment.

Learning English as a foreign language is one of those integral dimensions that is promoted in Colombia's Ley General de Educación for high school education. This is why CEFA abides by the suggested English curriculum of the Ministry of Education with its Standards Guide 22 and Basic Learning Rights (MEN, 2006, 2016). Consequently, the English area constitutes one branch of CEFA's Human Sciences Department, the staff of which is composed of seven English teachers. These teachers are in charge of the English classes from secondary school to high school, including the in-depth English course, and the amount of time allotted for each level ranges from 3-hour and 2-hour classes in secondary

school and high school respectively to 4-hour classes for the in-depth courses. Although no

specific methodology is put forward at the school to teach English, the teachers follow the

"Plan de Area," a document containing essential information such as linguistic content and

language notions to be taught as well as cognitive, skill-based, and attitudinal objectives

shaping the learning outcomes of each grade for the English courses.

The cooperating teacher that I was assigned for my practicum process at CEFA is an

English teacher that has worked in different Colombian educational settings for 16 years. She

holds a degree in foreign languages and international businesses as well as teaching diploma

courses. Since 2018, she has been an English teacher at CEFA where she currently teaches

English to 10th grade students.

Among those students are 33 belonging to the Media Design 10th grade, who warmly

welcomed me as a student teacher in the classroom 220. Their ages range from 13 to 15.

While most of them live near the school in neighboring zones, some come from distant places

such as Caldas. Concerning their English background, a small number of the girls have been

involved in extracurricular English activities, namely private lessons, online courses, and

language-learning mobile apps, but the majority of them have only taken English courses as

part of the school's curriculum. Moreover, all the students attach importance to learning

English and regard it as a tool that will help them access a global world in which higher

education and work opportunities require people to be proficient in English language.

Finally, in relation to the classroom environment, the class takes place in classroom

220 equipped with laptops and internet connection, but it is impossible to make the most out

of those devices due to unsolved technical malfunctions. As a result, the class has a

whiteboard, a recorder, and a TV available. The sitting arrangement consists of four

medium-sized desks, one behind the other, each shared by four students. At both sides, there

are smaller desks for the rest of the students, whereas the teacher has her own in the front.

Statement of the Problem

Colombia's Ministry of Education (MEN) acknowledges the global tendency to use English as a lingua franca in different domains of life such as business, research, and entertainment. For this reason, expected more and more to include teaching English as a foreign language, it passed the 1994 Ley General de Educación establishing the mandatory subjects for elementary school and high school education, including EFL classes (MEN, 2018). With the Guía No. 22 Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés, the Common European Framework of Reference for Language was adopted as a guideline to classify the language level required in each school grade (MEN, 2006). To promote the language knowledge and communicative skills expected to be developed in public education, the Basic Learning Rights were designed, serving as a content framework for all the school grades (MEN, 2016).

Tailored to the students' immediate needs, the focus of the English class at CEFA is on the language skills they will be tested on in 11th grade when they take the ICFES standardized test. To this end, the class aims to help the girls develop writing and reading skills, the latter being given more importance as reading comprehension is central to the English part of this high-stake test. On that account, as registered in my classroom observation journal (March 11th), the students worked on vocabulary taken from the textbook to enhance their global comprehension of texts and write true sentences based on their preferences about sports and hobbies. The rationale behind these activities was explained by my cooperating teacher during casual talks that we had after the class. According to her, "students ought to see English as a tool for communication rather than as a set of grammatical rules to be learned by heart and carefully applied when using it" (Journal, February 25th).

Nonetheless, though the students were aware that developing reading and writing skills would be helpful for them, they voiced their desire for a shift in the English class

toward interaction-oriented methods, when they were asked about possible changes they would make to improve their English learning experience in the classroom (Journal, March 18). They believed that through student interaction there would be more opportunities to practice and work on their speaking skills, a language ability they considered as useful as reading and writing. This perception on speaking and group work being relevant for their learning process was confirmed by means of a semi-structured form that I designed and administered on April 1st to obtain insight into their beliefs about the English class, classroom dynamics, and preferences for language abilities. The results showed that the majority of the students were interested in enhancing their speaking skills and felt motivated to work in groups to interact with their classmates.

It is important to note that student interaction was promoted in the classroom to some extent; still, it was seen as a strategy for students to carry out input-related activities and study for a quiz. As a consequence, thanks to the students' comments on their learning expectations, it occurred to me that this strategy could be further exploited in the English class in an attempt to meet such expectations through the implementation of purposeful interaction activities aiming at the development of English speaking skills. This idea is related to the fact that the optimization of student participation and involvement in the learning process requires activities promoting student-student interaction and collaboration (Figueiredo, 2008). That being so, a cooperative approach to improving students' speaking skills seemed to be a suitable and promising course of action to be taken in this research project.

Cooperative learning could be advantageous to the class in general and the students in particular. First of all, it reinforces my cooperative teacher's belief that language learning is an activity in which students learn how to communicate in a foreign language while grammar is assimilated within the communicative purposes (Journal, March 5th). For instance, the

emphasis on student-student interaction seen in cooperating learning could increase the communication opportunities in the classroom in order for students to value the meaning-making potential of a foreign language. Second, implementing cooperative learning strategies could enable Media Design 10th grade's students to put into practice and ameliorate their speaking skills through group work, which was a learning expectation of these students identified on my visits to their classroom.

Theoretical Background

Both the specific problematic and the suggested solution explained in the previous section make it possible to define the particular concepts at play throughout this action research project in order to establish its scope and that of the pedagogical intervention aiming to solve the issue identified in the chosen educational context. The concepts to be discussed below are cooperative learning and speaking skills. Then, trying to explore how these two terms relate in the EFL classroom, I will present the results of two action research interventions carried out in Colombia to contribute to the development of learners' speaking skills by means of cooperative learning.

Cooperative Learning

Kaufman et al. (1997) state that cooperative learning (CL)"is a carefully planned learning strategy that involves forming appropriate, sustained learning groups of interdependent members who have been assigned a specific learning goal" (p. 38). This conception of CL suggests that it goes beyond learner groups spontaneously formed at a given moment in a class; instead, it requires creating work groups in which interdependence means sharing responsibility for a common objective and participating in its fulfillment. Consequently, Johnson and Johnson (2009) have defined five aspects to be included in any CL method: "positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, the appropriate use of social skills, and group processing" (p. 366). These elements may have

teaching and learning implications in a CL environment. On the one hand, teachers can use these aspects as guidelines for lesson planning to monitor group performance. On the other hand, learners can benefit from supporting one another in the learning process.

To further explain the teaching implications of using CL in the classroom, it is pertinent to mention the different roles that teachers should play so that group work and cooperation ensure learning. Davidson and Worsham (1992) proposed a set of "management functions that must be performed" (p. 12):

- Initiating group work,

- Presenting guidelines for small-group operations,

- Fostering group norms of interdependence and mutual helpfulness,

- Introducing new material in some form,

- Interacting with small groups in various forms, and

- Evaluating student performance.

These authors clarify that, while these actions are often carried out by teachers, some of them can be assigned to students, which means that it is the teacher's main job to be a facilitator and a monitor of student interaction, the learning process, and task achievement rather than being the main doer in the classroom. In addition to this, students have the opportunity to become active and supportive participants in the class that are capable of playing a role in the teaching part within the cooperative groups. Consequently, CL distances itself from the traditional classroom, known for the independent work and constant competition among peers for them to be recognized and praised for their positive outcomes (Kagan et al., 1985), because it highlights the relevance of the teacher's guidance and the value of peer interaction.

This noticeable difference in the way teaching is approached can potentially be advantageous to student learning, as CL is seen as a practice that is fundamental for 21st century education (Little, 2012). Reporting on the benefits of this strategy, Bossert (1988)

affirms:

> In general, the research has successfully demonstrated that student achievement is at
>
> least as high, and often higher, in cooperative learning activities as in traditional
>
> classrooms. At the same time, cooperative learning methods seem to promote positive
>
> interpersonal relations, motivation to learn, and self-esteem among students. (p. 225)

This particular effect on learners' motivation to learn was also noticed in the preliminary

questionnaire that I conducted in my group. Its results showed that the majority of the

students would feel motivated to work in small groups in the English class. While this

preference might be explained by their need for developing social skills as teenagers, Kagan

et al. (1985) suggest that students effectively working together tend to develop altruistic

attitudes and a positive perception of school. Nevertheless, this author also points out that

individual accountability is essential for student achievement, that is to say that significant

interaction and motivation to learn only occur when students perform responsibly in their

groups.

Speaking in EFL

In the traditional English classroom, methods featuring grammar and translation

exercises have been used to teach students the written form of language. Viafara's (2008)

historical review of pre-service teachers shows how a focus on grammar-translation methods

shaped their English learning process in high school. While written language is an important

skill to develop, a lack of student exposure to spoken language may hinder their performance

using speaking skills. This is why according to Gutiérrez (2005) "learners of foreign

languages in our context [Colombia] usually do not like to speak the L2 and most of the time

they exhibit a passive attitude in class" (p. 84). To combat this, he suggests helping learners

see a foreign language as a tool for interaction through the practice of speaking skills in a

meaningful way.

If it is crucial to use speaking skills meaningfully in the classroom, then conceiving a communicative model proves to be necessary. This is what Bachman and Palmer (1996) have done to detail the language ability speakers have to develop in order to communicate and create discourse, whether it is written or oral. In their model, two components explain this ability: (a) language competence as the knowledge used to create and interpret discourse and (b) strategic competence as metacognitive processes to monitor language use. Table 1 shows the elements contained in the two previous components. One of the main advantages of this communicative model is that the pragmatic knowledge component seems to be suitable for the EFL class to foster language ability. In terms of oral skills, it not only serves the purpose of structuring the authenticity of spoken language to be taught and included in a lesson, also it allows teachers to describe and assess their students' speaking skills and oral performance.

Table 1

Model of language ability

Language competence	Organizational knowledge	**Grammatical knowledge** Vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and graphology **Textual knowledge** Cohesion and organization
	Pragmatic knowledge	**Functional knowledge** Ideational, manipulative, instrumental, and imaginative **Sociolinguistic knowledge** Register, idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and figures of speech
Strategic competence	**Goal setting, assessment, and planning**	

Furthermore, although language ability matters because it has to be clear for teachers what to expect from their learners' performance when using language orally, awareness of the different kinds of spoken language in the classroom can help increase the opportunities for using the target language. As a result, Brown (2000) offers a classification of the six types of

oral production realized by the students: (a) imitative for identifying specific speech sounds, (b) intensive used for practicing phonological elements, (c) responsive as answers to teacher or student- generated comments or questions, (d) transactional for conveying and exchanging information, (e) interpersonal for the purpose of maintaining social relationships, and (f) extensive to give monologues. The first two elements of this list allow students to become aware of the characteristics of spoken language while being guided by the teacher, but the rest of the elements are embedded in the communicative use of language, thus relating to Eckard and Kearny's (1981) idea that "there must be a sender and a receiver in order for ideas, information, or feelings to be communicated" (p. 4). This way, the types of oral production can hint at the possibility of incorporating CL into the EFL class, so that students explore and practice their speaking skills.

Developing Speaking Skills by Means of Cooperative Learning

Cortés and Sánchez (2018) and Lemos (2012) conducted action research studies so as to perform pedagogical interventions in Colombian public schools with learners experiencing difficulty using English speaking skills in the classroom. Both studies drew on cooperative learning as an appropriate strategy to tackle issues such as lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge as well as little motivation and few opportunities to speak English. Concerning speaking skills, the results showed that learners became aware of the need for enhancing their lexical richness and the importance of listening to their classmates to use language meaningfully. As to the effect of CL on promoting oral skills, data suggested that it helped create opportunities for interaction and practice through the consolidation of groups and adoption of diverse roles by the students.

<div align="center">

Research Question and Objectives

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Research Question

How can the use of cooperative learning in an EFL classroom promote the development of speaking skills among 10th grade students in a public Colombian institution?

General Objective

- To explore the usefulness of cooperative learning in an EFL classroom to promote the development of speaking skills

Specific Objectives

- To assess how cooperative learning strategies influence students' oral production

- To describe the student interaction process taking place within cooperative work groups

- To monitor the learners' oral production shown during the cooperative learning activities

<div align="center">Action Plan</div>

In order to plan out the action strategies to be carried out during the implementation of the research project, my cooperating teacher and I discussed the linguistic, pragmatic, and sociocultural content that needed to be addressed in the second term of the class, so that my interventions would be in line with the syllabus for 10th grade (MEN, 2016). This discussion led to the design of a unit consisting of five 2-hour lessons working as a connecting thread of the content to be taught, which comprised topics related to talking about future plans, spending a weekend in Medellin, and leisure activities. Furthermore, the unit was intended to enhance the students' learning experience through cooperation activities and the practice of speaking skills, with the teacher acting as a guide and a facilitator to provide scaffolding and feedback when necessary. Concerning the resources and materials, this unit plan included hands-on activities, online videos and presentations, worksheets, posters, and images.

In relation to cooperative learning, the students were expected to assume four specific roles that would help structure cooperation in the small groups. These roles were as follows: (a) wordkeeper, in charge of key vocabulary and expressions studied in class, (b) motivator, dealing with active participation among the girls, (c) group observer, overseeing group

effectiveness, and (d) time tracker, concerned with rules related to time and deadlines. In addition, four cooperative action strategies were devised and were to be implemented thus: (a) cooperation and classroom situations, (b) jigsaw activity, (c) short conversations with my peers, and (d) weekend plans presentations. The action strategies involving speaking English had to do with dialogues, conversations, and presentations, while formative and summative assessment tools would be used to provide feedback and grades.

The data collection methods that I found the most appropriate to gather the necessary descriptive, empirical data featured teacher and student journals, class products, and a focus group interview. The journals would be kept throughout the pedagogical implementation, with the student one encompassing open-ended questions for the sake of clarity. The products related to audio recordings that the girls would make and hand in at specific moments, whereas the focus group interview was to be conducted by the end of the pedagogical implementation.

Development of Actions

The actions that I developed with my students during the implementation phase of the research project materialized as a process in which the use of spoken English in the classroom was gradually promoted by means of cooperative learning activities. These activities aimed at preparing the girls for a final task called *Spending a weekend with my friends in Medellin*, providing the necessary vocabulary, expressions, and language functions related to the task.

Although it was supposed to begin in August following the official institutions' holidays, the application of the action strategies was met with delays caused by several factors affecting the development of the school's classes on Fridays. Administrative events, namely CEFA's Assessment Committee and Parent meetings, postponed a month's worth of English classes to August. This meant that I had to assist my cooperating teacher with some

lessons that were not related to my research project. Moreover, since the topics studied through these sessions would be included in the mid-term exam, it was unfeasible to cover them after my project was carried out. Fortunately, no negative consequences for my research originated from this situation, other than a necessary rescheduling of the implementation spanning from mid-September to early November.

During the first lesson, the students were informed about the objectives and methodology of the research project. They were also introduced to cooperative learning and spoken English as the bedrock of our class from then on. Concerning oral production, a reflective activity about the importance and benefits of speaking a foreign language was conducted to motivate the girls to express their previous experiences as English speakers, as well as their concerns, weaknesses, and strengths. On the other hand, awareness of what cooperative learning in the classroom meant was achieved by asking the class to form groups of four people each and then choose one of the four student roles previously shown to them to discover the principles that supported cooperation. These two activities helped reassure the girls that their language level did not have to be perfect for them to try and speak and that cooperative learning would help them create supportive relationships to their peers in their learning process.

The first action strategy took place during the second part of lesson 1. It was named "Cooperation and Classroom Situations" and consisted of student-created dialogues representing common student-teacher and student-student interactions in the classroom such as asking for clarifications and favors, agreeing or disagreeing, etc. The objective of this action strategy was to promote the use of spoken English in the classroom through cooperation in small groups. As a result, the students formed groups of four girls each, expected to work together throughout my lessons, and designed a dialogue based on key vocabulary and expressions as well as complementary information that I provided them.

Once ready, the groups read out their dialogues, and those listening had to guess what classroom situation they represented. Finally, the small groups came to the whiteboard and summarized the essential language for each classroom situation for everyone to take notes.

During lesson 2, we carried out the second cooperative action strategy revolving around a jigsaw activity about weekend plans. For this purpose, all the content of the lesson was broken down into four sections called "weekend locations," "food and drinks," "outfit," and "transportation," and then I asked the girls in the small groups to choose a different section in which they would like to become experts. Thus, new expert groups were formed and had to complete the speaking activities in each section while interacting with the specific assigned material to subsequently teach what they learned to their peers in the original groups. Finally, when the original groups gathered again, each girl presented the information she had worked on to the others in the group, and, once all the students were familiar with the four sections of the lesson, I asked the small groups to design their own weekend plans through a mind map that they handed in by the end of the lesson.

In regard to the third action strategy, two cooperative activities that complemented one another were developed. The first one involved watching an authentic video on weekend activities and solving a worksheet featuring English expressions to talk about future plans and intentions, so that the girls could get acquainted with the language they needed to begin talking about their previously designed weekend plan. With this "ticket-to-participate" activity done during the first half of the lesson, the students were now ready to take part in the second activity consisting of peer conversations about their weekend plans to put into practice the language expressions they had learned. This allowed the girls to engage in meaningful interactions with their classmates through authentic language use thanks to the prior preparation they had while creating their weekend plans and studying related language functions.

The last action strategy took place after a 3-week pause because of October's recess week, Secretaría de Educación's family day, and teachers' union conferences. Although the goal of this delayed action was for the girls to give a short presentation in groups about their weekend plans, it was not developed as planned due to the events that forced its postponement. I had initially decided to allocate in-class time for the preparation of the presentations, which included posters to be used as visual aids and an outline of what the students would say. However, this preparation was made asynchronously to compensate for lost time. The presentation day began with the groups holding their posters in turns to talk about their chosen weekend location and the activities they would do there, using the vocabulary and expressions studied in class. Finally, individual performance was graded, and feedback was provided afterwards.

Data Analysis

In order to inspect the effect of CL on the promotion of oral production, teacher and student journals as well as a focus group interview were conducted. Both journals allowed me to assess the influence of cooperation on students' use of spoken English and the interaction process in the groups. Additionally, these instruments enabled me to monitor the learners' performance during the cooperative activities from the perspective of the researcher and that of the participants. Finally, the focus group interview was run after the action strategies were done to discuss the achievements obtained by the girls and enhance the understanding of cooperative learning as a methodology to practice speaking skills.

Once sufficient evidence had been collected, I approached it laboriously to uncover what it might reveal about the research's objectives. This undertaking followed the inductive analysis model the purpose of which is "to allow the important analysis dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be" (Quinn, 2002, p. 56). This implies that the analyst has to

carefully examine the gathered data to discover the interrelationships that arise from recurrent information. Additionally, Quinn states that content analysis helps reduce and make sense of qualitative data and is achieved through the identification of patterns that describe findings and themes that help categorize those.

To this end, I collected the teacher and student journal entries and transcribed the focus group interview in order to begin the reduction and sense-making process of the data. Then, I inductively examined this information in an attempt to unearth emerging patterns that could help me recognize the main categories of analysis. Each of these were grouped based on their recurrence and triangulated by comparing the patterns that surfaced from the different data collection instruments. Finally, I labeled these dimensions which were arranged in four categories with more specific subcategories.

Findings

This study was concerned with the implementation of cooperative learning in a 10th grade class to promote the use of spoken English among the students, due to the lack of opportunities they had to speak the language in the classroom and interact with their peers prior to the application of my action strategies. Accordingly, it was elucidated how cooperative learning could lead to a considerable increase in English oral production on account of several recurring factors favoring the learners' attitudes and willingness to speak the target language. Such factors resulted in the main categories of analysis that are presented below.

Cooperative Learning as a Favorable Stage for Speaking

This category accounts for one of the most noticeable effects of cooperative learning on the promotion of speaking English in the classroom and deals with a suitable setting for oral production that cooperation establishes. While the learners were used to working on textbooks and writing short texts as indicated in the Statement of the Problem, the

cooperative action strategies caused them to engage in diverse speaking activities no matter their individual performance and see themselves as authentic language users. In relation to this, student 1 wrote in her journal that "[hablar en grupos] benefició bastante ya que estamos acostumbradas a redactar y escribir más en inglés que practicarlo oralmente, y el habla es fundamental para aprender así que por mi parte, me ayudó mucho" (Student journal entry, October 3, 2022). The following three subcategories further explain this finding.

Enhanced Speaking Opportunities

In each of the lessons that I delivered, speaking activities were carried out by the class in different small groups that the learners formed. As a result, it was found that the continuous practice of this skill allowed the girls to explore this ability in a classroom setting deliberately adapted to the use of spoken English. Based on the data, cooperative learning significantly enhanced the opportunities for students to practice their oral production by facilitating interaction among them and enabling them to immediately utilize newly learned language. In line with previous studies such as that of Lemos (2012), the learners became aware of how important it is to devote time to practicing English orally to improve their performance.

Among the evidence that supported this aspect, there are some reflections that were recorded in the journals. Student 2 (Student journal entry, September 27, 2022) was of the opinion that:

Fue muy bueno el hecho de poder hablar y sobre todo en inglés delante de varias personas, no es algo que hago mucho ya que no tengo la oportunidad, sin embargo, considero que cuando estas oportunidades se presentan es muy bueno aprovecharlas para fortalecer mi habilidad de speaking.

This highlights the relevance she attributed to in-class time to speak English despite it not being the case for the most part of her school experience. Another benefit of using spoken

English in the classroom is that the girls could put into practice new vocabulary and expressions that they encountered. For example, I recorded in my teaching journal that "this type of knowledge was developed appropriately when students had the chance to learn the basics and put it into practice right away" (Teacher journal entry, September 25, 2022).

Becoming Language Users

As the previous point implies, this subcategory suggests that when there are more opportunities to use English orally, students can learn the language through speaking. Consequently, the girls not only improved their vocabulary and grammar but also explored their potential as language users through short conversations and oral presentations. This point is illustrated thanks to the idea that "[speaking in the classroom] nos ayudaría mucho ya que sabríamos cómo mantener una conversación y asimismo a entenderle a aquellas personas que nos hablan en el idioma" (Student 2, student journal entry, September 27, 2022).

Extrinsic Motivation to Speak

Another important aspect about CL as a favorable stage for speaking proves that in general the girls in the groups enjoyed learning English through the proposed methodology, as it helped them feel more interested in and committed to practicing the language orally. They became more likely to perform the speaking activities that were developed in the classroom because of the fact that "la motivación grupal fue fundamental para el desarrollo de las actividades" (Student 7, focus group, November 5, 2022). Jakavonytė's (2021) study also demonstrated that group work resulted in a motivation increase perceived by its participants. This implies that cooperative learning can foster extrinsic motivation essential for student involvement in the learning process. Likewise, cooperative learning was seen as a fun, interesting way of learning and practicing English that distances itself from traditional methodologies to which the students are accustomed (Student 8, student journal entry, October 3, 2022).

A Shared Learning Experience

The second major finding shows how learners experiencing CL with a view to speaking English benefited from the possibility of equitably distributing lesson content both to facilitate individual work and achieve their collective outcomes. This result is concordant with two of Johnson and Johnson's (2009) principles of cooperative learning, namely positive interdependence and individual accountability, because the advantages of group work only materialized owing to the sum of individual and collective efforts on the girls' part. Aware of this idea, student 3 stated during the focus group interview that "la responsabilidad de ayudar en grupo es para el beneficio de nuestros aprendizajes" (Focus group, November 5, 2022). Two subcategories related to this point emerged to complement its description.

Balancing Responsibilities

Regarding this subcategory, it was discovered that the learners created a balanced learning environment in order to better face the challenges that each speaking activity posed. For this purpose, cooperative learning allowed the girls to divide the group work by assigning roles and responsibilities in an equitable manner, based on their preferences, subtopics they could choose, and their skills. Accordingly, student 4 acknowledged that "al ser un trabajo grupal, cada una tenía un cargo. generando así un equilibrio, conocimiento en general, respecto al speaking cada una lo desarrolló a su ritmo" (Focus group, November 5, 2022). This reflection expresses the way learning and speaking English could be a shared experience, which is also possible due to the perception that the work of each group member is reduced as shown in the following comment: "cada una tuvo una sola cosa que aprenderse, no todo el grupo aprenderse muchas cosas al mismo tiempo" (Student 5, student journal entry, September 29, 2022).

Individual and Collective Efforts

In spite of the distribution of responsibilities in the groups, the participants did not

regard their individual work as being isolated from the collective goals that they always had in mind. Instead, whenever a girl was expected to take care of an activity segment, they realized that doing it would be an essential contribution to the group's efforts in achieving the lesson's speaking goals, thus exhibiting awareness of individual efforts in the accomplishment of tasks (Teacher journal entry, November 2, 2022). Finally, since this relates to Johnson and Johnson's (2009) CL principle of individual accountability, we can find similar results in other studies, namely Jakavonytė (2021) arguing that when they work in groups, "pupils feel individual and mutual responsibility and accountability" (p. 7).

Peer Support while Speaking

Since the transition from mainly writing English to using the target language orally could be challenging for the class, it remained to be seen how the learners would cope with this change. According to the data analysis, they reacted positively to this move because of the fact that they were able to support each other in the small groups to boost their confidence to speak while providing on-the-spot help to those in need. To this effect, it was noticed that "cooperative learning reinforces the idea that students working in groups seek to help each other in order to progress in the tasks assigned to them" (Teacher journal, October 7, 2022). As is evident, two subcategories regarding self-confidence and mutual help were identified plus a third one about improved students' relationships.

Self-confidence to Speak English

The students that participated in this research championed the idea that they felt more self-confident to speak English in the classroom thanks to the cooperative learning action strategies that we developed. This increase in self-confidence was noticed in the two types of oral production activities that were proposed throughout my lessons such as transactional and extensive speaking, meaning dialogues and presentations respectively. Furthermore, it was linked to two aspects. On the one hand, the girls spoke English confidently with trusted peers:

"el estar en grupo y con personas de confianza permite que estimulemos y desarrollemos aún mejor nuestro habla en inglés" (Student 2, student journal entry, September 27, 2022). On the other hand, the learners overcame their fear to speak when addressing their classmates in English rather than their teacher: "no hubo temor al hablar en comparación con el maestro, porque se daba fácil la comunicación y se corregía sin problemas" (Student 4, focus group, November 5, 2022). As seen in these excerpts, students feel less anxious to interact with their partners in the target language (Adams, R. 2018).

Mutual Help in Learning

Another result regarding peer support was the fact that the girls benefited from the mutual help that pervaded the interaction within the small groups from the very beginning of my lessons. This type of help presented itself as impromptu feedback provided by the students during the cooperative learning activities in which "como trabajamos de forma conjunta podemos corregirnos la pronunciación, y así aprendemos todas de forma divertida y equitativa" (Student 6, student journal entry, September 16, 2022). Besides the correction of pronunciation mistakes, the groups also solved doubts about grammar and vocabulary, which contributed to the quality of their interventions (Teacher journal entry, November 2, 2022). While mutual help was central for learners to correct each other's language errors, it also facilitated the sharing of specific content discussed in temporary groups, creating a reliance on and trust in partners of the same group. Similarly, Habil and Kandasamy (2018) conducted a study on cooperative learning and student speaking skills, showing that helping each other was a recurrent theme that the participants referred to while discussing the effects obtained.

Improvement of Student Relationships

The last major finding related to peer support within the cooperative groups reveals a better social interaction among the girls that worked together in the small groups. As is expected in a class of students with varied preferences and cultural backgrounds, some get

along easily while others are indifferent to certain peers. Although this could have posed

difficulties in the development of my action strategies, the learners acknowledged that they

lessened tensions and smoothed things over to work in groups better. In relation to this,

student 3 recognized that "tuvimos la oportunidad de compartir y aprender de compañeras

con las que antes no tratábamos, reforzando el concepto práctico de separar asuntos

personales de los académicos" (Student 7, focus group, November 5, 2022). Discussing

similar findings, Alghamdy (2019) stated that "in general, students indicated that a CL

environment enables them to forge new relationships with other classmates in the classroom"

(p. 274).

Student Control of Speaking

Bearing in mind that none of my learners came to the classroom as empty heads to be

filled with knowledge, cooperative work in the small groups offered them the chance to use

their previous knowledge and make independent decisions that they deemed advantageous in

meeting the lesson goals. Therefore, this finding explains how the students felt in control of

their English oral production as they found ways to purposefully use the language and play

the central role in the classroom. For instance, the students did not have to wait for the

teacher to make suggestions, so that they could begin their task and monitor group

effectiveness (Teacher journal entry, September 19, 2022).

Spontaneous and Helpful Actions

This subcategory points out the participants' awareness of useful actions they could

take in order to ensure the achievement of the goals set for each lesson. Previous knowledge

and consensus as to how to apply it were fundamental in this aspect. By way of illustration,

the following journal entry tells of the procedure that a group followed while working on a

speaking activity: "cada una se encargó de analizar el ejercicio, luego íbamos poniendo ideas

para la creación de este y ensayábamos si el aporte funcionaba de acuerdo al diálogo que

queríamos realizar" (Student 2, student journal entry, September 27, 2022). Other

spontaneous and helpful actions taken by the learners and mentioned during the focus group

were to raise questions, outline ideas, monitor actions, correct and listen to each other (Focus

group, November 5, 2022). All this shows that, after comprehending the instructions of the

assigned work, the learners in the small groups directed its development, an ability which

Cortés and Sánchez (2018) labeled as "self-directed learning" to explain the students'

autonomy process taking place in cooperative learning.

Conclusion

Challenging as it is, student oral production can be practiced and developed in the

English classroom more appropriately if learners and teachers alike cater to a learning

environment where speaking the target language allows opportunities for meaningful

interaction between them, based on individual and collective efforts to fulfill common goals.

This is exactly what this study demonstrated through the implementation of cooperative

learning because it sets conditions under which group work promotes and stimulates the use

of spoken language.

For this reason, the findings that emerged from the data analysis process detailed the

way in which cooperative learning enabled the learners to speak English more than they were

used to, while equitably distributing responsibilities among group members and making

decisions to direct their oral production. Additionally, Peer support was key to using the

language orally as the learners' extrinsic motivation and social relationships improved.

Regarding the educational context where this study was conducted, it is worth

mentioning that I faced challenges that large classes represent in Colombian public high

schools. However, the cooperative learning environment that I created with my students

helped overcome the difficulties that a crowded classroom can cause thanks to the relevance

of student roles in the lessons and the sense of purpose and responsibility they developed

during group work. This is why CL is arguably a methodology to be taken into account in this type of learning setting where traditional education may obscure learners' potential for the sake of the teacher's control over the classroom.

Finally, since there is a range of possibilities to group students while implementing CL, it would be interesting to further explore this by creating groups of students with varying skills and language performance. While I allowed my learners to get together in groups without establishing previous conditions about English level, other teachers interested in CL and oral production could consider a mixed-ability approach to grouping students in order to study its implications and challenges for learning, speaking, and cooperating in such a setting.

Reflection

The teaching practicum was a demanding process that contributed in different ways to my development as a teacher. Regarding language teaching at a public school, I was able to take a closer look at both the curriculum that determines English learning for high school education and the ways in which it is developed and adjusted to specific needs and expectations of students in the classroom. Thus, I learned how important it is to analyze the educational setting with regard to learning goals, available resources, and students' attitudes and perceptions of language learning, in order to consider all of these while planning lessons and academic terms. As to the research project, it helped me realize that teaching is an ever-developing practice, for which reflection on teacher's principles and beliefs is necessary, along with a fair amount of curiosity that pushes teachers to innovate and improve classroom experiences. In addition to this, I discovered that educational research is a tool for better understanding what happens inside and outside the classroom by questioning practices and knowledge that might be taken for granted in language learning as a discipline.

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