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Improving Low-level third-grade students' performance in English in a Heterogeneous Group by  
Implementing Cooperative Learning.

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this action research was to verify the effectiveness of cooperative learning in a heterogeneous group. It was conducted in a public school in the municipality of Marinilla; in a group of 45 students. This project had two stages: first a detailed observation of the English classes was done and an analysis of their development in depth. Second, the application of group and pair activities. The data collection tools used were weekly journals, interviews with students and collection of artifacts. Results demonstrated the benefits of cooperative learning during primary education as well as the cognitive and social skills developed during the implementations. Some drawbacks of cooperative work were found that could be investigated and improved in future actions.

*Keywords:* cooperative learning, heterogeneous groups, group work.

**Degree requirement**

This action research project is submitted as a requirement to obtain a bachelor's degree in foreign language education (English- French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, El Carmen de Viboral, Colombia.

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## Preface

I am a foreign languages student from the University of Antioquia. I have been interested in the field of education since I was in high school, and my main goal is to gather knowledge for my professional development. I leaned towards cooperative work because, in addition to noticing the shortcomings of this type of implementation in my practicum place, I had a very gratifying experience regarding group work during my university years that led me to consider that cooperative learning can be a path of great learning and social support. This project was developed in a third-grade group in a primary public school located in the municipality of Marinilla. This work is aimed at academic teachers, researchers and the general public. But very especially to the undergraduate students in foreign languages who are starting this path of research.

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### Description of the Context

The institution where this action research project was carried out is in the urban area of the municipality of Marinilla, Antioquia, Colombia. It currently offers education in primary and secondary school with an emphasis on industrial techniques. Regarding the mission, the institution aims to be inclusive, committed to training, competitive and innovative people, capable of researching and integrating the information and communication technology (ICT) responsibly in all fields, and thus interacting successfully in all social contexts. Likewise, its vision is to educate excellent academic and technical graduates capable of responding to the demands of a society in permanent change and with solid ethical training that allows them to live fully. Also, the institution seeks to train its students from an early age, so its opening toward infants is far-reaching.

Concerning the class, it was a 3rd grade and lessons were once a week in 120-minute period. The classroom is in poor condition and has limited resources, no computer, television, or other technological resources. The institution follows the model of *Mallas de Aprendizaje* as well as *Guías de Periodo*. The English class is based upon the traditional method, so tasks such as taking notes from the board, worksheets and repetition are normal in the lessons. Likewise, the most common way to evaluate are the individual traditional written exams.

Participants in this study included 40 students from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and my cooperating teacher. The students were 29 boys and 11 girls, whose ages ranged from 8 to 12 years old. They come mostly from social strata 1 and 2, and were exposed to poverty, violence, and lack of care from parents. The cooperating teacher has thirty-five years of experience in early childhood education, fourteen of them in this school. She began her professional life as a Normalist and practiced her career in the rural areas of the municipality of Marinilla. She has not any qualification or training



in the English language. She believes that teaching is a path of great sacrifice and vocation, but it has helped her build her life model, and so far, she does not regret her choices.

The main problem that I identified in the English class was the lack of opportunities that the students had to socialize and carry out group tasks, which made group cooperation and meaningful learning impossible to achieve.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Over the years, teachers have implemented cooperative work in foreign language classrooms to stabilize the educational level and minimize the learning gaps among students. Taking Cohen's (1994, as cited in Wafaa, 2014) definition "Cooperative learning can be characterized as a social process in which knowledge is acquired through the successful interaction between the group members" so it seems convenient for both students and teachers to use cooperative learning as an effective method to improve social skills as well as cognitive development.

Based on the observations' reflections, I identified some issues that directed me to the main problem. One of the main elements that I could notice was that the teacher did not fully promote group work in class. Activities such as worksheets, reviewing, drawing, writing, and constant repetition were done individually. This way of carrying out the activities in class caused students to focus only on themselves, leading to a continuous imbalance between learning levels and the ability to socialize and cooperate.

Continuing along, as I have compiled in my observations (Observation journals excerpts 3, 4 and 5), approximately half of the group finished the activities in the time given by the teacher, while the other half fell behind, causing the obvious delay in class activities and content because those who used to finish faster, had to wait in their seats for considerable periods of time

doing nothing before class activities continue. Additionally, when changing activities, students who had not managed to finish or understand the topic were left with inconclusive explanations, and content with empty holes that could hardly be filled during the school year. This variety in the way students perform in class allowed me to characterize it as a heterogeneous group, commonly called “mixed-ability groups” or they can also be defined as a “group of students with differing levels of learning, abilities, interests, and skills” (Al-Subaiei, 2017, p. 118).

Nevertheless, the students showed great willingness to help and guide their classmates (Observation Journal excerpt 5). The students constantly and actively expressed their desire to help their classmates to complete the activities. I find it pertinent to use cooperative learning to improve learning skills and reduce the acquisition gaps among students and promote safe pedagogical relationships among students. This strategy will allow me to use their ability to socialize and their empathy towards others.

Finally, cooperative learning can become one of the greatest tools for teachers and students in ELF heterogeneous groups as it has the potential to include all the social actors in the classroom, leading to improve social and cognitive skills. I might direct the group into active learning through group work activities, student support, and individual activities involving positive group feedback. Thus, bearing in mind these class issues, I designed an action research proposal aimed at using cooperative learning to improve students’ performance in the EFL classroom in a heterogeneous third-grade group.

### **Theoretical Background**

In this theoretical background I attempt to establish a connection between the concepts of cooperative learning and heterogeneous groups and how it can positively affect English Foreign Language (EFL) students. First, I address the concept of the EFL classroom to highlight the

typical conditions of learning English as a foreign language. Second, I explain my understanding of cooperative learning as an effective teaching method and its variants. Third, I present the concept of heterogeneous groups as an essential aspect for this project. Finally, I state the need of using cooperative learning in heterogeneous third graders groups.

EFL classroom refers to the educational activity that aims to teach English as a foreign language. According to the Oxford definition, “An EFL classroom is in a country where English is not the dominant language.” (n.p) Similarly, foreign language learners have various needs that their language teachers must meet. To begin with, students who belong to an EFL classroom need constant motivation and practice of the target language since the classroom is the only space where the language is practiced. In addition, they need their teachers to advise them on the use of the language and its implications in the globalized world. In Colombia, we find EFL classrooms with various teaching methods that seek to mediate between the student and the English language. As the country desires to implement English as the official foreign language, English courses have been declared mandatory in most schools and universities of the national territory. However, the conditions of these courses are, most of the time, insufficient in some of the public institutions. In primary schools, for instance, there are not English trained teachers because of the lack of access to superior education in the country. Also, the physical conditions and the number of students in the academic grades are very difficult to control. It is normal to find groups of forty-five or fifty students, making it almost impossible for all students’ needs and requirements to be fulfilled. Regarding the teaching models, public institutions often follow the traditional methods (Translation, transcription, learning by heart), leaving aside other methods that could possibly help to build a safe environment where all students, with the help of the teacher, can meet and solve their educational needs.

Nonetheless, there is a resource that can be used by teachers in all social contexts and environments as an essential tool in large English groups: Cooperative learning. One of the main characteristics that determine childhood as an essential stage of learning is the desire to cooperate and work in a group. It is evident that during the primary school stage, it is very likely that students tend to prioritize group work and demonstrate communication skills that ensure correct understanding among their generational group. In this way, cooperative learning emerges in foreign language classrooms as a theory that is gaining strength and popularity among language teachers. According to Johnson and Johnson (1994), “Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning,” which tells us that small groups are a tool in the classroom, especially in groups where there are large amounts of students. In this sense, cooperative learning generates multiple benefits within the EFL classroom. As stated by Wafaa (2014), “Research has shown that cooperative learning can help students develop skills in communication. Cooperative learning is the opportunity for groups to work together and for students to talk to one another” (p. 94); this may ensure that students develop cognitive, communication, empathy, and teamwork skills.

In the same way, Johnson and Johnson (n.d) have defined various types of cooperative learning. On the one hand, we find the so-called “formal cooperative learning” that comprises those actions that the teachers take in the course and that guide the student toward group work. As an educational guide, the teacher instructs the students, chooses the formation of the small groups, determines the role of the students within his small group, and ensures each member’s interaction so that skilled students and those who need more support establish a fruitful process. In the same way, the teacher is in charge of generating and guaranteeing the adequate

functioning of each group, analyzing, and verifying the functioning of this type of learning. Also, the teacher is responsible for evaluating the processes and determining if their students benefit from group activities.

On the other hand, “informal cooperative learning” suggests that students can meet and benefit from the learning processes of their peers more casually. The workgroups are not so defined, and the students can assume the roles by themselves, adopt theories and share them with their peers, and actively learn and develop diverse communication skills. The key to this type of cooperative learning is that each group presents a final product to demonstrate their own perspectives in something that people can read, see, listen to, or understand (Johnson & Johnson, n.d).

Another benefit of cooperative learning is the sense of belonging generated in the student. That is, while in large class groups, the shyest children go unnoticed by their teachers and peers, through cooperative learning, students are expected to feel that their contributions are significant and valuable because all group members are expected to contribute to the work of the group by sharing their ideas, helping to solve problems, arguing intellectually in order to reach an agreement, and working toward the goal (Johnson & Johnson, n.d).

Additionally, cooperative learning is an effective way of working in heterogeneous groups because it adequately integrates all learning styles and rhythms. Cooperative work in heterogeneous groups has several purposes. One of them is to make sure that each child has the opportunity to learn at their own pace and benefit from the progress of others. In addition, cooperative learning “Ensures all members are making good academic progress” (Johnson & Johnson, n.d).

Regarding heterogeneous groups, when we refer to those class groups where there are

different levels of learning among the students of the same class, that is, where students learn at different rates. Returning to the definition of Fritsche (2021), who maintains that “Heterogeneous ability grouping stands for the concept of organizing students with different abilities in the same group” (p. 4). It is prevalent to find classes with diverse abilities and characteristics in current educational contexts. Various reasons influence the generation of these groups, including the students’ personal backgrounds, the different age ranges, and the level of socio-economic development of the context where the institution is located, among other variables that determine the numerous processes in each group. In public education, it is common to find these kinds of groups because of diverse reasons. Low socio-economic families do not always understand the concept of education as an essential one for the life of their children, so the access to certain services or products such as books, museums, private classes, or other goods are almost none. Also, there are a significant number of undiagnosed learning delays that can potentially affect the performance of certain students, provoking the general delay of the rest as well of the group. As that, heterogeneous grouping can emerge easily as the conditions of the educational environments are so varied.

Likewise, heterogeneous groups present both difficulties and advantages for the language teacher. The learning process can be affected due to some students’ low performance. Following this perspective, those children are often in the uncertainty of what is expected from them in a cooperative group activity (Van Dijk et al. 2020), which can cause some difficulties of socialization as well as of the development of the processes. However, those same students can benefit. As stated by Wang (2013), “Heterogeneous grouping based on student ability is more beneficial for student achievement and student satisfaction; high and medium level ability students benefit more in homogeneous groups, but low-level ability students benefit more in

heterogeneous groups” (p.3). As students with a low level of learning begin to relate academically with their classmates, they will acquire study and learning patterns through socialization, kindness, and teamwork.

Many theories may disagree, but there is evidence that suggests that heterogeneous groups are appropriate to introduce the cooperative learning model as a great tool to improve the general performance of students. According to Johnson and Johnson (n.d), “Typically, cooperative base groups are heterogeneous in membership (especially in terms of achievement motivation and task orientation).” (n.p) Cooperative learning can be an effective tool in heterogeneous groups’ teaching and learning processes. Likewise, both low-level students and advanced students can acquire invaluable communication and social skills. Though the doubts if homogeneous groups (a type of grouping where students have similar learning abilities) are better for implementing cooperative learning, it had been demonstrated through various investigations that cooperative learning applied in heterogeneous grouping can, in fact, maximize standards of learning, socialization and motivation within both low-level and high-level students (Ghanbari et al., 2020).

### **Research question**

How can cooperative learning improve students’ performance in English in a heterogeneous third-grade group?

### **General objective**

To explore how cooperative learning may foster students’ performance in a heterogeneous third-grade group of a public institution of Marinilla.

### **Specific Objectives**

1. To analyze the development of activities when working in groups and pairs and the possible

individual achievements through cooperative learning.

2. To assess group tasks productions taking into account personal abilities for the development of group activities.
3. To evaluate how cooperative learning in a heterogeneous third-grade group works.

### **Action plan**

With the aim to solve the research question, three actions were implemented. The first action was the implementation of group work activities with the purpose of promoting cooperative learning. These activities were fully narrated in a journal for each class; the purpose was to analyze and compare variations between implementations. The second action was the development of written pieces as the final products from these group activities. I collected student's artifacts with the objective of evaluating the possible success of cooperative learning and used my journal to interpret students' progress during class work. The third action was cooperative learning activities to analyze how students worked in groups. I collected student's artifacts, a written reflection, to identify students' ideas, and impressions about group activities. I also collected data by applying interviews at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the implementations to know the participants' perspectives and opinions regarding the usefulness of cooperative learning in the English classroom.

### **Development of Actions**

This section describes the teaching and research actions applied for this project. It is important to mention that, due to some issues with the curriculum, there were some changes of



topics during the implementation as well as in the time devoted to implement the actions.

The first action required me to introduce the project to students so they would have an idea of why I was redirecting the class in specific directions. In the same way, I started by implementing informal grouping with an oral activity to recognize their strengths and weaknesses regarding group work. In this first activity, students had to form groups by themselves and talk about their daily routine, they used Spanish to express their ideas. Based on their performance in the groups I could identify students that could be group leaders and some others that were isolated and needed help with socialization.

The second action involved group work. I organized the first formal group activity. I chose the leaders, and I directed the activity considering the topic provided by the school curriculum. Each group had to create a poster representing the months of the year. For this, they worked together, and some distributed the roles. While some of them were writing the months of the year in the target language, others had to classify, cut, and paint the images provided by me. Then, they would paste the images in the corresponding month, at this stage students really worked in a cooperative way and enjoyed the time they spent together.

The third action referred to another group work but discussing a different topic. I taught the parts of the body in English and did some informal grouping activities (where students would decide their groups, number of members, leading roles, etc.). Then, we did a formal grouping activity that consisted of creating a monster on a piece of paper. They needed to point out the parts of the body in English that they learned in class with the aim of promoting healthy social and cognitive skills development. Likewise, students were put in groups of four or five people and we did not choose the leaders for each group which affected the development of the activity; having leaders' roles was important in group work as students feel the lack of direction when

they do not have the leader. Also, I ended up realizing that time was not sufficient, so I received unfinished products.

Action number four was a group work focused on the analysis of roles within the groups, the topic to be discussed was places and professions and there were some variations regarding the original action plan. The group activity consisted of doing a city map where they would have to locate the professions in the correct place. So, I selected the leaders again and gave the images of the occupations we learned in the previous class, then, students started planning and discussing the best way of drawing the places they needed to have in order to place the images, they started by drawing and added the name of the places in English. After that, they located the professions that were also in the target language. This was made with the objective of confirming if the use of leaders was effective or not.

Action number five consisted of doing cooperative work by learning the vocabulary of the seasons and the clothing. The cooperative activity for these weeks focused on doing a group dictionary where all the students had to represent clothing with a drawing or a craft, adding the name of it in English. In four big groups (each group was named: winter, summer, fall and spring) they would work together but each one of them had a specific piece of clothing to represent through a drawing, adding the name in English and Spanish. The idea of being in groups was intended to promote collaboration, learning sharing, sharing resources, etc. Finally, we did a mural integrating each group's work. This was made with the purpose of promoting individual creativity but being part of a big group.

The last action allowed students to reflect on the process of working in groups. I did the closure of the implementation with an activity that involved students writing their feelings about the class and the work in groups. The intention was to have written texts in the form of narrative

in order to know students' opinions. I asked students two questions regarding their emotions about the English class in general and their perceptions about group work. The children responded with words and short sentences expressing their thoughts.

### **Data analysis**

This data collection was based on Burns's (1999) stages proposed in her framework "Collaborative action research for English language teachers". These stages are: Assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building meaning and interpretations, and reporting the outcomes. I wrote and codified the journal's information weekly. Also, I interviewed the students at the beginning of the process, and at the end. Then, I transcribed and analyzed the student's responses in order to find similarities with the categories that emerged from the journals. And finally, I used the student's artifacts pictures to find similar patterns that led me to demonstrate if cooperative learning was useful in the primary stage. After all the data was gathered, I started analyzing it and building interpretations.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

This study aimed at determining how cooperative learning improve students' performance in English in a heterogeneous a group. This section illustrates the results yielded from the data analysis, which are divided into four categories: Grouping strategies, Benefits of cooperative learning, Students' behavior and feelings towards cooperative work, and Teacher's role in cooperative learning. Each of these categories will be detailed in the following paragraphs.

#### **Grouping Strategies**

Various grouping strategies were implemented which resulted as effective for this

research project. Students developed some qualities typical of teamwork, such as leadership capacity and the ability to adapt to other students. In class groups, you will always find children with different kinds of capacities such as leadership abilities and group management that emerge from those who want to lead and rules acceptance from those who desire to follow their classmates. Some students are ambivalent, that is, they can adapt perfectly to leading or following someone else's ideas. Likewise, there are other types of students who accept roles naturally and adapt to them without any conflict. Indeed, it is right to affirm that, normally, there always will be some students with the desire to become leaders somehow. (Alfares,2017)

### ***Leadership Enhancement***

Based on Alfares's statement, some decisions were made regarding the distribution of students for group activities. To begin with, in each class, some children, who had previously been identified as potential leaders, were chosen. In the same way, other students were assigned to check if their defiant attitudes could be positively affected according to the new role they had to play. In the journal, it is stated that "Then, I assigned some leaders (others volunteered for the position)" (Journal entry excerpt 5, September 15, 2022). In this way, it was possible to identify that students felt confident and were willing to assume their respective roles when someone guided them more precisely. As reported in the journal "I found it curious that, by not electing leaders, they chose their leaders out of their democracy and delegated specific roles" (Journal entry excerpt 7, journal, October 21, 2022). Similarly, data analysis aided to verify that students like and are motivated by the possibility of representing a leadership entity within their small groups. For example, one of the students said, "I would love to be the leader of my group" (Student's interview, September 09, 2022).

### ***Assigning Roles***

Throughout the process, students chose their own roles and oversaw fulfilling them within their small groups, trying to follow a rhythm throughout the process, as reported in the journal “They assigned roles and cooperated with each other” (Journal entry excerpt 1, August 26, 2022). According to Johnson and Johnson (n.d), “Group members must know how to provide effective leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict management, and be motivated to use the prerequisite skills.” Thus, despite the drawbacks, the students adapted positively to their roles.

### ***Decision-making***

There were moments when the students decided the number of members of each work group and how they would organize themselves. This refers to the decision-making capacity that emerged in the students, as it is expressed in the journal: "Students insisted on making larger groups, so I finally agreed. Some worked in pairs, others in groups of three, and even others in groups of four" (Journal entry excerpt 6, October 21, 2022).

### **Benefits of Cooperative Learning**

Data analysis evidenced that the third-grade students were naturally inclined towards mutual collaboration, cooperation, and the company of the other(s) while developing the proposed activities.

### ***Students Help Each Other to Develop Cooperative Work***

It was evidenced that students were usually interested in asking for and accepting help from their classmates during the school day. as recorded in the journal “Some children started to help each other and compare answers” (Journal entry excerpt 5, September 15, 2022). Likewise, in the interview applied to one of the students, when questioned about group work, he claimed that “Porque si por ejemplo yo no sé decir hola en inglés y otro compañero sí, entonces yo le

pregunto a mi compañero y él me responde”<sup>1</sup> (Student’s interview, October 20, 2022). This shows great interest in developing group practices that extend beyond duty and become companionship through social interaction. This can be observed in the following image (See image 1, Student 1 [here](#))

Consequently, Alfares (2017) states that “Groups may allow students to be more independent because they are encouraged to teach others and also to learn from others” (p. 248). This assertion was verified through the performance of the various activities: Students showed great capacity for initiative in their small groups, each group interpreted the instructions in their own way and at the end of the process there were somewhat different results but that complied with what was established (see images, Artifacts 1 [here](#) ) Therefore, as Wafaa (2014) specifies, “Research has shown that cooperative learning can help students develop skills in communication. Cooperative learning is the opportunity for groups to work together and for students to talk to one another” (p. 94).

### *Acceptance and Welcoming Within Groups*

In the same way, social skills and feelings of empathy emerged among students when they perceived that a classmate had been left out of the group. Data analysis reflected acts of camaraderie as reported in the journal “I also realized that when some kids came back from the make-up exam, they were immediately added to the groups by the integrants” (Journal entry excerpt 3, September 8, 2022).

In the same way, it was observed that the group dynamics changed depending on their members, this was evidenced in the journal “Later on, they were welcomed in different groups,

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<sup>1</sup> "Because if for example I do not know how to say hello in English and another colleague does, then I ask my partner and he answers"

so the dynamics of each group changed as the new members joined” (Journal entry excerpt 4 September 9, 2022). It is possible to affirm that the students were willing to accept and work with different people in the group, even if this implied that some things could change.

### *Democracy*

Data analysis also revealed some benefits of cooperative learning such as growing inclination for democracy among the workgroups. These were reported in the journal “kids started to have some debates and agreements to choose the one representing the group” (Journal entry excerpt 2, September 01, 2022). Similarly, in the interview, one of the students stated “Si, porque algunos decían que de una forma y otros decían de otra hasta que nos pusimos de acuerdo”<sup>2</sup> (Student’s interview, October 20, 2022). According to theory, these abilities are to be developed during early childhood as they learn to work with others as some researchers suggest that the correct use of social skills during the group work is important to successfully fulfil the learning process. Those social abilities such as problem resolution and decision acceptance are difficult to acquire and require extensive dedication to learn them (M. van Dijk et al. 2020) In this case, students demonstrated more difficulties adjusting and resolving conflicts early in the implementations, but as weeks went by, groups became more organized and fighting simultaneously reduced.

### **Students’ Behavior and Feelings Towards Cooperative Work**

Through the classes, it was possible to observe that group activities generated different types of emotions in students that trigger, indeed, certain behaviors and attitudes.

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<sup>2</sup> "Yes, because some said that in one way and others said another until we agreed"

### ***Students' Enjoyment, Engagement, and Motivation***

During the group activities, evidence show that students committed themselves to their responsibilities in the best way and showed feelings associated with happiness, acceptance and enjoyment, as reported in the journal "However, it was evident that the students enjoyed the activity" (Journal entry excerpt 5, September 15, 2022). Data analysis indicated that primary school students must develop cognitively and socially while bonding emotionally with their classmates. In this way, they can feel accompanied, understood, and valued during their educational process, as seen in the image (Student 2 [here](#)). This was also evidenced in the journal, "I found that the children were so willing and engaged in the activity, and produced such good outcomes, that I ended up giving all of them high grades" (Journal entry excerpt 1, August 26, 2022).

### ***Students' Relationships and Desire for Learning Cooperatively***

Data revealed students enjoying group work on several occasions. As the classes developed, the children asked to carry out the activities in a group and took advantage of the space to generate interactions with their classmates. As compiled in the journal, "Kids started to ask, constantly, if they were allowed to do the activity in groups or pairs" (Journal entry excerpt 4, September 9, 2022). In addition, students demonstrated responsibility and commitment when assuming roles within their small groups. As reflected in the journal, "The children worked happily while sharing material, helping each other and even exchanging the vocabulary they had been given" (Journal entry excerpt 6, October 20, 2022). Likewise, students confirmed their desires in an interview in which the student expressed "Porque... trabajé muy bien y todo el mundo se entendía y era muy divertido"<sup>3</sup> (Student's interview, October 20, 2022). In this way, it

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<sup>3</sup> "Because... I worked really well and everyone understood each other and it was a lot of fun."



could be said that cooperative learning can also favor students' performance in social life.

### ***Students' Misbehavior and Distraction During Instructions***

Despite the positive aspects previously mentioned, there were some misunderstandings regarding discipline within the classroom during the implementation of group activities. To begin, the students demonstrated that the time for creating the small groups was a moment of stress and chaos, where noise and misbehavior predominated most of the time. As registered in the journal, "However, when choosing the teams, the children got out of control (so much that I couldn't explain the activity successfully)" (Journal entry excerpt 1, August 26, 2022). In the same way, there were times when the students could not capture all the information correctly and felt lost when carrying out the activities, as reported in the journal "At the beginning, because of the misbehavior of some students, it was difficult to organize the groups because the students interpreted that they should make small groups instead of four large groups" (Journal entry 6, October 20, 2022). In addition, there were difficulties at the time of closing the activities due to the students' immersion in their work. Sometimes, the reason was the little attention they paid to the teachers. As described in the journal, "In this way, it was really hard work to reunite the group again and make them return to their seats because of the physical space and the noise" (Journal entry excerpt 4, September 9, 2022).

### ***Misunderstanding in Communication***

Group activities increased both socialization among students and misunderstandings. The children constantly fought and argued for specific reasons such as the lack of commitment of some members of the group, disagreements, and students' personal characteristics, as verified in the journal, "kids started to work as some fights occurred with some groups: A group started to argue and remove group members because they were too many and did not manage to get to

agreements" (Journal entry excerpt 4, September 9, 2022). One student stated that group work presents difficulties because "No se entienden bien y se ponen a pelear por ejemplo piden prestado algo o lo cogen sin permiso"<sup>4</sup> (Student's interview, October 21, 2022). Regarding the above, researchers such as Johnson and Johnson affirm that it is entirely normal to have inner fights since the procedures and skills for solving problems are vital for the success of cooperative learning, the students involved must adapt and develop strategies by their own (Johnson and Johnson) we could then assume that this attitude was a side effect of group work and got better over time.

### *Sadness, Rudeness, and Frustration*

Data analysis revealed that when the activities took place, some students showed negative feelings around group conflicts, such as misunderstandings and indiscriminate expulsions. Students' sadness and anger were evidenced in the journal "I noticed that some kids presented issues understanding the democracy of the choices because they soon forgot that someone else from their groups was interacting and they were all the time trying to participate by themselves." In another section of the same journal, "there were some misunderstandings regarding the ones that were representing the groups," "I guess that some kids felt unheard as they all talked at the same time" (Journal entry excerpt 2, September 01, 2022). The students expressed their feelings in the interview "Pues en la del mapa me sentí aburrido porque me dejaron haciendo todo solo y en la de hoy me sentí triste y aburrido también"<sup>5</sup> (Student's interview, October 21, 2022). In this sense, another student confessed that when she was rejected from her work team, she felt sad and

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<sup>4</sup> "They do not understand each other well and start fighting, for example, they borrow something or take it without permission"

<sup>5</sup> "Well, in the one on the map I felt bored because they left me doing everything alone and in today's one I felt sad and bored too"

overwhelmed by other classmates “No... no me dejaron hacer nada...”<sup>6</sup> (Student’s interview, September 09, 2022).

### **Teacher’s Role in Cooperative Learning**

Data analysis evidenced that the teacher's accompaniment during the group activities was essential for their correct development. The cooperating teacher and I, as a pre-service teacher, provided constant accompaniment and guidance in the different stages of the implementation. This led me to conclude that there is a specific influence of the teacher’s role in cooperative work that I will present below.

#### ***Problem-Solving***

There were times when the students got out of control or did not know how to proceed when a specific problem arose, so the teacher in charge, in this case, me, would come in to resolve the situation. As stated in the journal

A child leader got very frustrated because he hadn't been able to make a team and said he didn't want to do the activity. He really looked very sad, so we took some members from other teams and formed a new group (Journal entry excerpt 1, August 26, 2022).

Likewise, the guiding teacher is responsible for resolving internal conflicts that may arise in the groups through appropriate and timely intervention.

#### ***Teacher’s Decision-Making and Guidance***

During the process strategies needed to be refined as classes progressed. One of the purposes was to promote social relationships between students and structure the different stages of the activities to ensure the proper functioning of cooperative learning. Likewise, it is essential to have the opinions of other teachers to guide the strategies, just as the cooperating teacher and I did at all times of the process. As stated in the journal

The cooperating teacher and I agreed that this type of activity needs a bigger space to get

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<sup>6</sup> “No... They didn't let me do anything...”

away from each other and be more concentrated in the activity than being careful not to damage their work. Also, we considered it worthwhile to determine some boundaries: Groups must be formed by a maximum of four people, and the teacher must select team leaders to give a sense of order (Journal entry excerpt 4, September 09, 2022).

In this regard, the theory proposed by Johnson and Johnson suggests that the teacher is in charge of forming the groups, choosing the methods of assigning groups, choosing appropriate moments in class to implement cooperative work, evaluating whether the activities are meeting the class objectives... (Johnson and Johnson, n.d). In this way, teachers become the guides and promoters of group work in the classroom.

### ***Providing Instructions***

Data revealed that students were often distracted during the instruction period in the group in general. Sometimes, they needed help understanding the specific rules of each task. For that reason, some strategies were implemented to explain the final objective of the class, such as repeating the instructions to each group and presenting guide samples of each final product. As reported in the journal “I went from group to group explaining the activity again and asked them to work quickly” (Journal entry excerpt 1, August 26, 2022). This was also evidence in students' products from class work (see images, Artifacts 2 [here](#)). Finally, the teacher in charge must provide clear and concise instructions and ensure that students fully understand what is expected from them at the end of each session.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This action research paper intended to verify the effectiveness of cooperative learning in heterogeneous groups in a third-grade group in a public school. The information collected showed that group work in an EFL context positively and significantly affected the cognitive and social performance of those involved during the process. The psychosocial benefits verified

through the analysis led me to conclude that cooperative work during childhood is a crucial stage of learning. It addresses social skills and the ability to learn more easily from their peers.

Likewise, it helps them put into practice what they have learned through manual activities that help them understand vocabulary while learning social roles, democracy, language skills, and recognition of rules and regulations. In a similar manner, the group strategies implemented were modified to obtain better results until reaching the conclusion that, in childhood, it is more feasible to use formal cooperative learning to avoid unnecessary fights and thus have better control of the small groups. Finally, the role of the teacher is vital in group work. The teacher becomes an essential guide for the students.

A possible implication for this project would be the control of the time and the physical space in which the group work would be employed. Applying the implementations, I understood that time could be a lack of time since each group follows its rhythm for establishing work patterns, assigning individual roles, understanding the activity, and other tasks that may make group work slower than expected. In addition, an adequate physical space is essential to guarantee the correct development of the proposed activities. The physical space needs to be large and open, where students can occupy their places and feel that they can communicate with each other in an orderly manner. It is also essential for the teacher to have better control of each group.

I also suggest to teachers interested in delving a little deeper into this field to forget about the myths around group work so they can experience fundamental changes within school dynamics. In other words, applying this type of responsibility to students can be positive because, being mixed groups, students with low academic performance will be encouraged or pressured by their peers to get involved in the activities and comply with the final product. I am

aware that these types of academic events could be exhausting for teachers, but they will surely be worth it.

As a future action idea, it might be good to apply some socialization strategies before any group activity. The preceding could be a suggestion because some students share complex backgrounds and do not easily adapt to an environment that involves giving in and accepting orders from their peers. By applying previous socialization activities, fights and internal discussions could be prevented and reduced, and trust and credibility in colleagues might be increased.

For future research, it would be interesting to apply and analyze the change of students in more constant cooperative learning, that is, that the workgroups are maintained and strengthened throughout time. In addition, it would have to imply a greater willingness on the part of the teacher to give up important spaces in the class and keep abreast of changes in the dynamics of each group over time.

### **Reflection**

In this practicum, I must confess that I felt in so many ways. First, I had a difficult encounter with reality, however, there were times that I was doing a great job, especially when children showed me love or when they came to ask simple questions but for them it was the opportunity to interact with me. Regarding the research process, I felt comfortable with my two advisors. This part of the practicum was quite good as I learned about theory and how to put it into practice, I discussed education and other important concepts with my classmates.

Nevertheless, it is my duty to mention the things that went wrong. Deep in my heart, I know I hated most of the process. To begin with, the practicum had always been a stage of the

career that scared me since the beginning of my studies. Besides, I did not have many options. I felt forced to take the only institution available in my town, I felt forced to accept my actual cooperating teacher. I felt forced to keep going with a process that was killing my desire to become a teacher.

I felt sad about the situations experienced within the practicum site. The students made me feel welcome, but there were too many of them in a very small space, so much that I sometimes couldn't managed to attend to all their needs. I also felt challenged to work in a space with few resources and little compromise. But we kept going till the end of the process. Also, the mental fatigue accumulated during these years of study made a dent in my mind and made me perceive the process as being harder, especially at the end.

But I deeply appreciate the learning that I have acquired during this year, because despite everything, it was my first experience as a teacher, and I will always keep it in my heart.

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