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Improving Low-Level First-grade Students' Performance in English in a Heterogeneous Group by
Implementing Cooperative Learning

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Abstract

This action research aimed at enhancing low-level students' English performance in a heterogeneous group through cooperative learning. It was conducted in a public school in La Ceja-Antioquia with 38-first graders. Action strategies included two stages. The first was based on making detailed observations about the development of English classes and examining the responses students gave to it. The second stage consisted of the use of group activities implementing the action plan. Data gathering instruments included teacher's journal, Students' interviews, CT's interview, and collection of artefacts. Findings revealed the benefits of using cooperative learning, the attitudes, and emotions of students towards it, the role of the teacher when implementing cooperative learning, and the outcomes achieved after this implementation.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, heterogeneous group, performance, EFL classroom.

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 student of foreign languages at the University of Antioquia, Colombia, Eastern section. The desire to pursue this type of academic work came from my personal experience throughout the course of university, since by working in a group most of the time, I improved my academic performance, so when I saw in the practices that there were children with academic levels very varied, I was motivated to propose the implementation of cooperative learning in a heterogeneous group. In addition, this action research was developed in a public institution in La Ceja, Antioquia with a first-grade group, of which I observed and worked with 38 students. This paper is mainly aimed at teachers, researchers and the entire educational community who want to continue and deepen on this topic.

Laura Isabel Calle Franco

La Ceja, Antioquia. November 30th, 2022

Description of the Context

The institution where this action research was carried out, Institución Educativa El Concejo Municipal, is a coeducational public school located in the municipality of La Ceja, Antioquia, Colombia. offering services in two different sites. Also, the school offers two shifts, morning for primary and afternoon for high school.

The institution's mission was to educate students from a humanistic perspective, developing a scientific, technological, cultural, ethical, and axiological life project based on coexistence and respect for difference. As for the vision, it consisted of the contribution of pedagogical innovation and interaction with the community to generate participatory processes for the comprehensive education of students.

In primary school, the teachers taught all the subjects, including the area of English. The first-grade teachers based the English course on a study plan designed in 2020 by the high school English teacher, with 2-hour class per week. The main objective was that students recognize English as another language and react verbally and non-verbally to the vocabulary and expressions taught. Also, the main achievement was to prepare them for skills such as listening, conversation, and pre-reading in English.

The participants of this study included a group of 38 first graders with ages between 6 and 7 years old and who belonged to the middle socioeconomic stratum. Their classroom had a large window, two boards, the teacher's desk, and the chairs in rows and it did not have electronic devices or internet connection. The classroom did not include any sort of visual decoration for first graders as the same room is used for high school students.

Regarding the cooperating teacher, she graduated in high school from Normal Superior de Caramanta, Antioquia and knowing that she is a normalista, she had a position as a teacher in a village. In addition, she holds a degree in social sciences. Afterwards, she started teaching

primary school and has been teaching there for 17 years. She teaches all the subjects, regardless of her lack of experience, confidence, and qualifications in the English area.

The issues that caught my attention were the lack of material and resources that was a constant difficulty for teachers who wanted to implement different academic activities, and the heterogeneity of knowledge, which made it more difficult to achieve the proposed objectives of the school.

Statement of the Problem

Cooperative learning promotes interaction and facilitates the learning processes of students as well as it is more dynamic. According to Samsudin (2006) "Cooperative learning then means a lesson where the students work together in small groups to maximize their own and each other's learning." (p. 1). However, over time we have believed only in the fact that individualized work is a straightforward way of showing the cognitive progress of the different individuals who go through the classroom, reducing collaborative work to social experiences and not to learning aids. Besides, when students work as a team, they benefit themselves and seek successful results for everyone else (Samsudin, 2006).

In the different observations' reflections, I pointed out that individualized work is prioritized over cooperative work. The teacher implemented worksheets in each class, and these were done individually (Journal 1,2,3,5,6, 2022). This prevents students from creating shared learning experiences and increasing their communication skills. There was only one day when the teacher took advantage of the group work and young learners liked it, as recorded in the journal "The children were happy to draw their partner. The next indication is that they should draw themselves next to the drawing they have already made... Seeing the children work in pairs motivated them" (Journal 4, March 4, 2022)

Another aspect that I observed was the heterogeneity of the knowledge in the groups. Being a public institution, the diversity of individuals increases, both in the cultural aspect and in the ability to retain certain knowledge. Therefore, I realized that there were students who learned much easier and faster and a few others who had difficulty understanding a specific topic. This generated problems in class activities since those more advanced children had to wait for the other classmates to finish to continue with the lesson. I reported this in the journal: It seems to me that it was mostly used for those children who were more advanced in the written part because many others approached me and did not know if they were doing it well or not, when I saw it closely, I realized that many children did not know how to read, much less write (Journal 2, February 18, 2022).

That is why the lessons did not keep up with the content and there was no opportunity to level up students' language knowledge. Contrastively, I noticed that students have a positive attitude when it comes to helping their less advanced classmates. For instance, in my journal I recalled that: Children who are more advanced in their learning are very willing to help those who have a harder time with certain topics. I have also noticed that some children understand in a great way when the more advanced ones explain to them. That may be because the children are very close to each other (Journal 2, lesson plan, April 22, 2022). This means that they are interested in helping their peers and in turn improving the language level of the class.

Finally, taking into account everything I mentioned above, I consider that the implementation of cooperative work will help less advanced students to understand and level up their knowledge in the first grade. What is more, cooperative learning allows a pragmatic and conducive environment to practice English, motivating them to acquire new knowledge of the language and develop communication skills (Wafaa, 2014). Therefore, considering the problem identified previously, I would like to tackle the improvement of heterogeneous groups in EFL

classroom through cooperative learning

Theoretical Framework

This action research is based on the concepts of cooperative learning and heterogeneous groups. The following section includes, first, definitions and characteristics of cooperative learning. Second, the influence of teaching and learning English in heterogeneous groups of EFL students. Finally, I will make connections between cooperative learning, heterogeneous groups and EFL.

Firstly, 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 (n.d), "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 generous amounts of students. 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); hence cooperative learning generates multiple benefits within the EFL classroom and aids ensure that students develop cognitive, communication, empathy, and teamwork skills.

Likewise, 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 both, in charge of generating and guaranteeing the adequate functioning of each group, analyzing, and verifying the functioning of this type of learning, and 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).

Now the role of the teacher in EFL heterogeneous group is essential when trying to implement the cooperative learning approach. Although the teacher's participation goes into the background, the teacher should be the one who develops the rules and expectations of group work, guiding students with examples, instructions and intervening when problems arise in group interaction (Klang & Olsson, 2020).

The last advantage of cooperative learning refers to its effectiveness of working with

heterogeneous groups because it adequately integrates all learning styles and rhythms.

Cooperative work in heterogeneous groups has several purposes. One of them is to ensure that each child can learn at their own pace and benefit from the progress of others. In addition, the academic process through cooperative learning is positively guaranteed (Johnson & Johnson, n.d).

Secondly, regarding the influence of teaching and learning English in heterogeneous groups of EFL students, we must define first EFL. 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" (2011). 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.

Moreover, the term heterogeneous groups refer to those class groups where there are different levels of learning, 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 various processes in each group.

Finally, heterogeneous groups present both difficulties and advantages for the language

teacher and the learning process can be affected due to some students' low performance, 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.

Additionally, I must highlight the great disposition that heterogeneous groups present to introduce the cooperative learning model. According to Johnson and Johnson (n.d), "Typically, cooperative base groups are heterogeneous in membership (especially in terms of achievement motivation and task orientation)." 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 for each student. Normally advanced students lead cooperative learning since "the peer leaders clarify goals, facilitate engagement of the students with the materials and one another, and provide encouragement" (Felder & Brent, 2007, p. 4) This is due to the heterogeneous groups that can facilitate socialization and apply solutions to problems of understanding certain knowledge, since these leaders have the function of transmitting trust-building, leadership, decision-making, communication, and conflict management skills.

To conclude, cooperative work in heterogeneous groups provides easiness for the teaching and learning of English to level up the performance of students, motivating them to socialize the knowledge acquired with the participation of the teacher as a secondary agent that leads them to positive interdependence, individual accountability, and the appropriate use of collaborative skills. For this, the role of the teacher is essential since he must raise awareness and

provide support in the individual roles and responsibility of students in the cooperative work process (Van Dijk et al., 2020, p. 485).

Research Question

How can cooperative learning improve students' performance in English in a heterogeneous first grade group?

General Objective

To explore how cooperative learning may foster students' performance in English in a heterogeneous group in a first grade of a public institution of La Ceja.

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the development of classes when working in groups and pairs and the possible individual achievements through cooperative learning.
2. To examine students' products when working cooperatively in class.
3. To evaluate group tasks taking into account personal abilities for the development of group activities in heterogeneous groups.

Action Plan

I developed three research and teaching actions. The first action was the implementation of different activities that promote cooperative work to improve cooperative learning and students contribute to their classmates learning process. All the information was recorded in a daily journal with the intention of analyzing and identifying the reactions and behaviors of the students during this project. The second action was the development of written pieces of paper to foster teamwork inside the classroom. I collected four students' artifacts with the intention of identifying students' progress. And the third action was the implementation of cooperative learning through projects. I conducted six interviews with the students and one with the cooperating teacher during the project to evaluate the feelings and opinions of the students according to their performance in English with the help of their work team and to analyze the CT's perspectives about the implementation of cooperative learning.

Development of Actions

The first action that I implemented was a group discussion with students and the cooperating teacher about the project. In addition, I applied a worksheet to identify the learning abilities of each student to later assign them a work group. During the implementation, the topics worked in class varied a lot without any sequence, these were proposed by the cooperating teacher which were based on the syllabus created by the high school English teacher.

The second action I implemented was the creation of a poster about the months of the year. I taught the months of the year through flashcards that helped children to identify what was celebrated in each month. Later, we did the posters activity, for this I chose eight advanced students and then I separated the other children into eight groups. Each group made a poster by

coloring representative images of each month. Afterward, some groups presented their poster in front of the other children, they used Spanish to present their work. This allowed me to promote interaction and foster communication among students.

Action number three referred to peer-assessment. I taught the numbers from one to twenty. Here I presented the topic through songs and games like “Simon Says”, this allowed me to continue grouping them in a more didactic way. After that, all the children completed a worksheet individually, then I gathered them in groups so that they could do peer-assessment. The idea was for them to compare their answers and notice if there were any inconsistencies so that they could correct them together, provide feedback to their classmates' worksheets, to and provide assistance if it was needed.

Action number four referred to the creation of collage done cooperatively. I taught the fruits and vegetables by guessing them through a mystery box. Also, I changed the groups to provide students with the opportunity to work together with new peers and with different ways of working and learning. In addition, in groups, the students made a cooperative collage, each group had to paste images of fruits and vegetables that corresponded to the color assigned to the group. Then just one group could present the fruits and vegetables work due to the lack of time because school official events. They spoke mostly in Spanish, and they told us what was in the collage. The whole activity was with the idea of improving cooperative learning and students contributing on their classmates learning process.

Action number five was about doing pair work by completing a wordsearch. I introduced the topic of classroom supplies through flashcards, and we played Treasure Hunt in different groups, this activity involved looking for hidden objects around the classroom. Then I got them into pairs to do a word search to analyze and compare the different ways that children can help each other, either in groups or in pairs and which one works better.

Action number six referred to putting a puzzle together in groups. Here I taught the parts of the house through videos for children to memorize the vocabulary in audiovisual way. In addition, the students drew their dream house and presented them in front of everyone thus the other children could give feedback, aiming at providing opportunities to develop their communication skills in front of the whole class. Finally, I organized groups again and we did a puzzle together. The idea was to assign each group one of the parts of the house, and they had to put the puzzle together. All the parts of the house came together to make a general review of this topic. This with the aim of allowing students to face tasks together and level learning.

Data analysis

The analysis of this project was based on three tools to acquire the necessary information for ten weeks. According to Burns (2010), assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building interpretations, and reporting the outcomes, are the stages to develop the data analysis. This is the reason why I organized the information and did the transcription of the interviews; I selected the information by codes and categories for easier analysis. Then I looked for learning patterns to analyze the progress of the students. Finally, I matched all the information I collected from these tools to provide the findings.

Findings and Interpretation

To improve students' performance in English in a heterogeneous first-grade group, it was implemented different activities to promote cooperative learning. In the next section, I will explain the findings that arose from the data analysis, as follows: a) Students' attitudes and emotions towards cooperative learning, b) Teacher's role when implementing cooperative learning, c) Advantages of cooperative learning, d) Outcomes achieved through cooperative

learning.

Students' Attitudes and Emotions Towards Cooperative Learning

Data analysis revealed some emotions and attitudes that students exhibited in the midst of cooperative work, such as motivation and participation in the different activities, as well as preferences towards group work over pair work. This allowed to analyze how attitudes and emotions toward collaborative work influenced their performance in English.

Motivation and participation in students' work.

Data analysis revealed the importance of student motivation and involvement in cooperative work. When the students were happy, they followed the instructions, and their behavior was better. "Everyone was very judicious. They complied very well with my instructions. They were delighted to draw the house of their dreams" (Journal Entry 8, October 18, 2022).

Data also showed that mood shifts affected children's participation when they were sad, angry, or tired. But at the same time, it was noticeable that they felt more motivated when they saw the other students' attitude towards the instructions. As we can see in the following piece of evidence, "One of the girls told me that she preferred to work individually, she was sad and did not want to participate, but seeing that the others worked as a team, she decided to work cooperatively" (Journal Entry 4, September 6, 2022).

In addition, in the interview with the cooperating teacher, she expressed her perception of the children's motivation and participation throughout the implementation.

La percibo de que ellos trabajan con mucho agrado, de que les gusta, participan mucho, se ven las clases muy activas y el trabajo de ellos como que colaboran y como que lo que ellos tienen lo dan. Entonces también me ha gustado mucho (CT's interview, October 27,

2022).¹

These social behaviors, which usually vary according to the student's context, demonstrated the environment built to share information and give and receive instructions. Furthermore, a good attitude toward knowledge generated positive effects on learning through cooperative work, as stated by Johnson and Johnson (1989), cited by Samsudin et al (2006). Some benefits "include increased social behaviors and improved self-esteem, attitudes toward school and acceptance of differences. Students tend to have higher self-efficacy about their chances of being successful effects on learning" (p. 2).

Preferences towards group work over pair work.

The data analysis evidenced the tendency and preference of children to work cooperatively. Indeed, when working in pairs, most of the children worked very well. Their outcomes evidenced this since the communication was more straightforward, which is why the results were in accordance with what was expected, it means the individual achievements through cooperative learning, as we can see in the following artifacts (see artifact, [here](#))

However, I saw that the students were willing to learn various skills regarding language and how they could develop their work when working cooperatively. "I had to put some of them in trios because they did not want to work in pairs. This tells me that some prefer groups" (Journal Entry 7, September 27, 2022). The reason was that, on occasions, the children did not like their classmates, and it seemed better for them to have more classmates with whom to share the information. As evidenced in the following excerpt from the journal entry.

Then I organized the children in pairs (structured groups to make it easier to work with) to develop a worksheet. However, many of the children are restless and dissatisfied with their classmates. Some show it with their faces. Others tell me directly that they would

¹ "I perceive that they work with great pleasure, that they like it, they participate a lot, the classes are very active and their work as collaborating and as what they have they give. So, I also liked it a lot".

prefer to do it as an individual activity if they could not work in bigger groups (Journal Entry 5, September 13, 2022).

Accepting students' group preferences helped them to have a good attitude throughout the learning process. It motivated them to cooperate because they tended to share and interact more easily according to their interests. As Johnson and Johnson (1994) affirm some relevant cognitive processes and relational acts only take place when pupils encourage learning among them. This showed that working in groups not only helped some students' intellectual capacity but also helped them develop communication skills and accept the different abilities of their classmates.

Teachers' Role When Implementing Cooperative Learning

Data analysis revealed that the teacher's intervention is essential for the proper development of cooperative work, from the strategies that can implement throughout the class to the appropriate instructions that he provides to the students for a suitable performance in group work.

Teachers' strategies to implement cooperative work.

Data showed the efficiencies in structuring groups and the students' good performance thanks to the teacher's intervention by providing different roles in collaborative activities. This generated in the students the feeling of working freely and efficiently as reported in the journal

I can emphasize that organizing the groups myself significantly impacts the order and time of the class. Here I was able to implement semi-structured groups, and it worked very well. The children felt free to work; most were very judicious (Journal 2, August 23, 2022).

The teacher is an essential piece of cooperative work when the structured or semi-structured groups are implemented since the teacher is in charge of establishing the contact that the students will have with their classmates (see the photo, [here](#)), for example, the roles they will play in each group. Teachers also promote the order and stability of students in cooperative work

and influences learning and self-esteem. As Johnson and Johnson (1994) state, "How teachers structure student-student interaction patterns have a lot to say about how well students learn, how they feel about school and the teacher, how they feel about each other, and how much self-esteem they have" (p. 1).

Teacher's proper instructions.

Data analysis revealed that when the teacher explained, in general, to the whole group, some students did not pay attention. They constantly asked what they should do. It was difficult to speak because they were not in silence. Nevertheless, the students worked appropriately when the teacher explained group by group. Something that is expected of cooperative work, as we can see in the following evidence "I explained to each group what they had to do since doing it, in general, was very difficult because the children did not want to be silent" (Journal 6, September 20, 2022).

Johnson and Johnson (1994) affirm, "The first requirement for an effectively structured cooperative lesson is that students believe that they 'sink or swim' together" (p. 2). This means that the clarity of the instructions is crucial for students to work positively, and thus reduces the chances that children forget or misinterpret what is expected of cooperative work and the activities carried out in class.

Advantages of Cooperative Learning

Data analysis also revealed some benefits of using group work in the classes, such as socialization and interaction, mutual help, and positive group reinforcement of the students.

Socialization and interaction.

The interaction between the students was evident and abundant in cooperative work. In

the different interviews carried out with the children, they expressed their satisfaction when sharing with their classmates in the classes since this allowed them to increase the ties of brotherhood and friendship. As seen in the following response “Sí porque a mi me gusta estar mucho con compañeros, me gusta disfrutar mucho con ellos, trabajamos muy bien juntos” (Kid 6, interview October 25, 2022).²

I also noticed that socialization in the students allowed them to develop the ability to trust others and share their materials and likes and dislikes regarding different topics, not only in English. “I also saw that they learn with this resource and socialize very well, tell each other what they like, create new friendships, share colors, etc.” (Journal 8, October 18, 2022).

Students' socialization has a direct impact on their English learning and good performance in the language because it facilitates communication, develops cognitive and social skills such as discussion among peers, understanding, and acceptance of the knowledge of others, and recognizing one's own role and of the classmates in an academic and social context. As Wang (2013) states when describing cooperative learning “when students express their thoughts, discuss or even argue about the thoughts of other students, the interactions among group members lead them to reorganize information based on their comprehension and then share it with other members” (p.3).

Students help each other.

Data reported that group work is very important in promoting learning since it helps less advanced children learn from more advanced children. “Sí, porque me ayudan tanto, me ayudan a aprender” (Kid 5, interview October 25, 2022).³ But at the same time, it allows the most advanced children in their knowledge to help those who tend to be left behind for different

² "Yes because I like to be with colleagues a lot, I like to enjoy a lot with them, we work very well together".

³ English translation: "Yes, because they help me so much, they help me learn".

reasons. "Me gusta más trabajar en grupos porque siento que también estoy ayudando a los amiguitos" (Kid 6, interview October 25, 2022).⁴ (see the photo, [here](#))

Figure 1 shows that 83.33% of the children interviewed prefer cooperative work instead of individual work because they think they can improve their performance in English much more

Figure 1

Students' responses when asked about pair or group work

DO YOU THINK YOU LEARN MORE WITH THE HELP OF YOUR CLASSMATES?	YES	NO
Kid 1	✓	
Kid 2		✓
Kid 3	✓	
Kid 4	✓	
Kid 5	✓	
Kid 6	✓	

Furthermore, during the lessons, students progressively asked about the possibility of working in a group, apparently there was an internal sense that compelled them to help.

However, it struck me that the children who finished quickly constantly asked me, "¿Puedo ayudar a mi compañero?" so their friends could also go out to eat and play. It means it is as if, in the children, there was an internal sense of helping others to prevent them from being left behind (Journal Entry 3, September 30, 2022).

Even when they were not explicitly asked to work in groups, the children sought ways to

⁴ English translation: "I like working in groups more because I feel like I'm also helping my friends".

help each other. "I see that although I don't ask them to help each other, they already do. Collaboration seems innate in them" (Journal Entry 8, October 18, 2022).

Help among students is an advantage of group work since, as Fritsche (2021) states, "Students could help each other out and pull each other forward, and that weaker students could latch on to stronger students" (p.13). Following this line, cooperative learning was the opportunity for students to exchange information and support each other, to increase the initiative and motivation within the class, and increase the degree of understanding of the students in the knowledge acquired.

Group positive reinforcement.

Data analysis showed the benefit of positive reinforcement among students when learning cooperatively since it increases motivation, which strongly impacts the child's learning. It gives them a sense of self-pride, as shown in the following evidence.

On the whisper phone, I could notice that when a child did not know how to give the correct answer, the great majority (if not all the children) tried to help him by giving him the correct answer. When this classmate answered what the other children told him, they rejoiced and congratulated their partner (Journal Entry 4, September 6, 2022).

Although positive reinforcement and feedback were given relatively minor within the lessons, it was possible to observe that this engaged the students with the class topic, and they felt driven to learn and improve their English. Johnson and Johnson (n.d) affirm that cooperative learning groups promote academic support for students as well as personal support. In other words, positive reinforcement is a system that occurs in cooperative work, promoting the interaction of group members where they support, encourage, and praise the efforts of others.

Outcomes Achieved Through Cooperative Learning

Data analysis revealed improvement in students' language acquisition after implementing

cooperative learning, which was one of the main objectives I sought to carry out in the action plan.

Progress in students' performance in class.

It was evidenced a remarkable evolution in language acquisition in some of the less advanced students when they carried out group activities. At first, some students took a long time to carry out an activity, and the answers were not correct, they were baffled about it. However, in the middle of the implementation, these same students improved their English academic performance, their work was more diligent and successful, as seen in the following journal excerpt

Something that caught my attention is that some children worked quickly and did it very well (previously, when they did it that way, it was just to finish the activity regardless of whether it was correct or not). It is also impressive to see that those who started as the least advanced carried out the activity correctly, and without my help, it means only with the help of their classmates (Journal 4, September 6, 2022).

In addition, when we carried out the first activity (the posters), most of the children let the more advanced ones do much of the work. However, in the last artifact (the parts of the house (see artifact, [here](#)), I noticed that the less advanced took the initiative to carry out the exercise. "Some students (two of them particularly) continue to surprise me since they did not work before, and now they are the first. They have made considerable progress" (Journal 7, September 27, 2022).

It was evidenced that cooperative learning works as a possibility to understand more while putting into practice the theory students learned in class. In addition, Richard M. et al. (2007) affirm, "Students working alone may tend to delay completing assignments or skip them altogether, but when they know that others are counting on them, they are motivated to do the work promptly" (p. 1). It means that the weaker students who work alone are prone to stagnate

cognitively while working cooperatively. These same students will find positive stimuli that will drive them to learn and work adequately since the stronger students “faced with the task of explaining and clarifying material to weaker students often find gaps in their understanding and fill them in” (Richard M. et al., 2007, p. 1).

Conclusions and Implications

This research had the purpose of improving first-grade students' performance in English through cooperative learning in a heterogeneous group. Considering the data collected: the attitudes and emotions of the students, the role of the teacher, the advantages and results of cooperative learning, I can conclude that these factors were essential in the process. Not only to help foster the academic performance of some students with a low level of English, but also when it comes to improving the communication skills of students, their motivation and participation.

In addition, this research had implications for the teachers' practice in this context. The first implication is that the teacher must take into account the emotions of the students and understand that these vary according to the family or social situation that the children are experiencing now. This can certainly affect the motivation and participation in the class and with their classmates. In this sense, the role of the teacher is fundamental for a proper development in the activities and to guide the students both academically and emotionally.

Another implication is the strategies for managing groups, since controlling the order of children is challenging, they are full of energy and constantly want to play with their other classmates. By applying the action plan, I realized that it is necessary to have certain strategies such as the assignment of groups, the roles that the teacher gives to each student, the instructions on the activities, the positive reinforcement, etc. so that the use of cooperative learning is

effective.

For this reason, I suggest to the teacher who wants to implement something similar, that the activities and strategies implemented in group work be diverse and creative, since students usually get tired of the same thing. With students, especially children, it is necessary to vary so that the attention is focused on learning. I also suggest implementing cooperative work without fear and constantly since, although it can be exhausting, it is beneficial for the learning processes of less advanced students.

It would be important to further investigate this topic in different social contexts and in more advanced grades to analyze how these external agents influence the learning development of students with a lower level of English through cooperative learning.

Reflection

Throughout the practicum, I found myself with various feelings towards the teaching of foreign languages. When I started with my first observations, I thought that the process would not be complicated and that dealing with children would be easier than if I had done it with teenagers because I was fortunate to have excellent cooperative teachers who were really qualified in their work. But the reality was totally different for me. Although I admit that it was not so difficult compared to other contexts, I did not imagine how difficult it would be to face the reality of public education. Some challenging aspects were, for example, teaching a class to many children who were not silent and wearing out my voice. Also, kids who fought over insignificant things. Last but not least, children's complex realities in their families and how these affected the educational processes due to parents' lack of support. Little help with teaching materials and how these had to come from my salary, which was difficult because they didn't pay me for the

practices.

However, I always had my advisors' unconditional support, which motivated me to continue. It was then that I decided to focus on the good things that I could learn from this process, the love of the children, their joy, their participation, and motivation to learn new things, the contagious laughter, and the effort they put into learning English. This was gratifying for me. I was also able to improve many skills as a person, put shyness aside, leave indifference and rejoice in the processes of others.

Moreover, I understood that being a teacher is a vocation that comes from the depths of the heart, which is not only teaching a class but also being a guide. I cannot say I feel it, but I'm not ruling it out. I'm looking forward to learning new things about this profession, and if I am allowed to teach again, I will do it without any problem.

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