



**UNIVERSIDAD  
DE ANTIOQUIA**

**INCREASING STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT THROUGH  
COOPERATIVE LEARNING**

Autora

Angie Paola Patiño Barrera

Universidad de Antioquia

Escuela de Idiomas

Medellín, Colombia

2022



Increasing Students' Engagement through Cooperative Learning

**Angie Paola Patiño Barrera**

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

**Licenciada en Lenguas Extranjeras**

Asesoras:

Astrid Tangarife Sánchez

Magíster en Enseñanza y Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras

Natalia Arias Patiño

Magíster en Enseñanza y Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras

Universidad de Antioquia

Escuela de Idiomas

Medellín, Colombia

2022

### **Abstract**

This action research study conducted at a public institution located in Medellín, Antioquia was aimed at exploring the impact of cooperative learning as a strategy to increase seventh graders' engagement in the English class. Data were collected through a research journal, video recordings, mini surveys, a focus group, and an interview with the cooperating teacher of the institution. The analysis shows that cooperative learning is an effective strategy to increase the students' emotional engagement as it can foster positive feelings such as happiness, interest and satisfaction. Additionally, this strategy has a beneficial impact on the students' cognitive engagement because they can gain understanding of the content more easily as they help each other when their language limitations keep them from advancing. However, in relation to the students' behavioral engagement, the analysis showed no consistency in the findings because at some points they were engaged and behaved, but there were situations where their behavior was inappropriate. It would be worth conducting research on these topics, but under different circumstances; for example, in safer places with less time restrictions.

*Key words:* cooperative learning, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement

### **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 extend my gratitude to all the people who have contributed in any way to the completion of this project and who have supported me throughout the process of becoming a teacher.

First of all, I would like to thank my family for being my biggest support and for always encouraging me to pursue my dreams, and not to give up despite the difficulties. Their unconditional love has been a fundamental part of this process.

Likewise, I would like to express my most sincere thanks to my practicum and research advisors, Natalia Arias and Astrid Tangarife, for their guidance, ongoing support and commitment. They have motivated me and contributed greatly to my academic and professional life.

I would also like to express my appreciation to my friend and classmate in the teaching journey, Juan González, who has always listened to me, helped me and accompanied me throughout the academic program. Finally, I would like to thank all the friends I have met during these years of learning for their precious friendship and the memories they have shared with me.

**Table of Contents**

Preface .....6

Description of the Context..... 7

Statement of the Problem ..... 9

Theoretical Background .....12

    Cooperative Learning (CL).....12

    Engagement ..... 15

Research Question..... 18

    General Objective..... 18

    Specific Objectives..... 18

Action Plan ..... 19

Development of Actions.....20

Data Analysis..... 23

Findings and Interpretations ..... 23

    Positive Impact of Cooperative Learning to Increase Emotional Engagement ..... 24

    Beneficial Impact of Cooperative Learning to Increase Cognitive Engagement.....26

    Non-conclusive Impact of Cooperative Learning to Increase Behavioral Engagement .....27

    Students' Positive Reaction Towards CL as a Work Strategy in the English Class..... 29

Conclusions ..... 31

Reflection ..... 32

References ..... 33

Appendix A..... 35

Appendix B..... 36

## **Preface**

Engagement has always been of utmost importance in my own learning processes in the university, but it was not until I started this process that I discovered my interest in this topic. During the first phase of the practicum, which was observation, I noticed that commitment and involvement were not a constant in the English classes, as used to happen when I was in high school. I quickly realized that it was not going to be possible to promote long-lasting language learning if I did not first focus on trying to increase the students' engagement.

Furthermore, throughout my time in the program, I developed awareness about the importance and benefits of working together as it was a fundamental part of learning to teach. When thinking about how to improve the students' engagement, I identified cooperative learning as a potentially effective strategy that could help me to provide students with pleasant and enriching experiences while learning the language. For this reason, in this project, cooperative learning was used as a way of providing learners with an enjoyable class atmosphere that could lead them to improve their conduct, foster positive feelings and enhance their commitment to language learning.

### **Description of the Context**

Institución Educativa Antonio Derka Santo Domingo is a public school located in the northeast of Medellín city, in the Santo Domingo Savio neighborhood. The institution was created fourteen years ago as part of a government program called “Medellín, la más educada” and with contributions from Empresas Públicas de Medellín (EPM), one of the most prosperous companies in the city. I. E. Antonio Derka has four different branches: Antonio Derka Santo Domingo, Santo Domingo, Antonio Derka and Carpinelo Amapolita, being Santo Domingo the place where this action research project was carried out. It is important to highlight that this neighborhood has been negatively affected by illegal groups and problems of violence; in fact, the school is sitting on an “invisible border”, which restricts some people from crossing it.

In spite of the difficulties the neighborhood has to deal with, the institution intends to make a significant contribution to the society through education. It offers preschool, primary and secondary levels. In addition to this, it offers adult education and technical high school education in cooperation with Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA). Antonio Derka's mission is to develop, through humanistic principles and ethical values, education of high quality that allows the formation of socially and professionally competent citizens who can contribute to transformation of the society and the environment. As stated in its vision, this institution aims to be a leading educational community in the integral formation of students and the development of quality technical and academic programs through curricular flexibility and active methodologies. Antonio Derka guides this process through research, innovation, multiculturality, leadership and inclusion to establish a link between the students, higher education, and professional life.

According to the institutional educational project (PEI), the population of the school is over 3000 male and female students distributed in different groups from preschool to eleventh



grade; twenty-two of these groups are located in the Santo Domingo branch. Concerning facilities, the Santo Domingo campus has 11 classrooms distributed over three floors, a laboratory, an auditorium, a teachers' room, two computer rooms and two outdoor areas for sport activities. The institution has three libraries distributed in three of the branches, but none of these is located in the Santo Domingo Branch. All branches have Wi-Fi connection, but only teachers have access to it. Concerning the available resources for the English class, it can be said that they are limited and the majority of them are placed in the main branch of the school.

Regarding the teaching of foreign languages, the students have three hours of English instruction per week. The teaching of English at the institution is based on the Colombia Bilingüe program and the Basic Learning Rights established by the Ministry of National Education (MEN) for this subject. In terms of the methodological approach implemented at the school, they follow a task-based approach for seventh graders which is suggested by the government program. The institution has additionally adopted strategies to strengthen foreign language learning such as conversation clubs, a spelling and singing contest, as well as the use of educational games and music in the classroom. Nevertheless, not all the students actively participate in these activities because they usually take place in the main branch.

The cooperating teacher is a professional graduated from Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia (UCC) and has seven years of experience as a teacher. The first five years of experience were in the private sector, where he worked in different schools. He has been working in public schools, including Institución Educativa Antonio Derka Santo Domingo, for over two years. He has expressed that teaching has been a very rewarding experience for him and that he likes to implement David Ausubel's theory of meaningful learning as a methodology for his classes.

This research project was carried out with a thirty-group of seventh graders who are pre-adolescents ranging between eleven and fourteen years old. The students' attendance to the school varies constantly, there are usually fewer students than expected in class. They belong to different neighborhoods of comuna 1, close to the institution. As mentioned above, the context that surrounds them is difficult since the neighborhood has been highly affected by problems of violence, illegal occupation of the land and drug use. Despite the students' low performance in the English class, most of them have a positive perspective and attitude towards the language. However, sometimes they have a disruptive behavior and are reluctant to carry out the proposed activities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Engagement is a fundamental component of the teaching and learning process, notably when it comes to foreign languages. A high and positive engagement implies learners' active involvement in class activities and has a direct impact on their achievement. Nonetheless, the situation in the seventh grade at Institución Educativa Antonio Derka was completely different. During my observation time as a student-teacher, I noticed that the learners' disengagement in the English class was one of the biggest issues affecting the teaching and learning process, which was evident in their behavior and lack of interest during the activities. The class observations registered in my research journal, a questionnaire and an informal interview with the cooperating teacher provided enough information to evidence this problem.

Since I started observing on March 2nd, when the students were doing a dictation activity based on vocabulary, I noticed that most of the students were distracted and doing other types of activities such as talking to their classmates, using their phones, and playing with white-out. From the beginning, the students were badly behaved; many of them were very noisy and made

the teaching process difficult. On March 17th, during another class observation focused on different games to learn English idioms and practice spelling, a disproportionate participation and a lack of attention was evident. Even though the dynamic of the class was interactive, and the students had enough opportunities to participate, a large part of the students were not interested in the games implemented in this class and did not want to use the foreign language as expected.

Although the students usually tried to complete class tasks, most of them only did the activities out of obligation, and not out of interest or desire to learn. Besides this, the students did not seem to perceive a meaningful use of the language in the classroom and did not feel capable of using it purposefully, which caused some lack of engagement when carrying out class activities. In addition, the content of the activities appeared to be challenging for them, the topics apparently did not match their interests and needs, and the way the activities were developed did not seem to be attractive or appealing enough for them.

As it was of paramount importance to inquire about the cooperating teacher's beliefs in this respect, an informal interview was held with him during the first part of the practicum. This conversation provided helpful information concerning the students and the relation between their learning process and the context. After conducting the interview, I learned that from the cooperating teacher's point of view, it was difficult to motivate them; apparently their families did not encourage them to go beyond and see different realities outside their immediate context in the neighborhood. The opinions and beliefs of the teacher were fundamental since he constantly interacted with the students, and knew first-hand their needs and realities in the classroom. Notwithstanding, it is worth highlighting that the cooperating teacher had been working with these students for a short period of time.

In order to provide evidence and obtain information about the roots of this disengagement and the students' experience, perceptions, and interests in the English class, twenty-six students answered a questionnaire anonymously. Two of the questions were intended to find out whether the students liked to study English and if they considered that learning it was important. A large majority of the participants stated that they did like to study English and that they considered it important. Some of the reasons students provided were the usefulness of the language for their future, the opportunity to travel to English-speaking countries, the status of English as an international language of great importance, their interest towards the subject, and even the fun that learning this language provided them. Concerning their learning preferences, 69 % of the participants said they liked to work in groups and another representative percentage of students expressed their interest to draw, paint and play.

Additionally, the learners were asked whether they liked the environment of the class and how they felt about learning English in terms of the level of difficulty. Concerning language learning, more than 50% of students find learning English a difficult task, while 14 students expressed that they did not feel comfortable with the classroom environment due to the excessive noise and dirt. The data collected through the questionnaire reflected that the source of the students' disengagement was not related to a dislike or a negative perception towards the language itself. On the contrary, they did like English, but there were other factors that strongly affected their engagement such as the class atmosphere, instructional techniques that made learning difficult and the type of topics they were interested in. The learners' responses and opinions were reliable sources of information that helped me to demonstrate the existence of disengagement and the importance of addressing it, placing cooperative learning as a potentially effective strategy.

### **Theoretical Background**

In any learning process, students should invest time, effort, and emotions to succeed. When learning a foreign language, this becomes more crucial because these processes usually take place in contexts that do not favor the acquisition of it, as the one in which this study took place. In this section, I will present the two main theoretical concepts underlying and guiding this action research project. Firstly, I will refer to cooperative learning, along with its basic components and its impact on teaching and learning. Finally, I will elaborate on the concept of engagement and its different dimensions, as well as its importance in the foreign language learning process.

#### **Cooperative Learning (CL)**

From my perspective, cooperative learning seems to be a flexible and widely known teaching and learning strategy implemented in many different contexts and levels of education, in which teamwork and group goals as forms of learning empowerment are key features. According to Johnson and Johnson (2017), “cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (p. 3). This instructional practice is grounded within the social interdependence theory, which proposes that learners’ achievement and outcomes are impacted not only by their efforts and actions, but also by the actions of others. Thus, positive interdependence occurs when students' actions lead to the accomplishment of common goals, while negative interdependence refers to the opposite situation (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 366).

Even though the basic premise of cooperative learning is working together, the mere division of students into groups does not represent completely what this teaching technique entails. In fact, Johnson and Johnson (2017) present five fundamental components of cooperative

learning: positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, social skills, and group processing. According to these authors, *positive interdependence* implies the acknowledgement by students that they are bound together, and that individual success cannot be achieved without group success. *Promotive interaction* makes emphasis on helping each other during group work, and promoting or supporting team members' efforts to learn and achieve common goals. *Individual accountability* is related to the individual assessment of each team member and their sense of personal responsibility towards their own performance in the task and towards the group. *Social skills* encompass the set of necessary skills and abilities to coexist within a group and effectively cooperate with others; it includes effective communication, problem solving, team trust and decision making. The last element is *group processing*, which promotes formative assessment and feedback on the actions taken by each member of the group and on what to improve (pp. 3-4).

Literature on the field has demonstrated that the implementation of cooperative learning can bring along many positive effects for students. Nastasi and Clements (1991) refer to different effects of cooperative learning in terms of cognitive and socioemotional realms: higher levels of active participation, improvement on academic performance and high-level thinking strategies; enhancement of motivation and positive feelings towards the learning process and school as well as increase in self-worth, social acceptance, and appropriate peer relationship (pp. 111-112). Similarly, Johnson and Johnson (2009) also report benefits of cooperative learning concerning efforts to succeed —long-term retention of information, increased intrinsic motivation, beneficial attitudes in the learning process and productivity—; the quality of relationships —growth of social support and greater respect and prosocial behaviors —; and psychological health — emotional maturity, higher levels of self-esteem, self-confidence and autonomy, as well as

improvement in personal identity and social relations— (pp. 371-372) . In addition, Pateşan et al., (2016) highlight the benefits regarding the English language acquisition, stating that students can improve their oral communication skills and become more self-confident when speaking in the foreign language as they have relevant information to share or discuss with their classmates (p. 482).

Concerning the role of cooperative learning in language acquisition, Sijali conducted a longitudinal research study in 2017 with the aim of exploring the effectiveness of this instructional practice for improving learners' English language proficiency in secondary level education in Nepal. The participants of this study were 150 learners, among which 78 were part of an experimental group and the rest were part of a control group. They implemented cooperative learning with the experimental group whereas a traditional methodology was implemented with the control group. Data were collected through a proficiency test to measure the four language skills, a questionnaire to evaluate the students' attitudes regarding their English improvement due to the strategy implemented, and an English semi structured interview applied to 7 students from the experimental group and 2 from the control group.

The results of the study were presented in five different categories: listening, speaking, reading, writing and overall proficiency level. Firstly, the experimental group demonstrated a higher performance and more positive attitudes towards CL in listening skills while the control group had a lower performance and negative attitudes regarding the role of the traditional way of teaching in improving their listening skill in English. Secondly, the results were similar in the category of speaking skill, yielding that the students in the experimental group had a better performance and more beneficial attitudes. Thirdly, there was evidence that the CL approach was more appreciated by the students and more effective in improving their reading skill than the

traditional approach. In the fourth place, the difference between the experimental group and the control group with respect to their writing skill was exactly the same as the previous categories. Finally, it was found that the overall performance was higher in the experimental group with significant differences and that students expressed more positive attitudes towards the role of CL. The students highlighted the importance of the support of their classmates while working in a group, their enhancement of social skills such as good relationships and conflict management, as well as their perception of cooperative learning as an interesting, effective and supportive way of learning.

### **Engagement**

The concept of engagement is complex and broad because it can be viewed from different perspectives or contexts, and there is little agreement about its meaning. Skinner and Pitzer (2012) define engagement as a “constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally positive and cognitively focused participation with learning activities in school” (p. 22). The definition provided by these authors highlights the importance of understanding engagement as the interconnectedness of different characteristics. Additionally, it situates the concept in the context in which this action research project was conducted: the classroom.

Despite the lack of consensus concerning the conceptualization of engagement, the existing literature has identified it as a multidimensional construct (Fredricks et al., 2004; Prada Arias et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2016). In this regard, Fredricks et al., (2004) have proposed one of the most predominant categorizations of engagement, in which three different dimensions have been developed: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. In accordance with these authors, behavioral engagement implies students' positive and appropriate way of acting, as well as their commitment and participation in academic or in-classroom activities. Emotional engagement



refers to affective factors such as the reactions and the negative or positive feelings of the learners, including frustration, interest, enjoyment and so on. Cognitive engagement is related to learning strategies and processes such as mental effort, flexibility, and self-regulation (pp. 62-64). In addition to this, researchers in the field have included the social dimension to refer to interaction in the classroom and students' disposition to establish relationships and maintain them while learning (Svalberg, 2009; Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Wang et al., 2016). These dimensions provide a clear perception of the concept of engagement and highlight specific aspects to focus on in order to measure and recognize whether students are engaged or not.

Lack of student engagement has become an issue in educational processes, as it has a direct impact on learning outcomes and achievement, and teachers can easily recognize its absence or presence in students. In this respect, Ali and Hassan (2018) state that learners who are actively engaged tend to have better academic results and more positive attitudes, whereas learners experiencing low engagement show negative academic results, attitudes and behaviors (p. 2162).

In the same vein, Fredricks et al., (2004) claim that "engagement is malleable; it is presumed to be a function of both the individual and the context. Thus, it can be changed more easily than an individual trait or a general tendency" (pp. 82-83). As specified by Ali and Hassan (2018), teachers have the potential to overcome academic and social obstacles through well-planned teaching and learning strategies to increase student engagement (p. 2164).

Svalberg (2009) states that, in the field of language acquisition, the concept of engagement may explain why some specific linguistic behaviors and attitudes facilitate language learning (p. 2). Similarly, Al Rifai (2010, as cited in Prada Arias et al., 2022) expresses the idea that engagement helps to understand the motivational factors driving learning and has a

connection to those reasons students encounter in learning the language (p. 41). Therefore, it can be concluded that engagement is a fundamental element in the acquisition of a foreign language since it is connected to motivation and the type of behaviors language learners adopt towards the language.

Likewise, a connection between engagement and cooperative learning can be drawn. Well-planned collaborative activities with consistent goals offer opportunities for social practice in language learning, which heightens student engagement (Prada Arias et al., 2022, p. 45). In addition, Ali and Hassan (2018) claim that relationships between peers may have an impact on student engagement since they encourage each other to be active in school, to feel at ease and to develop social interaction (p. 2167). These authors emphasize the influence of cooperative learning on engagement, as well as its potential effectiveness and relevance as an educational strategy to increase learners' engagement when acquiring a new language.

Terry (2018) carried out a quasi-experimental research study aiming to determine the relationship between student engagement and cooperative learning activities to improve academic achievement in vocabulary and grammar. This research study was conducted at Universidad San Ignacio Loyola, a private Peruvian university, in two different English classrooms. The participants were divided into an experimental group of 22 students and a control group of 23 students, all of whom were undergraduate students from different majors taking English V. Data were collected through the following instruments: a pretest and a post-test applied to the students, questionnaires, mini-surveys to the students at the end of cooperative learning activities, rubrics to verify their progress on cooperative tasks and to evaluate their performance in grammar and vocabulary, voice recordings of some collaborative activities, and class observations and logs.

The results of the study were positive and confirmed the researcher's hypothesis: cooperative learning activities keep students behaviorally and cognitively engaged, which can improve academic achievement, especially vocabulary and grammar. Firstly, it can be asserted that the students' performance and engagement in cooperative learning tasks improved throughout the course in the experimental group, which was reflected in the results of the pre-test and post-test. It was found that behavioral and emotional engagement significantly increased, while behavioral and emotional disaffection was reduced. In addition, some increase in engagement was evident in the low rates of absenteeism and drop-out in the experimental group, where none of the students quit the course in contrast to the control group where some of the students dropped out. Secondly, grammar and vocabulary knowledge were the variables with more positive effects among the students, which was evident by the comparison of the pre-test and post-test results. Besides the above, a comparison in the grades of the experimental and control groups also supported this result since the experimental group's grades were higher than those of the control group. Finally, it was found that most of the students considered cooperative class sessions fun and interesting.

### **Research Question**

What is the impact of using cooperative learning to increase seventh graders' engagement in the English class at an EFL public institution?

### **General Objective**

To explore the impact of cooperative learning as a strategy to increase seventh graders' engagement in the English class at an EFL public institution.

### **Specific Objectives**

To analyze how cooperative learning can impact learners' cognitive dimension of engagement.

To encourage positive interactions and coexistence among learners.

To provide learners with a pleasant class atmosphere that leads them to have proper behavior and positive feelings.

### **Action Plan**

In order to explore the impact and usefulness of cooperative learning to increase student engagement, I developed an action plan taking into consideration the schedule of the institution and the amount of weeks proposed by the university for the semester. Through the implementation of this action strategy, I intended to focus on the improvement of the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions of student engagement.

During the first two weeks, I planned to socialize the proposal with the students and the cooperating teacher. To do this, we would have a round table discussion in which I would expose to them what this action research project would be about, its objectives and the importance of their participation. Considering the relevance of ethical issues when developing research, I would also provide a consent form to ask for their permission to analyze data obtained from them. In addition, I thought it was relevant to obtain information about their current level of engagement, as well as their perspectives about the strategy to be implemented; therefore, I decided on a questionnaire for this purpose.

From the beginning, I would write a research journal in which I would keep a record of descriptions and reflections with relevant information for answering the research question of this project. The descriptions and reflections would be focused on the strategy implemented — cooperative learning— and the level of behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement observed in the students during the different class sessions.

The main strategy of this action research would be implemented between August and November by carrying out between six or seven cooperative learning activities in accordance with the school syllabus proposed for the English subject. These activities would be based on two of the five main elements of the cooperative learning theory: positive interdependence and promotive interaction. To collect data and evidence from these cooperative learning activities, I would record and subsequently analyze the classes in which I would implement the cooperative learning activities. Moreover, it was of paramount importance to inquire about the students' impressions and feelings regarding the class and the cooperative learning activities that were conducted, hence, I would design a mini survey for students to complete it in Spanish at the end of these activities.

Furthermore, three more activities would be developed between the end of October and the beginning of November. First, I would conduct a focus group with six to ten students with the purpose of expanding their perceptions and feelings towards the class and the cooperative learning activities in which they participated. Second, I would hold an interview with the cooperating teacher to know his opinion about the strategies implemented, and whether he noticed some progress in the students' level of engagement or not. Third, the students would answer the same questionnaire they answered at the beginning in order to compare their answers provided in both questionnaires. Finally, I planned to start analyzing the data in October to finish writing the final paper in November.

### **Development of Actions**

As stated in the action plan, I implemented some action strategies in order to explore the impact and usefulness of cooperative learning to increase student engagement at three different levels: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. In the following lines, I will present the actions that

were actually implemented and those that could not be conducted for some external reasons that were not under my control.

Firstly, I socialized the proposal with the students and the cooperating teacher through a round table discussion, and asked the students for permission to use the data collected through a consent form. I explained the purpose and objectives of this action research project to the students, as well as the importance of their participation. Although they were attentive and most of them signed the consent form, they did not ask questions or show any interest in knowing more about the project. This might have happened because, as some of them expressed it, they were not used to working cooperatively. These activities were scheduled for the first two weeks of the semester but, due to a situation of violence that occurred in the neighborhood, and delayed the end of the second term, they were held in the fourth week of the semester. In addition, I wanted to apply a questionnaire prior to the implementation of the main strategy to obtain information about the student's current level of engagement at that point, and their perspectives on cooperative learning, but unfortunately, it could not be conducted given the time constraints caused by the aforementioned situation.

From September 8th to November 2nd, I wrote a research journal entry after every cooperative learning activity. This data collection tool included descriptions and reflections of the whole process. The descriptive part accounted for the different situations, expected and unexpected, regarding cooperative learning and the effect it had on the students' engagement. As for the reflective part, I wrote about my impressions and feelings when conducting the cooperative learning activities. These entries provided me with useful information, as I could keep track of any possible changes and implementation of different strategies.

Concerning cooperative learning, I planned to develop between six and seven activities in which two principles of the cooperative learning theory were evidenced —positive interdependence and promotive interaction—, but I was only able to carry out four activities because of time limitations. The students missed many of the English classes due to some school events, meetings or teacher training, and some other classes were reduced to half time. These activities took place between September and November, and they covered some of the topics suggested in the school syllabus, and those proposed by the English teachers for a final institutional project.

As a way to collect data and evidence from these four cooperative learning activities, I used two tools. First, I designed and provided the students with a mini survey at the end of the cooperative learning activities to learn about their perceptions and feelings during the class. Second, I video recorded and described in writing the classes in which the cooperative learning activities took place. These actions were of paramount importance as they enabled me to focus on each of the different dimensions of engagement: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral.

During the second week of November, I conducted a focus group with five students to compare and validate the information they provided in the mini survey about the class and the cooperative learning activities. Additionally, I wanted to inquire about their perceptions in relation to the effect of cooperative learning on the different dimensions of engagement. This focus group was audio recorded and subsequently analyzed. Moreover, I held an online interview with the cooperating teacher with the purpose of knowing his opinion about the implemented strategy and the changes he had observed in the students' level of engagement. Finally, I analyzed the data collected and reported the findings in the final paper.

### **Data Analysis**

For the data analysis, I followed Burns' (2009) process, in which five stages are proposed: assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building interpretations, and reporting the outcomes. As a first step, I assembled the data obtained through a research journal, video recordings, mini surveys, a focus group, and an interview with the cooperating teacher. All these data were organized in different folders, containing the purpose of each source and the dates in which they took place so that I could keep clearer track of everything I collected. After organizing all the necessary information, I carried out the second step in which I carefully reviewed the information and assigned codes and categories to reduce the amount of data and start identifying recurrences. In the third step, I compared and examined the information from all the sources to find possible patterns. After that, I started to connect the evidence coming from the data with the theory and to construct interpretations that could help me to answer the research question. In the following section, I will present the findings and interpretations that emerged from this analysis.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

The data analysis showed interesting outcomes in terms of the effectiveness of cooperative learning to increase some of the dimensions of student engagement. Four main findings emerged from this analysis: positive impact of cooperative learning to increase emotional engagement, beneficial impact of cooperative learning to increase cognitive engagement, non-conclusive impact of cooperative learning to increase behavioral engagement and students' positive opinion towards cooperative learning as a work strategy in the English class. In the next lines, I will present in detail these findings along with the interpretations.



### **Positive Impact of Cooperative Learning to Increase Emotional Engagement**

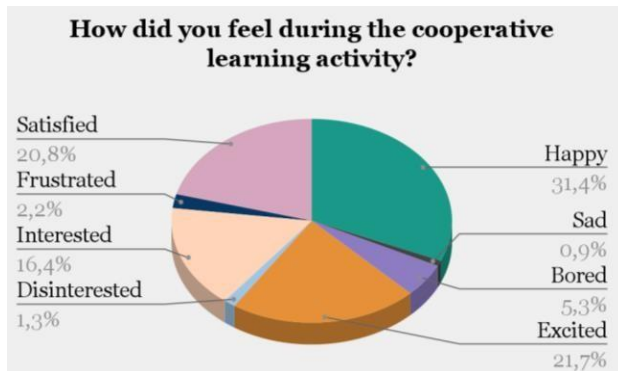
Data analysis revealed that there is a strong relation between cooperative learning and emotional engagement, and that the participants' feelings were almost always positive during the implementation of the strategy. Cooperative learning activities allowed the students to feel comfortable during the classes and learn in a more enjoyable way as they had opportunities to share with their friends and complete tasks. Evidence of this is what student K expressed in the focus group when they were asked how they felt during the cooperative learning activities. He said that when they were in rows, he was bored; he did not want to do anything in class, he did not hand in homework, and he kept falling behind. When they worked in groups, he did everything, and he had more fun. To the same question, student J said that he felt happy because he was with his classmates doing the tasks. Before that, he was a little bored or did not show the level of capacity that he had. In relation to the comments provided by the participants, Nastasi and Clemements (1991) point out the positive effects of cooperative learning at a cognitive and socioemotional level. Among the different benefits, they highlight the increase of active participation and the enhancement of motivation and positive feelings towards learning.

Fredricks et al., (2004) emphasize that students' positive reactions and feelings such as interest and enjoyment are connected with emotional engagement. In relation to this, the mini surveys support this positive impact and are consistent with what the students expressed in the focus group (see Appendix A). The first question sought to know how the students felt during the cooperative learning activities and offered as choices: *happy, sad, bored, excited, disinterested, interested, frustrated, and satisfied*. As it can be seen in figure 1, approximately 90% of the answers were classified into the categories of *happy, excited, interested* and *satisfied*. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that there was some increase in the responses referring to

*happy*: 1st CLA (15), 2nd CLA (16), 3rd CLA (19), 4th CLA (21); and a decrease in the answers referring to *bored*: 1st CLA (5), 2nd CLA (2), 3rd CLA (4), 4th CLA (1), as shown in figure 2.

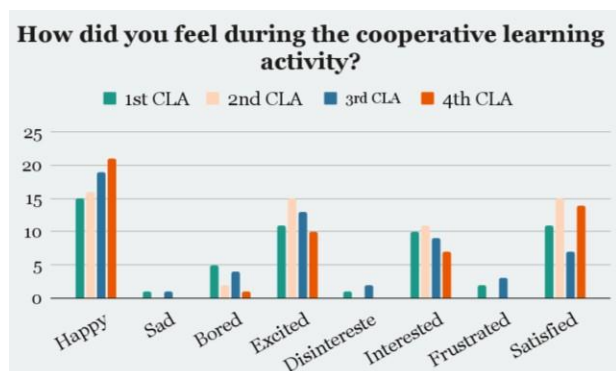
**Figure 1**

*Feelings towards CLA's*



**Figure 2**

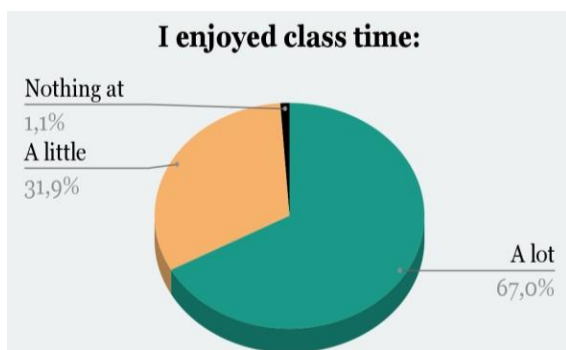
*Comparison of Feelings in the CLA's*



The answers provided to the third question of the mini surveys are also important evidence of the students' emotional engagement. In this part, the students were inquired about how much they enjoyed class time, and three different options were given: *a lot*, *a little* and *nothing at all*. As can be seen in figure 3, 67 % of the responses indicated that the students enjoyed the class time very much during the cooperative learning activities. In figure 4, we can observe some increase in the responses *a lot*, as well as some decrease in the responses *a little* throughout the activities.

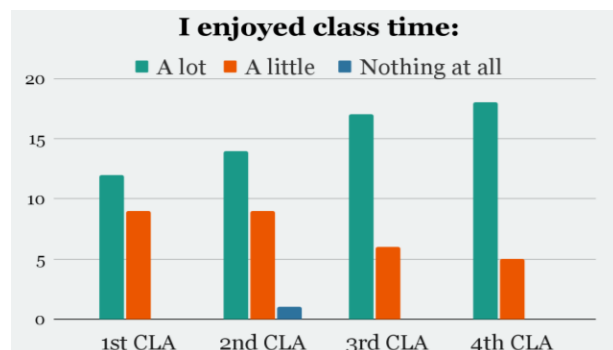
**Figure 3.**

*Class Enjoyment during CLA's*



**Figure 4.**

*Comparison of Class Enjoyment*



Nevertheless, it is important to mention that, in some specific cases, there was an occasional decrease in emotional engagement due to difficulties encountered when working cooperatively, particularly regarding students' lack of commitment towards the group.<sup>1</sup> As an example of this, in the focus group, student V said that she felt both happy and bored when asked about her feelings during cooperative learning activities. She explained that she was happy because she could work with her classmates, but bored because her classmates were not doing their best.

### **Beneficial Impact of Cooperative Learning to Increase Cognitive Engagement**

Concerning cognitive engagement, the data analysis revealed a beneficial impact thanks to promotive interaction, one of the five fundamental elements of cooperative learning theory. Johnson and Johnson (2017) state that promotive interaction happens when, in order to achieve team goals, students help each other and promote team members' efforts to learn. Cooperative work allowed the students to construct knowledge together and gain understanding more easily by explaining to each other and making individual contributions according to their strengths and prior knowledge.

This finding can be confirmed with the perceptions expressed by the students during the focus group in response to the questioning about different items such as effort, development of activities and quality of work. The students declared their appreciation for this type of work because of the support they provide each other during the learning process. Student A said that he felt more comfortable working cooperatively because when someone did not understand, the person who understood could explain to the others. Likewise, student S mentioned that for her, it was better to work in groups because when she did not understand something, her classmate

---

<sup>1</sup> The responses from the focus group and the interview were translated from Spanish to English by the researcher.

explained it to her or when he did not understand it, she explained it to him. She also added that her grades improved. Concerning the above, Johnson and Johnson (2009) state that in cooperative learning, which is based on social interdependence theory, students' achievement and outcomes are affected by their efforts and those of their teammates.

Despite this positive effect, it is necessary to mention that there were some linguistic limitations that acted as a barrier during the implementation of the project and the pursuit of improving the students' English language skills. On September 14th, I wrote in my journal about how concerned I was that the students found it difficult to write simple sentences and use *the verb to be*, even when they had been working on the topic for some time. In addition, in the journal entry of November 2nd, I wrote that the students had difficulties writing sentences and only few students were able to use *there is /there are* and the vocabulary learned in class. However, it is of utmost importance to consider the complexity of the context in which this action research project was carried out, as well as the time constraints faced. Cooperative learning is a strategy that requires time and continuous action to foster significant changes. In this case, I was only able to develop four cooperative learning activities and with considerable time intervals between each one.

### **Non-conclusive Impact of Cooperative Learning to Increase Behavioral Engagement**

In relation to behavioral engagement, the findings that emerged from the analysis were not consistent. According to Fredricks et al. (2004), behavioral engagement refers to students' positive and appropriate way of acting, as well as students' commitment and participation in tasks and school activities. Based on this, it is possible to affirm that changes were only constant in one aspect of this dimension, while in the other one they were irregular.

The students' conduct and way of acting was changeable throughout the implementation of the cooperative learning activities and was different among the groups formed in each activity. In my research journal from September 28th, I described that, although they followed my instructions and had good conduct in general, there were moments in which they lost attention and did other activities. Moreover, I said that in three of the six groups, the moments of distraction and negative behaviors displayed were constant, while in the other groups these moments were less recurrent. In the same way, in the journal entry of November 2nd, I referred to the students' behavior by saying that some of them respected the norms of the classroom and followed my instructions, but the rest of them had negative behaviors and were not able to stay on task.

The lack of significant impact of cooperative learning to improve students' conduct was supported in the video recordings, where the descriptions varied all the time between positive and negative perceptions. Additionally, this was also corroborated by the students in the focus group since their answers to the question of how they would define their behavior during the activities were very similar to what is already reported. For example, student K said that sometimes he behaved well and sometimes badly; that sometimes he talked a lot and did nothing in class, but in the end, he handed in the assignments. Student J manifested a similar thought by stating that they tried to be on their best behavior to get the highest score on the peer-assessment, but that they ended up talking or walking around. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to point out that the cooperating teacher did observe an improvement in the behavior of the students. During the interview, he expressed that, although at the beginning the behavior was not adequate, classes went smoothly when cooperative learning activities and group work were implemented.

Regarding students' commitment and participation, there was a noticeable influence since all the students assumed a role in the group and worked on task completion. As registered in the journal entry from September 14th, all the students completed the cooperative learning activity and created their own poster including one stereotype about the assigned country (see Appendix B). Through the focus group, student K also provided proof of this when he answered whether he noticed a change in their effort and in the quality of their work. This student declared: "now that I work in groups, we divide the roles and some of us draw, others write, others do the cover and so on; I feel more comfortable working in groups". Besides this, when the cooperating teacher was asked how he perceived the students' reaction to the cooperative learning activities, he observed a positive effect on the completion of the activities. He expressed that although at the beginning the students were reluctant to do the activities, as the explanation became clearer and the activities were more dynamic, there was an impact, and they developed the tasks completely.

### **Students' Positive Reaction Towards CL as a Work Strategy in the English Class**

The participants of this study emphasized on their positive perception of cooperative learning as an enjoyable, motivating, and useful way of working during the English class. Evidence of this is what was expressed by the students in the mini surveys and in the focus group, where they highlighted the importance of cooperative learning for strengthening their skills and for making learning more engaging. For example, when they were asked to share their opinions about cooperative learning, student V mentioned that she liked it because they started to learn how to share, express themselves and do things well. With respect to the same question, student A added that he thought it was something good and very fun because they could learn more, gain more knowledge, learn about the language, and socialize with their classmates. This relates to the results of the research study conducted by Sijali (2017), in which the students

expressed positive attitudes towards the role of CL. They highlighted their enhancement of social skills, as well as their perception of cooperative learning as an interesting, effective, and supportive way of learning.

In the same vein, the students remarked an improvement when working cooperatively in terms of autonomy gain, conflict management skills and group processing. When asked in the focus group about different aspects of cooperative learning such as peer-assessment and roles, student A mentioned, “at the beginning, we used to fight over who wanted to draw or write and so on, but now we try to see who draws or writes better and we assign the roles so that we all work cooperatively”. He then added, “now, when I am going to be graded, I do not take the copy of the peer-assessment, but I let the whole team assign a grade to me, so that there is no disagreement or discord”.

The personal notes I wrote on September 28th in my research journal also confirmed it. First, I described that during that activity, it was easier for the students to assign the roles, they did it without help and tried to maintain and assume them throughout the activity. I then expressed that none of the groups had any problems assigning the grades when completing the peer- assessment, and that it was possible to see them discuss the different criteria together. Furthermore, through the interview, the cooperating teacher remarked that the development of the cooperative learning activities had a significant contribution to the improvement of the communication among the students, an aspect that had been poor at the beginning of the year. The aforementioned findings can be associated with the variable of social skills, one of the essential elements of cooperative learning theory proposed by Johnson and Johnson (2017). This element refers to the skills and abilities students need to cooperate effectively with others, including effective communication, problem solving, team confidence, and decision making.

### **Conclusions**

This study sought to explore the impact of cooperative learning to increase the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of students' engagement in an English class. The findings demonstrated that this action research project had positive results and that cooperative learning is a useful strategy since engagement did increase at certain dimensions.

Working in groups while effectively assigning roles, supporting, and encouraging each other enhanced the student's participation and task completion, allowed them to understand class content more easily, and fostered positive feelings. The implementation of cooperative learning activities helped to promote a classroom environment where the students felt comfortable, enjoyed the class time, and started to learn to coexist appropriately. Nevertheless, cooperative learning activities did not show a significant improvement in the student's conduct, one of the variables of behavioral engagement.

Furthermore, apart from the different dimensions of engagement, the findings proved that activities based on cooperative learning stimulated the enhancement of autonomy, social skills and communication processes. These aspects are of crucial importance not only for the process of learning a foreign language, but also for education and life in general.

These results are relevant as they suggest that, although engagement emerges from the students themselves, there are some external factors that may influence their level of involvement towards learning such as teaching strategies. Consequently, teachers have a big responsibility when deciding on the strategies to be implemented because they can have a great impact on the students' engagement.

Despite the positive results of this project, there were some limitations related to the context in which it took place. This may be a possible reason why progress in the students'



behavior was not consistent and the English performance of the students remained low. I am certain that the positive impact could have been higher if the conditions had been different.

### **Reflection**

Teaching as part of the practicum has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences I have ever had. This process has allowed me to grow not only academically and professionally, but also as a person; especially since it was my first experience as a teacher in a school. I learned about the reality of teaching in our country, but I also broadened my perspectives, tried to put myself in other people's position, and understood how violence and lack of opportunities continue to be a constant that affects education in our context.

Despite the difficulties I experienced in terms of time constraints, social problems and unexpected challenges, I have the sensation that I was well received by the students as their teacher. I also felt that the participants of this study ended up appreciating cooperative learning as a positive strategy to be implemented in an English class. In addition, I can affirm that the difficulties were great opportunities for improvement and for reinforcing knowledge related to teaching strategies, approaches, classroom management and lesson planning. It was a real pleasure to realize, through some moments shared with this group of teenagers, that teaching will never be easy, but it is certainly a worthwhile task.

Finally, I invite future student-teachers to give themselves the opportunity to fully live and enjoy the process, in spite of any setbacks that may occur. Be aware that education in our country represents a multitude of daily challenges that we as teachers can positively face while contributing to the formative process of the students amidst different realities. Do not be afraid to change what is taken for granted in schools and to try new strategies and ways of teaching.

### References

- Ali, M. M., & Hassan, N. (2018). Defining Concepts of Student Engagement and Factors Contributing to Their Engagement in Schools. *Creative Education, 9*, 2161-2170. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2018.914157>
- Burns, A. (2009). Action research in second language teacher education. In A. Burns & J.C. Richards. (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 156-160
- Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(1), 59-109.
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2009). An Educational Psychology Success Story: Social Interdependence Theory and Cooperative Learning. *Educational Researcher, 38*(5), 365-379. <https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0013189X09339057>
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2017, September 22-23). *Cooperative Learning* [Paper presentation]. Congreso Internacional de Innovación Educativa, Zaragoza, Aragón, Spain.
- Nastasi, B. K., & Clements, D. H. (1991). Research on Cooperative Learning: Implications for Practice. *School Psychology Review, 20*(1), 110-131.
- Pateşan, M., Balagiu, A., & Zechia, D. (2016). The Benefits of Cooperative Learning. *International Conference KNOWLEDGE-BASED ORGANIZATION, 22*(2), 478-483. <https://doi.org/10.1515/kbo-2016-0082>
- Philp, J., & Duchesne, S. (2016). Exploring engagement in tasks in the language classroom. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 36*, 50-72.

- Prada Arias, A. Y., Trujillo Rodríguez, M. A., & Herrera Mosquera, L. (2022). Enhancing Language Learning Engagement through Critical Literacy Practices. *Lenguaje*, 50(1), 37-65. <https://doi.org/10.25100/lenguaje.v50i1.11085>
- Sijali, K. K. (2017). Effectiveness of Cooperative Learning for Improving Learners' Proficiency Level of English Language in Secondary Level Education in Nepal. *Journal of NELTA*, 22(1-2), 13-25.
- Skinner, E., & Pitzer, J. (2012). Developmental dynamics of engagement, coping, and everyday resilience. In *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp. 21-44). New York, NY: Springer.
- Svalberg, A. (2009). Engagement with language: interrogating a construct. *Language Awareness*, 18(3-4), 242-258.
- Terry, F. (2018). *Keeping students engaged through cooperative learning activities to improve academic achievement in grammar and vocabulary*. [Master's thesis, University of Piura]. Piura. <https://hdl.handle.net/11042/3435>
- Wang, M.-T., Fredricks, J. A., Ye, F., Hofkens, T. L., & Linn, J. S. (2016). The Math and Science Engagement Scales: Scale development, Validation, And psychometric properties. *Learning and Instruction*, 43, 16-26.

**Appendix A**

**Example of Students' Answers in the Mini Survey**

**Encuesta**

Lee cuidadosamente las siguientes preguntas y responde:

1. ¿Cómo te sentiste durante la actividad cooperativa?  
(Puedes marcar varias opciones)

Feliz  
 Triste  
 Aburrido  
 Emocionado  
 Desinteresado  
 Interesado  
 Frustrado  
 Satisfecho

2. En pocas palabras, describe tus sentimientos con respecto a la clase de hoy:  
*Fue buena y a la vez muy divertida. Los compañeros no nos ayudaron mucho.*

3. Disfrutaste el tiempo de la clase de hoy:

Nada en absoluto  
 Un poco  
 Mucho

**Encuesta**

Lee cuidadosamente las siguientes preguntas y responde:

1. ¿Cómo te sentiste durante la actividad cooperativa?  
(Puedes marcar varias opciones)

Feliz  
 Triste  
 Aburrido  
 Emocionado  
 Desinteresado  
 Interesado  
 Frustrado  
 Satisfecho

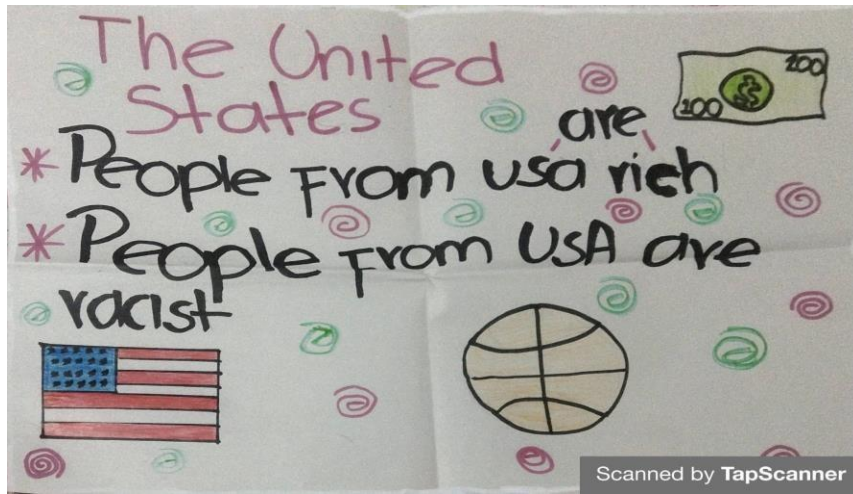
2. En pocas palabras, describe tus sentimientos con respecto a la clase de hoy:  
*me senti muy bien en esta clase aprendo cada vez mas y me divierte*

3. Disfrutaste el tiempo de la clase de hoy:

Nada en absoluto  
 Un poco  
 Mucho

**Appendix B**

**Students' Work in the First CLA**



Roles	Students
Illustrator	
Writer	
Pronunciation checker	
Presenter	