

Some contributions to English oral interaction from cooperative learning

Algunas contribuciones a la interacción oral en inglés desde el aprendizaje cooperativo

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Abstract: Cooperative learning allows teachers and learners to develop workshops by teams to build knowledge according to the contents proposed in the English classes. This article is the product of qualitative research, which objective was to explore how cooperative learning improves the oral interaction in English of ninth grade students at a private school in Ubaté, Cundinamarca. This study was framed in the Action Research, the instruments to collect data were the teacher's journal, reflections from each workshop and three interviews to sixteen students of the participating grade. Teamwork, cooperative learning and oral expression in English of ninth grade students are highlighted in the results. The conclusions point out that cooperation is a social practice among students that stimulates, motivates and improves learning and oral interaction in English.

Keywords: well-disposed behavior, oral English proficiency, work by teams, qualitative research, social practice.

Resumen: El aprendizaje cooperativo permite no solo a los estudiantes adquirir conocimientos trabajando en equipo, sino también a los maestros desarrollar los contenidos propuestos en las clases de inglés. Este artículo es producto de una investigación cualitativa, cuyo objetivo exploraba cómo el aprendizaje cooperativo mejora la interacción oral en inglés de los estudiantes de noveno grado en un colegio privado de Ubaté, Cundinamarca. Este estudio se enmarcó dentro de la Investigación Acción, utilizando como instrumentos de recopilación de datos: el diario del maestro, las reflexiones de cada taller y tres entrevistas grupales a los dieciséis estudiantes del grado participante. Finalmente, los resultados y las conclusiones muestran que el trabajo en equipo y la cooperación son prácticas sociales entre los estudiantes, lo cual estimula, motiva y mejora el aprendizaje y la interacción oral en inglés.

Palabras clave: buena actitud, hablar en inglés, trabajo en equipo, investigación cualitativa, práctica social.

INTRODUCTION

The English teaching-learning process takes into account reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in order for students to be able to develop the English speaking competence, specially, oral interaction. Nevertheless, in our schools, many English teachers have focused the learning process on writing and reading skills, with activities such as filling the gaps on copies, complete blanks, identify vocabulary (verbs, nouns, etc.) among others. It means that the students have learnt English language based on grammar aspects instead of getting involved into working in small groups to foster spoken English.

This research project was based on the conception that English language learning process works better if we are cooperative; it means working together to achieve a determined goal. Related to the students' learning process, the cooperative workshops encouraged not only the English oral interaction, but it made the English learning process a useful experience for ninth graders and made the English classes more enjoyable. Besides, it guided the students to control their own learning, developing habits to increase the English language usage into the classroom context. On the other hand, in terms of the teaching process, this investigative practice generated a support for innovation in pedagogy and education fields.

The investigation was carried out at the private school San Francisco de Asís, in Ubaté-Cundinamarca. The sample for this research was made up of sixteen students, divided into five small groups, to whom five workshops were applied in order to develop their oral interaction and the students' well-disposed behavior, which made possible a better involvement of students in their academic process.

Taking into account these ideas, this paper presents a research study based on the implementation of cooperative learning approach as a pedagogical strategy to improve ninth graders' oral interaction. The investigation was based on asserts about cooperative learning and oral interaction concepts of many authors such as Holt, Chips & Wallace (1991), Johnson & Johnson (1989), Kagan (1994), Hamm and Adams (1992), Cohen (1972), Slavin (1995), Cooper (1979), among others. Taking into consideration that the cooperative learning concept was based on recognizing that team members share academic commonalties and recognizing that the student's performance is caused by themselves, we explored the cooperative learning possibility in the teaching-learning process to make the students interact among each other using English language into the classroom.

This research was guided by the question: How to improve oral interaction in ninth graders at "Colegio Cooperativo San Francisco de Asís" from Ubaté-Cundinamarca through the implementation of cooperative learning approach?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are many studies from researchers that have published their outcomes about cooperative learning such as Coleman (1961), Slavin (1964), Holt, Chips & Wallace (1991) who advice that students must work in teams to help each other mastering academic content and improving academic and personal performances. A research by McGroarty (1993) shows that group work benefits second language learners in three ways: input, interaction and contextualization of knowledge. Kagan (1994) states that when students work together the positive interdependence that develops, foster social behavior and improve ethics relations. Working together help language development as well because students have the chance to use the language for a variety of purposes. Thus, cooperation is a tool that allow people to interact and to learn in an exploring environment where students are the main characters, by means of a permanent interaction between peers, student-teacher, student-student, and group work.

Johnson & Johnson (1995) and Brandt & Ellsworth (1996) spoke about factors for successful cooperative learning: "positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interactions, social skills, appropriate leadership, communication skills, work reflection", among others. Olsen & Kagan (quoted

by Oxford, 1997, p. 18), cooperative learning is assumed as a “group learning activity organized, thus, learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others”.

From this research experience, cooperative learning goes beyond group work, because students helped and supported among them to complete the tasks, it means, they offered assistance to each other for mutual benefit. When ninth graders worked together, they were more receptive and their interaction was more enthusiastic. Agreeing to this experience, cooperative learning was an approach that permitted students to interact, learn and solve problems.

METHODOLOGY

It was a qualitative research with an action research approach. Firestone (1987) and Mills (2003) define action research as a systematic inquiry, conducted by teachers with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn. By their part, Parson & Brown (2002) state that action research allows teacher to study their own classroom, their own instructional methods, their own students, their own assessment; in order to better understand them and be able to improve their quality or effectiveness.

In addition, Kemmis & McTaggart (2000) support that “action research is used to refer to teacher-initiated classroom investigation which seeks to increase the teacher’s understanding of classroom practices” (p. 45). Action research involves investigations in the teacher’s own classroom; in that way, the whole research study followed next four phases: planning, action, observation and reflection.

Planning. It is not necessary to depend on a hypothesis; what it needs is to observe carefully what is happening into the classroom to be able to detect what aspect, kind of interaction or behavior can give into a different problem. On this step, the English learning concern that called the attention was to characterize the ninth graders’ oral interaction as a consequence of the implementation of cooperative learning.

Action. The action plan had to do with cooperative workshops. Five workshops were designed for small groups (teams) of four or three members in order to interact sharing students’ speeches about the topic that we were studying. Every workshop presented a determined objective. In this stage, the students were committed to the process of the investigation.

Observation. The data was collected through interviews and the teacher’s journal. The purpose of it was to establish relations between the students’ strengths and weaknesses in their English language use. Based on the observation, the researcher could present the qualitative data collected by means of the research instruments.

Reflection. Every workshop had a critical reflection about the teaching practice, the development of the activities and the students’ way to achieve the goal. In addition, it allowed to improve next workshop to be applied in the research process, describing and understanding the educational values that underlie our practices. In this way, some aspects were taken into account such as students’ speech, personal relations and work in teams, among others.

Population

The research study was carried out at “Colegio Cooperativo San Francisco de Asis”. It is a private institution located in the rural area of Ubaté - Cundinamarca. Since 1964 to 1974, the Franciscanos community administered it; later, the student’s parents cooperative administered it. Its main characteristic is based on the following values: respect, responsibility, personal grow, honesty and catholic principles. The whole group consisted of 16 students among 13-15 years old. There were seven girls and nine boys, most of them came from the rural areas. The participants of this work were ninth graders since 2015. The whole group participated on

workshops, four participants were interviewed, one student per team, and the teacher’s diary was written in each session. Next table (Table 1) shows a description of each one of the participants in this research study.

Table 1. Description of each one of the participants.

TABLE 1
Description of each one of the participants

Students	Genre	Age	Personality		Hobbies		
			Introvert	Extrovert	Creative	Responsible	
Ss. 1	Male	13					Music, Dance, TV, soccer
Ss. 2	Male	13					Music, draw, soccer, TV
Ss. 3	Female	13					Music, read, volleyball
Ss. 4	Male	13					Music, read, soccer, BMX
Ss. 5	Female	14					Music, TV, basketball
Ss. 6	Female	13					Music, basketball
Ss. 7	Male	14					Music, read, soccer
Ss. 8	Male	14					Music, draw, soccer
Ss. 9	Female	13					Music, read, sing
Ss. 10	Female	13					Music, TV, basketball
Ss. 11	Male	13					Music, read, soccer
Ss. 12	Female	13					Music, TV, make up
Ss. 13	Male	15					Music, TV, soccer
Ss. 14	Male	13					Music, basketball, soccer
Ss. 15	Female	14					Music, read, basketball
Ss. 16	Male	14					Music, draw, soccer

For some of them, their conception about English was not a positive one. This perception was showed through their lack of oral interaction. Because of this, they failed some periods and did not reflect any improvement in their English learning process. They were used to get low grades and they conceived the English learning as a complicated issue but not as a way to acquire knowledge, enrich the culture and, consequently, as an opportunity for their future lives.

Research instruments

With regard to collecting data, I applied permanent observation, which involved three instruments: journal, interview (structured/semistructured) and workshops’ reflection. First, the teacher’s diary helped to show information about the development of activities during the workshops; it supported to record the students’ attitudes and their oral interaction. Concerning to teacher’s diary, Porlán & Martín (2000, p. 26) stated, it “fosters the development of a deeper description of the classroom’s dynamics through detailed account on the different events and everyday situations. The same fact to reflect it by writing, favors the development of capacities of observation and categorization of reality, allowing go beyond the simple intuitive perception”.

Second, interviews (structured/semistructured) recorded the students’ reactions about the development of workshops. According to Calderón-Noguera (2011, p. 13) the interview is a research instrument to collect data, “it is characterized by dialogue between at least two persons. It is a flexible instrument, where the interviewer and interviewee interact building an inter-subjective reality”.

According to Casteblanco-Cifuentes (2015, p. 283) the workshop “expresses work and strong achievements in learning, since it is based on learning by doing or experiencing the events where both theory and practice are linked. The workshop is a strategy that allows the activity around a school subject”. And she continues, “the workshop is an activity where the students develop new knowledge and confront their skills with the help of the teacher” [translated by the researcher]. Kisnerman (quoted by Casteblanco-Cifuentes, 2015, p. 283), stated that the workshop is “a production unit of knowledge from a concrete reality, to be transferred to that reality to transform”. So, workshops’ reflections were used as instrument because that collected information along each session helped to support the present investigation.

Pedagogical proposal

This proposal implied five workshops with a variety of cooperative learning activities to improve the ninth graders English oral interaction. The members of the teams were responsible not just for learning what the teacher was teaching, but also for helping teammates to learn. This aspect created an atmosphere of achievement. Students worked through the assignment until all small group members understood and completed it.

To know the worth of the contribution of this paper, I need to say that it consisted on adapting those steps and procedures all led to improve the English language level for school students, in this case, in order to be applied with ninth graders of “Colegio Cooperativo San Francisco de Asis” from Ubaté-Cundinamarca. I really wanted those ninth graders to interact orally among each other using English language in an easy way. Thus, the results with the cooperative approach concerning oral interaction were especially significant.

DATA ANALYSIS

The process followed to analyze the data gathered began in reading, re-reading, making triangulation. It means, comparisons and contrasting the information provided by each one of the instruments. Then, I identified and underlined common patterns in each instrument. After that, I wrote down in a separate paper language aspects in which I could include the information found in each instrument. Finally, I named the categories to explain in the data analysis the research study.

According to Firestone (1987, p. 93), data analysis is the process to order, structure and give meaning to the data in order to explain that data collected by the researcher. In this way, the researcher enters into the dialogue with it, questioning and finding new meanings. Taking into account the previous considerations, this analysis was supported through the research instruments which were based on the classroom’s sessions. These instruments explored students’ experiences during the learning process along this study. Interviews, workshops’ reflections and teacher’s diary provided with the information to be analyzed and answer to the research question.

Findings

During the study, the ninth graders of Institución Educativa Colegio Cooperativo San Francisco de Asís, Ubaté-Cundinamarca, had the opportunity to speak with freedom about different themes and issues that they concluded from their real life, experiences and other situations. Once the students completed the required task, each group shared their work orally in front of the other groups. We created a cooperative learning environment and not a competitive one; so, when a member of a group made a possible mistake it was an opportunity for them to reinforce and overcome the issue as a team.

Students increased their vocabulary by means of the development of cooperative environment. Every session concluded with oral presentations. So, it must be said that the development of the speaking skill in this ninth graders group was a challenge, since it was not an easy task to make people speak in a foreign

language. Nevertheless, all of that collected information could show the credibility of the gathered data. From the analysis one category and two subcategories were defined (Table 2).

Table 2. Category and two subcategories.

TABLE 2
Category and two subcategories

Question	Category	Sub-categories
How to improve oral interaction in ninth graders at "Colegio Cooperativo San Francisco de Asís" from Ubaté-Cundinamarca through the implementation of cooperative learning approach?	- English Oral interaction is best achieved with the classmates	-well-disposed behavior -Oral Proficiency

Oral interaction is best achieved along with classmates

This category emerged as a result of the data analysis focused on team group and speaking because students learn best in situations where their attention is focused on meaning rather than on language; and students communicate easier in informal settings and in situations where they can express their emotions and attitudes. The students seemed responsible and committed with the cooperative learning activities that they developed in oral way into their groups. Thanks to that, the students strengthened their oral interaction they felt that the goals had been reached. As Table 3 shows, most of the students agreed it is significant to recognize others' voices to grow as integral individuals.

Table 3. Extracts.

TABLE 3
Extracts

As I just said before, to reach the oral interaction, the ninth graders established relationships to interact each other in English, not just taking the turn when the teacher gave the instructions. In this way, next table (Table 4) shows that the students could tell something to express him/herself in English. Based on this research experience, oral interaction is one of the main features in the students' English learning process.

Table 4. Extracts.

TABLE 4
Extracts

I observed that through cooperative learning workshops, it was possible to make the students work together learning and putting into practice oral interaction; it was confirmed in all activities from the beginning to the end of this investigation. As Table 5 shows, the development of those cooperative workshops allowed the students' oral interaction by actions like constructing answers together, making questions, doing presentations, watching short documental and talking about different issues from academic topics and themselves.

Table 5. Extracts.

TABLE 5
Extracts

All of those aspects improved the students' oral interaction. The category Oral interaction is best achieved along with classmates including the following subcategories: well-disposed behavior and oral proficiency.

Well-disposed behavior

well-disposed behavior helped the ninth graders to get well along with classmates. It was a constructive learning process into classroom. It involved not to give up, be certain of their abilities, showing self-esteem and self-confidence, among others. Throughout the next extracts, the reader will be presented with the students' voices regarding this subcategory (Table 6).

Table 6. Extracts.

TABLE 6
Extracts

The students agreed that by means of the development of the cooperative learning workshops, they could share their ideas and learn more from one another. The next table (Table 7) shows that the students also said that they had good relationships among themselves, but now those relationships were better than before throughout the implementation of the teams into the English classroom.

Table 7. Extracts.

TABLE 7
Extracts

According to Biehler and Snowman (1993, p. 48) "if you do not understand how something relates to your goals, you will not care about that thing". In accordance with next table (Table 8), some of the students explained that they felt comfortable in the English classroom and they really enjoyed being in that English class.

Table 8. Extracts

TABLE 8
Extracts

As it has been seen throughout the examples, all of their contributions pointed out the fact that they really felt motivated with the experience based on cooperative learning approach. We can see in Table 9 that the students got the real meaning about what cooperative learning is. It goes beyond the achievement of a learning task; it is the way of cooperating among each other taking into account the other's opinions to grow as a whole.

Table 9. Extracts.

TABLE 9
Extracts

Through the development of this investigation, ninth graders expressed to have a well-disposed behavior in the development of the cooperative learning workshops, since they had not had an experience like this as English learners in previous levels. They found that those workshops were relevant for them, because workshops could help them to gain not just well-disposed behavior but confidence and motivation to put into practice the English oral interaction. In addition, they assumed that working in teams was a way to overcome fear and learn together.

Therefore, the workshops and teacher's diary evidenced the relevance of working in teams since it characterizes their interest towards cooperative learning approach. In this way, the students demonstrated their interest to be in charge of their performance in positive ways. As Biehler and Snowman (1993, p. 49) explained before "we do not want our children to be motivated solely by a desire to please the teacher, what we need to address is how to make the content of the curriculum fit into the concerns of the child". Similarly, what the students expressed in the interviews showed that they agreed in having a well-disposed behavior for the activities planned for the investigation, which in essence involved cooperative learning approach.

Oral proficiency

Based on my experience as a teacher-researcher and taking into account my continuous observation, at the beginning it was difficult to encourage ninth graders to speak in English. However, as we can see in Table 10, cooperative learning approach played an important role as a tool to reduce the students' oral interaction difficulties, because It allowed them to be cooperative and they could do their best to learn vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence structure in order to interact orally with each other.

Table 10. Extracts.

TABLE 10
Extracts

The students felt that cooperative learning approach helped their English oral proficiency. It means, most of the students were able to express orally inside the team and in front of their classmates. Due to this, the students could discuss and solve the task assigned to the teams. The Table 11 shows that students were aware of the discussing topics, contributing with solutions and developing the activities among the members of the team with the possibility to help and be helped when having difficulties.

Table 11. Extracts.

TABLE 11
Extracts

Throughout the information provided by students regarding to this subcategory, it showed that the implementation of cooperative learning approach characterized their oral interaction, of course the English skills as well, to cooperate among them. That is, when a student knew how to write, read or pronounce something he had the responsibility to tell the others; in that way, through cooperation the planned topic to be developed during the class was almost covered because of the ninth graders' contributions. Besides, it is necessary to say that the students knew some vocabulary previously, and they use it to rehearse their oral interaction to cooperate among them.

Furthermore, it showed that the students who worked together could improve their academic level. It can be seen also as an indicator that shows how much the students learnt and the degree of performance in the English language. It means that cooperative learning approach made students get better levels of achievement. In fact, the cooperative learning approach helped the ninth graders to improve their English oral interaction; since among other reasons, the difficulties were for them better solved by teams than individually. Interpretation.

In summary, I must say that I wrote a diary where I noticed different aspects such the development of the research study workshop by workshop. Those observations can give account of the whole process that I carried out with this cooperative learning approach. The social relations among the students are evidenced in the diary, because there was more acceptance among them, which allowed to work by teams cooperatively.

According to interviews and informal dialogues, the students felt comfortable when they used the English language, many times they used switching. It means some ninth graders used Spanish words to express their points of view. The students got familiar with switching, since it was a useful and easy way to put into practice the English language. Currently, I consider that switching is a suitable mean to diminish the fair's student and to facilitate speaking.

In every workshop, I provided the students with information about the given theme and topic, then I suggested them to look for more information by themselves. It was relevant because the students were capable to complement what they received in class. The students tried to use the most familiar vocabulary related to all these topics. At the end, the students became aware of their need to speak in English.

Here, it is important to mention that in a competitive work, participants inside a group perform as individuals. For instance, when a member of a team fails, it is actually an opportunity for the rest of the students to gain a score. This idea is too far from what cooperative learning means as I have said before.

Consequently, oral interaction was enhanced because all members of the teams had the chance to hear and be heard by their classmates. Although, the speaking skill is crucial in a cooperative learning classroom environment, since it allows the students to use the language in real and meaningful situations, the development of the four English skills were worked as a whole. For this particular study, speaking was developed more than the other skills, because it is close related with the development of the oral English interaction.

The students revealed most interest towards the development of the speaking skill, when they were allowed to discuss about a topic as a team. They asked always for more time to discuss their concerns. At the end, all the groups did their presentations. Every member of each team made their contributions, it did not matter if someone participated more than the others did.

As a final point, the data gathered by means of the instruments, indicated that through the cooperative learning approach is possible to observe the development of students' oral interaction and, consequently, its improvement. Besides, through the cooperative learning approach, the ninth graders were aware of their needs, strengths and weaknesses as learners. In addition, the data suggests that the students were able to improved their English oral interaction, through cooperative learning approach and, at the same time, understand what team group means. Furthermore, the cooperative learning approach improved social relations, since ninth graders were used to work alone and into the classrooms is common the existence of a group of students who are more advanced than the rest of the whole group. In this case, it was an opportunity for the less advanced students to be part of a group; consequently, social relations were improved.

CONCLUSIONS

Learners were aware of the importance of the English oral interaction. The students solved many academic difficulties they had at the beginning of the study. Doubts related to vocabulary, sentence structure,

pronunciation, word order, miswritten words and, in general, with formal rules of language were worked and clarified through cooperation among teammates inside the team.

As in all teaching-learning experiences, weaknesses also make important part, since it is not common to find everything perfect. In this research experience, the teacher-researcher could find as a weakness the fragility of students to forget learned habits. We believe that cooperative learning approach should be promoted constantly in order for students and teachers to be committed with this concern. It would be suitable to accomplish an interdisciplinary work in which all the subjects should be included. Cooperative learning is not just appropriated for students but also for teachers to improve our pedagogical practices and allow us to be more reflective and critical about our role.

Along the research study development, it concluded that implementation of cooperative learning approach improved oral interaction in ninth graders, because ninth graders had brought positive outcomes to the students' English learning process. Teamwork rose their interest to interact orally each other, it means, students felt motivated and interested in practicing English. In this way, the concept of the English language subject was not a boring idea and they enjoyed doing better their oral interaction.

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NOTES

- 1 Artículo de investigación, producto del trabajo de investigación “Oral interaction is best achieved with your classmate: cooperative learning approach to enrich students’ learning process” como requisito para optar al título de Magíster en Docencia en Idiomas de la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia.