COOPERATIVE LEARNING: ANOTHER WAY TO LEARN TOGETHER

NELSON D'OLIVARES DURÁN
mxynelson@yahoo.com.ar

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview about cooperative learning as another way of learning together in the English classes. Also, as a qualitative study (action participative research), it focused on learning by means of the practice in terms of exploring how cooperative learning helps improve the English speaking skill of students in their English classes, showing it as one more way for raising students' interest in English learning in a scholarly environment.

Key words: cooperative learning, work in small groups, speaking skill.

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es proveer una mirada acerca del aprendizaje cooperativo como otra forma para aprender juntos en las clases de inglés. También, como investigación cualitativa (investigación acción participativa), se enfocó en el aprendizaje por medio de la práctica para explorar cómo el aprendizaje cooperativo ayuda a mejorar la oralidad de los estudiantes en las clases de inglés, mostrando que el aprendizaje cooperativo es una forma más para motivar a los estudiantes hacia el aprendizaje del idioma inglés en un contexto escolar.

Palabras claves: aprendizaje cooperativo, trabajo en grupo, oralidad.

"All for one and one for all, united we stand, divided we fall".
Alexandre Dumas, *The Three Musketeers*

Introduction

The debate about language teaching has moved from the "teacher-centered" to "learner-centered". In that sense, cooperative learning was a means to contribute to the teaching-learning process. Consequently, the next pages provide an overview about cooperative learning as another way to learn together. The importance of this paper lies in exploring on how cooperative learning helps to improve the English speaking skill of students in their English classes, and, of course, sharing the researcher's understanding of cooperative learning based on his/her experience implementing it with 9th graders from a public Institution in the city of Tunja.

Taking into account some previous experiences as an English teacher. First, I carried out some observation sessions on the ninth graders and I made some semi-directed interviews where students expressed they did not have vocabulary to use in a classroom, besides they felt classmates laughed at each other when they pronounced some words in English. Also, I interviewed the English teacher; she revealed her assumptions regarding the students' poor interest in learning the English language. Finally, through a diagnosis, I identified three types of students: first, students with low interest to learn the English language; second, those who wanted to approve the subject; third, who were eager

to learn English. All those aspects gave cause to develop this project based on cooperative learning.

In that sense, cooperative learning has been used in education attaining positive consequences, Kagan (2001) affirms "cooperative learning is a form of teaching that challenges students at the intellectual as well as the social level and that combines various levels of simultaneous learning processes in an ingenious way". Based on my experience, I consider the students acquired a variety of ways and skills to learn how to interact with others in the English language in a better way.

So, in this paper, the reader will find an interesting route for not getting lost. First, the literature review introduces ideas like cooperative learning, roles and benefits for learners and teachers, small groups in cooperative learning, speaking in the classroom, autonomous learning; second, the research design takes qualitative research, and action steps research; third, pedagogical design explains categories and subcategories; and finally, conclusions.

The Participants

As researcher of this study, I am a ninth grade English teacher. This proposal was carried out with ninth B graders from a public Institution in the city of Tunja. The group consisted of 40 students; in turn, they were

divided into ten groups of four students. They used to get low grades and they conceived learning English as a complicated issue and not as a way to acquire knowledge or to know a new culture, etc. For that reason, this project worked the workshops with all the students. In what follows, the theoretical framework will be presented which has constituted the support of this work.

Literature Review

Many generations of people have been aware that cooperation is a life skill since in our daily social life relations involve cooperation with others to accomplish a shared goal.

Cooperative learning

Initially, cooperative learning was thought to reduce academic competition in the students, Coleman's (1961) studies propose that instead of encouraging competition in the scholar settings, schools should develop a more cooperative approach for teaching.

Then, based on the work of Coleman, Slavin (1964) led investigations on a form of cooperative learning and defined cooperative learning as "instructional programs in which students work in small groups to help one another master academic content". Slavin argues that cooperative learning has the potential to take advantage of "the developmental characteristics of adolescents in order to harness their peer orientation, enthusiasm, activity, and craving for independence within a safe structure".

In the same way, Holt, Chips & Wallace (1991) advise that English Language

Learners need "the maximum amount of time possible for comprehending and using the English language in a low-risk environment in order to approach the language proficiency of their peers". It means improving academic and personal performances.

In fact, cooperation means working together. Cooperative learning is to work together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative activities, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to students and beneficial to all other group members (Deutsch, 1962). Besides small groups are important to work in cooperative learning in order for students to learn together to take advantage of their own process and each other's as well. Johnson & Johnson (1995) stated

> cooperative learning efforts result in participants striving for mutual benefit so that all group members gain from each other's efforts (Your success benefits me and my success benefits you), recognizing that all group members share a common fate (We all sink or swim together here), knowing that one's performance is mutually caused by oneself and one's colleagues (We cannot do it without you), and feeling proud and jointly celebrating when a group member is recognized for achievement (We all congratulate you on your accomplishment!) (p. 80).

In that way, 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" (Olsen & Kagan, 1992, p. 8, quoted by Oxford (1997)).

Cooperative learning benefits for learners and teachers

In cooperative learning groups, the teacher offers students the chance to interact with students who have a high English level. Also, because it is common that many students struggle with difficult academic material; so, according to Kagan (1994) cooperative learning groups allow students to work in a team with others who have already gained proficiency with the language. This way not only offers a supportive environment for learning new content and acquiring English language skills, but also helps to foster friendships and social development.

Based on my practice, I could conclude that cooperative learning improves academic performance among high and low achieving students. These benefits were demonstrated by ninth B graders, who were used to work against each other to get a high grade that one or a few of them could attain, this attitude was changing because students comprehended that it was not a competition, then positive effects emerged from themselves: self-esteem, social relations, constructive attitudes toward their own English learning process, and motivation.

According to Hamm and Adams (1962), "teachers, who try cooperative learning often adopt a fresh, new attitude to their jobs" (p.28). During this experience, it made that teaching and classroom management

became easier, students had the freedom to produce ideas, and consequently, cooperative learning helped students work together to reach learning goals. It also helped the teacher take more control over the teaching process in the classroom.

Small group in cooperative learning

According to this research experience, small groups consisted of four students, it means, I had forty students in my EFL class and students worked in teams of four randomly chosen members, then I had only ten small groups for instruction. It is common that a student or a group of students had understood a part of the instruction, or what an activity consisted of, the rest of the team members had to pay particular attention and then, they used their joint abilities to explain and to go well with the activity.

In this way, when we worked in small groups with students, they shared their strengths and weaknesses as well, it allowed them to interact, engage and improve their understanding of English; in contribution, Hamm & Adams (1962) state some small groups benefits such as "reducing learning anxiety, becoming a team player, participating in peer tutoring, and building cooperative teams" (p. 41).

Roles in cooperative learning

The teacher's and learners' cooperative learning roles are different from the ones they have in an ESL traditional class. According to Cooper (1990) the teacher has some cooperative learning responsibilities such as: planning lessons and activities dealing with the topics; grouping students,

distributing them and making small groups; presenting and explaining tasks; monitoring group activities, intervening when necessary; and evaluating students. (p.56). On the other hand, cooperative learners have responsibilities as well:

> "Each group member should make constructive contributions to the group's efforts. Group members should encourage their fellow group members to contribute. Group members should keep each other on task, working toward their shared goal. Compromise is required from all cooperative learners. Those in a cooperative learning group should treat each other with care and respect". (p. 55).

In that sense, a cooperative learning teacher must be patient enough for the group members to interact, because groups required a crucial time before the students began to feel relaxed and comfortable with the classmates' team, and they did their best to help each other and learn together, they adopted the saying a*ll for one and one for all*.

Perhaps, one of the most difficult aspects of cooperative learning for teachers is to let students produce their own result and solve their own problems. In this pedagogical intervention, both the teacher and the students had learned to work together cooperatively; after instructions, the students had to try to work on their tasks on their own and with the help of other group members and at the end, with the teacher's help. Additionally to this statement, Cohen (1972) says "a key to successful cooperative learning is the teacher's preparation. Cooperative learning activities may require

more planning than traditional lessons" (p.94). Regarding the lesson plans (see chart 1), they got the content and in the students' presentations it took in those contents in their oral speeches.

To deal with assessments, what I observed in the students was that all team members tried to take part and make their contribution in order to get the task done. Hamm & Adams (1962) point out "when it comes time to assess students and assign grades, the teacher may assess what each individual learner accomplished. Secondly, the teacher may assess how well the student participated as a member of the team" (p.45). It means, the student or any classmate who understands the activity could explain it to others. If a student did not understand what it consisted of, they used their cooperative abilities to obtain solutions. Then, the teacher provided feedback group by group.

What speaking means in the classroom

Richards (1991) considers that speaking aims to the ability of the people to express sounds to freely say whatever the speaker wants based on a word perception in a given context. So, speaking is related to listening, reading and writing skills, depending on the speaker's needs. In this experience, there were some circumstances in order for speaking ability to be practiced in the classroom. For instance, the students interacted using English with a basic grammatical and contextual knowledge.

Related to speaking skill, Johnson, Johnson & Smith (1991); Anderson (1980) state that the speaking skill in a foreign language deals

with the fact of being immersed in a real or unreal, permanent, steady linguistic context. Although we are not immersed in an American context, both teacher and students tried to create an environment, taking into account some aspects of this culture: posters, expressions on the wall, news, flag, rock music, candy, and so on. Those elements are important in an English educational setting.

Autonomous learning

It is another concept to deal with cooperative work and small groups because the students build it inherently, for making valid decisions about their learning process. According to Benson & Voller (1997) definition, it refers to the ability to take charge of one's own learning, it means, to take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of the learning (p.12). In my words, autonomous learning has to do with the capacity that we have to act by ourselves and in cooperation with the classmates.

As teachers, we must know that autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent. With regards to autonomous learning, Little (1996) argued that "autonomous learning presupposes a positive attitude to the purpose content and process of learning" (p.13). In other words, autonomous learning aims to help students consider the factors which affect their learning, so that they may become more effective learners and take on more responsibility for their own learning. The definitions of autonomous learning also emphasize the importance of the willingness of students to take on more responsibility for their own learning.

Research Design

This study was framed in the qualitative research paradigm with an action research approach. Firestone (1987) defines action research "as a systematic process of inquiry which aims at looking for answers to questions or solutions to problems in a consistent, objective way by gathering, analyzing and interpreting information" (p. 92). In other words, it seems that action research points the way to look critically at schools' daily routine for solving problems, innovating classroom processes, by collecting information in a spiral way: planning, action observation and reflection.

Likewise, Kemmis & McTaggart (2000) reinforce this issue, "action research is used to refer to teacher-initiated classroom investigation, which seeks to increase the teacher's understanding of classroom practices" (p. 45). In this particular situation, this research took into consideration the steps of action research:

Planning: as it was said above, the English learning concern which called the attention for this study was the one related to raising students' interest towards the improvement of English speaking skill through cooperative learning. During the direct observation of the whole group, through my reflections as a foreign language teacher and of course, through the insights and assumptions as a researcher, I came to the conclusion to explore this issue.

Action: the action plan was designed by means of twelve workshops in small groups in order to meet and share students' ideas, feelings, and opinions about the topic we were dealing with. It was an important step to make them aware of their roles in the research experience and therefore, to count on their commitment.

Observation: it was important to write down feelings, impressions and thoughts in a diary after each session, and to consign students' evidences in the teacher's field-notes. At this stage it was important to reflect upon three main issues: what I observe, what I think of what I observe and what I should do. Video recordings as well as photos validated and provided support for this study.

Reflection: it looks for the understanding of processes, issues and constraints found in the implementation of the strategic action. It also made me look back in order to think about what had been recorded from the observation. The meaning of impressions and data is drawn through reflection and it gave the starting point for the revised plan in the next cycle.

About the field-notes, they were written permanently (after each class), those notes allowed me to make my own reflections upon two main items: experience and susceptible aspects to correct and improve the next workshops. Particularly, it is a crucial point because it is where the researcher gains a deep understanding of what is investigated.

With regard to the research methodology, it involved three instruments for collecting data: teacher's diary, surveys and interviews.
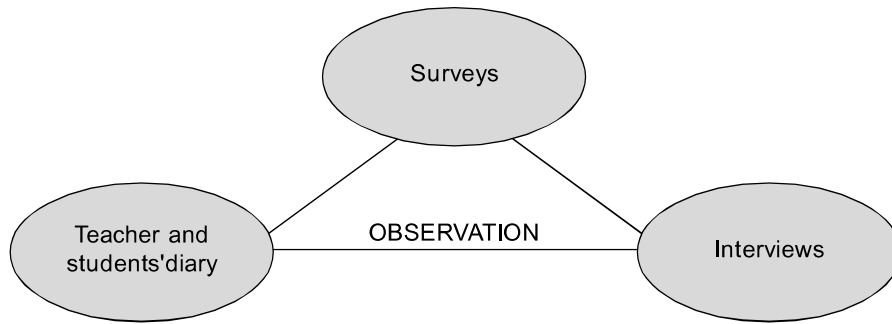
First, I analyzed the diary's information. From the beginning I defined three items to write in the teacher's diary: what I observe, what I think of what I observe, and what I should do. Next, the analysis was focused on the information gathered from surveys. Then, I started the analysis of the students' interviews. I wrote in my diary information related to the development of the workshops, after I examined the instruments' information simultaneously in order to establish the categories and subcategories, and the connections with the research question of this study.

PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN

It started with an observation to follow the school environment and students' behavior to determine the possible problematic issues to get a global view over what was happening in the classroom and the attitude towards the English speaking skill. Then, a diagnostic test was applied to find out the students' perceptions of working in groups or alone in the classroom, and the sort of material they enjoyed working with within the English classes. After that, with the results showed by the diagnosis, I proceeded to design twelve cooperative learning workshops, one by one along the study, many of them were based on our own circumstances. This means, depending on the topic being studied.

(Chart 1)
UNIVERSIDAD PEDAGÓGICA Y TECNOLÓGICA DE COLOMBIA
FACULTAD CIENCIAS DE LA EDUCACIÓN
"ALL FOR ONE AND ONE FOR ALL"
Institución Educativa San Jerónimo Emiliani, Tunja.
Teacher: Nelson D'Olivares Durán

NUMBER 4	TOPIC Prepositions	DATE Sep/19-20 2007	THEME Describing locations	TIME Three hours	OBJECTIVES To describe objects' locations	PARTICIPANTS Teacher and 9-B students

RESOURCES	PROCEDURE	COOPERATIVE LEARNING ROLE	EVIDENCES FOR PROJECT
Human resources Copies Pens Camera CD player CD music	-Greeting and organizing the class. -Calling attendance. -Teacher introduces the topic (prepositions), and gives some examples. -Teacher provides a copy with a prepositions list to the teams to work with. -Teacher makes a simple sketch in front of the class as an example involving the theme and topic in order to be performed by students in front of their classmates, with the purpose teams realize about the prepositions functions. -Teacher gives some commands like: make circles with their teams around the classroom for practicing the vocabulary and organize a sketch. -At the same moment, music is playing; when the music stops, everyone stops too, and at random, the teacher picks a team in order for students to perform a short sketch in front of the class, every team has to perform as well. -As an assessment, students say and writen ten sentences (prepositions), which their classmates used in their performances, at this given moment, students must understand and know how and where to use the prepositions. -As homework, the students would look for some information about US cities, in order to talk about them in the next class. -Farewell.	Think-group-share Objectives: to ensure maximum description within a group and share information (ideas, feelings,) about places of our school. Organizer: increases the vocabulary for describing locations. Processes: small groups (4 students). Look for as much vocabulary as possible in order to get enough terminology to start the descriptions, talk about your thoughts in each described school place. Group success: each student can explain her/his point of view to the others. Accountability: share the information and personal feelings about describing (school places). According to my observation, I realized that groups are organized by lines; often, the first students have high scores, while the last students, low. It raises a question: is it possible to involve all students into classes actively? a possible answer could be yes, why not work in groups. Concern for previous consideration, I can say that in the classroom, students learn the English language from each other and they will do better if they were organized in small groups for working together to accomplish similar interests. I agree with the statement that a teacher said long time ago: "we must learn to ask what children have learned to do, not what grade they are in".	-photos -teacher's diary -students' diary

| RESULTS		QUESTIONS
ACHIEVEMENT Students practiced all vocabulary as they can talk about the objects locations.	**DIFICULTIES** Some students found distractions in their cellular phones.	How to use music as didactic material to get the students' attention to create a good musical environment. Debrief (activity): how do the students describing places?, and how well do the students know their school places?

Findings

The triangulation of data allowed finding clues to organize and to come up with commonalities among them. I re-read and revised the texts to identify those commonalities; then, I underlined the subcategories with red, brown, violet and orange; after that, I found mainly two categories as well; in this way, it was much easier to categorize the gathered information.

CATEGORIES AND SUBCATEGORIES
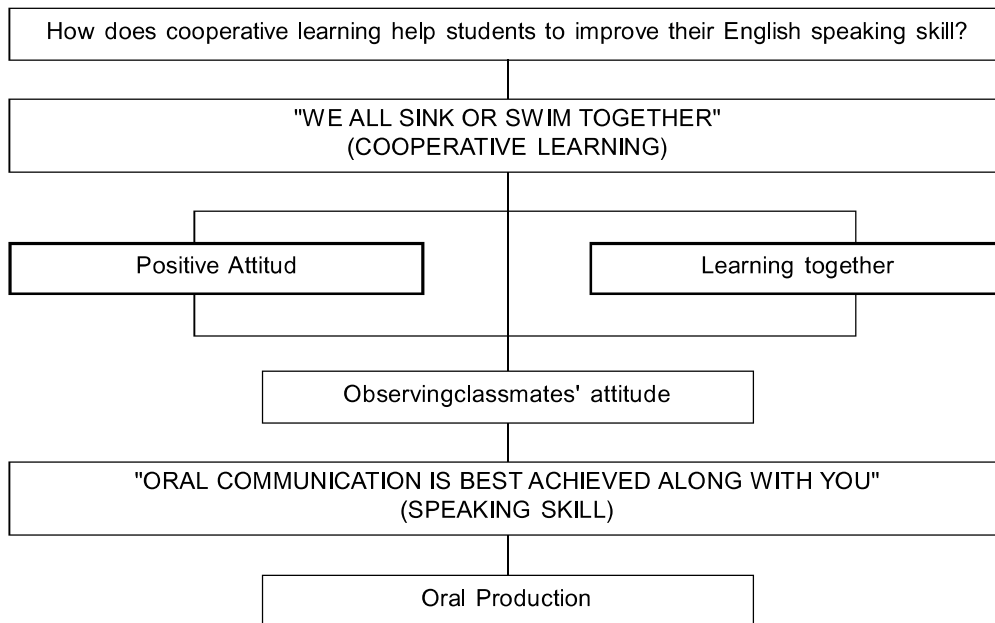
First category

"We all swim or sink together". Hamm and Adams (1962) affirm that "cooperative learning had positive effects on students' self-esteem" (p. 59). In this experience, it gave students the opportunity to feel secure when they spoke in front of their classmates. In doing so, all the members of the group had the chance to express their ideas and concerns, consequently, other aspects as grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, etc.,

were enriched from each other. They helped each other, it showed that the majority of the students were aware of the responsibility they had in the group.

Subcategories:

a) *Positive attitude* helps students cope more easily with other students. It brought constructive changes in the classroom, such as: not giving up, believing in themselves and in their abilities, displaying self-esteem and confidence, among others.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS	*"A mí me gusto, realmente trabajar en grupo porque fue muy creativo y nos ayudó bastante a afianzarnos en nuestro inglés, inglés que flojamente teníamos, y pues realmente la parte en la que teorizamos todo eso que sabíamos y le perdimos el miedo a hablar inglés". (see annex C)*
EXCERPTS FROM SURVEYS	*According to surveys' analysis, it showed that 85% of the students agreed with the cooperative learning activities. It motivated them because they collaborated with each other, increased their vocabulary, and followed the procedure step by step. It means, they had a positive attitude towards the English learning in this way. (4th question from first survey, annex D)*
EXCERPTS FROM TEACHER AND STUDENTS' DIARY	*Students enjoyed sharing their ideas in spite of their pronunciation mistakes. Each group came to the front of the class and tried to do their best, acting out to present their work. (Teacher's diary. Session #4. Annex E)* *"El trabajo en grupo nos crea una Buena actitud frente a la clase de inglés que hace que los compañeros se colaboren para hacer la actividad bien y todo salga bien". (Students' diary. Annex E)*

b) *Observing classmates' interest*. The students said that they felt committed to work for the group because they knew that the achievement of the goals in tasks would depend on themselves. In consequence, the result of their work would not only directly affect them, but also the other members in the group. In other words, the students realized that they had to work to obtain personal benefit and that if they did not contribute with their own part, the other members of the group would be affected.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS	*"...algunos que les daba miedo o no les gustaba el inglés definitivamente, entonces no colaboraban mucho, pero poquito a poco se encontró la forma de que trabajaran". (see annex C)*
EXCERPTS FROM SURVEYS	*According to fourth survey, the third question showed that students increased their English level through the workshops that suggested the development of the speaking skill in front of an audience. (Annex D)*
EXCERPTS FROM TEACHER AND STUDENTS' DIARY	*Students are getting more confident talking about real situations such as: earthquakes, hurricanes, terrorism, and so on. They also talked about Global warming (there was a group that shined with their fluent presentation about this topic. It couldn´t have been a better beginning of the session. The rest of the students were motivated in developing their own production). Teacher's diary. Session #7. Annex E* *"Cuando uno trae un reporte, los compañeros le ponen mucho cuidado para corregirle si está bien o está mal" Students' diary. Annex E* *"Nosotros dentro del grupo tenemos que ayudarnos siempre, teniendo en cuenta a los otros compañeros". Students' diary. Annex E*

c) *Students reported learning together*. The students agreed that throughout working together, they could improve their academic level in English. In this way, the academic level can also be seen as an indicator that shows how much the students have learnt to say and the degree of performance in the English language. It means that "all for one and one for all" made students get better levels of achievement. In fact, the cooperative learning strategy helped students to enhance the English speaking skill; since, among many reasons, difficulties were for them better solved in a group than individually.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS	"…y sí, llega a tal punto que si alguien del grupo necesita alguna colaboración y el otro podía ayudarle, pues se daba la oportunidad de reforzarle lo que él necesitara". (Annex C)
EXCERPTS FROM SURVEYS	Eighty five percent of the students said that all the cooperative activities were the most adequate ones to raise the English language in the ninth B grade. Why? Thirty five percent of the students said that all the cooperative activities were the most adequate because students found a collaboration environment. (Third survey, question #2. Annex D)
EXCERPTS FROM TEACHER AND STUDENTS' DIARY	The students have practiced the English pronunciation using the songs. They have also spoken about the previous short story contained in a musical video. They have made some speeches about love, happiness, army, war, and loneliness, among other themes. Teacher's diary. Session #11. Annex E "Hemos aprendido mucho porque nos ayuda a charlar en ingles con los compañeros y nos gusta hablar en grupo, porque es muy bueno y aprendemos más". Students' diary. Annex E

Second category

"Oral communication is best achieved along with you" (speaking skill). Speaking is related to listening, reading and writing skills, depending on the speaker's needs. Based on this teaching experience, the students worked and learnt together, they put spoken English into practice. Consequently, cooperative learning created an environment where students were able to interact, negotiate answers, ask questions, make presentations, sing songs, watch movies and videos, and talk about themselves, improving their speaking skill. This category included Oral production as the subcategory.

Oral production. At the beginning it was difficult to encourage ninth B graders to speak English. Nevertheless, cooperative learning reduced the students' communication obstacles. It allowed students to acquire and put into practice vocabulary, sentence structure and pronunciation in order to speak and share the information in this cooperative environment.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS	*"El grupo trató de que la persona que sabía algo o si yo sabía algo, tenía que comunicárselo a todos para que lo estudiaran y yo estudiar lo de los demás, y llegar a tal punto de saber todo el tema y saber de toda la exposición" Annex C*
EXCERPTS FROM SURVEYS	*Contrasted with first survey, the second one (which elicited information from the students about the capacity to use the English language). The majority of students had grown in their speaking skill. Second survey. Annex D*
EXCERPTS FROM TEACHER AND STUDENTS' DIARY	*Students tried to talk about different topic in order for them gave themselves an important chance to take out the vocabulary that they could have and they did not use. We agreed on Global warming was an interesting topic to talk about. They felt motivated with the Al Gore movie, for that reason they have to develop the second part of the activity better: they are going to prepare a short oral report and they have to do their best at it. Teacher's diary. Session #12. Annex E* *"En las clases de inglés hemos sido capaces de poner en práctica nuestro vocabulario de inglés dentro de nosotros mismos y de este modo hemos ido soltando la lengua cada día más". Students' diary. Annex E*

Conclusions and Implications

In context, it can conclude that according to the first category: *we sink or swim together (cooperative learning)* and its subcategories: *positive attitude*, *observing classmates' interest* and *learning together*, revealed that the ninth graders were able to put into practice the vocabulary that they knew. The instruments showed the students' progress with the application of the workshops, since the students expressed themselves in English.

In relation to the second category: *oral communication is best achieved along with you* (speaking skill) and its subcategory *oral production* indicated that for ninth graders are important and necessary to work in small groups in order to practice the speaking skill giving the chance to broaden their vocabulary. In addition, cooperative learning allowed the students to express in English what they want to say in the classroom; in this way, cooperative learning permitted the students to show progress when they tried to speak with others.

Independently of students' low or high academic performance, they looked for their group-mates' help, encouragement and support to achieve a goal; it showed that, for students it is important and necessary to learn to work together and cooperative learning is a suitable way for them, since it encourages their interest in maintaining positive expectations in order to create a supportive, helpful and cooperative environment where they improve their academic performance.

In summary, this research experience, considering the idea of «all for one and one for all", allowed students to gain strengths in an English learning situation where cooperation took the central part. It also lets the students know that teamwork is a strategy in which all group members grow from their achievements and their weaknesses.

As a final point, this paper intends to give colleagues an example of how cooperative learning can be practiced in classrooms. It suggests that teachers can provide students

with spaces to work in groups to improve speaking skill. As a researcher, I hope that the ideas discussed in this article will produce new ideas for those teachers interested in working with cooperative learning; and of course, for future studies, it could be possible to go forward with this work addressing topics dealing with critical thinking.

Student's diary page
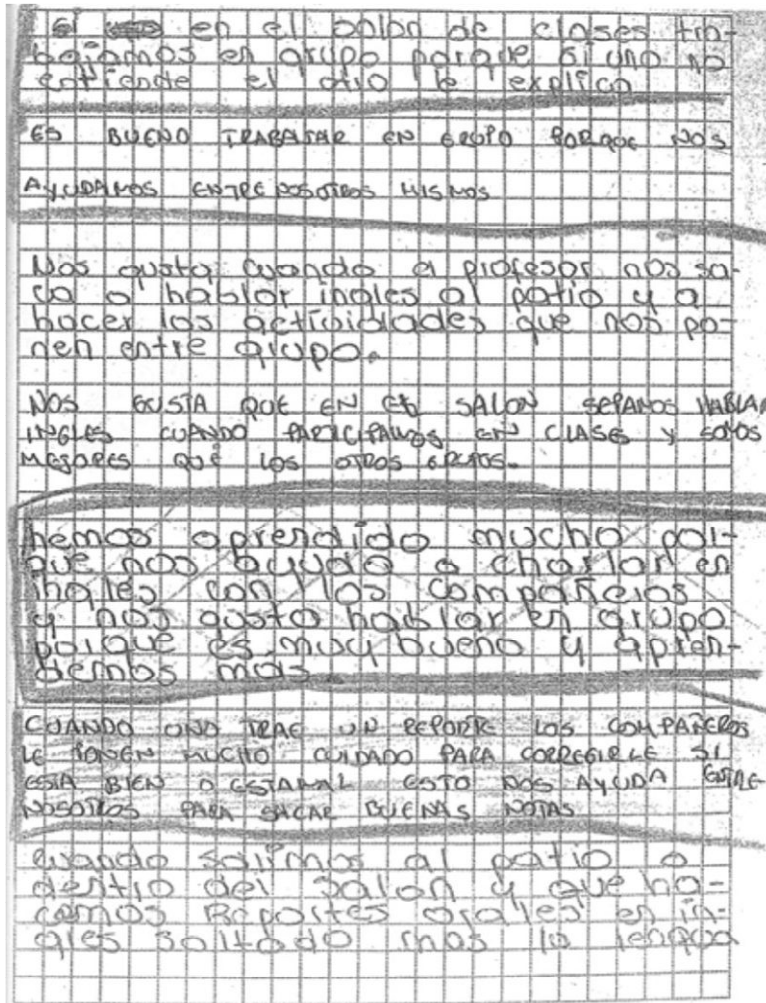
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THE AUTHOR

NELSON D'OLIVARES DURÁN. He holds a B.A. holds a B.A. in Modern Languages English and Spanish from Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC). He is an M.A. Candidate in Linguistics at UPTC. Currently, he is studying a PhD. in Language and Culture at UPTC. His research line is Language.