

Developing Teamwork and Reading Skills in the ESP Classroom. Case Study

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Abstract

In the ideal ESP (English for Special Purposes) classroom, students should work together in order to perform their tasks. However, they should also compete and work independently. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the importance of teamwork/cooperative learning in encouraging cooperation, competition and independent work and in developing teamwork and reading skills in the ESP classroom. Cooperative learning involves students actively, as it organizes them into groups, giving them defined roles and a common group task. Cooperative teaching techniques involve the students in class and help them to increase their knowledge. The first section of this paper is an introduction to Cooperative learning, while the second one presents its basic elements and activities. The last section focuses on a case study that highlights the positive effects of cooperative learning methods on English reading skills.

Key words: teamwork skills, cooperative learning, reading skills, English for Special Purposes (ESP), English learning

J.E.L. Classification: K00

1. Introduction

Cooperative Learning is a successful teaching strategy that can be applied at all levels, meeting students' various needs, such as socialization, emotional support, group membership, feelings and opinions sharing. Cooperative Learning is an ESL/EFL teaching and learning method through which students with different levels of ability work together in small groups or pairs, in order to answer a significant question, to debate a subject matter or undertake a project, in order to perform a common task. This modern method increases the students' responsibility with regards to their work (this means that every team member is responsible for his/her learning) and to the whole group work (students also help their team mates learn) (Johnson et al., 2014); the teacher evaluates both types of work, i.e. the individual and the group one. Cooperative learning is extremely efficient as it encourages students to think critically, to express their opinions to solve the given task; it helps students develop their oral skills by interacting with each other; it enhances students' satisfaction with their learning experience (Meng, 2010: 701-702).

Having in view that one of the major problems of contemporary education is to motivate students, we strongly believe that the students' learning motivation increases significantly when they perceive that their activities have a goal, when they are given the occasion to decide in terms of their learning, when they feel responsible for participating actively in different activities and solving certain tasks. Furthermore, motivation may be increased if students consider their studies important, if they work with interesting material and if they are constantly encouraged. In this respect, the method used by the teacher plays a vital role, as it highly influences the students' motivation, helping them to better understand the subjects taught. In this regard, Cooperative Learning fulfils several important functions, such as the promotion of students' self-esteem, creation and maintenance of positive relationships, learning and academic achievement, increase in

the students' retention and satisfaction with their learning, development of students' communication and social skills (Adams, 2013). Moreover, learning becomes student-centered (students can actively participate in their learning) and is shared by group members (students can question, challenge, share and discuss each other's ideas, and internalize their learning); it no longer falls within the teacher's responsibility, as the responsibility of setting goals, evaluating learning and facilitating learning belongs to all (Johnson et al., 2014). In order to involve the students actively within the learning process and to increase their motivation, teachers should choose exciting and stimulating activities that raise the students' curiosity. Moreover, they should involve them in projects that require teamwork or pair work over a longer period of time (with the achievement of the same goals).

2. Cooperative Learning: basic elements and activities

It is only under certain conditions that cooperative efforts may be expected to be more productive than competitive and individualistic efforts. Among others, according to Johnson and Johnson (2001), this method implies positive interdependence (one's success depends on the success of every group member) and interaction between students (the students from the same group share resources, help and encourage each other). Moreover, individual and group responsibility (both every group member and the entire group as a whole are responsible for the achievement of their common goals) as well as interpersonal and teamwork skills play an important role. In addition to the knowledge related to different academic subjects, students acquire other skills, such as leadership skills, decision-making abilities, conflict-management skills, communication skills. Last but not least, group processing (group members discuss their achievement level, working relationships, actions, decisions, patterns of behavior) also represents an element that plays a major role in cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson, 2001: 13-15).

Cooperative learning comes with a wide variety of activities allowing students and teachers to work together, such as class activities for developing speaking skills that trigger the development of effective communication, in order to perform different speech acts, e.g. asking and answering questions, expressing opinions, asking for and providing information, greeting people, telling stories, etc. (Macpherson, 2007). Other cooperative learning activities are jigsaw (every group member receives some unique material to learn and then teach to his/her group members; for more information see Miaz, 2015), think-pair-share (individuals think silently about a question, then they exchange thoughts and share their answers with other pairs/ teams/ the whole group), flashcards (useful in presenting, practicing, assessing, reinforcing and consolidating different grammar or vocabulary items).

Numbered heads together is another cooperative learning strategy where every student is responsible for learning the material, as each group member should know the answer to the problems raised by the teacher (Astuti, 2014). In its turn, the cooperative learning technique known as the three-steps interview improves students' speaking ability, as they have to collect, share and even analyze different pieces of information, data, ideas, etc. related to a certain subject or theme (Saifuddin, 2013). Another useful activity is represented by the round robin, where group members (sitting in a circle) are asked by their group leader a question (or a problem is raised) and they brainstorm as many solutions/ answers as possible (Carruba, 2013; Maldonado et al., 2011: 39).

Therefore, by its various small group activities and techniques, cooperative learning requires students to depend on one another for success, provide for individual accountability (assessment is applied to each group member and to the entire group as a whole), employs interaction between students and contributes to the development of their interpersonal and group skills (Gillies, 2003). When working in small teams, students learn to focus on their task, work together, check each other for understanding, help one another on certain learning tasks. Moreover, their learning objectives and tasks may encourage cooperation, competition or independent/individual work (Johnson et al., 2014: 4). In this regard, it is noteworthy that cooperation should represent the main goal, while competition can modify the learning rhythm; independent work or learning is useful only when the acquired knowledge is applied in teamwork activities (Johnson et al., 2014: 5-6).

Having in view the above-mentioned issues, it should be noted that students should not work in pairs or groups all the time. As students become more confident as far as their learning is concerned, they should be asked to perform more and more student-centered tasks. Moreover, teachers should always keep a balance between leading the students and allowing them to control their own learning.

3. Case study: Research hypothesis and methodology

Research hypothesis and methodology. This experiment was conducted on two groups of students, in their first semester of the academic year 2016/2017 and it was based on the following hypothesis: if teachers use the Cooperative Learning method in the ESP classroom, then students will feel at ease and their reading comprehension skills will be improved. In order to test the above-mentioned hypothesis on the influence of cooperative learning and traditional learning on the students' reading comprehension abilities, we used, as research methods, the experiment and the observation. This research was conducted on a sample of 45 students majoring in Business Economy (Faculty of Economic Sciences, the first year of study) divided as follows: the experimental group consisted of 20 students while the control group included 25 students. The experiment was performed in the first semester of academic year 2016/2017, during two ESP seminars. Both groups studied the same material (Units *Recruitment* and *Employment*: job advertising, the recruitment process, contract of employment and job description, earnings, rewards and benefits). The lesson plans of both groups had the same instructional objectives and were based on the same reading passages and exercises. Nevertheless, the lesson plans for the experimental group provided opportunities for small-group interaction and sharing resources among team members (the students were divided into five teams of four members each). On the other hand, the students from the control group worked individually and shared their answers with the class. Worksheets were provided to both groups; however, as far as the control group is concerned, learning activities were performed through traditional methods, while the experimental group performed cooperative learning activities.

Reading is generally defined as a decoding process of written symbols, starting from smaller units and reaching larger ones. Traditional reading classes are characterized by the teacher's central role, the students being asked to read (skim or scan) a given text. Then, the teacher explains the key words and phrases, and then asks his/her students to answer several questions or perform reading comprehension tasks. In Cooperative Learning, the teacher splits the text into several parts and every group member is given a different part. Then, the students must find the other persons in the class who received the same part, form a reading group, discuss/analyze the respective part, go back to their initial group, share opinions/information and form a complete idea about the entire text. Afterwards, the teacher asks reading comprehension questions and each group member is accountable for the answers. Finally, the teacher comments upon the cooperative reading class (Hollingsworth et al., 2007).

In this study, before the experiment, the teacher administered an initial test in order to evaluate the students' English reading comprehension abilities and to identify the differences between the two groups. At the end of the experiment, the students were given a final test, in order to measure the students' English reading comprehension abilities after using cooperative strategies. The grades used at the initial test and final test were the following: under 5; between 5 and 6.99; between 7 and 8.99; between 9 and 10.

4. Data interpretation and results

The grades awarded to the students from the experimental group on the initial test are shown in Table no. 1 below:

Table no. 1 Initial test results of the experimental group

Grades	under 5	5-6.99	7-8.99	9-10
		6	7	4
Percentage %	30%	35%	20%	15%

Source: author's own processing

After analyzing the students' grades, the following conclusions can be drawn as far as the experimental group is concerned: 70% of the students passed the test (7 students got grades in the range of 5 and 6.99; 4 students scored between 7 and 8.99 and only 3 got grades between 9 and 10), while 30% failed it (i.e. 6 students got grades under 5). The grades obtained by the students from the control group on their initial test are shown in Table no. 2:

Table no. 2 Initial test results of the control group

Grades	under 5	5-6.99	7-8.99	9-10
		9	9	4
Percentage %	36%	36%	16%	12%

Source: author's own processing

By analyzing the above grades, it can be stated that 64% of the students from the control group passed the test while 36% failed it.

Table no. 3 Scoring classification of the students' reading skills (initial test)

Classification	Experimental group	Control group	Criteria
Excellent	3 students	3 students	Understands well the structure of the whole text and perceives its main ideas.
Very good	2 students	3students	Understands the text as a whole but hesitates about figurative items.
Good	2 students	3 students	Understands easy sentences but hesitates when encounters complex ones.
Pass	7 students	9 students	Understands most of the words; sometimes needs additional explanation
Weak	3 students	4 students	Shows difficulty in understanding the text and often needs additional explanation.
Very poor	3 students	3 students	Difficulty in understanding the text

Source: author's own processing

The initial test results and the Table no. 3 above reveal that there is no significant difference between the experimental and the control groups. Both groups had almost equal English basic knowledge before the experiment. In both groups, there were students who understood well the structure of the whole text and perceived its main ideas. Nevertheless, some of them showed difficulty in understanding the text and often needed additional explanation. These learners did not display good comprehension and inference skills. Moreover, these results showed that some students have obvious deficit in knowledge and this was an opportunity to introduce new and relevant ESP vocabulary items, useful in the students' future interactions (Leonte and Istratie-Macarov, 2016: 226). The grades awarded to the students from the experimental group on the final test are shown in Table no.4 below:

Table no. 4 Final test results of the experimental group

Grades	under 5	5-6.99	7-8.99	9-10
		2	4	9
Percentage %	10%	20%	45%	25%

Source: author's own processing

The results presented in Table 4 above reveals that 90% of the students from the experimental group passed the test and only 10% failed it. The students' grades (the control group) on the final test are shown in Table 5:

Table no. 5 Final test results of the control group

Grades	Under 5	5-6.99	7-8.99	9-10
		7	8	6
Percentage %	28%	32%	24%	16%

Source: author's own processing

The results shown in Table 5 reveal that 72% of the students from the control group passed the test while 28% did not.

Table no. 6 Scoring classification of the students' reading skills (final test)

Classification	Experimental group	Control group	Criteria
Excellent	5 students	3 students	Understands well the structure of the whole text and perceives its main ideas.
Very good	5 students	2 students	Understands the text as a whole but hesitates about figurative items.
Good	4 students	2 students	Understands easy sentences but hesitates when encounters complex ones.
Pass	3 students	6 students	Understands most of the words; sometimes needs additional explanation.
Weak	1 student	3 students	Shows difficulty in understanding the text and often needs additional explanation.
Very poor	2 students	9 students	Difficulty in understanding the text

Source: author's own processing

The results showed that our research hypothesis (i.e. the use of Cooperative Learning activities in the classroom improves the learners' reading comprehension skills) is valid. The students from the experimental group showed more confidence, and they learnt the materials within a group easily, improving their reading comprehension skills. Moreover, they involved themselves actively during the teaching and learning processes. They became more aware of the mistakes they made especially because they always gave feedback to their classmates' performance. The various cooperative learning activities made the class atmosphere enjoyable and improved the students' understanding of the materials and the teacher's classroom management.

The results indicated that the students from the experimental group, who carried out Cooperative Learning activities, got better grades (which reflects a higher achievement level in terms of their reading skills) than the students from the control group, who performed reading activities through traditional learning/ teaching methods. The lower grades obtained by the students from the control group were due to the fact that, through traditional learning, students did not

interact with each other (they interacted only with the teacher). Communication among students and comprehension were limited. They took turns in reading each paragraph and they had to answer direct reading comprehension questions that required the reproduction of information from the text, which kept their understanding at a minimum level.

5. Conclusions

At the end of the experiment, the students from the experimental group changed their attitude towards group work. In the beginning, they did not like working in groups and felt uncomfortable reading different texts. After the experience of sharing and learning with others, they found real and concrete reasons to work with their partners. Many values were learned during the process, such as solidarity, responsibility, team spirit, etc. The first time they used Cooperative Learning Strategies was not easy, as they wanted to work only with their friends and, in some cases, did not follow the rules. In the first session, some groups delegated one student to do the activity, but when the teacher asked another student for the answers, they understood why it was important that everyone in the group managed the information. Thus, they changed their concept of group work. It was no longer a case of a group of friends where only one person had the responsibility of working and giving all the answers. Competition among the groups was an important factor to motivate students to work as a group, because it is important for them to be the best and to be recognized. A good attitude was an element that students included in their strengths, because they noticed that good relations among them were important if they wanted good results in their activities. They valued and respected their partners and, in some cases, discovered new friendships through the work. The roles played by students during cooperative learning activities changed constantly. For instance, at the beginning of the experiment, the teacher assigned some roles in order to explain students how to work. After practicing the respective elements, students assigned each other the same roles for each session, but they also created new ones. For example, one student recorded the steps made, another was the leader or the spokesperson, and they fulfilled those functions according to the task. Students could rotate the functions in different groups. This helped to reinforce self-esteem in some students. Materials, topics and special equipment resources were motivating factors in the experience. These elements gave students tools and encouragement in their work. Students were aware of their own responsibility in the process. They identified the fact that the project's successful result was achieved through their good attitude and the contributions of all class members.

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