

RUNNING HEAD: COOPERATIVE LEARNING TO IMPROVE SPEAKING

COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN GROUP WORK ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE SPEAKING  
SKILL IN LARGE CLASSES

Mario David Velásquez Morán

Paper submitted as a requirement to opt for B.A degree in English and French

Submitted to the School of Human Sciences in Partial Fulfillment

Linguistics and Languages Department

English and French Teaching Program

University of Nariño

2016

COOPERATIVE LEARNING TO IMPROVE SPEAKING

COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN GROUP WORK ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE SPEAKING  
SKILL IN LARGE CLASSES

By

Mario David Velásquez Morán

Submitted to the School of Human Sciences in Partial Fulfillment

Linguistics and Languages Department

English and French Teaching Program

University of Nariño

2016

**Nota de Responsabilidad**

Las ideas y conclusiones aportadas en este Trabajo de Grado son Responsabilidad de los autores.

Artículo 1 del Acuerdo No. 324 de octubre 11 de 1966, emanado por el Honorable Concejo Directivo de la Universidad de Nariño.

**Nota de aceptación**

---

---

---

---

---

ASESOR

---

JURADO

---

JURADO

## **Acknowledgment**

Dedicated to my family for always supporting me.

### **Resumen**

Esta investigación bibliográfica expone algunos aspectos relacionados con el empleo del aprendizaje cooperativo (Cooperative Learning), siendo una alternativa positiva para el proceso de aprendizaje y enseñanza de segundas lenguas. Debido a sus beneficios, el aprendizaje cooperativo ha sido de gran utilidad en la enseñanza del idioma inglés. Con la adecuada aplicación de este tipo de aprendizaje los estudiantes pueden mejorar sus habilidades lingüísticas en este idioma. Además, a través del trabajo en equipo se pueden obtener resultados más productivos. Por esta razón, el trabajo grupal es una estrategia eficaz que tiene como objetivo alcanzar las metas propuestas en el área de inglés. Finalmente, esta investigación proporcionará al lector información más detallada; la cual permitirá comprender de mejor manera cómo el aprendizaje cooperativo puede mejorar el habla en inglés a través de actividades grupales en aulas con una numerosa cantidad de estudiantes.

*Palabras Claves:* Aprendizaje cooperativo, trabajo de grupo, habla.

**Abstract**

This research paper contains some aspects related to the use of Cooperative Learning (CL) as a positive alternative in the teaching and learning process of second languages. Due to the benefits of cooperative learning, this is taken into account for the teaching of English. Research has shown that students can improve their language skills in this foreign language, provided that this type of collaborative work is applied in an appropriate way. Furthermore, they can obtain productive results when they work in groups. Group work is an effective strategy that teachers use with the purpose of accomplishing the objectives established for the English class. Finally, this paper will provide the reader more detailed information that is necessary to understand in depth how cooperative learning through group work activities can improve speaking in classrooms with large number of students.

*Key words:* Cooperative learning, group work, speaking.

**Table of Contents**

	<b>Pag.</b>
Cooperative Learning for Speaking.....	10
Significance of Cooperative Learning .....	11
Cooperative Learning Objectives .....	11
Cooperative Language Learning in EFL Classrooms.....	12
Learners and Teachers Role in Cooperative Language Learning.....	14
Speaking .....	15
Why is Speaking Important?.....	16
Types of Speaking Performance .....	17
Principles for Teaching Speaking Skills.....	17
What is a Large Class? .....	19
The Problem of Large Class for Teachers. ....	20
Advantages of Large Classes.....	21
Challenges of Large Classes. ....	21
Group Work.....	25
Why Using Group Work in EFL Classrooms? .....	26
Group Work Techniques.....	27
Proposal .....	32
Conclusions .....	37
References .....	38

### **Cooperative Learning in group work activities to improve speaking skill in large classes**

In this modern world, to speak an international language is a great advantage. According to the California Department of Education (2003), learning a foreign language makes learners reach academic excellence. It gives them the chances to obtain personal enrichment, academic accomplishment, and financial opportunities in their further lives. Learning a foreign language is a process which implies working hard on it. Second language learners have to develop social and communicative abilities for an effective achievement of the target language.

Throughout the years, experts in the subject have proposed some approaches to guide speakers of other languages who want to learn a new language. These approaches are based on facts that second language learners face when they are studying a new language. An approaches' purpose is to provide learners with the objectives and steps in order to obtain positive results in the process. Richards & Renandya (2002), mention that cooperative language learning (CLL) takes into account the work of the student for the group. CLL is an approach which has several advantages for language learners, one main advantage is promoting learners' interaction as a way of fulfill objectives established for the foreign language class.

Cooperative learning has advantageous teaching techniques that teachers can use to aid students gain more opportunities for success. Moreover, it encourages reciprocal helpfulness and cooperation in all of the students in the group work. CL could be implemented in Colombia, where English is taught as a foreign language. However, large classes does not allow both teachers and students achieve the goals established for the English class. In addition, Speaking is one of the aims of this research. In Colombian high schools students do not have a good level in this skill. So, it is considerable to know the benefits that cooperative learning could have for speaking.

The implementation of the cooperative language approach through group work activities might be an excellent alternative to improve speaking in Colombian classrooms which have a numerous amount of students. The group work strategies that cooperative learning offers are tools that can help teachers and learners to succeed in achieving proficiency in the target language, especially, to develop and improve the speaking skill.

### **Cooperative Learning for Speaking**

It is understood that the main objective of learning a language is to produce communication with the purpose of creating interaction. According to Artz & Newman (1990), cooperative learning is defined as small groups of learners that work together as a team to complete an activity in order to achieve a common goal. Students can improve their language skills in the target language since teachers apply the adequate techniques that cooperative learning offers. Colombian public high schools have a large number of students in a classroom. As a result, teachers cannot accomplish the expected results in speaking. Kagan (1986), states that cooperative learning can promote language acquisition by taking into account a motivating and contributory scenery. Additionally, Jacobs, Power, & Loh, (2002), mention that cooperative learning has some basic principles which can be propitious in English foreign language (EFL) classes. First, students see cooperation as a value. Second, cooperative learning can integrate students in heterogeneous groups. Third, it instills in students a positive interdependence and individual accountability. Fourth, in a cooperative environment students must develop simultaneous interaction and equal participation. Fifth, it allows students to develop cooperative abilities and group autonomy.

Through some cooperative activities teachers can offer a variety of elements to increase speaking in students. Harmer (2001), explains that “*the ability to speak fluently presupposes not only a knowledge of language features, but also the ability to process information and language*

*'on the spot'*" (p.269). It is important to mention that for this paper speaking is related to the application of some group activities which can be supportive tools for the English class. Teachers and students can obtain positive results in the oral production of the target language by using such activities in large classes.

### **Significance of Cooperative Learning**

Rodgers (1998), relates that in the twentieth century the U.S professor John Dewey was considered the promoter of establishing cooperation in the process of learning inside the classrooms. Cooperative learning was developed in the United States in the 1960's and 1970's due to the need to create integration in public high schools, and since then cooperative learning has been a topic of study.

Zhang (2010), states that cooperative language learning is being used in the majority of classrooms due to its enrichment by providing productivity, achievement and opportunities for communication. This is an approach which provides learners the possibility of finding alternatives that help them to improve their language skills when learning a new language, taking into account communication as a main objective.

Cooperative learning could work as a supportive instrument since teachers provide students with the adequate activities in order to produce more output in the second language. Besides that, it makes of cooperation a great solution to solve drawbacks that a large class presents during the speaking process of the English class. In addition, CL can make communication in students a continuous activity because of the interaction they have to develop.

### **Cooperative Learning Objectives**

According to Richards & Rodgers (2001), Cooperative language learning has some objectives which can be usually applied on learner-centered group work, these objectives are significant during the process of teaching a second language:

- To give opportunities for a natural process of second language (L2) acquisition through the use of group tasks.
- To provide teachers an adequate methodology to achieve goals in a variety of settings.
- To focus attention in particular lexical items, language structure and communicative purposes through interactive activities.
- To give opportunities for students to promote favorable learning and communication strategies.
- To improve learners' motivation and reduce stress. Also, to establish a good classroom environment.

The previously mentioned objectives can be useful to be applied in Colombian public high schools. Generally, most of them are affected by the large number of students in a classrooms, and for this reason there is not a favorable development in learning the foreign language. It is important to highlight that through the objectives that cooperative language learning has, teachers could handle the situation regarding large classes and improve the process of learning the English language. In addition, teachers could adapt those objectives depending on the type of problems that are present in the English class.

### **Cooperative Language Learning in English Foreign Language Classrooms**

Johnson, Johnson & Holubec (1994), state that cooperation means that each individual in a group has to work to achieve common goals. Learners inside the team must work together to improve each other's learning. In EFL classrooms like in public high schools in Colombia, students will need to cooperate in the activities assigned by the teacher in order to achieve the aims that have been proposed. In this manner, collaboration is activated, and learning is built by the knowledge that each one of them have.

According to McGroarty (1989), there are six learning benefits for English second language learners in classes where cooperative language learning is being applied, and these are:

- It offers a variety of tasks that teachers can apply through different types of interaction.
- It gives the opportunity to develop or employ the language in different ways to improve their cognitive progress and language abilities.
- It takes into account the support of another instructional approach which is Content-Based Instruction.
- It gives the chance to include a variety of curricular tools, encouraging language use and concept learning.
- It allows teachers the freedom that leads to an innovation of skills; mostly those which engage communication.
- It offers learners the chance to serve as material to work in their own groups. Students assume a more dynamic position in the learning process of the L2.

An important aspect related to the application of cooperative learning in English foreign language classrooms is that this approach provides noticeable advantages. Oxford (1997), says that cooperative learning can work as a way of *“Encouraging inherent motivation, intensifying self-esteem, producing gentle and humane relationships, lowering concern and predisposition.”* (p. 445). Communication is the aim for establishing interaction. If teachers want students to improve the speaking skill, it is necessary to take into consideration this approach because it is well structured and has positive advantages as the author mentioned.

Brown (2007), argues that communicative competence is an important component of communication, and also that meaning is the result of negotiation as a way of giving and taking. In this way, when students interact they are providing information, and at the same time this

information is taken as new knowledge by all the participants in the group. Furthermore, students could have good results in achieving the L2 by applying and adapting the adequate activities of cooperative language learning.

### **Learners and Teachers Role in Cooperative Language Learning**

In the classroom, teachers and students need to play a role according to their function in the class. According Johnson et al (1994), there are roles that students and teachers have to take into account when working in a cooperative environment.

**Learner role:** a student who is part of a group has to work cooperatively with his/her other partners. When students start working in a group they learn group work abilities. They are in charge of guiding their own process of learning. Students are able to plan, guide and assess their own learning whereas they discover learning skills. Additionally, students in their cooperative role have to show an active and direct engagement. Also, taking into account that participation is important.

**Teacher role:** the role of the teacher must be active and supportive. The teacher must prepare an acceptable and well planned learning environment by establishing goals, creating tasks, grouping students, choosing the resources, and taking into account the class time. Moreover, the teacher has to play a role as facilitator of learning. He/she has to move around the classroom to aid students or team groups with the doubts or questions they have.

In EFL settings like in Colombia, both students and teachers should carry out the roles that cooperative learning implies in order to develop a good process in the English course. In a large class, student's role is to collaborate and guide the members of the group they belong, inside of a team each student plays a role in which commitment is necessary to obtain satisfactory results. As well as students' role, teachers also play a significant role, in large classes teachers are the main support for students' difficulties during the language learning process. Teachers' role is to

lead students to a dynamic and cooperative environment where students can feel more motivated to learn.

### **Speaking**

Teaching English as a foreign language in large classes can be a laborious exercise because of some events that do not allow making progress in learning this language. Class time, lack of resources and large number of students are common problems that teachers have to face. As a result, the speaking skill is affected. For these reasons, cooperative learning is a solid tool that can make students improve their oral production along the language learning process.

Bygate (1987), declares that “*speaking is a skill which deserves attention as much as the literary skills in both native and foreign languages*”. (p.15). In contexts such as public high schools in Colombia, speaking is probably the most affected skill. It is important to pay attention to speaking as well as the other skills. This skill is essential for learners since communication is the main objective for any language, and students who speak the English language could have more opportunities in their professional lives.

Burns & Joyce (1997), and Luoma (2004), state that the speaking skill is an interactive process in which there is a construction of meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Students’ interaction is necessary to produce communication; not only to obtain information from others, but also to create new ways for learning the target language.

Carter & Nunan (2001), mention that “*Speaking is typically reciprocal: any interlocutors are normally all able to contribute simultaneously to the discourse, and to respond immediately to each other’s contributions*”. (p.16). When a group has an activity to develop, all the students start to share ideas and interact with the others to collect information. All of the members in the group work must contribute with something they know to complete the activity, so each one of them will have to speak.

Richards (2008), says that the proficiency of the speaking skill in English is an important objective for non-native speakers of this language. English foreign language or English second language learners always look for an advancement in their speaking ability. Nevertheless, it is not so easy to achieve it. For instance, probably large classes in public high schools are more focused on grammar than speaking. So, the possibility to obtain a good level in speaking is low.

According to Harmer (2007), speaking for students can become a difficult process because most of the time it can be affected by the variety of students' levels in just one classroom, probably a task cannot be correctly applied or the organization of an activity is not well structured, and as a consequence speaking can turn into a challenge for teachers and students.

### **Why is Speaking Important?**

Bailey (1999), Simpson (2006), & Malone (2007), state that during this modern time the world is full of competitiveness. Learners from a variety of areas such as arts, literature, and business etc., have to prove a good level of speaking in English because this language is seen as a global one. In EFL classrooms like the ones in Colombia, teachers need to discuss the importance of speaking this language. Students have to raise awareness that this L2 can be useful and important to gain better opportunities in their further lives. In addition, Thornbury & Slade (2006), argue that speaking is social because creates communication and fosters mutual compromise. It redefines social identity and implicates to active interpersonal abilities.

It was stated by Chastain (1998), that speaking is a productive skill which comprises many elements. Speaking is more than just making right sounds, choosing the appropriate words or producing the constructions grammatically correct. This is a skill that promotes communication which is essential for our daily life, and in terms of education, speaking is essential for constructing interaction inside the classroom.

Meriem (2013), explains that “*the speaking skill is one of the important skills in studying English as a foreign language in which the student shows his/her knowledge using his/her oral capacities*”. (p. 3). Speaking is the result of working hard. Generally, this ability is thought to be the most important of the four skills. Probably, it is one of the most difficult skills that language learners have to face.

### **Types of Speaking Performance**

Brown (2007), mentions some categories of speaking that students are required to take them into account when learning a second language. First, imitative speaking is when learners try to pronounce some words or phrases in order to focus on some particular elements of the language, but interaction is not totally developed. Second, there is intensive speaking, this can be self-initiated, and in this category, learners can practice some phonological or grammatical aspects of the language. It can be developed in pair work. Third, in responsive speaking learners can deal with some short questions or comments, and their speech can be meaningful and authentic. Fourth, transactional speaking (dialogue), learners are supposed to exchange specific information. It can be an extended form of responsive speaking, and learners are able to sustain a conversation. Fifth, in interpersonal speaking (dialogue), learners are able to maintain social relationships instead of just exchange some information. Sixth, at this point, in extensive speaking (monologue) learners are able to produce oral reports or short speeches, and their monologues can be prepared or improvised.

### **Principles for Teaching Speaking Skills**

Brown (2007), suggests some principles for teaching speaking. First of all, it is important to focus on fluency and accuracy. Accuracy is the correct use of the target language, and fluency refers to the use of the language in a fast and confident way. During the process of learning the L2, it is important to take into account the learners' needs. Second, it is necessary to provide

learners intrinsically motivating techniques, and the teacher's role is important in this case because teachers need to appeal to student's interests or objectives, and motivating students is important when they are doing the activities in the classroom. Third, to encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful contexts. Even though it is a laborious work to devise authentic contexts and meaningful interaction, teachers need to make use of good resources to deal with these concepts. Fourth, it is significant to provide students adequate feedback and correction because learners depend on the teacher to receive it. It is important to give corrective feedback in an appropriate situation in the classroom. Fifth, it is considerable to capitalize on the natural link between speaking and listening, since these skills are involved teachers can take advantage to integrate them because in an activity where speaking is being developed, listening can be also taken into account. Sixth, teachers have to give students the opportunities to initiate oral communication. One aspect of oral communication competence, it is the ability to start conversations, ask for information, make comments and change the subject. Consequently, students are capable to initiate a spontaneous conversation in which oral communication is activated. Seventh, it is crucial to encourage in students the development of speaking strategies. They have the chance to practice some strategies to achieve their oral communication objectives, strategies such as:

- “Asking for clarification (what?)
- Asking someone to repeat something (hub, excuse me?)
- Using fillers (uh, I mean, well) as a way of gain time to process.
- Using conversations maintenance cues ( uh- hub, right, yeah, okay, hm)
- Getting someone's attention ( hey, say, so)
- Using paraphrases for structures one can't produce

- Appealing for assistance from the interlocutor,( to get a word or phrase, e.g.)
- Using formulaic expressions (at the survival stage) (how much does \_\_cost? how do you get to the \_\_?)
- Using mime and nonverbal expressions to convey meaning”. Brown (2007, p.332).

It is considerable to mention that all the principles above are useful and necessary for the development of the speaking skill. Each principle gives important information to the improvement of the oral production of second language learners. Besides, Houhou (2013), says that “*The effective teaching of speaking skill has become increasingly important in EFL settings because of the strengthening rank “position” of the English as a language for international communication.*” (p. 1). Speaking the English language has several advantages. EFL learners must to consider that speaking this language is a key to succeed in their future as professionals.

### **What is a Large Class?**

On the one hand, Gedalof (2006 as cited in Wetsphalen, 2013), argues that a large class is defined as a class in which the teacher cannot make individual extent eye contact with each learner inside the classroom by around a period of 50 minutes, considering that a large class could be more than 50 learners. On the other hand, Hayes (1997), explains that there is no a quantitative definition about what a large class can be. This depends on people’s criterion because there are different contexts in which the educational system can change.

Coleman (1989), says that in some private language schools a class with 20 students can be considered as a large class, in Lancaster University a large class is around 50. So, the meaning of a large class can differ.

Wattanapokhakul (2006), states that the meaning of large class can depend on the subject that is being taught and the teacher's experience. For instance, in Colombian public schools settings the English subject is developed by the work that teachers and learners do. As a result, interaction is the principal element to generate oral production, but sometimes some teachers make use of traditional strategies that do not work on the current days. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases the results are not positive, also taking into account that the number of students in a classroom is big.

Forero (2005), remarks that the majority of EFL teachers around the world think that teaching English in large classes is a worrying problem because of the large mixture of students, heterogeneous ages and abilities, learning and individual attention difficulties. Teachers think that they can obtain positive and efficient results in small school groups. However, it is not possible in the Colombian settings because of the large number of students in a classroom. It is not so easy to carry out an English class. As the previous author mentioned, in a large class teachers have to face different situations that deflect the process of achieving a high competence in the second language.

### **The Problem of Large Class for Teachers**

A research about teaching English in large classes by English teachers at Burapha University explains how teachers are involved in the problem of what a large class can be. In the research Gibbs & Jenkins (1992), mention six characteristics of large classes that teachers have to deal with. These are: relationship building, class management, teaching methods, evaluations, resources and health problems. In addition, Todd (2006), remarks some drawbacks of teaching in large classes in seven aspects: learning problems, class management and activities in class, physical problems, mental factors, students' reaction problems, evaluation and students' acceptance.

Some of the circumstances the previous authors mentioned are perceived in Colombian EFL settings. Large classes create an unstable environment in which both teachers and students are involved. This brings up to the question of whether there are alternatives to solve this situation that is affecting the process of teaching and learning the English language. Fortunately, there is a strong possibility that cooperative activities solve the problem; hence, the speaking skill could be improved.

### **Advantages of Large Classes.**

It is reasonable to think that large classes do not offer positive results. Nevertheless, the following authors show some points of view about the positive effects that teachers can find in teaching in a large class.

According to Hess (2001), a large class can be a good resource for the teachers, taking into account that students can be an instrument for developing interaction. Also, Teachers can make students who have a good level in English help their partners who have some difficulties in learning the foreign language. Added to this, teachers are never bored, and they will always try to find new alternatives to deal with the large number of students in the class. Moreover, Ur (1996), expresses that when a teacher in a large class does not have enough time for each one of the students, they by their own will develop their own strategies to solve most of the time their questions or doubts. In such a manner, students must work together; being themselves able to create an atmosphere of cooperation.

### **Challenges of Large Classes.**

It is also important to mention the challenges that a large class has, despite of the advantages the authors mentioned before. Renaud, Tannenbaum & Stantial (2007) present some challenges for teaching in large classes, and they also explain their practical solutions. The challenges are presented in four categories: (1) managing the classroom, (2) using pair and group work to

encourage cooperative learning, (3) teaching with limited resources, (4) motivating students in heterogeneous classes.

1. Managing the classroom: trying to manage a crowded classroom in which students can be or not interested in learning English is a difficult situation. The two major problems for this case are how to maintain discipline, and how to correct a large number of written works.

- **Maintaining discipline:** this is due to the boredom or alienation that can appear in the classroom. In some cases, if students are interested in the class, the discipline problems can dissolve. Nonetheless, when discipline is affected teachers could opt to use some strategies to control it. For instance: to determine classrooms rules, to design a variety of activities that catch the attention of the students according to their different learning styles and interests, to organize routines, to create a sheet of paper in which students sign when the class starts to control attendance, in this way teachers do not waste time calling their names, to establish a seating chart, to assign the more advanced students the task of helping the ones who need help, and to teach students to respect the others' opinions.
- **Correcting large number of written works:** even though speaking is the main objective, it could be interesting to know about how to deal with written work in a large class. Two techniques can help teachers to correct these works, these are: (a) students work in groups to obtain one written task per group, (b) each student in the group is in charge to self-editing and one or two times they can peer- editing the paper to finally give the paper to the teacher. Renaud, Tannenbaum & Stantial. (2007).

2. Using pair and group work to encourage cooperative learning: in cases such as in Haiti, where the academic purposes are more related to competitiveness, it is considerable to introduce cooperation. For this situation, it is necessary to put into practice the following strategies: at the

beginning of the school year, it is important to explain the students about language learning and let them know the necessity of using the language to interact. At the moment to introduce pair or group work for the first time, it is important to design simple activities for a short time, make students get into groups in a quick way. They can work with those next to them or behind them. Organize the groups in advance, students can work in many classes in the same group, this is to avoid time consuming. Determine some signals for students about when a task can start or stop. Give students one copy of handout per group or pairs, in this way they have to share it and work as a team. When students work in groups it is important that they do not use the mother tongue the most of the time. So, teachers need to establish control to avoid this. Teachers need to set some rules for students to work in a polite environment inside the group. Teachers need to clarify students' doubts or questions before they organize their groups. Renaud, Tannenbaum & Stantial. (2007).

3. Teaching with limited resources: in some developing countries the lack of resources is an obstacle for teachers and students. Sometimes, teachers just count on some textbooks and materials that the school has. There are some alternatives to overcome these difficulties: teachers can make use of some methods to avoid writing large texts on the board such as the dictogloss method. Students can bring some materials from their houses which can be useful to speak or write about them during the class. To avoid writing on the board and wasting time, teachers can create some large texts in sheets of newsprint or brown paper before the class. The use of pictures from magazines or drawings can be useful to increase vocabulary and improve the interest in the four skills. The use of realia can be a good option to increment students' interest. Teachers can make use of what students say as information to develop some activities in class. Renaud, Tannenbaum & Stantial (2007).

4. Motivating students in heterogeneous classes: inside a large class students can feel isolated. If they feel that the teacher does not know them or does not care about their language learning process, students hardly will work during the class. To solve this situation, there are options to motivate students inside a heterogeneous class: it is important that at the beginning of the course teachers explain students the importance of learning English and the benefits of it. Prepare some extra activities for those students who have a higher level, then when they finish the task they can work on an extra activity, while the rest of students finish the task. When a student is speaking the teacher should be away from this one rather than staying around, in this way the student has to speak loudly, so the others can listen. Teachers need to adapt the materials depending on students' levels, ages or needs. Higher level students can be monitors and help the lower ones who present difficulties in the L2. Making good personal relationships with students can help to encourage students' commitment in learning the target language. Teachers have to determine goals for the activities as a way of increasing students' understanding. Create activities which are success-oriented, so students can achieve them, and also they gain confidence and motivation to keep working. Renaud, Tannenbaum & Stantial (2007).

Large classes in Colombia are negative situations that teachers face every day, and this is affecting the level of English. Most of the time, the English classes turn boring and simple. The majority of students just want to pass the subject no matter how. Apparently, they think, it is not useful to learn it. A common thought is that they could never travel abroad, especially to English-speaking countries.

Probably, the gist of the matter is that teachers in Colombia need to know about alternatives that help them to find out a solution, or at least control the problem. As it was previously mentioned, this research paper takes into account group work activities to improve speaking skills in the EFL classrooms. The activities can be useful to manage the large number of students

in a classroom. Furthermore, they are also useful for students to develop the speaking skill in a positive and productive way.

### **Group Work**

Brown (2007), expresses that group work “*is a generic term covering a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self- initiated language*” (p.224). This is an important point to consider, when teachers are assigning activities to their students, teachers need to raise awareness that working in a group is not only to get together, and that is all. Students have to communicate among them, trying to express their opinions or feelings in the L2 in order to achieve common goals.

According to Webb & Mastergeorge (2003), group work is considered as an effective technique used for educational purposes. This technique promotes interaction in students that are part of a group, sharing information, giving different opinions, learning new knowledge are part of working in a group. Besides, group work can help students to develop new alternatives of thinking. It is significant to establish goals for the target language in group, it makes all members of the group participate and work actively to achieve success in any task or activity.

Brown (2007), remarks some advantages that group work provides in EFL classrooms. For instance: group work produces interactive language. It promotes an embracing and supportive climate. Additionally, group work encourages in learners aspects such as responsibility and autonomy, and finally, group work is a way in which learners are improving their educational process.

Teachers can notice that group work offers advantages which are positive features for students who are learning the language. Nevertheless, it is important to mention some limitations when applying group work.

Brown (2007), explains some possible disadvantages for group work. Mostly, teachers are afraid of losing control of the class due to that students probably can make use of the native language in their groups. Moreover, Students in their small groups can reinforce mistakes they make. Also, teachers do not have the control of monitoring all the groups at the same time, and in some cases, students tend to work alone.

Although it is possible to find some drawbacks in applying group work, it is not so complicated to solve them. Teachers need only to plan and adequately correct the activities that they will apply for students. In addition, teachers can carefully choose, and execute the activities by organizing or integrating students in such a manner that everybody works actively to develop the activities.

### **Why Using Group Work in English Foreign Language Classrooms?**

Oxford (1990), mentions that *“because language in all its aspects is a social act, cooperating with other people is essential”*. (p.170). It is necessary to create cooperation among students in the class. The purpose to make that students work in groups is an option that teachers can use to enhance in students their language skills.

Gillies (2003), declares that *“students are also more motivated to achieve when working in groups as opposed to working individually”*. (p. 2). Group work offers students a motivating factor, and working in a team gives them the opportunity for sharing ideas, clarifying different opinions, and creating new ways of thinking. Students feel more confidence working in groups.

Brumfit (1984), points out that professionals in the subject argue that if group work is applied in an adequate and effective way, it can improve not only students' knowledge, but also their social intelligence, and thinking capacities. Group work allows students to improve their social abilities, and also it can raise awareness about being more responsible for their own process of learning.

### **Group Work Techniques**

Brown (2007), suggests some techniques that are useful to encourage cooperation when it is about working in groups. These technique are:

- **Games:** any activity can be transformed in a game which can be scored. Guessing games are types of the most common games to practice in the classroom. For instance, twenty questions is a game that can be used for small group of students. In this game, as a secret way a student decides to play the role of a famous character, so the rest of the students must discover who the famous character is? by asking 20 yes/no questions. Each student in the group has his/her turn to ask the question, the student in charge of the character has to walk around the group. As a result, the right answers of this activity are scored. Brown (2007)

- **Role plays and simulations:**

**Role plays:** commonly this type of activity implies (a) one or more students are given a role in the team work and (b) an objective is assigned in order that the members of the group can achieve it. As an example: one student plays the role of an employer, and other student plays the role as a possible employee; the purpose is that the employer interview the student who plays the other role. The aim of this activity is creating interaction among the participants of the group.

**Simulations:** they can be more complex than a role play, and usually a simulation takes into account a considerable number of groups, where learners work in an imaginary situation in which the objective is to find out a solution for a particular problem. For example, in this imaginary situation the members of the group are wrecked on a “desert island”. One part of the students has a profession (cardiologist, nurse, merchant or farmer, etc.), and the other part of students has shocking characteristic for instance someone (has a physical disability, is a criminal, is a drug

user, etc.), and only there is a limited amount of food to survive. As a consequence, students must decide who will live or die. Brown (2007).

- Drama: it counts with a story that is prepared in advance and with a script. Small group works can create and prepare their own dramatizations. First, they write about what they will perform, and then they will practice the representation, all of them working collectively. Usually this technique is referred to as a “skit”. In the course of the time, this activity can implicate more dramatic performances which have shown positive results on language learning. However, drama activities can take lot of time to develop, taking into account class time, and it is not common to use drama inside a typical school curriculum. Brown (2007).
- Projects: it can be a good option for students of all ages, particularly, it can be ideal for younger students who can obtain benefits of it for the improvement of the language. Several projects can offer good results. As an example, the teacher wants to raise awareness to their students about the importance of the environment. So, the teacher organize the groups, and make that each group develop a different activity. Group A can be in charge of creating an environmental bulletin board for the rest of the class; group B can create sheets with the corresponding information; group C can develop a three-dimensional presentation, and group D can prepare a sketch, etc. Therefore, students are kept working on profitable projects. In this case, responsive and productive language is used in a significant way. Brown (2007).
- Interviews: it is a well-known activity for pair work and group work. Interviews can be appropriate for learners at all the levels of proficiency. In a lower level, interviews can be well- planned in terms of information and grammatical aspects. In this level, the purpose

of using an interview can be limited because it just takes into account basic topics such as expressing personal information, or responding to simple questions, e.g. what's your last name?, How old are you? Where are you from? etc. In contrast, if it is about a higher level, the use of interviews can become more complex, students will need to be able to express opinions, beliefs and feelings. Brown (2007).

- **Brainstorming:** its purpose is to initiate in students some kind of thinking process. It takes into account the students' creativity. This technique is generally used to prepare students to read a text, to debate about a controversial topic or just to write about it. This strategy engages students in concepts they find interesting. For example, a teacher is preparing a reading about future means of transportation. Then when groups are formed he/she asks students to brainstorm about (a) different forms of transportation, past and present, and (b) current difficulties to more efficient means of transportation. So, the students' work will be to make a list with all their ideas, all of them share information in order to add it to the list. In this technique, all the ideas that the participants give are valuable. After gathering the information, the teacher and students can evaluate and discuss about what they have in the list. Brown (2007).
- **Information gap:** this is a technique which has a variety of activities where the main objective is to communicate or to request information. Its two main purposes are (a) attention to information and not to language forms and (b) the necessity of communicative interaction in order to achieve an aim. The information that learners have to look for can start from a simple to a complex way.

For instance, in a beginning level one objective of the activity could be that each student of a group work search information from the other members of the groups such as ages, hobbies,

favorite food, and so on. The information they have is written on a chart. In an intermediate level, an activity could be to make that the groups of work look for information about different jobs, and all the aspects related to those, such as the requirements, the process, and the time to get them. In an advanced level, a suitable activity might be to make that students debate about an author's book, it could be to speak about the message of the author in the book. Brown (2007).

- Jigsaw: for this technique each member of a group is provided with a specific information, its objective is to collect all that information in order to accomplish a specific task. For instance, suppose that four students of a group have an imaginary application form, each one of those application forms has different information; hence, students start asking questions (they must not show their application form) as a way of obtaining and complete the information for their forms. Another activity could be to give maps to students in small groups, in this case each student receives different information (where the mall is, where the church is, etc.) the objective for beginners can be just to locate the information in a correct way, and for the intermediate students the aim of the activity will be to give directions about how to get from one place to another, creating a cooperative exchange of information to complete the activity.

A well-known jigsaw activity that can be used in large classes is “strip story”. In this activity, teacher takes a short written text that he/she cuts sentence by sentence into little strips, then fold the short papers, and give one paper to the students. The objective for the students is to organize the full text, determining the place of each sentence. When they have completed text, they can read it. This is an activity that students enjoy doing, and most of the time they find it challenging. Brown (2007).

- Problem solving and decision making:

Problem - solving group techniques center on finding a solution for a specific problem that a group of work has. This type of techniques can or cannot involve jigsaw features. The problem situations that students are given to solve can begin from simple to complex. In a simple one, it could be to give directions about a map, a more complex topic would be to create a schedule for means of transportation such as trains, planes or buses, and a very complex situation might be to find out solutions for topics related to mystery, politics or moral dilemma. Problem-solving is a technique that focuses on the learners' attention on significant reasonable challenges, and the grammatical or phonological aspects are not so taken into account in this case.

Decision- making techniques are just a way of a problem solving technique which objective for the students is to make a decision depending on the type of the problem situation. Brown (2007).

- Opinion exchange: most of the time a belief or feeling can be considered as an opinion that can be based on empirical aspects, or in other cases, it can be taken more seriously. At a beginning level, opinions can be difficult for students, in contrast to the intermediate ones who can deal with some more advanced activities of this type where they can exchange opinions. It is important to take into account that at times opinions can be appropriate, but other times they are not, particularly when the purpose of the activity is to work with topics of the real life. Brown (2007).

To create debates in the classroom, it is important that teachers find interesting topics for students. Correspondingly, learners are involved in the activity because each one of them has something to speak about it.

Also, it is necessary to mention that teacher needs to have a considerable and delicate position in the class when asking students to speak about their beliefs. For example, religion is a belief that can be ingrained since students were children, and it can turn uncomfortable if other students do not believe in any religion. For this reason, the teacher has to do everything to avoid this kind of problems by explaining students that all the opinions are valuable, and they will not be ridiculed or rejected.

The previously techniques mentioned by Brown are some of the many that cooperative learning has to offer. These techniques can be very useful for classes in which cooperation is the aim. In EFL Colombian classrooms it is important to adapt those strategies, the type of these can vary depending on the objectives established by the teachers. When the teachers decide to incorporate a group work activity, it is necessary to give students the instructions for the development of the activity, and also explain the purpose of this one.

### **Proposal**

Even though there are many group work techniques, in this section three group work activities are taken into account, they are games, jigsaw, and role play. These techniques mentioned by Brown (2007) are the basis to develop three activities to improve speaking skills in students who are learning English in classes with a large number of students.

The following activities can be adapted depending on the teacher objectives, and students' needs. Furthermore, it is important to mention that the activities are prepared for students from sixth to eleventh grade.

**Activity #1.**Game. For sixth and seventh grade. "Match the word".

In this activity, the teacher needs to prepare in advance some small strips of paper for each student in the class. Besides, the vocabulary will be simple, and if the teacher prefers, he/she can use other type of topics.

Procedure:

- The teacher writes a word in each strip of paper and then folds them. This word needs to make a match with another one. For instance, moon and sun, day and night and so on.
- Then students can organize groups of 5. When the group is ready, each member of the group takes one strip of paper. After that, the teacher gives the direction to start, each member in the group begins to ask his/her partners some characteristics about the word they have.
- They cannot say the word, but they can use synonyms or give references of it, in order to guess the word that the other partner has.
- Initially, learners have to speak with all their partners in the group, if the word is not in the group, they can go to another one and do the same.
- When students find the word that makes a match, they go to the teacher and show him/her the match. The student who finishes, returns to his/her group and sits down. He/she has to wait until their partners find their match.
- When all the members of a group finish, they gain 5 points, and in this way all the groups keep playing until the last group finishes with 1 point. The teacher decides if points are necessary or maybe can use a different kind of incentives.

The purpose of the game is to make students speak principally by making questions. They will be concentrated finding their match, and speaking is their main tool. The game is fun, and it is not complicated because in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades the English level is not so high, and if teacher prefers, he/she can make it more challenging depending on the purposes for the English class.

**Activity #2.** Jigsaw. For eighth and ninth grades. “Finding the solution”

In this activity, the teacher chooses some debatable topics such as global warming, endangered animals, and social media addiction. These are interesting topics for his/ her students.

**Procedure:**

- The teacher writes the topics in small's pieces of paper. After that, he/she asks students to form small groups of 5 and then the teacher gives one topic per group. For instance, group A has global warming, group B has endangered animals, and group C has social media addictions etc.
- Each participant in the group has to speak participating in order to share what he/she knows about the topic. Each student needs to give a solution to solve that problem.
- As while the members of the groups interact, one student takes notes about the information they are giving. Initially, the group decides who will take the notes.
- After sharing the information and giving the possible solutions, students in the group have to create a final oral report based on their interventions, and the notes they have.
- Group A; group B; and group C have to be well informed about the information they have organized.
- Then each member in the group has to move to another group, e.g. Students from group A go to group B and C. When all the groups are mixed, they start to interact and speak about the topic they have, providing the others the information and the solutions they have found to solve the situation.
- Later, all the students return to their initial groups. There, they share the information that has been obtained from the other groups.

- Finally, the teacher asks students to make an oral report about the information of a group different from them. As an example, group A speak about what they learn from group B and so on. In this case, feedback can be taken into account, and the teacher can give a note or points depending on his/her evaluation criteria.

This activity allows students to improve their speaking abilities because they are participating actively finding a solution for an issue that is affecting our society. Moreover, these kind of topics can promote a critical thinking in students.

**Activity #3.**Role play. For tenth and eleventh grade. “The president”

For this role play, it is important to mention that the level on these courses is higher, so the development of the activity can be more complex for students. The activity is about finding possible solutions to some problems that the Colombia country has. So, students in each group must think about possible solutions to help the country. The teacher can make the activity easy or complex, this depends on the objective for the class.

Procedure:

- First of all, the teacher chooses some relevant topics or situations such as: education problems, drugs trafficking, health system problems, and so on.
- After the teacher has chosen the themes, he/she asks students to form groups of 5.
- When the groups are organized the teacher describes the activity. He/she explains to students that someone in the group has to play the role of a president, two students are the president counselors and the other two members are experts in social problems.
- Each group takes a paper with a topic, e.g., group A has education problems, group B has drugs trafficking and group D has health system problems.

- The groups have some time to prepare the role play. While they are organize their ideas, they have to create a script. In this one, the experts in social problems must mention to the others students the facts about the problem. The counselors have to explain to the president the problem and their solutions. Finally, the president has make an intervention with the final decision. During this time, they discuss a lot about what is the best solution.
- After sharing their ideas and comments, and finishing the script, they will have some minutes to organize their role play.
- Before starting the role play, students must describe to the partners of the other groups the role that each one of them is playing. The members of the other groups can play the role of the Colombian people.
- When the first group starts, e.g. group A starts speaking about the problem about educational problems. The experts in social problems and the counselors must act the situation explaining to the president the effects of the problem and possible alternatives to solve it, all of them need interact speaking about it. Then, the president has to make the final decision, giving the solution to the problem. The student who plays the role of president has to recreate the situation as if he/ she were in front of the Colombians. The other groups do the same according to the problem they have.

This activity is very interesting because students are working with real problems that our country face. They will debate about the topic in their groups in an active way. Each one of them will be trying to find the best alternatives to solve the problem. As a group, they will do a good work.

### **Conclusions**

After reviewing some information for this research paper and writing about it, it is possible to conclude that a large class is a common problem that most teachers in Colombia have to face every day. It can be a challenge for teachers to deal with a numerous amount of students in the English class. Fortunately, there are some alternatives that can aid teachers to solve the difficulties that a large class represents in the process of learning the English language. Cooperative language learning is an excellent alternative to solve this problem. In this approach, students are asked to work on their own, and at the same time as a group in order to accomplish a common objective. Furthermore, the application of this approach enables students to develop autonomy and responsibility in order to obtain success in learning the second language.

It is considerable to say that cooperative learning provides a good environment in which students feel more confident and motivated to speak. Additionally, group work activities are useful for gaining success in oral performances, these make that students interact by sharing their ideas, opinions or information they have in order to active speaking. Also, group work activities allow students to discover interpersonal abilities when working together.

The improvement of the speaking skill can be a laborious task for Colombian teachers who teach English as a second language. For this reason, group work activities are a great option that teachers can use to improve speaking in students. Finally, speaking can become a skill they enjoy to practice for the reason that cooperative learning strategies make students participate actively in a collaborative way, having positive results for the achievement of the English language.

### References

- Artz, A. F., & Newman, C. M. (1990). Cooperative Learning. *Mathematics Teacher*, 83, 448-449.
- Bailey, K. (1999). Speaking: A critical skill and a challenge. *Calico Journal*, 16(3), 277-293.
- Burns, A & Joyce, H. (1997). *Focus on Speaking*. Sydney: National center for English Language Teaching and Research.
- Brumfit, C. (1984). *Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching: The roles of fluency and accuracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language Pedagogy*. White Plains. New York: Longman.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). Chapter 14. *Sustaining interaction through group work*. *Teaching by Principles*. Pp.223-240. White Plains. New York: Pearson Education.
- Bygate, M. (1987). *Speaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carter, R. & Nunan, D. (2001). *The Cambridge guide to: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge University Press.
- California Department of Education. (2003). *Foreign Language Framework for California Public Schools. Kindergarten through Grade Twelve*. CA: Union Label.
- Coleman, H. (1989). *Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project*. Leeds and Lancaster Universities.
- Chastain, K. (1998). *Developing second language skills (2nd Ed.)*. Chicago: Harcourt Brace Publishers.

- Forero, Y. (2005). *Promoting Oral Interaction in Large Groups through Task-Based*. [Thesis]. Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras. *Profile*. Retrieved on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, from: <http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/11126>
- Graham, G. & Alan, J. (1992). *Teaching Large Classes in Higher Education*. London: Kogan. Page Limited.
- Gillies, R. M. (2003). Structuring cooperative group work in classrooms. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 39, 35–49.
- Hayes, U. (1997). Helping teachers to cope with large classes. *ELT Journal*, S 1, 31-38.
- Harmer, J. (2001). *The practice of English language teaching*. (3rd ed). Longman.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Essex: Pearson Longman.
- Hess, N. (2001). *Teaching large multilevel classes*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Houhou, I. (2013). *Enhancing EFL Learners' Speaking Skill through Effective Teaching Methods and Strategies*. [Thesis]. Second Year LMD Students of EFL at Mohamed Kheider University of Biskra. Retrieved on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, from: <http://dspace.univ-biskra.dz:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/4820/1/M%C3%A9moire.pdf>
- Jacobs, G., Power, M., & Loh, W. (2002). *The teacher's sourcebook for Cooperative Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Johnson, D., R. Johnson, & E. Holubec. (1994). *Cooperative Learning in the Classroom*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Kagan, S. (1986). *Cooperative learning and sociocultural factors in schooling*. California: California State University.
- Luoma, S. (2004). *Assessing Speaking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Malone, M. E. (2007). *Oral proficiency assessment: The use of technology in test development and rater training*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Meriem, Z. (2013). *The Negative Impact of Large Classes on Students' Oral Performance. The case of second year LMD students at Biskra University*. [Thesis]. Retrieved on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016, from:  
<http://dspace.univ-biskra.dz:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/4753/1/Memoire.pdf>
- McGroarty, M. (1989). The benefits of cooperative learning arrangements in second language instruction. *NABE Journal* 13 (2) (winter): 127-143.
- Oxford, R. L (1990). *Language learning strategies: What a teacher should know*. Heinle & Heinle publishers.
- Oxford, R. (1997). Cooperative learning, collaborative learning an interaction: Three communicative strands in the language classroom. *Modern Language Journal* 81: 443-56.
- Renaud, S. Tannenbaum, E. &Stantial, P. (2007). Student-Centered Teaching in Large Classes with Limited Resources. *English teaching forum*. (3), 12-34. Retrieved on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, from: [https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource\\_files/07-45-3-c.pdf](https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/07-45-3-c.pdf)
- Richards, J. & Renandya W. (2002). *Methodology in language teaching. An anthology of current practice*. Cambridge. University Press.
- Richards, J.C., & Rodgers, T.S. (2001) *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. (2008). *Teaching listening and speaking: From theory to practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richard, W.T. (2006). "Why Investigate Large Class?" reflections, Vol.9, Special. Issue: Large Classes.

- Rodgers, T. (1998). Cooperative language learning: What's new? *PASAA: A journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 18(2):12-23.
- Simpson, J. (2006). Differing expectations in the assessment of the speaking skills of ESOL learners. *Science Direct*, 17, 40-55.
- Thornbury, S., & Slade, D. (2006). *Conversation: from description to pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ur, P. 1996. *A course in language teaching: Practice and theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watanapokakul, S. (2006). *A development of the active learning instructional model for enhancing secondary school students' English communicative abilities in Large classes*, The Asian Conference on Language Learning Official Conference Proceedings Osaka, Japan.
- Webb, N. M. & Mastergeorge, A. (2003). Promoting effective helping behavior in peer-directed groups. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 39, 73–97.
- Westphalen, L. (2013). *Teaching large classes: the magnificent seven!*. Australia: The University of Adelaide. Retrieved on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016, from:  
[https://www.adelaide.edu.au/professions/pedagogicalpossibilities/downloads/Teaching\\_Large\\_Classes.pdf](https://www.adelaide.edu.au/professions/pedagogicalpossibilities/downloads/Teaching_Large_Classes.pdf)
- Zhang, Y. (2010). Cooperative Language Learning and Foreign Language Learning Teaching. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*. 1, (1) 81-83. Finland: Academy publisher. doi:10.4304/jltr.1.1.81-83.