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**THE EFFECT OF GROUP WORK ON ANXIETY AND ORAL COMMUNICATION IN  
THE CLASSROOM**

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**Submitted to the School of Human Sciences**

**Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of B.A. in English and French**

**Linguistic and Languages Department**

**English & French Program**

**University of Nariño**

**November, 2016**

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**NOTA DE RESPONSABILIDAD**

Las ideas y conclusiones aportadas en el siguiente trabajo son responsabilidad y exclusividad del autor.

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San Juan de Pasto, Agosto del 2016.

## THE EFFECT OF GROUP

### Resumen

Abstracto Este trabajo pretende examinar el efecto del trabajo en grupo como una estrategia para reducir la ansiedad en el aula. Según la investigación, la ansiedad afecta el aprendizaje de idiomas de los estudiantes, especialmente sus habilidades de discurso. Los estudios han demostrado que la interacción en un grupo puede ser útil para disminuir los altos niveles de ansiedad en los estudiantes y como resultado, para proporcionar a los estudiantes con más oportunidades para desarrollar y mejorar sus habilidades comunicativas. Hay tres capítulos que explican: 1) la descripción del problema; 2) el marco teórico que sustenta la tesis; y 3) el método de investigación utilizado en esta propuesta (método de investigación, técnicas de investigación y procedimientos de investigación). Esta investigación puede tener implicaciones para la enseñanza de EFL, específicamente en apoyo al desarrollo y mejora de las habilidades de comunicación oral de los estudiantes. Palabras clave: trabajo en grupo, ansiedad, comunicación oral

## THE EFFECT OF GROUP

### Abstract

This paper is intended to examine the effect of group work as a strategy to reduce anxiety in the classroom. According to research, anxiety affects students' language learning, especially their speaking skills. Studies have shown that interaction in a group may be useful to decrease high anxiety levels on students and as a result, to provide students with more opportunities to develop and improve their communicative skills. There are three chapters explaining 1) the description of the problem, 2) the theoretical framework that supports the thesis statement and 3) the research method used in this proposal (method research type, research techniques and research procedures). This research may have implications for EFL teaching, specifically in supporting the development and improvement of learners' oral communication skills.

*Keywords:* group work, anxiety, oral communication

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## **The Effect of Group Work on Anxiety and Oral Communication in the Classroom**

According to literature, anxiety is one of the problems that language teachers may probably encounter in ESL and EFL classrooms. Different strategies that may attempt to reduce high anxiety levels have been proposed, and group work is one of them.

In this paper, the symptoms of students' reticence to speak in the class and the possible causes for it are discussed, as well as the possible consequences of not reducing high anxiety levels in the classroom. Besides, the possible solutions are presented, including group work that is the strategy developed in this paper. Moreover, there is a literature review that includes articles and research on the field. Other important aspects in this proposal include procedures and steps to develop the analysis and application of group work in the classroom.

Finally, the general objectives, specific objectives, the significance of the research, the target population, geographical delimitations and limitations of the project are addressed.

### **Chapter I**

#### **Description of the problem**

##### **Symptoms of target population**

The specific symptom discussed in this project is students' reticence to speak in the class. According to Beebe et al. as cited by B.M. Tsui (1996), the lack of speaking is considered to be one of the most common problems that language teachers have to face in ESL classrooms. A similar problem occurs in EFL settings. For instance, Sato (2003) explains that EFL Japanese students display problems when speaking in the class, even when they are highly competent in reading, listening and writing.

On the other hand, according to Bailey, Daley, Onwuegbuzie (1999), Oxford (1999), Mitchell and Myles (2004) as cited by Sanchez, Sanchez & Obando (2016), there are physical,

psychological, or social symptoms related to anxiety. Physical symptoms include faster heartbeat, muscle tension, dry mouth, playing with hands, avoiding eye-contact and excessive perspiration. Psychological symptoms include embarrassment, helplessness, fear, going blank, poor memory recall and retention and self-belittling. Concerning social symptoms, they include negative social behavior such as inappropriate silence, unwillingness to participate, absenteeism, and withdrawal from a course.

### **Possible causes**

Besides the anxiety associated to foreign language learning, there are different elements that may interfere with students' speaking performance in the classroom. According to Sato (2003), one of the possible causes is the use of the grammar translation method (GTM) in the class, because this method is focused on the achievement of grammatical features in the written form of the target language, not in developing communicative skills. Another possible cause is the large class size, because it limits interaction and encourages teacher-centered classes. Students' cultural background and personal characteristics such as students' shyness, lack of self-confidence, personality can also be other possible causes for students' reticence.

Finally, anxiety can also be considered as a possible cause, and the one discussed in this paper. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), studies have shown that the feelings of anxiety are centered on the two basic task requirements of foreign language learning: listening and speaking. Therefore, anxiety may affect learners' oral communication skills.

### **Possible consequences**

If high anxiety levels are not reduced in the class, students may have less opportunities to speak in the class and improve their oral communication skills. Another possible consequence is

that classes may probably be more teacher-centered rather than student-centered, which may decrease the practice of speaking skills in the class.

Besides, according to Sánchez, Sánchez & Obando (2016), other perceptible consequences regarding anxiety and that constitute a serious issue in SLA include students' isolation, as people will not work with these students. Also, students' attendance can be affected, since they may stop attending certain courses or even avoiding taking tests knowing that they may fail a course. Students can also suffer physically, which includes illness to avoid going to a class, no participation in class even if it means being labeled negatively and finally, dropping out of school.

### **Possible solutions**

According to research, group work can be considered as one of the strategies used to reduce anxiety and increase students' communication in the classroom. Its use is supported by different authors.

For example, Long and Porter (1985) state that there are pedagogical, as well as, psycholinguistic rationale that encourages the use of group work in the class. Regarding pedagogical rationale, Long and Porter (1985) state that group work increases language practice opportunities, improves the quality of student talk, individualizes instruction, promotes a positive affective climate and motivates learners. Concerning psycholinguistic rationale, these authors state that evidence of it has emerged from recent work on the role of comprehensible input in SLA and Interlanguage.

Further studies also support the use of group work. According to Sato (2003), group work can be considered as an effective strategy for encouraging real communication in the classroom which was revealed in his studies. Sato (2003) considers this technique as a way to create a

relaxed atmosphere and an intimate community that encourages learners to speak in the classroom and reduce anxiety.

Other possible solutions proposed by other authors include the use of an anxiety graph, which helps students to detect the cause of their anxiety. According to Young (1991, p.430) “students chart their level of anxiety to show that not every phase of an oral interaction produces an equal amount of anxiety”, and students can analyze the results with their teacher.

Students can also use journals to write about the situations in which they feel anxious. According to Young (1991), these journals let students express their emotions, fears, and plans for the future. Besides, Young (1991) establishes another solution in which teachers record themselves to analyze what they do when teaching from another perspective, paying attention to their teaching style and students’ reaction to the class. Moreover, Young (1991) proposes that teachers assist to conferences and workshops to keep up to date with the new teaching philosophies, studies and practices.

Finally, Oxford (2001) as cited by Sánchez, Sánchez & Obando (2016) states that affective strategies like deep breathing, positive self-talk, and praising oneself for performance can also be useful to reduce anxiety.

### **Research questions**

- What are the possible effects of group work on decreasing possible high anxiety levels among learners?
- What possible effects can the use of group work have on increasing communication in the classroom?

## **Objectives**

### **General objective**

To analyze the effect of group work on anxiety and oral communication in the classroom.

### **Specific objective**

To examine the contributions of group work to reducing foreign language anxiety in students.

### **Significance of the proposal**

This proposal may be useful for teachers to use group work in the classroom as a strategy to reduce anxiety. In that way, teachers may give more opportunities to students to practice their speaking skills in the class. Besides, teachers may use this research as a guide to apply group work in their classes. Moreover, this research may beneficiate students at any level, because they can have more opportunities to practice the target language and have a better understanding of the subject. Furthermore, students' social skills may be developed and/or increased, because they can study at a friendlier environment in which they can practice with their peers and have a better sense of working with others.

### **Problem delimitations**

#### **Conceptual delimitations**

There are key concepts to take into account in this research:

- Anxiety: According to Spielberger as cited by Zheng (2008, p. 2), anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system.
- Communication apprehension: it is a kind of shyness that affects people when communicating with others. (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986).

- Communicative competence: Savignon (1983, p. 4) defines communicative competence as “a way of describing what a native speaker knows which enables him to interact effectively with other native speakers”.
- Group work: According to Brown (2007), it is a generic term that covers a variety of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self-initiated language.
- Reticence: According to Phillips (1965), it is defined as the avoidance of social and verbal interaction.

### **Population**

This research can take place at I.E.M. Escuela Normal Superior de Pasto in San Juan de Pasto. This institution is a mixed public school. The participants are teenagers ranging from fourteen to fifteen years old. They belong to a middle social class and are in ninth grade. There are around forty students per classroom and a different teacher is assigned depending on the subject. In percentage, there are approximately 60% of women (144 students) and 40% of men (96 students). Regarding age, most of the students are from fourteen to fifteen years old.

### **Geographical delimitations**

The research can be carried out in Pasto, Nariño, Colombia. The students belong to ninth grade at I.E.M. Normal Superior de Pasto located in Carrera 26 No. 09-05, La Aurora, Pasto, Nariño. This institution is the second best high school of the city. It has the third place in the region, and it is the first Normal school in the southwest of Colombia. It was created in 1911. Since 2008, José Coral Asain has been the principal. On the other hand, the location of this institution is at La Aurora, Comuna Siete in Pasto. In this neighborhood there are around sixty

inhabitants. Most of them are formal workers, and a small part of the students live near the school. Around the institution, there are some stores, markets, and residential houses.

### **Limitations**

The possible limitations may be related with the application of the FLCAS because the participants may not answer consciously or may not tell the truth. Other problems may be related to the lack of cooperation of the participants, teachers and administrators.

## **Chapter II**

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Related Research**

Over the last years, there has been a number of research and articles about group work and/or anxiety developed by different authors such as Koichi Sato (2003), B.M. Tsui (1996), Sanchez, Sanchez & Obando (2016) among others. Research papers and thesis have been developed as well, providing information about communicative competence and the use of group work as an effective strategy for reducing anxiety and promoting the use of the second or foreign language in the classroom. These studies constitute the rationale for this research. Some of the most notable studies are:

#### **Regional studies**

In 2007, a thesis titled “Effect of Anxiety on the Low Mastery of English” was developed by Andrea Concepción Bravo Delgado and Edelmira Mireya Ramirez Luna in the school of Human Sciences at the University of Nariño. There are some aspects of this research that can be helpful in order to analyze anxiety in the classroom. Different variables are discussed that help to understand the effects of anxiety on students. According to this study, there are some attitudes and methods applied for some teachers that stop the development of creativity and decrease the

interest in the language learning process. Students are in the stage of adolescence, so learners search their personal identity, feel pressure of peers, and have psychological and physical changes. Thus, the main purpose of the research is decreasing the levels of anxiety in order to improve the English learning.

### **National studies**

In 2008, a thesis titled “Action Research on Affective Factors and Language Learning Strategies: A Pathway to Critical Reflection and Teacher and Learner Autonomy” was presented by Yamith José Fandiño Parra at Universidad de La Salle, School of Human Sciences, Bogotá D.C. This research stated that Colombian EFL teachers should address issues related to affective factors and language learning strategies by engaging in critical reflection and carrying out action research projects. These reflections and projects cannot only provide their students with appropriate activities to face up to the emotional difficulties of social interaction and language learning, but they can also open their own work to systematic inspection and construct valid accounts of their educational practices. In the end, action research studies on language learning strategies can help Colombian EFL teachers and students realize that they can and should be active, reflective and autonomous agents of their language teaching and learning processes.

### **International studies**

In 2003, a study was carried out in Japan by Koichi Sato. It was a one-year project completed at Georgetown University and sponsored by the Japanese government. The study was called “Improving Our Students' Speaking Skills: Using Selective Error Correction and Group Work to Reduce Anxiety and Encourage Real Communication”. In this study, Sato (2003) examines obstacles faced by Japanese students that learn English, in spite of the fact that many of these students are very good at reading, writing, and listening, but not at speaking. He states

that students are worried about making oral mistakes which cannot be erased once uttered, and oral activities completed in English class are often meaningless and irrelevant to daily life. In the project, Sato (2003) introduces group work as one of the strategies to solve the problems mentioned above. He also provides sample lesson suggestions to apply group work in the classroom.

There are also studies and theories of language teaching and learning related to group work, anxiety and oral communication in the classroom as the followings.

### **Anxiety**

Anxiety and its implications constitute a topic that has been developed by different authors, because it is one of the possible problems that may occur when learning a language. However, it is important to consider the definitions of anxiety.

#### **Definitions of anxiety**

Spielberger as cited by Horwitz et al. (1986) states that anxiety “is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system”. From the point of view of psychology, anxiety is defined as “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure” (Encyclopedia of Psychology, 2000). According to psychology, people with anxiety have disturbing thoughts or worries, they also tend to avoid situations where they feel concerned and they may have physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, dizziness, trembling or sweating.

Regarding these definitions, it is necessary to consider anxiety in relation with language learning.

## **Language Anxiety**

Over the years, researchers have had the hypothesis that anxiety has a considerable impact in language learning. The concept of foreign language anxiety has been supported by different authors including McIntyre and Garner (1989, 1991), Aida (1994) and other researchers. According to MacIntyre & Gardner (1993), studies have confirmed the existence of 'language anxiety' and its effects on second language learning. On the other hand, Horwitz as cited by R. Humphries (2011) states that anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning and it is only logical that this would also apply to second language learning. Besides, MacIntyre & Gardner (1993) state that language anxiety is a fear of apprehension that takes place when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language. This anxiety is linked directly to performing in the target language, so it is not just a general performance anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) also state that students of different fields such as mathematics or science do not perform adequately because of anxiety, and this situation happens to foreign language learning students as well. They also affirm that students feel that anxiety is a big obstacle to overcome in learning to speak a foreign language.

Furthermore, they mention that learning approaches such as Community Language Learning (CLL) and Suggestopedia can be directed to reduce anxiety. Consequently, language anxiety can be generated by different causes.

## **Causes of Language Anxiety**

According to Young (1991), there are six important causes of anxiety:

1. Personal and interpersonal anxieties. Personal and interpersonal factors are the most discussed issues that generate anxiety. Competitiveness and self-esteem are part of this rubric. Bailey (1983) suggests that competitiveness is a source of anxiety because

- students compare themselves to others or to an unrealistic self-image. On the other hand, Krashen affirms that self-esteem leads to anxiety because people with low self-esteem care about what other people think, and at the same time, they are concerned with pleasing others.
2. Learners' beliefs about language learning. Learners have unrealistic ideas about language learning. For example, Horwitz (1988) in his study found that learners care about correctness of their utterances and having a perfect pronunciation. Other beliefs like "two years is enough to become fluent at languages" or that there are people who are more capable of learning languages than others. These and other erroneous beliefs lead to anxiety.
  3. Instructors' beliefs about language teaching. According to Brandl (1987), instructors believe that some degree of intimidation can help learners to improve. They also think that correction is always necessary and working in groups makes them lose control over the class, or that teachers have to do most of the talking and teaching in the classroom.
  4. Instructor-learner interaction. Anxieties related to instructor-learner interactions are reported in Horwitz et al., Koch and Terrell, Price, and Young (1991). For example, "harsh manners" of correcting students, or when learners care about what others think because they do not want to sound "dumb" can cause anxiety.
  5. Classroom procedures. Having to speak in the target language in front of others constitute the principal source of anxiety in this rubric. For example, Koch and Terrell as cited by Young (1991) found that most of the students reported that oral

presentations constitute the most anxiety activity in their Natural Approach classes.

Other sources include oral tests, or answering questions on the target language.

6. Language testing. Madsen et al. (1982) found out that some specific tests lead to anxiety. In other cases, students feels anxious when they study but the items presented on the test are different, or when teachers use question-types which learners are not familiar with. In language testing, the greater the degree of student evaluation and the more unfamiliar and ambiguous the test tasks and formats are, the more anxiety levels are produced.

Another factor that is related to anxiety is reticence in the classroom.

### **Reticence and anxiety**

One of the most common problems that teachers have to face in the classroom is the lack of participation of students (Beebe, 1983; Katz, 1996; Lucas, 1984; White and Lightbown, 1984 as cited in B. M. Tsui, 1996, p. 145). According to B. M. Tsui (1996), in a study developed in Hong Kong, teachers attributed students' reticence to five main reasons:

- Low English proficiency;
- Fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed by other learners;
- Teachers' intolerance to silence;
- Uneven allocation of turn (teachers ask smart students when other learners do not respond);
- Incomprehensible input.

Consequently, the effects of anxiety on learners take place in the process of language learning.

**Effects of anxiety on language learning**

Studies on effects of anxiety on language learning reveal different effects on students. Kleinmann (1977) says that EFL students with more anxiety levels had problems related to grammar than others who did not have a lower level. On the other hand, Steinberg and Horwitz (1986) found that students with anxiety attempted less interpretive or less concrete messages. In clinical experience, it was proved that students experience apprehension, worry, even dread, and they have difficulty concentrating, become forgetful, sweat, and have palpitations.

They also show avoidance behavior since they miss class and postpone homework. Clinical experience at the University of Texas describe how anxiety is centered on two basic skills: listening and speaking, and that the most common problem was during speaking. Students said they felt fine when responding to drills or preparing speeches in the foreign language class, but they “froze” in role-play situations. Students who practice the language in their dormitories and not in the classroom, or do not understand what the teacher is saying are other effects of anxiety.

On the other hand, E. K. Horwitz (1984) affirms that wrong beliefs of language learning can frustrate students, for example, students who belief that the target language has to be used once it is learned correctly, and that it is not good to guess words in that language. Those beliefs create anxiety because they are expected to communicate before fluency is accomplished.

Since anxiety is a very problematic topic when learning a second language, it is important to know how to identify anxiety in the classroom. These identifications can be helpful to detect anxiety on students.

**Ways to identify language anxiety**

Gardner and McIntyre as cited by Oxford (1999) explains that teachers may infer general anxiety through the use of tests, but it is not recommended because researchers view anxiety as something specific. It is better to determine it directly. Some ways to identify anxiety include:

- General avoidance: forgetting answers, arriving late at class, carelessness;
- Physical actions: touching objects nervously, playing with clothes or hair, unable to reproduce sound in the second language, even after hear them;
- Physical symptoms: pain or tension in body parts;
- Other signs depending on the culture: perfectionism, self-criticism, excessive competitiveness.

Another way to identify anxiety is through the application of a questionnaire called Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) that has been recognized worldwide.

**Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)**

In 1983, there was a group at the University of Texas called "Support Group for Foreign Language Learning". In this group, they discussed conflicts and problems in language learning, as well as ways to decrease anxiety. Those experiences helped in the creation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which consisted on a 3 -item, five -point Likert scale survey (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). According to this scale, anxious students share similar characteristics and the items evaluated are reflective of communication apprehension, test-anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation in the foreign language classroom.

Now, consider the components of anxiety.

**Components of anxiety**

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) describe three components of anxiety:

1. Communication apprehension. It is a kind of shyness that affects people when communicating with others. Some manifestations of communication apprehension are fear of talking to others in pair or groups, in public and learning or listening to a spoken message. Students who are afraid of speaking in a group are likely to be afraid of talking in front of a public, or when they are monitored by the instructor.
2. Test anxiety. It refers to a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure. Test-anxious students usually set huge demands on themselves. Since evaluation is common when learning languages, students may consider tests and quizzes as difficult. Oral tests can also lead to test anxiety and oral communication anxiety.
3. Fear of negative evaluation. It refers to "apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (Horwitz et al. 1986). This fear may occur on many situations such as interviews for a job or in the foreign language class. Students may be afraid of teachers or peers' evaluation.

However, Horwitz et al. (1986) state that language anxiety is not only the combination of these three components. Instead, they consider foreign language anxiety as a "distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al. 1986, p. 128).

Usually adult learners have a good self-confidence, but learning a language brings other kinds of challenges to the learners since it involves mental processes to communicate in the target language. Thus, feelings of reticence, fear or even panic may appear in the language learning process.

Regarding these factors, teachers need to consider some pedagogical implications when dealing with anxiety in the classroom.

### **Pedagogical Implications of Anxiety**

According to Horwitz et al. (1986) teachers have two options when anxiety is present in their classes:

- Helping students to deal with anxiety
- Making the classroom environment less stressful.

But first, teachers have to recognize the presence of anxiety in the classroom before attributing poor students' performance on low motivation, lack of ability or an insufficient background (Horwitz et al. 1986, p. 131).

Another variable that is considered in this research is oral communicative competence and some aspects related to performance and competence.

### **Communicative competence**

Communicative competence is a popular concept in language learning. There are different definitions provided by several authors.

#### **Definitions of communicative competence**

The term “communicative competence” is the blending of two words, communication and competence. According to Savignon (1983), communication is “a continuous process of expression, interpretation and negotiation”. On the other hand, Chomsky (1965) defines competence as the knowledge of the language.

Regarding these two concepts, Hymes (1972) defines communicative competence as not only the grammar competence, but as the ability to use that grammar in different situations bringing the socio-linguistic perspective of Chomsky's view for competence.

Another definition of communicative competence is provided by Savignon (1983) who defines it as “a way of describing what it is a native speaker knows which enables him to interact effectively with other native speakers”. Savignon (1983) also states that interaction in this case is spontaneous and unplanned. Thus, communicative competence requires much more than a knowledge of the linguistic code. Native speakers not only know *how* to say something, but they also know *what* and *when* to say it immersed in a cultural context that includes not only roles of speakers in particular situations, but also roles of other participants and non-verbal communication such as gestures, posture, and facial expressions.

Communicative competence is considered to be challenging in the classroom in terms of language learning. Now, consider the role of communicative competence in language teaching.

### **Communicative competence in language teaching**

According to Savignon (1983), the concept of communicative competence appeared as a symbol for everything that *audiolingualism* (1960's) could not be, a method that could not respond to learners' needs, as well as, its lack of creativity and flexibility for language learning. Audiolingualism was widely accepted in the 1960's but then it was called into question. Chomsky declined the idea of language as a habit structure and introduced his theory of transformational grammar. His theories revolutionized American linguistics and focused attention on the mental properties that people use when learning a language.

Chomsky argued that sentences are not produced by behavior formation but they generated by the learners' *competence*. (Richards & Rogers, 2014, p, 72). As Savignon (1983) states, the pressure of politics, marketplace and society resulted in the redefinition of methods and goals of language learning. Clearly, there is a need of communication. The development of the concept of communicative competence linked to language learning is traced to two sources:

theoretical (discussions in psychology, linguistics and communication theory) and practical (pedagogical needs and concerns). Here the notion of communicative competence conceives language not as individual behavior but as one of many symbolic systems that members of a society use for communication among themselves. Now, people and languages are perceived not in isolated settings but in a social context (Savignon, 1983, p. 10).

Consequently, it is necessary to consider the definition of oral communicative competence.

### **Oral Communicative competence**

Different authors have defined oral communicative competence. For example, Bygates (1991) defines oral competence as the ability to form abstract sentences that are produced and adapted to circumstances at the moment of speaking. Therefore, making rapid decisions and contributions that adequately fit the situation. On the other hand, O'Maley and Valdez (1996) say that oral competence refers to an ability to understand meaning between two or more speakers. Besides, Brown and Yule (1983) consider oral competence as an interactive process where a meaning is built on by producing and receiving processed information.

Finally, the last variable to consider in this research is group work. Its characteristics and other aspects that need to be taken into account to apply this technique in the classroom are discussed next.

### **Group work**

Different studies support the use of group work. According to Sato (2003), group work can be considered as an effective strategy for encouraging communication in the classroom which was revealed in his studies that group work can be considered as a technique to create a

relaxed atmosphere, and an intimate community which encourage learners to speak in the classroom (Sato, 2003, p. 5). Now, it is important to consider the definition of this technique.

### **Definition of group work**

According to Brown (2007), group work is a generic term that covers a variety of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self-initiated language. This technique is widely used today in language learning. According to H. Long and A. Porter (1985), group work looks as an effective strategy for increasing communication in the classroom, and there are pedagogical, as well as, psycholinguistic rationale that supports this idea.

### **Pedagogical rationale**

According to Long and Porter (1985), there are five pedagogical arguments to use group work in the classroom.

1. Group work increases language practice opportunities. In many cases, learners do not have enough opportunities to practice the target language in the classroom. It occurs because teachers talk most of the time leaving few time for learners to practice or teachers spend a lot of time in teaching grammar points, drills or asking questions to the whole class. Group work cannot resolve this problem entirely but can help. In a group, students can practice and talk between them giving them more chance to practice. According to Long and Porter as cited by Brown (2007), “by one estimate, if just half of your class time were spent in group work, you could increase individual practice five-fold over whole-class traditional methodology” (2007, pp. 173).
2. Group work improves the quality of student talk. Real communication rarely takes place in the classroom due to arrange conversations that have nothing to do with a

real context. However, communication in groups is a natural setting for conversation. Also, students can engage in real conversation rather than isolated sentences. Besides, students can take roles and practice language functions related to them. Through group work, students can develop at least some of the skills that constitute *communicative competence* in second language learning.

3. Group work individualize instruction. Learners are all different from each other, but group work can help to deal with this by working on different sets of materials suited to students' needs in small groups.
4. Group work promotes a positive affective climate. Facing the teacher can be a stressful situation for the student. In contrast, group work offers a relatively intimate setting and a supportive environment for students because students can change sentences, make mistakes and corrections but in confidence with friends and people inside the group.
5. Group work motivates learners. For all the reasons mentioned above, it is reasonable to believe that group work also motivates students. According to Littlejohn (1983), empirical studies support this assumption. For example, it has been found that small-group, independent study can lead to increased motivation to study Spanish among beginning students.

Now, consider the psycholinguistic rationale about the use of group work.

### **Psycholinguistic rationale of Group Work**

According to H. Long et al. (1983), this evidence of psycholinguistic rationale has emerged from recent work on the role of *comprehensible input* in SLA and on *Interlanguage*.

1. Comprehensible input in SLA. Language used by the native speakers seems to be modified to facilitate comprehension when addressing to non-native speakers. This is called *foreigner talk*. Thus, it can be said that native speakers help their partners (non-native speakers) to understand what they say. Modifications includes clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, repetitions and rephrasings of their own and the non-native speakers' utterances. When doing these modifications, native speakers are concentrating in communicating with the non-native speakers. That is, their focus is on *what* they are saying, not on *how* they are saying it. There is also a substantial amount of evidence consistent with the idea that the more language that learners hear and understand or the more comprehensible input they receive, the faster and better they learn. Krashen (1980, 1982) proposed an explanation for this in his "Input Hypothesis" arguing that learners understand language that contains some target language forms which are a little high than their current language also known as  $i + 1$ . The same situation can be applied to group work in which students work together doing the same kind of negotiation for meaning. Now the focus is not on quantity but in quality of the talk in terms of negotiation process.
2. Interlanguage talk. It is defined as the negotiation work possible in conversation between non-native speakers. Different research related to interlanguage shows that the kind of negotiation work is very successful in groups of students of the same first language background. Things simply seem slightly better with mixed language groups. Further, it appears to be "the combination of small-group work (including pair work) with two-way tasks that is especially beneficial to learners in terms of the amount of talk produced, the amount of negotiation work produced, and the amount

of comprehensible input obtained” (Long and Porter, 1985, p. 215-225). Thus, group work can be considered to be beneficial for foreign language students.

Now, it is necessary to consider the types of group work before considering group formation in the classroom.

### **Types of group work**

According to Davis (2002), there are three basic types or models of groups that can be implemented in the class.

1. Informal learning groups. These are groups for occasional uses (discussion of lectures) only within a class section.
2. Formal learning groups. Groups that are brought together to complete a designated task or assignment which may occur over several weeks or until the assignment is graded.
3. Study teams. Teams are different from groups. Team is long-term in nature (a semester or more duration). It may be used as a form of social organization in order to prepare for final exams or other long-term assessment tasks (a case study project). It has a stable membership and offers support to group members during the study period. The function of a study team is less focused on assignments and more on learning support and encouragement.

Nevertheless, to have a better sense and control of this technique, it is necessary to consider the stages of group work in order to apply it in the class.

### **Group stages**

According to McCollom et al. as cited by Dörnyei and Malderez (1998), research suggests that groups present similar stages in their development process even in different

contexts. Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) also state that these similarities can describe an evolution of groups in terms of patterns and phases, as well as, a practical implication to choose suitable intervention from therapists or teachers which led them to propose four group stages: group formation, transition, performing and dissolution.

1. Group formation. According to Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998), it is not easy for learners to join a group when they meet for the first time. There are different aspects involve at this stage, which are tension in interaction which leads to anxiety and lack of confidence. Besides, students are suspicious and try to find their role inside the group. That is why the first classes are important for the future functions of the group because a social structure is established that will last for a long time.
2. Transition. After students have formed groups, they start another process. Hadfield (1992, p. 45) claims that group formation is not difficult, but maintaining cohesiveness inside the group is more complex. There is a transition to work through. New conflicts take place like competition or disagreement, but they are overcome due to group norms, common values, standards that remove tension and increase productivity.
3. Performing. At this stage, there is a maturity inside the group that leads the members to work as a whole in order to achieve a goal. Some problems can occur at this point, but they can also be overcome because of self-organization in the group.
4. Dissolution. This is the last stage when students say good-bye and share what they just did. Eventually, teachers have to provide students with guidelines in order to maintain what they have learned or how to keep improving the L2 competence.

Regarding the stage of grouping, there is an important part that teachers need to think of and it is planning according to oral language proficiency.

### **Oral language proficiency grouping**

Planning is the first thing to think about when it comes to organize a group. This is very important in order to give students a more solid structure and avoid problems related to class management and when students start talking about something else and not doing what they are supposed to do in the group. Judy A. Rance-Roney (2010) says that in the ESL classroom despite the opinion of some teachers that the best option to organize a group is by grouping students with a high proficiency with those who show a low-proficiency in order to help the last ones to improve their oral proficiency, the best way to organize a group is by grouping students with similar proficiency, so, in that way, each member of the group will have the same opportunity to talk and express their opinions. She also suggests as a strategy to keep a list of students organized by proficiency level. By doing this, a teacher will have ready-made proficiency groups. In addition, if the teacher wants to organize the group heterogeneously, it's necessary for them to assign to each student a role that fits with his or her proficiency level.

Although, group work is a strategy to reduce anxiety, there are some issues that need to be taken into account before applying it in the classroom.

### **Group work issues in the classroom**

Issues related to the application of group work cannot be ignored. Some of the most relevant ones are:

- The free-rider problem. When specific students obtain reward for no effort. That is to say, students do not participate in the activities developed in the group. One way of solving the problem of social loafing and free-riding is to carefully consider the tasks given to

students and to reward the effort of groups, as well as, rewarding the work of individuals.

However, this is harder than it sounds. Tasks need to be designed to maximize students' contributions and to recognize and notice their efforts.

- The “sucker effect” problem. According to Kerr (1983), it refers to students responding to other free-riding students upon their efforts by free-riding themselves. In other words, they do not work because others do not do the same. It is suggested that this is the cause of procrastination in many group work activities.
- Group work and ethnic mix. Lack of communication among different ethnic groups is a problem for effective group work.
- The social dilemma problem. Social behavior is influenced by how social situations are organized. Motivation has to do with this problem. According to Watkins (2004), there are two main sources of motivation for students: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is when the individual is engaged because what he or she does is personally rewarding, and extrinsic motivation is when the individual wants to get or achieve something. The dilemma in setting group work tasks for students is how to foster intrinsic motivation.

Other issues that can affect the use of group work are explained by Brown (2007).

### **Excuses for avoiding group work**

As explained by Brown (2007), some teachers are afraid of using group in the class because of five important reasons or “excuses”:

1. The teacher is no longer in control of the class.
2. Student will use their native language.
3. Students' error will be reinforced in small groups.

4. Teachers cannot monitor all groups at once.
5. Some learners prefer to work alone.

However, Brown (2007) states that these drawbacks rather than reasons to avoid group work, and that these problems can be solved by careful planning and management.

In contrast, there are some strategies that can be used to apply group work and avoid some of these problems.

### **Strategies to apply group work in the classroom**

If teachers want group work to be effective, they must take into account that grouping students is not as easy as it seems. It needs planning and engaging activities that give students instructional knowledge. Judy Rance (2010) sets a list of instructional strategies related to the desired learner outcomes that can help to take advantage of group work activities. Among those strategies, the most significant are:

- To develop a sense of community, belonging and safety it is a good idea to begin with “community-building activities”, so students can learn from each other (by introducing themselves, talking about their personalities and cultures).
- To maximize opportunities for rehearsing, engaging, creating and manipulating the language, it can be appropriate to design activities that involve participation of all of the students and not just a few ones. In order to do this, students should have the linguistic input required to perform a specific task.
- It’s important to use functional language to accomplish a task. In order to do this, the teacher can explain functional language and conversational strategies that can be useful for the learners.

- To increase awareness and tolerance of different cultures, teachers should make clear the rules of engagement and define specific but revolving roles for students, so they can get involved in the activities, creating an environment of respect, tolerance and equality among them.

On the other hand, Brown (2007) proposes some practical steps to apply group work successfully in the classroom.

1. Selecting appropriate group techniques (games, role-play and simulations, projects, interviews, brainstorming, information gap, jigsaw, problem solving and decision tasks, opinion exchange, etc.)

2. Planning group work following the next steps:

- Introduce the technique.
- Justify the use of small groups for the technique.
- Model the technique.
- Give explicit detailed instructions.
- Divide class into groups.
- Check for clarification.
- Set the task in motion.

Finally, Brown (2007) suggests teachers to monitor the task with an active participation and conclude the activity with a whole-class debriefing or processing in which the class reports on task objectives and can establish affective support.

Now, consider the research method, techniques and other important points to develop this research.

## **Chapter III**

### **The Research Method**

#### **Research Paradigm**

In order to carry out the investigation, experimental research is used. According to Oddle and Mayer (2009), experimental research follows a methodology that has three important criteria: random assignment which constitute the subjects (or other entities) that are randomly assigned to treatment groups. The second criterion is experimental control in which all features of the treatments are identical except for the independent variable that is the feature being tested. Finally, the third criterion is appropriate measure which means that the dependent measures are appropriate for testing the research hypothesis. Oddle and Mayer (2009) also affirm that experimental research is generally recognized as the most appropriate method to obtain causal conclusions about instructional interventions.

This method is appropriate for applying this proposal in a real situation, because group work activities have to be applied, in order to examine the results obtained and determine whether group work actually reduced high anxiety levels or not, and whether students could practice their speaking skills even more.

During this research, it is quite important to describe the actual situation of these students at a given point, and at the same time, to study the effects of group work on anxiety management and oral communicative competence.

#### **Research techniques**

In the present research, it would be recommendable to use observation and a special questionnaire as techniques. Marshall and Rossman (1989, p. 79) define observation as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for the

study". According to Erlandson et al. (1993), these observations let the investigator describe current situations using the five senses, providing a "written photograph" of the situation under study. Observation can be used to find out in the first place, if there is lack of participation in the classroom.

After these, the FLCAS questionnaire can be applied in order to measure anxiety levels of the group of students. After this, group work activities suggested by Brown (2007, p. 179) such as games, roleplays and simulations, drama, projects, interviews can be selected and applied in the class.

Right after the application, interviews can be used to ask students how they felt during the process, and if they can tell any difference before and after the application of group work on reducing their high anxiety levels. Kvale (1983, p.174) defines interview as "an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena". According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), interviewing consists on asking questions and getting answers from the participants of a research. The answering part is usually developed through electronic devices such as telephones or computers.

Finally, weekly reports are used in order to follow the process and keep track of what occurs during the sessions.

### **Population, Sample, and Setting.**

#### **Population**

The participants of this study are 45 high school students, 23 female and 22 male that are currently studying at Institución Educativa Municipal Normal Superior de Pasto. This institution is one of the most important and recognized in Nariño. There are two study schedules, morning

and afternoon. Around three thousand students study in this institution, and most of them belong to a middle social class.

### **Sample**

A group of thirty-five students from ninth grade (9-6) of I.E.M. Normal Superior de Pasto. These students age range between fourteen to fifteen years-old. There are twenty girls and fifteen boys who belong to a middle social class. These students represent the 2% of the population in this school.

### **Setting**

The research can be carried out in Pasto, Nariño, Colombia with the students of ninth grade at I.E.M. Normal Superior de Pasto, in Carrera 26 No. 09-05, La Aurora, Pasto, Nariño. Cr4 Cl 19, during 2016. Nowadays, there are three main entrances in this school. The most important zones are the library, the auditorium, the stadium and the principal's office. The principal characteristic of this institution is that curriculum is focused on forming teachers, adding an extra year of education for students who want to become educators.

Regarding Proyecto Educativo Institucional (PEI), the school's mission is to shape professionals of the education field to work on elementary schools with academic excellence, engaged with the integral development of an equal, fair and more humanistic society that takes part of the different challenges proposed by the region, the country and the world. Teachers form students with excellence criteria, sensibility and social responsibility. This school is located in La Aurora neighborhood that is located in Comuna Siete in Pasto. In this neighborhood, there are about 60 inhabitants. Most of them are formal workers and many of the students at I.E.M. Normal Superior live in this neighborhood. There are some local stores, small markets and residential houses near the institution.

## **Research Procedure**

In order to carry out this study, a letter is sent to the institution to ask for permission to develop this project. Once obtained the permission, the research can take place in the target classroom. Students are informed about the project. Then, the FLCAS is applied in order to measure anxiety levels. Next, group work is introduced for everyone in the classroom as a strategy to reduce anxiety and increase oral communication. Also, observation is used throughout all the project to check the process before, during and after the application of group work. Finally, at the end of the study other interviews are done to determine if the strategy was positive, practical and helpful. Finally, a thank you letter is sent to the principal, the students, the teachers and all the people who helped to develop this project, and a report of the findings is exposed to students and teachers in order to make them know whether the study worked and group work can be used in the future as a feasible technique to reduce anxiety and encourage participation in the classroom.

## **Validation criteria**

### **Pilot Study**

The pilot study intends to determine the validity, reliability and the learners' responses to the interviews. According to Arnold et al. (2009), a pilot study can be defined as a small research done to help in the implementation of a main study. In this case, interviews can be done before the research in order to do a preliminary analysis of the project. The questions can be based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which is one of the most important scales to measure anxiety levels in the classroom. The normal scale has thirty-three questions that will be translated into Spanish by the research group Lenguaje y Pedagogía from Universidad de Nariño to avoid misunderstandings of the items, since it can cause serious

problems to obtain valid results in the diagnosis of anxiety levels. After the diagnosis, three group work activities can be applied in the classroom and observation is performed during those activities (reports, listening, and discussion) to analyze their influence on students' performance and finally the application of new interviews and surveys to determine students reactions to the activities implemented in class.

### **Ethical issues**

A letter in which the research project that would be developed is explained would be authorized by the Institution.

The present research would not cause any damage to the students, because it consists in observation of some classes, interviews authorized by the students and directives. Students' names are not used to protect their integrity.

Students are not forced to participate in the research. It is voluntary.

A copy of the research results is handed out to the administrators of the School as well as the teachers and students who participated and collaborated with the development of the project. In addition, an oral report of the results is carried out for a better understanding and in order to receive opinions and feedback by the people involved in the project.

At the end of the work developed in the Institution, a thank you letter is sent to the students, teachers and administrators for their collaboration during the process.

**Budget**

<b>QUANTITY</b>	<b>RESOURCE</b>	<b>AMOUNT</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
45	Photocopies survey	50	\$ 2.250
5	Folders	1000	\$ 5.000
45	Sheets of paper	50	\$ 2.250
	Transportation		\$ 200.000
200	Printing	300	\$ 60.000
	<b>Subtotal</b>		\$ 269.500
	Extra-expenses		\$ 100.000
	<b>Total</b>		\$ 369.500

**Schedule**

<b>ACTIVITIES</b>	<b>Sept 2015</b>	<b>Feb 2016</b>	<b>March</b>	<b>April</b>	<b>May</b>	<b>June</b>	<b>July</b>	<b>Aug</b>	<b>Sept</b>	<b>Oct</b>	<b>Nov</b>
<b>Elaboration of the proposal</b>											
<b>Editing process</b>											
<b>Correction process</b>											
<b>Application of the project</b>											
<b>Analysis of results</b>											
<b>Elaboration and presentation of the project</b>											
<b>Publishing</b>											

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