Improving Eleventh Graders' Oral Production in English Class through Cooperative Learning Strategies

Mejora de la producción oral de estudiantes de grado undécimo en clase de inglés, a través de estrategias de aprendizaje cooperativo

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This paper aims to report on research carried out with eleventh graders at Colegio de Bachillerato Patria in Bogotá. The main objective of the research was to establish strategies to help students to improve their oral production in English. Instruments used to collect the data were: field notes, students' and teachers' surveys, students' interviews and audiotapes recordings. Considering the data gathered, this research prompted a more cooperative environment among students in the oral process. Finally it was a way to motivate other teachers in the school to work with these kinds of strategies.

Key words: Cooperative learning strategies, oral interaction, interaction activities, collaborative learning

El propósito de este artículo es presentar una investigación que se llevó a cabo con estudiantes de grado undécimo del Colegio de bachillerato Patria en Bogotá. El principal objetivo consistió en establecer estrategias que ayudaran a los estudiantes a mejorar su producción oral en inglés. Los instrumentos utilizados para recolectar información fueron diarios de campo, encuestas a estudiantes y profesores, entrevistas a estudiantes, grabaciones de audio y video. Considerando la información recolectada, este estudio promovió un ambiente de más cooperación entre los estudiantes. Finalmente fue una manera de motivar a otros docentes en el colegio a trabajar con este tipo de estrategias.

Palabras Clave: Estrategias del aprendizaje cooperativo, interacción oral, actividades de interacción, aprendizaje colaborativo

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Introduction

Through this project I wanted to use some cooperative learning strategies to help my students better express themselves orally.

Globalization, the opening up of the economy and scientific and technological process are factors which have influenced the new world order in different fields. Nowadays, it is necessary to improve students' performance as workers in facing future labor challenges. One of those challenges is the development of communicative competence in one or more foreign languages, to be able to interact on equal footing with the rest of the world. According to these new demands, today will depend not just on one's professional knowledge but on the ability to present that knowledge in an appropriate way.

Drawing on my experience and after checking some school policies, for example to get the students to level B2 in eleventh grade, it was necessary to find strategies to help our students to practice and improve their oral production, and for achieving the desired oral level. Many strategies were available to be applied if we wanted to work on oral production but, taking into account the heterogeneous population in the school, the most appropriate strategies were provided by cooperative learning.

This research was carried out at Colegio de Bachillerato Patria. This school is located in the north of Bogotá in Chico neighborhood. It was approved in 1967 by the Education Ministry (Ministerio de Educación Nacional – MEN) and it was classified as a state school but with special character (which means that it follows the MEN's educational policies but is administered by the Defense Ministry). This school belongs to Liceos del Ejército (Army Schools), and its mission is to educate the children of members of the different armed forces: Army, Navy and Air Force. In some cases, the school has foreign students. The school has different working conditions in comparison with other schools, because the students' families in the Patria School need to move frequently from one place to another, and during the year it is necessary to receive students from different parts of the country.

This school is co-educational. The total number of students in the school is 1050, and in each course there are 35 students on average. Considering all those aspects, our school was a special context for working on the project with our students. My main question was: To what extent are cooperative learning strategies effective in reaching the desired oral production level of eleventh graders at Colegio de Bachillerato Patria? My secondary questions were: What are the appropriate strategies to develop oral production? What kinds of factors are necessary for cooperative learning strategies to work? How can teachers encourage good group dynamics and create a comfortable atmosphere where students are not afraid to speak and enjoy communicating with each other?

Literature Review

The problem described in this research required special theoretical support. The theoretical elements included in this research were closely related and provided a clear path for developing processes and steps.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative Learning has been defined by various professionals from different fields.
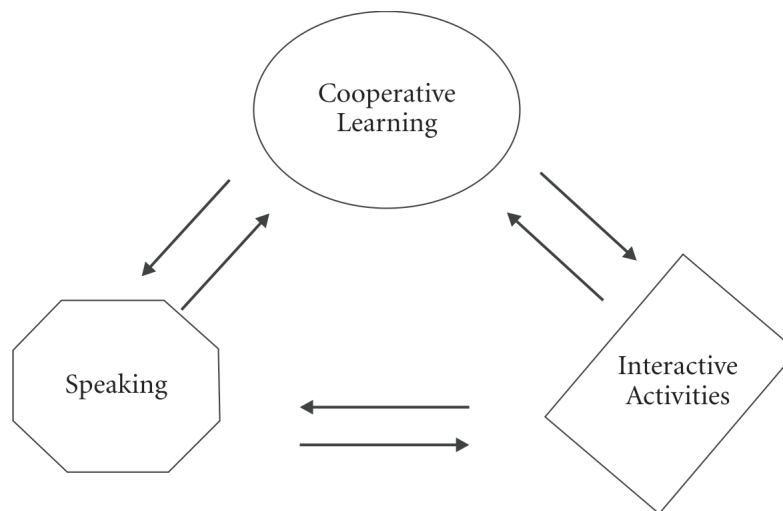
Diagram 1. The theoretical elements of this research.

Johnson (2001) defines cooperative learning as a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Artz & Newman (1990) define cooperative learning as small groups of learners working together as a team to solve a problem, complete a task, or accomplish a common goal.

Furthermore, different researchers and academics give special characteristics and qualities to cooperative learning. Cooperative learning strategies have been shown to improve academic performance (Slavin,1990), to lead to greater motivation to learn (Garibaldi, 1979 in Kagan 1986), to increase time on-task (Cohen 1988), to improve self-esteem (Johnson and Johnson, 1989) and to lead to more positive social behaviors (Lloyd, 1988). Cooperative learning, according to another expert, promotes language acquisition by providing comprehensible input in developmentally appropriate ways and in a supportive and motivating environment (Kagan, 1995).

The model of Johnson & Johnson (2001) was taken in this research because they focus on developing a specific structure that can be incorporated in a variety of curriculums with an emphasis on integrating social skills and academic tasks. For them there are four steps that teachers must follow in teaching cooperative skills: Students must see value in group work, students must be aware of the necessary skills for successful group work in order to know what they are supposed to do, students must practice the skill (in this case speaking) and students need to process the skills they have practiced (in order to improve them). During the research it was also necessary to learn how to apply different techniques according to cooperative learning, because it is not only for group-work. Some of the techniques are:

Jigsaw

Groups with five students are set up. Each group member is assigned some unique material to learn and then to teach

to his group members. To help the learning, students across the class working on the same sub-section get together to decide what is important and how to teach it. After practice in these "expert" groups, the original groups reform and students teach each other.

Think-Pair-Share

Involves a three-step cooperative structure. During the first step individuals think silently about a question posed by the instructor. Individuals pair up during the second step and exchange thoughts. In the third step, the pairs share their responses with other pairs, other teams, or the entire group.

Round Robin Brainstorming

Class is divided into small groups (4 to 6) with one person appointed as the recorder. A question is posed with many answers and students are given time to think about answers. After the "think time," members of the team share responses with one another round robin style. The recorder writes down the answers of the group members. The person next to the recorder starts, and each person in the group gives an answer in order until time is called.

Numbered Heads

A team of four is established. Each class member is given a number between one and four. Questions are asked of group. Groups work together to answer their question so that all can verbally answer the question. The teacher calls out a number (for example, two) and each two is asked to give the answer.

Speaking Skill

This was other topic that was considered to give theoretical support to the research.

According to Chastain (1998, pp. 330-358), speaking is a productive skill and it involves many components. Speaking is more than making the right sounds, choosing the right words or getting the constructions
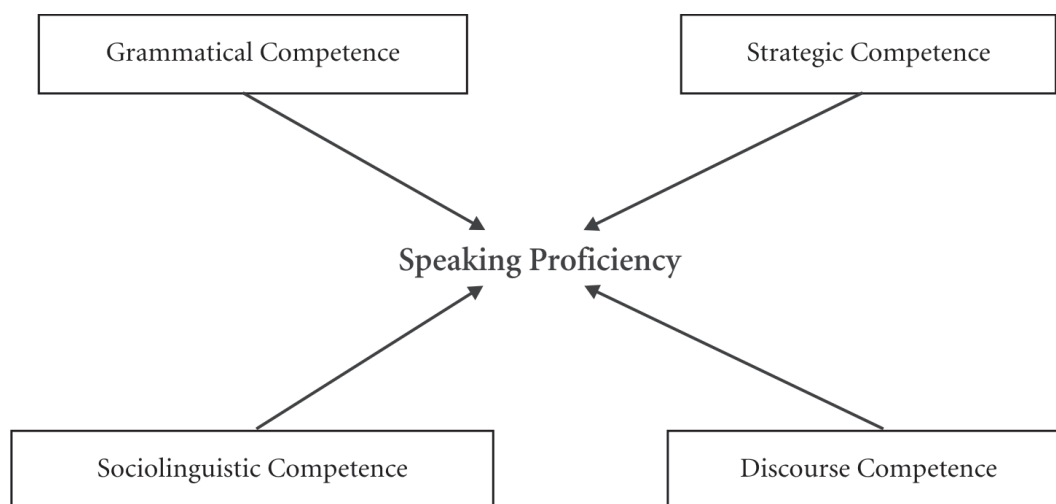

Diagram 2. Language competencies speakers can develop (Based on Chastain, 1998).

grammatically correct. One of the problems that teachers need to face in order to teach a foreign language is to prepare students to be able to use the language. How this preparation is done, and how successful it is, depends very much on how well teachers understand their aims. For that it is necessary to recognize that a certain amount of grammar and vocabulary is required and to clearly understand, the difference between knowledge about a language and skill in using it (Bygate, 1987).

Speakers also use their background and linguistic knowledge to create a message that will be meaningful to the audience. Speakers can develop language competencies. Canale & Swain (1980) and Canale's framework (1983) in Chastain (1998) describe these abilities:

Speaking activities

When we are going to work on speaking, the types of activities chosen (performance, controlled/guided and creative or freer activities) depend on what we want learners to do.

Performance activities provide students with opportunities to communicate in the language. Teachers and students at this point should concentrate on the meaning and intelligibility of the utterance, not the grammatical correctness. With practice, grammar errors should disappear. *Controlled activities*, such as repetition practice or set sentences prompted by picture or word cues, aim to improve the accurate use of words, structures and pronunciation. In *controlled and guided activities* the focus is usually on accuracy, and the teacher makes it clear from feedback that accuracy

is important. Some examples of activities for controlled practices are: Find Someone Who, questionnaires, information gap etc. *Guided activities* include model dialogues which students can change to talk about themselves and to communicate their own needs and ideas, and tasks which the students carry out using language taught beforehand. Finally *creative or freer activities* are usually designed to give either creative practice opportunities for predicted language items, or general fluency practice, where the specific language focus is less relevant. Some activities for freer practice are: interaction or information gap, role-plays, simulations, discussions and games. These activities were combined with cooperative techniques to motivate students to use and improve their English. Another necessary area of research was interaction, and how it can affect the effectiveness of different applied techniques.

Oral Skills and Interaction

Interaction skills involve making decisions about communication, such as what to say, how to say it, and whether to develop it, in accordance with one's intentions, while maintaining the desired relations with others. Our notions of what is right or wrong now depend on such things as what we have decided to say, how successful we have been so far, whether it is useful to continue the point, what our intentions are, and what sorts of relations we intend to establish or maintain with our interlocutors.

In spoken interaction the time constraint can be expected to have observable effects. Brown & Yule (1983) suggest that it is possible to distinguish between "short speaking turns"

and "long speaking turns". The former are the more common. In this case the wording and the subject matter tend to be worked out extempore as the speaking proceeds. The differences in form undoubtedly reflect the differences in decision-making on the part of the speaker. The later tend to be more prepared, such as an after dinner speech or a talk on the radio. The combination of those theories gave clear strategies to use with the students, according to their needs, in order to improve their oral production.

Research Design

Action research is the type of research design I followed since it is one of the most appropriate to carry out this investigation. It is conducted in naturally occurring settings. This kind of research collects information in a spiral way in order to solve problems, understand, change or innovate classroom processes. Many researchers have designed different models to apply action research. I adopted Cohen & Manion's (1985) model. They proposed eight stages in the action research process:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Develop a draft proposal based on a discussion and negotiation between interested parties.
3. Review what has already been written about the issue in question.
4. Restate the problem or formulate hypotheses.
5. Select research procedures, resources, materials, methods etc.
6. Choose evaluation procedures.
7. Collect data, analyze it and provide feedback.
8. Interpret the data, draw out inferences and evaluate the project.

One advantage of action research that we identified at this point was the spiral process, which provided us the opportunity to develop, improve and consider different elements at every step.

Fifty-three students participated in the project: eighteen girls and thirty-five boys, whose ages ranged from 14 to 17 years old. Students had similar socio-economic status (middle-high). The students from this level showed a positive attitude to the English class. They knew that it was a requirement in their future professional development and they tried to improve it every day.

Data Collection Instruments

For this research I adopted Hopkins' concepts (1993) to collect data. Following these concepts, I used various methods including:

Field notes

I took field notes for each English class; they allowed the identifying of reflections on and reactions to classroom problems.

Surveys

I conducted one survey with fifty three eleventh graders, including the selected groups who participated in the research. These surveys were applied in English. The other was a survey taken by the English teachers. The objective of these surveys was to canvas different opinions about problems and methodology in the English class.

Audiotape recordings

These audiotape recordings gave a general diagnosis and provided detailed evidence about oral production problems. Two kinds of activities were recorded. One was a free practice in class and the other one was a controlled activity. In the free practice students prepared an oral activity, and the teacher noticed that the students did not use English during their preparation; but when they presented the controlled activity in front of the teacher, they used English. Another characteristic of the situation was the method used to prepare the activity, because, although they were supposed to work in groups, the activity was actually developed by one student.

Finally I checked some **school documents** to find more information about the students' problem. I found the results of a QPT (Quick Placement Test) given to the students three years ago, when the British Council was contacted by the school to make a diagnosis of the English level in the school. According to the test, most of students were in level A1 with a few in level A2. These results generated some changes in the way English was approached as a subject. Some class hours were modified, as was the number of students per class. In addition, the placing of students in levels was discontinued.

During the cooperative activities, other instruments were needed to find out information on the oral production process.

– Students' diary: After each lesson, students answered some questions about their opinions of and attitudes towards the activities done in class.

Lesson	Speaking Activities	Cooperative Learning Strategies
1. What is the point?	Jigsaw Discussions Guessing Games	Jigsaw Numbered Heads Think Pair Share
2. Advertisements	Jigsaw Discussions	Three Step Interview Round Robin Brainstorming Jigsaw
3. The power of nature	Jigsaw Discussions Problem solving Exchange of opinions Presentations	Jigsaw Numbered Heads Think Pair Share
4. On the phone	Exchange of opinions Discussions Interviews	Round Robin Brainstorming Think Pair Share
5. Telephone messages	Guessing games Discussions Interviews Jigsaw	Round Robin brainstorming Think Pair Share

Table 1. Topics and activities used in class.

Field Notes and Classroom
Observations

Students

Surveys

Teachers

Interviews

Analysis of and
Reflection on Data

Audiotape
Recordings

Checking
Documentary
Evidence

Phase 1

Implementation of Cooperative Strategies

- Field notes
- Students' diary
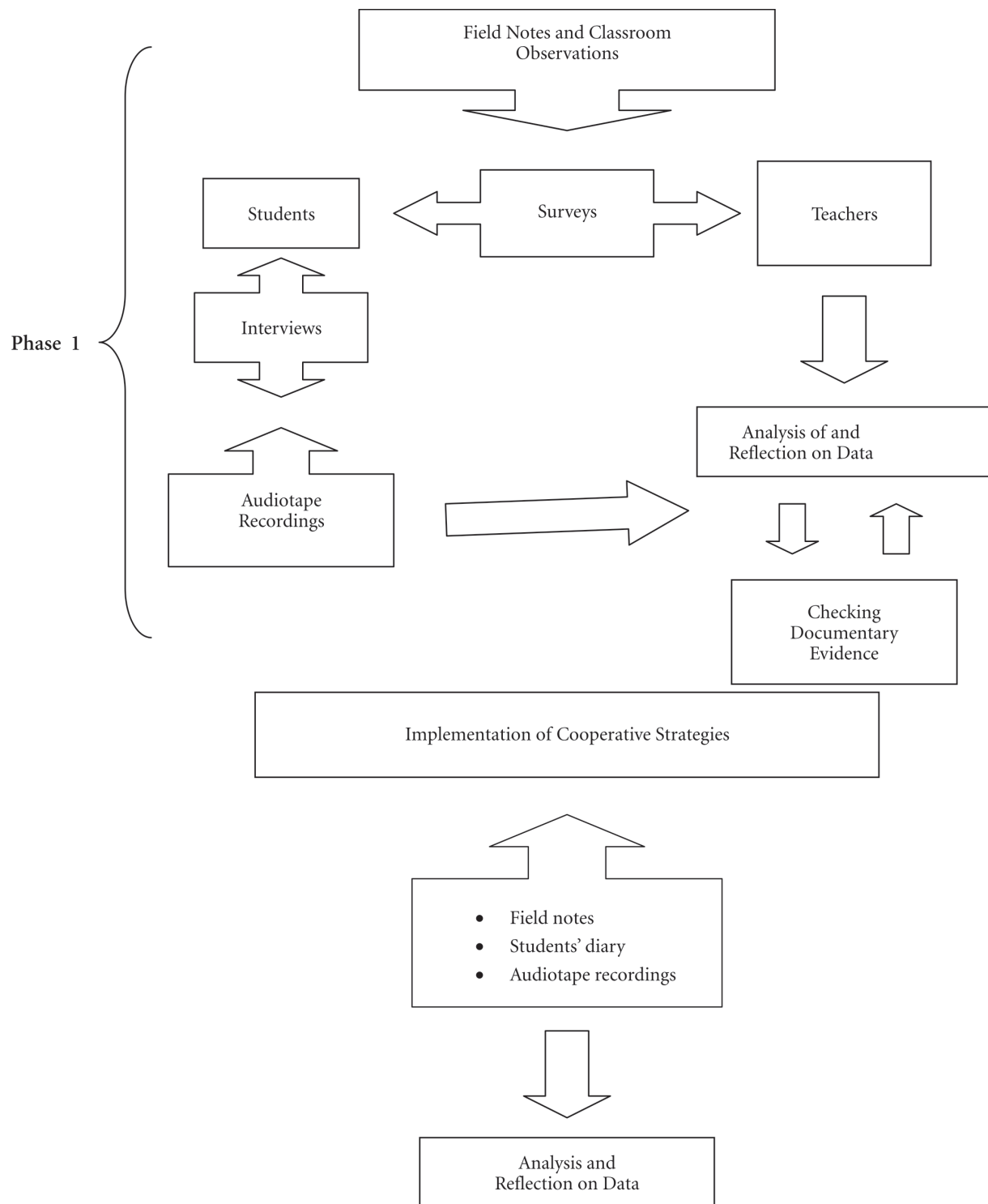- Audiotape recordings

Analysis and
Reflection on Data

Diagram 3. Data collection instruments.

Those opinions were kept on file in a diary during the time the cooperative strategies were used. (See Appendix 1).

– Field notes and audiotape recordings: To monitor the students' development and the effects of the strategies used.

Implementation of Cooperative Learning Strategies

During this stage of the research, five lesson plans were designed (see Appendix 2), in which I combined cooperative learning and speaking strategies. Each lesson developed a particular topic and also took into account specific grammatical structures. The topics and the cooperative learning and speaking activities used were:

Each topic was selected according to the students' interests and needs. Also it was important to look for and design special material as an important factor in motivating students to participate.

In each lesson the achievements, indicators, possible problems, previous knowledge, materials and specific objectives for each stage of the class were also stated.

Findings

All the students at the end of the implementation showed a different attitude towards group work and the skill of speaking. At the beginning of the process students did not like to work in groups and felt uncomfortable speaking English. After the experience of sharing and learning with others, they found real and concrete reasons to work with their partners. They could learn through teaching. Many values were learned during the process, such as solidarity, responsibility, team spirit, etc.

The first time they used the cooperative learning strategies was not easy, as they wanted to work only with their friends and, in some cases, did not follow the rules. In the first session some groups delegated one student to do the activity, but when the teacher asked another student for the answers they understood why it was important that everyone in the group managed the information. Competition among the groups was an important factor to motivate students to work as a group, because it is important for them to be the best and to be recognized.

After revising the students' diaries, and also observing the class session by session, various issues showed up in the students' answers. For example, they changed their concept of group work. It was no longer a case of a group of friends where only one person had the responsibility of working and giving all the answers.

The oral production improvement gave students the opportunity to help and to learn from their partners. They noticed that all of them had something to share and something to be valued in the group.

Students were aware of their responsibility in the speaking process. They understood that one way to improve speaking is practicing with others, interacting with others, and learning from others. In addition, they noticed their progress, in that at the beginning of the experience they were shy when they needed to communicate something orally but then they discovered that their partner was the teacher in some cases and they felt more comfortable asking for clarification of concepts or vocabulary.

A good attitude was an element that students included in their strengths, because they noticed that good relations among them were important if they wanted good results in the activities. They valued and respected their partners and, in some cases, discovered new friendships through the work.

The roles assumed by students during the cooperative learning activities were fluid. Roles were given by the teacher at the beginning to explain to students how they worked but after practicing those elements they were assigned by the students for each session, and they also created new ones. For example one student was the recorder, another was the leader or the spokesperson, and they fulfilled those functions according to the task. Students could rotate the functions in different groups. This helped to reinforce self-esteem in some students.

Materials, topics and special equipment resources were motivating factors in the experience. These elements gave students tools and encouragement in their work. The topics generally allowed them to discuss and think about their real life. Their personal and previous knowledge were always taken into consideration. They found reasons to express themselves and to share.

Discipline requirements and other behavioral rules were given at the beginning of the process by the teacher. The students needed to know how to work in a group and at the end of each class they reflected on that day's process in order to improve next time. They were responsible for their discipline during the process.

Students were aware of their own responsibility in the process. They identified the fact that the project's successful result was achieved through their good attitude and the contributions of all the class members.

The cooperative learning activities most used by the students for improving oral production were: Round Robin Brainstorming, Think Pair Share, Three Step Interview, Numbered Heads and Jigsaw.

The teachers' survey indicated that: The activities, topics, materials and group work helped students in their oral improvement; the responsibility for the teaching role was not the teacher's as the students in each group learnt through teaching others; in some cases, the time given for activities was not enough, as students wanted to continue with the activity.

Conclusions and Implications

Having analyzed and worked through this research project, I have concluded that cooperative learning strategies helped students to improve oral production and interaction, but it was a gradual process. I confirmed that speaking is a productive skill and it involves many components. It is more than making the right sound, choosing the right words or getting the constructions grammatically correct, as Chastain (1998) stated. During the experience students found reasons to express themselves orally and a path to use their previous knowledge through learning and teaching actively. The starting point for speaking was the appropriate input given by other communicative skills.

There are four main causes why students did not practice speaking during the experience: they did not have an appropriate input; in some cases, they did not have enough vocabulary or the correct grammatical structures to express something; another

cause was the teacher lacking attractive and appropriate activities to motivate students to express themselves; and finally it was necessary to create an environment where mistakes were not important.

Based on the results gathered I can say that there are five factors necessary to work with cooperative learning in the classroom: first, small groups are required; second, different levels of ability had to be considered; third, it was good practice to establish the group's rules according to each activity; fourth it was important to work on one skill for each stage; and finally, it was important to evaluate students performance.

The control of students' discipline was difficult at the beginning of the process because they were not in the habit of working with each other, in the sense that the teacher stipulated. During each class the objective of the activity and the rules to be used needed to be explained. For example, when the teacher raised her hand they knew that they needed to do the same, and to be quiet. Also, at the beginning they wanted to work with their friends, while in the first session they were shy during the activities because of their new partners.

Students were aware of their responsibility in the speaking process. Activity by activity, they noticed that they had many elements at their disposal to express themselves and to be successful in communicating. They understood that practicing speaking is the only way to develop it, obviously using an appropriate input. Listening and reading skills were used as a vehicle to develop students' oral production.

Cooperative learning has four main strategies to help the speaking process: Jigsaw, Numbered Heads, Think Pair Share and Three Step Interview. These strategies allowed and encouraged students to speak. At the end of the process students were able to identify the type of cooperative strategy that worked best for them.

The feedback given by the teacher at the end of the session helped students keep on talking in their groups, and they corrected errors unconsciously because, during the activity, they checked the expressions, vocabulary and pronunciation used. But the feedback couldn't be applied in the way stipulated in the theory, because there was not enough time in each session to apply the special techniques. In addition, many values and social skills were put into practice by the students: Honesty, responsibility, solidarity, team spirit and self-esteem.

Finally, cooperative learning was an appropriate method for improving oral production. It was enjoyable for the students and teacher because it used many elements contributed by the students and encouraged them to improve their process. Students said that they learnt more and had more opportunities to participate orally in the class; they felt comfortable using English in class. I noticed that my students attained a certain level of knowledge and proficiency in language use. But the most important point was that they could express themselves and communicate orally without the pressure of grades or other students' opinions.

The pedagogical implications of this research are relevant on different levels: students, teachers, school, and even national educational policies.

For the students: Students discovered that speaking is fun and easy when it involves working with others, and practiced values such as respect, tolerance, team spirit, and

the importance of interacting with others. Students also established new relationships with their classmates through cooperative learning.

For the teachers: Teachers found different strategies through cooperative learning for helping students to improve their oral production. Those cooperative strategies could be taken up by the school as tools to help the bilingualism process. This experience, at the same time, helped teachers to encourage their students into oral production, giving a real purpose for speaking and using other communicative skills as input.

These activities created a different environment in the class. That environment was free of anxiety and pressure; students were free to express themselves.

Finally it is important to mention some issues concerning the school where this project was developed: The school is going to begin a bilingualism process and, as such, it is very important to identify and apply strategies that could bring about a more homogeneous population using the current heterogeneous one, to achieve the desired level; the school is also adopting the new demands of the *Colombia Bilingüe Program* from the MEN, and so it is very important to adopt strategies that help the institution face and fulfill those demands.

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Appendix 1: Students' Diary

This instrument was used after each session to find out the students' opinions and attitudes towards the activities done in class. It was an important introspective tool kept by learners and focused on students' performance, cooperative learning and speaking strategies.

English Class
Survey

Teacher´s name _____ Date _____

1. What type of activities were used by the teacher?
   _____
   _____

2. Do you think those activities help students to improve their speaking?
   Yes _____   No _____

3. What aspects did students practice the most in class ?
   Listening _____
   Reading   _____
   Writing   _____
   Speaking _____
   Grammar _____

4. According to the activities, who is/are responsible for the learning
   process in the class?
   Students _____
   Teacher _____
   Students and teacher _____

5. How can you describe the students' during the group work activities?
   Positive _____
   Negative _____
   Indifferent _____
   Other   _____   Which?

6. According to the class complete this chart:

Positive aspects	Points to improve

Appendix 2 : Sample of a Lesson Plan

Liceos del Ejército

Colegio de Bachillerato Patria

English Department

Lesson Plan No. 1

Date:	September, 2006
Achievement:	Students will practice relative clauses structures.
Indicator:	- Students read a text to identify general and specific information. - Students share and clarify information.
Anticipated Problems:	Teacher explains that they are going to use some cooperative strategies in order to practice previous knowledge and some communicative skills (Reading-Speaking).
Cooperative Learning Strategies	- Jigsaw - Numbered Heads - Think pair share

Topic:	What is the point?
Assumed Knowledge:	Students during this session are going to practice the grammatical structures concerning relative pronouns and relative clauses. Also, they are recycling vocabulary.
Speaking Techniques	- Jigsaw - Discussions - Guessing games

Stage/Timing	Procedure/Activities	Stage Aim	Materials
Warm Up Activity "On your toes" -Think pair share (7 minutes)	Teacher gives each student a card with a part of the body, and they have to find a partner with the same part. After that, teacher gives them a worksheet where they need to match information and draw the pictures according to instructions. Then they share their answers with other pairs. Whole class feedback.	To motivate students.	Worksheets. Written cards.
Pre- Teach Vocabulary (5 minutes)	Teacher divides the class in groups of four students. Each student receives a piece of information (it could be a picture or a word). They need to match the pictures with the correct words. Whole class feedback. Teacher asks students to think about the topic of the class. Whole class feedback. Students discuss if they would consider having some of those things shown before. Whole class feedback.	To clarify vocabulary. To make predictions To discuss a specific situation.	Pictures, written cards.
Presentation Pre-reading Activity -Jigsaw	Teacher gives each student in each group a unique material that they need to explore and explain to the rest of the group without showing it. Students discuss the topic of the text and confirm the prediction they made before.	To set a context. To check predictions.	Strip papers
Reading Activity Text: "Body Language"	Students read the text and answer some questions about it. One student is the recorder of the group. Then all members of the group change their group to share their responses. Whole class feedback.	To check reading comprehension To share information	Reading cards
- Round Robin Brainstorming (10 minutes)	The groups of four are divided in two groups, each pair of students receives special material that they need to learn and then to teach to their group members. They use the text in order to find examples of defining and non-defining relative clauses.	To prepare special aspects of language. To practice the topic orally.	Worksheets.
- Jigsaw (10 minutes)	According to the groups each member is given a number between 1 and 4. Questions are asked of the group. Groups work together to answer the question so that all members of their group can verbally answer it. Teacher calls out a number to give the answer.	To practice in a controlled activity.	Worksheets.

Stage/Timing	Procedure/Activities	Stage Aim	Materials
Speaking Activity - Numbered head (15 minutes)	Each group receives a worksheet; there are two situational exercises with different definitions. Each team has a list of words with two definitions and one space to invent other one. First they decide their answers and then they ask the other group for the correct definition. Teams read the definitions by turns. They can discuss if the definition is correct or not.	To produce something new using previous knowledge.	
Group Work (15 minutes)	Students in pairs choose two words and write three definitions for each one. They change partner and ask orally for the correct definition.	To produce something new using previous knowledge.	
Wrap Up (20 minutes)	Students in pairs choose two words and write three definitions for each one. They change partner and ask orally for the correct definition.		