

Reading Activities: A way to **Foster Cooperative Learning** in Seventh Graders of a Rural Institution

Actividades de lectura: Una manera de fomentar el aprendizaje cooperativo en estudiantes de séptimo grado de una institución rural

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Abstract

This paper is a report about a mini-scale research that was carried out in a rural school in Aguazul (Casanare). During the development of the English classes, the teachers noticed that individualism was evidenced, students were always working in an independent way and those with difficulties felt apart and insecure about their learning process. The aim of this pedagogical intervention was to find a strategy to encourage students' cooperative work in order to learn and, more importantly, to work as a group helping each other. For this pedagogical intervention, students were required to read two texts and to solve some activities that allowed them to work as a group using cooperative learning. From a pedagogical perspective, cooperative learning provided the teachers with the possibility of making their students cooperate and to feel satisfied when helping others.

Key words: Cooperative Learning, Reading Activities.

Resumen

Este documento es un informe sobre una investigación a pequeña escala que se llevó a cabo en una escuela rural en Aguazul (Casanare). Durante el desarrollo de las clases de inglés, los maestros notaron que se evidenciaba el individualismo, los estudiantes siempre estaban trabajando de manera independiente, y aquellos con dificultades se sentían separados e inseguros acerca de su proceso de aprendizaje. El objetivo de esta intervención pedagógica fue encontrar una estrategia para alentar el trabajo cooperativo de los estudiantes a fin de aprender y, lo que es más importante, trabajar en grupo ayudándose mutuamente. Para esta intervención pedagógica, los estudiantes debían leer dos textos y resolver algunas actividades que les permitían trabajar como grupo utilizando el aprendizaje cooperativo. Desde una perspectiva pedagógica, el aprendizaje cooperativo proporcionó a los docentes la posibilidad de hacer que sus alumnos cooperen y de sentirse satisfechos cuando ayudan a los demás.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje cooperativo, Actividades de lectura

Introduction

There is a Chinese saying that goes: “If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody.” For centuries, the greatest thinkers have suggested the same thing: Happiness is found in helping others. (Santi, J, 2017) In that sense, working through the Cooperative Learning Method (CLM) is what this small-scale project focused, due to it is just not about receiving help from others, but also learning from that in order to share it to my whole group. When we work cooperatively, individualism knowledge disappear and we create an atmosphere in which everybody as a whole group learn at the same time. This is why it is really important to mention that this small-scale project concluded with five elements that can be evidenced in the students’ learning process. Positive Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Face-To-Face Promotive Interaction, Appropriate Use of Collaborative Skills and Group Processing are useful elements that helped us realize about the importance of implementing CLM in our daily classes.

This small-scale project will explain the context in which took place, providing information about the target population’s perspective about life and how we as researchers wanted to find a way to approach to them in order to switch that wrong way of seeing life. Besides, it describes the activities and tools that we applied in terms of collecting data to be analyzed and then articulated with theoretical principles. Moreover, the materials that we applied will be shown in order to let readers continue with the findings, which will lead us to strength our

main motto of not stopping in encouraging these students to have a better lifestyle in their future through education.

Rationale

Based on our needs analysis, it is noticed that one of the most normal human behaviors is social interaction, and although it is strongly attached to every human aspects, most of the methods in the educative system seem to forget that the progress in society is mostly due to social interaction. Johnson, R. & Johnson, D. (2002). That is why, teaching with an approach of cooperation and common goals is still strange. Cooperative learning is an alternative to fight the competitive and individualistic nature of the current system.

In cooperative learning, students not only share common goals they want to achieve, but share a common interest in the learning process of their classmates and foster a solidary, responsible and supportive environment for the sake of the whole team. The advantage the Cooperative Learning is that students first find themselves learning supported on their classmates (*Something we could relate to the concept of zone of proximal development*) and then they show individually the skills and competences they have acquired.

In the specific case of the activity proposed we could identify all of the 5 elements composing the cooperative learning, the chosen activity focused on strengthening reading comprehension. In the first place we could identify specific roles that students assigned themselves keeping in mind their abilities. Looking in the dictionary, controverting ideas, or supporting

opinions showed effective positive interdependence, which is the first element in cooperative learning. In the activity of reading for example, students divided themselves into smaller tasks but still kept in mind that each one of them was important for understanding the text or giving answers to the questions.

It was common to listen to them talking as 'we' or 'us' or using terms as 'our team' which showed the kind of compromise they had with the activity and their classmates success; so it was the feeling of frustration they had when they got a wrong answer, in the activity of kahoot, or example. Besides, we consider important to mention that thanks to the effective way we distributed class material (One set for each team) we used the principle of positive resource interdependence. By sharing material, even those who did not like to work in group, were forced to cooperate and feel part of the group.

A second element found in the development of our small scale project in the classroom was the face to face interaction. It was possible not only due to the group arrangement but was mainly evidenced in the interactions and the discussions they had in their groups. In the reading activity they exchanged ideas and confronted each other whether supporting an option of answer or controverting it and then helping their classmates understand why by explaining the reason in their own words.

The third element which is accountability and personal responsibility, was evidences mainly due to the feedbacks and supports that we gave to the students. Mistakes in the sessions were not only addressed individually but to the group. Students then,

were more aware of the possible mistakes of their classmates, and even pressed each other to make better contributions. *'Eso no tiene sentido, busca mejor' 'hagalo mejor' 'ponga atencion'* were the kind of things students said each other on the sessions, in the reading session, was useful to see how they pushed themselves to perform their roles better by looking definitions in the dictionary and then putting them in the text, as an example. In this way there was a sense of cooperative work and an enhanced sense of responsibility for the results of the group. They were aware that their contributions not only affected them, but to their whole team. In the kahoot session, the excitement of the activity made them focus on the game and the joy of the process was totally evidence.

The fourth element which is interpersonal and group skills is more difficult to identify since this method was being applied for the first time. It was difficult for them to accept feedback and provide it to their classmates with finesse, however we did saw a small improvement of the way they addressed their classmates. In the first session they, being unable to hide their frustration for their results or for not being listened, used a rude tone to express their opinions, this obviously caused a reaction on their classmates, which they could notice. Many of them, keeping in mind these reactions, and still wanting to participate from the activity, were forced to take care of their manners and the way they expressed opinions to their classmates. They started to trust on each other's abilities, to listen more carefully, and even support different opinions even if at the end they were mistaken. In the consecutive sessions there was less yelling in the groups and they were con-

centrated on the results rather than fighting themselves.

At the end of each session there was a feedback to analyze the answers of every activity. Since they were just getting used to work together in the reading session for example, there was an opportunity for students to make an auto evaluation. In this part every student had the chance to say what was his/her most significant contribution to his role, and they were also asked to say what they did not performed so well. All along during the development of the activity there were moments in which conflicts among the students impeded the normal development of it, so we had to mediate and try to coordinate students to get them focused on the common goal, always reminding them that the responsibility for the results was in a collective way.

Heterogeneous grouping was necessary at the beginning of the session since, it was important to pair stronger students with those with weaker abilities, so as with different genders. Of course this made some students upset or reluctant to work with those they were not used to. However the fact of using the principle of diversity in the group forming is important for future sessions and to empower students' cooperation and solidarity.

Context

This small scale project took place in a public school in San José del Bubuy, a village, located at the rural area of Aguazul – Casanare in Colombia. The school was created in 1995, it has a population of about 715 students per year and its philosophical premise is to educate free men and wo-

men. The mission of the school is to guide children, teenagers in the different levels and grades to become social leaders. The vision of the school is to encourage students into research, so they can use it as a mind of education and learning that allows them to have cultural, agricultural and eco sustainable practices at school.



Participants



The selected participants for this small-scale project were a group of 21 students

in which 11 are girls and the other 10 are boys. They are in seventh grade at Luis María Jiménez School. Their ages ranging from 12 to 14 years old. Most of the students come from a floating population and their parents are divorced; they live with step-fathers and step-mothers; the family income is very poor because they do not have a permanent job. The majority of them live in farms where their parents are not the owners, but they work there as farmers and take care of animals and the farm. They go to school by using the school bus from the government, by bicycle, or just by walking as mean of transportation.

Justification

As the target populations of our small scale project is located in a real area of Aguazul – Casanare, Colombia. Their thoughts are different and students' perspectives about life need to be reshaped for them to have a better lifestyle in their future. We more than simply teachers, we are educators, and our main motto towards learning is to encourage them every single day to switch their mentality and consider the idea of going to the university or even having an enjoyable job.

In that sense, we needed a way to approach them in order to achieve our goal and we started thinking about the skill we could possibly work on and then we remembered a phrase said by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra "The one who reads a lot and walks a lot, sees a lot and knows a lot", so we concluded that through readings we could get students' attention, and this could be a path we could get into and reshaped their minds by showing them with real context what a future could hold for them. For a couple of days, we had in

mind that "When we read, we learn" and it became our main quote; that is why we selected two main readings to be developed in two different times. The first reading was about "Family" and how this part of the society could influence in them. The second one was about "A teacher's daily routine" in order to contextualize that they could also have a professional life in their future but without explaining to them our main purpose, we wanted them to realize about it by experiencing that once they concluded with the activities.

After our two interventions, we decided that motivating those students to do our purpose needed to go beyond two simple meetings and readings, so we thought about including technology into our small project. The best way to realize about their understanding in the two readings was to evaluate them through Kahoot!, an excellent cooperative tool we applied, showing great impact not only in their thinking, but also in the importance they see learning a foreign language.

Description of the activities

We developed 2 activities about reading and vocabulary. They were developed in two different sessions. The first activity took place on Tuesday, April 3rd and it was about family members. We started giving instructions to the students about the activity to be developed. We asked students to form 3 groups of 5 students and 1 group of 6. The first part of the activity was to read and complete a text with a group of 16 words that were placed in a box at the top of the page. The idea was to read the words aloud and in a cooperative way trying to find the words' meaning, so students could read and complete the text

in a correct way. The second part of the activity was to answer 5 questions about the text with complete sentences. The third part was to circle True (T), False (F) and Doesn't Say (DS). Once the students finish the worksheet, they had to go to the board and write the answer of each question. For this final part, we drew a circle for each group on the board; the idea was that each group wrote their answers on the circle. Students started at the same time, then, once the student wrote the answer, they had to go back to the group to pass the marker over to another student and so on.

The second activity took place on Thursday, April 5th, this activity was about a daily routine of a professor. This worksheet was developed in the same way that the first one. Students had to read a set of words from a box, think and analyze the vocabulary and the meaning and complete a text that was about the teacher's daily routine; then they had to answer 15 questions about the text.

In order to have a supportive result and evaluate students' learning process, we decided to make students get involved with technology; that is why we implemented a cooperative tool called Kahoot!, which allowed us to see how Cooperative Learning was put into practice.

Theoretical Principles

The term cooperative learning (CL) refers to students working in teams on an assignment or project under conditions in which certain criteria are satisfied, including that the team members be held individually accountable for the complete content of the assignment or project. Felder, R., &

Brent, R (2001). Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups that allows students to work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. Class members are split into small groups after receiving instruction from the teacher. They then work through the assignment until all group members have successfully understood and completed it. (Johnson, D., Johnson, R. & Johnson E. 1994).

Developing CL becomes a different way to work on English classes, this method brings the five suitable elements for students to increase their knowledge due to through: Positive Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Face-To-Face Promotive Interaction, Appropriate Use of Collaborative Skills and Group Processing, they get to create an enjoyable atmosphere in which each element plays an important role in them in order to enrich their learning process.

It is important to mention that there are tons of positive things we can talk about reading due to it helps students in many different matters in terms of improving knowledge; the reader makes connections to already known concepts and principles and uses this understanding for problem solving in new contexts. Hermida, J. (2009) and negotiate the meaning with the author by applying their prior knowledge to it (Maleki & Heerman, 1992).

Taking advantage of this globalized world we are living nowadays, we considered a great idea to work with technology in the classroom. We decided to apply in this small-scale project an assessment tool called: Kahoot! And based on Gaer, S. (2015) Gaming is making learning more fun, Kahoot comes to be an excellent tool

in order to evaluate our students' learning process as a final step aiming a single goal which is to work in a cooperative way. According to its resources in its webpage: Kahoot! is a free game-based learning platform for teachers of awesome, classroom superheroes and all learners. In other words, it is just a game based classroom response system played by the whole class in real time. (Ganapathy, M, 2018). Multiple-choice questions are projected on the screen and students answer the questions with their smartphone, tablet or computer.

Findings

Students were so excited when they realized they were going to have 2 teachers; they felt so important, so we could notice that when students feel important, they try to do their best and make an effort to show that they are able to achieve the goals proposed in the class.

During the development of the activity, we figured out that the 5 elements of cooperative learning stated by Johnson were achieved. For example: *positive interdependence* took place when the students had to ask among them about meanings and vocabulary, so in that way, they could complete the vocabulary activity; they were so interested on developing the activity; they knew that the results were given by groups. *Individual accountability*: each student had the chance to have the activity, and to understand what he or she had to do, so each

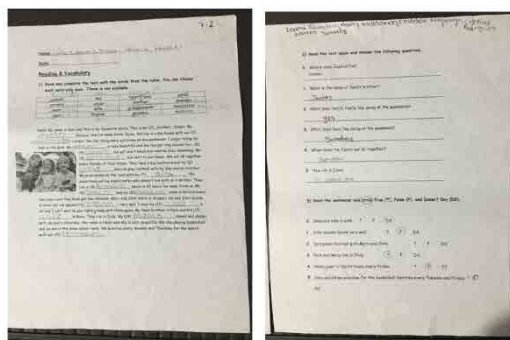
one of him or her had the same opportunity to participate. *Face-to-face promotive interaction*: this happened because as we know not all the students have the same knowledge, some may know more vocabulary than others may and so on, so they had to ask their partners about meanings, sentences, structures, etc. and to solve doubts among them, in other words, they had to interact and to share their understanding. *Appropriate use of collaborative skills*: during the developing of the activity, students had to face many situations as decision making, when they had to choose among one answer or the other, solving problems, when maybe they did not agree, being tolerant when partners did not agree, etc. Finally, *Group Processing*: in this final one the students felt the need of defining goals, so they started to work on completing the worksheets in a correct way.

Other important aspect about this cooperative work is that students had a space to appreciate their partners help. They understood that it is important to care about others and that when working together there come good results.

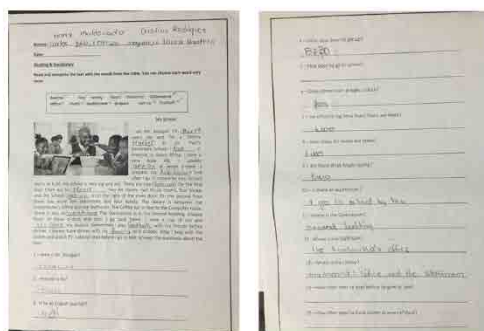
Materials

There were two different readings applied in this small scale project.

The first one was developed on April 3rd, 2018, as it is shown next:



The second one was developed on April 5th, 2018, as it is shown in next pictures:



To evaluate students' learning process, we applied Kahoot!, as a cooperative tool with the questions from both readings they developed in the two previous sections.



Conclusions

Cooperative learning works because students could improve their learning; it was noticed that students felt more comfortable when working in groups because they participated and were able to solve questions about the readings.

Once students were comfortable about participating in the English class, they felt a responsibility with the group because the more they participated, the better the results were and chance to have a better understanding of the topic was evidenced.

Through cooperative learning, students could understand somehow that when they are in a good attitude to learn, they can in a long term, change their minds about working in class and learning a foreign language.

Encouraging these students to have a better lifestyle is possible if we continue providing them with excellent resources in which they develop a critical thinking and can be able to switch their perspective about education.

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