Cooperative Learning in a Bilingual Middle School Classroom: The Challenges in the Classroom after Twelve Years of CL Implementation[1]

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Abstract

This article is based on research carried out in a bilingual middle school located in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico. The article discusses challenges that teachers at this school have perceived since they have been using Cooperative Learning (CL) in the classroom since 1995. Furthermore, the article describes the suggestions that these participants have made for any readers who are interested in implementing CL methods in their classrooms. The data presented in this article was taken from the thesis *Teacher's Perceptions of the Use of Cooperative Learning in Bilingual Middle Education,* presented in the Graduate Program of Greensboro College in 2010.

Resumen

Este artículo está basado en una investigación realizada en una escuela bilingüe ubicada en Xalapa, Veracruz, México. El artículo aborda los retos que los maestros en esta escuela han experimentado en la implementación del aprendizaje cooperativo en el salón desde 1995. Asimismo, se describen las recomendaciones que estos maestros puntualizan para aquellos lectores que se interesen en implementar el aprendizaje cooperativo en sus salones de clase. El artículo utiliza datos recolectados en una investigación realizada como parte de la tesis *Las Percepciones del Maestro en el Uso del Aprendizaje Cooperativo en la Educación Bilingüe a Nivel Secundaria*, presentada en el programa de posgrado de Greensboro College en 2010.

Introduction

My journey with Cooperative Learning (CL) started when I encountered this teaching method at Colegio Las Hayas Bilingual Middle School in 2005. My brief stay at the school before leaving for the USA did not allow me to fully understand this concept. Yet, in my curiosity to learn about CL, I asked my colleagues in Charlotte, North Carolina, for more detailed input about CL because they brought up this instructional method in staff development workshops. Needless to say, I found the answers to my question quite vague and confusing. Most of them refer to the term CL as group activities, pair work, 'find someone who' activities, worksheets to answer in teams, among others. The answers, it seemed to me, were examples of group work rather than proper definitions of CL. Although I myself had used group work in my classes, I wondered if I was really using CL by giving students the same worksheets and putting them in groups to answer. Was it really necessary to put them in groups if in the end I would give them a grade individually? I was doubtful that I was indeed using CL strategies or methods in my classroom. So I wanted to explore this term more fully.

In order to fully understand the meaning of CL, I reviewed the literature concerning CL methods. Although the research helped me to understand the concept of CL, I

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found little research about the implementation of CL in bilingual middles schools in Mexico. This led me to go back to the origin of my doubts which was at the bilingual middle school where I first heard about CL in Xalapa, Veracruz. The teachers have been using CL methods since 1995. The present article describes the perceived challenges that these teachers have encountered in the teaching with the CL method throughout these years and their recommendations.

Participants

A total of twelve EFL teachers from this bilingual middle school participated in the research carried out in 2009. At that time, they taught one or more of the following subjects: social studies, English language arts or an elective such as art or grammar. Their teaching experience in this school ranged from one to twelve years. To be more precise, four out of the twelve teachers have been working in this school for one or two years. This data revealed that the other eight teachers have been using CL methods for twelve years at this bilingual middle school.

Methodology

After reviewing the literature of CL, a survey was designed for the teachers. The survey was revised and redesigned based upon the comments and observations made by the coordinator of the TESOL program in Greensboro College, North Carolina. Then, I requested permission to carry out the survey from the heads of the bilingual middle school. After obtaining written permission, the survey was given to the school teachers. The survey contained three sections: 1) the first section collected demographic data about the teachers; 2) the second section consisted of twenty closed-ended questions related to CL research; and 3) the third section included consisted of three open-ended questions concerning the participants' perceptions about the use of CL in their classroom. The perceptions collected dealt with three specific areas: 1) the benefits teachers have perceived in the use of CL; 2) challenges they have encountered when using CL methods; and 3) recommendations to other teachers or schools that are planning on incorporating CL in their classrooms. This article focuses on the third section of the survey, specifically the challenges and recommendations.

Brief Review of the Literature

What is Cooperative Learning?

This question of what cooperative learning is arose at the beginning of my research. I had heard the term CL in professional learning communities as well as from education consultants, principals, instructional coaches and new teacher mentors. In fact, Jaques (2000) found that teachers and students like working in groups for different reasons, such as getting to know their classmates, learning from one another, helping others and being helped (p. 39). The idea of learning from one another was not new at all. What is new, however, is the creation of a series of models that use a collaborative approach.

From a top-down expository perspective, the idea of having learners work and learn from one another goes back to the social-constructivist theory. According to Dewey (1916), Piaget (1972), and Vygostky (1978), a learner becomes an active participant in the construction of their own knowledge by using prior knowledge, negotiation and social interaction to assimilate new knowledge (see Koohang, Riley,

& Smith, 2009, p.92). Furthermore, Murphy (1997, cited in Koohang, Riley, Smith, & Schreurs, 2009, p.93) points out the characteristics of social constructivism and how collaborative and cooperative leaning are relevant to favor such theory. With this in mind, it can be inferred that collaborative learning uses social constructivism as its main foundation and rationale.

According to Bruffee (1984), collaborative learning began in the late 1960s with the British educators Edwin Mason and Charity James who suggested that working collaboratively in small groups had better results in learning than working individually. Mason (1971) stated that "[one] cannot think of any part of moment of life in which we are not reacting to the presence of other people, or carrying over into relationships with everything else, what we have learned…from collaborating with other people while exploring the world with them" (cited in Rae, Roberts, and Taylor, 2006, p. 520). The idea of helping each other in groups or learning collaboratively became more popular following Mason's references, and Bruffee proved it in 1993 when he wrote his book *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge,* in which he described his experience as a College Professor in the USA with the use of collaborative learning with college students. In 1968, Charity James, in her book *Young Lives at Stake: The Education of Adolescents*, proposed a change in the British educational system by adding four elements that would promote a collaborative learning environment: (i) a *class lesson* that takes into account students' individual differences and learning preferences, (ii) *team-teaching* in which teachers exchange ideas and materials, (iii) *individualized learning* through special learning programs that students can choose based on their strength in certain disciplines, and (iv) *flexible grouping* where students are actively engaged, and make decisions in their learning process (p. 52-62). In her book, James (1968) disagreed with the learning techniques in which "the imposition of the adult will on the young is enforced day by day in each lesson" (p. 53). What she wanted was a change in the way that instruction was delivered as well as the way knowledge was constructed. James (1968) suggested the implementation of an instruction in which, "students with different needs, interests, potentials, and cognitive styles [did not have to] perform the same tasks." (p. 53). Moreover, James (1968) proposed having schools in which students could collaboratively learn through what she called "flexible grouping." (p. 61). By using "flexible grouping," teacher lectures as a means of instruction could be transformed into "collaboration" in which "young people are actively engaged and become decision-makers… [throughout] a collaborative process." (James, 1968, p. 62). Paraphrasing the words of Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1994a), it should be added that the need for a more collaborative environment appeared as an opposing force against the traditional classrooms where teaching was dominated by competitive and individualistic learning

For James and Bruffee, collaborative learning started to appear as part of educational jargon. In 1984 Bruffee started writing how collaborative learning had been used in American universities. In his article, "Collaborative learning and the conversation of mankind", Bruffee described how Brooklyn College Institute used collaborative learning as a strategy to help college freshmen and sophomores improve their skills in English composition workshops (p.635). Later, in 1993, Bruffee explained that collaborative learning has adopted several forms or names in

the past three decades such as: peer tutoring, reciprocal teaching, study teams, group presentations, and jigsaw among others (Cohen, 1994; Jacob, 1999; Jaques, 2000; Kagan, 1992; Silberman, 1996; Slavin, 1987). As the use of collaborative learning increased, its influence extended to the K-12 classrooms and also the use of the two terms collaborative learning and cooperative learning.

There have been several scholars that use collaborative and cooperative learning as interchangeable terms (Buzzeo, 2002; Hill & Hill, 1990; Marzano, Pickering & Pollock 2001; Smith, 1987, 1996). Bruffee (1993) argued that collaborative is a broader term whereas cooperative is a type of collaborative learning that is presented in a more specific and structured manner. Other authors claim that collaborative learning occurs more at a college level while cooperative learning is used more in the K-12 classrooms (Cohen, 1994; Jacob, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994a, 1994b; Kagan 1989, 1992; Slavin, 1987, 1995; Vatterott, 2007). By doing so, collaborative learning took on more structured forms and the latter authors developed different models or methods to include what James (1968) called flexible grouping, and by doing so, they gave birth to the methods and strategies known today as cooperative learning.

With the appearance of different cooperative learning methods, various definitions emerged as well. According to Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1994a) cooperative learning is defined as "the instructional use of small groups in which students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (p. 5). Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec suggest that students, who work in CL groups, work not only to learn content on their own, but also to assist their classmates to learn the content. Similarly, Jacob (1999) defined cooperative learning as a "diverse group of instructional methods in which small groups of students work together and aid each other in completing tasks" (p. 13). In this regard, Jacob emphasizes the importance of diverse groups, which is also a key element highlighted by Slavin (1995). In studies carried out by Slavin in 1987, and 1995, he developed CL methods that led students to work in heterogeneous groups to master content previously presented by their teachers. By doing this, Slavin (1995) then defined CL methods as "students working together in four-member teams to master material initially presented by the teacher" (p. 4). What Slavin (1995) suggested in his CL methods is to structure the groups in such a way that it creates "a situation in which the only way group members can attain their own personal goals is if the group is successful" (p. 1). Slavin (1995) has carried out many studies about CL in the USA and what he has learned from the flaws of the educational system is that schools require individual accountability for two reasons: 1) parents may put pressure on teachers and principals to hold their children accountable for their individual performance even in a team; and 2) students may suffer from what Slavin called diffusion of responsibility, also known as the hitchhiker who wants a free grade for the work that others in the team did. With this in mind, cooperative learning requires structuring small heterogeneous groups in which students work together to complete shared tasks, and encourage other team members to succeed in content mastery so that in the end the teacher can assess students collaboratively and individually.

The ideas of structured groups that achieve a common goal and structured groups that encourage students learning from one another have been essential in the CL

methods. According to Vatterott (2007), true cooperative learning is different from small group learning because it requires the existence of four elements: highly structured tasks, independent tasks, individual and group accountability, and mixed-ability constructed groups (pp. 305-306). Furthermore, Kagan (1989) explained that CL is "based on the creation, analysis, and systematic application of *structures*, or content-free ways of organizing social interaction in the classroom" (p.12). By using this approach, Kagan carried out studies in the 90s and eventually compiled several CL strategies named "CL structures" that are content-free and can be used with what he called the principles of CL (Kagan & Kagan, 2009, Chapter 5, p. 3). In short, CL methods strive to move away from the traditional teacher-centered teaching approach (which favored teaching practices such as lectures in which the only sources of knowledge are the book or the teacher him or herself) and move towards a student-centered learning approach where students do not depend merely on the teacher to succeed or gain knowledge.

Characteristics of CL

Several authors have described the abundant characteristics of CL methods of which a number of authors mostly agree upon (Borich, 1992, p.314; Crawford, Mathews, Mackinster & Saul, 2005, p. 48; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994a, p. 11; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001, p. 83; McCafferty, Jacobs, & Iddings, 2006; Kagan, 2009). The following are these characteristics:

1. Positive Interdependence: This is defined as "the perception that you are linked with others in such a way that you cannot succeed unless they do (and vice versa)" (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994b, p. 27). In group work where there is no positive interdependence, students work individually and success depends on individual accomplishment of a task. For instance, have students work in groups where they complete worksheets individually. Positive interdependence will promote the sense of "sink or swim together" (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001, p. 83).
2. Face-to-Face Interaction: This is when students interact. They help, assist, support, encourage, and praise each other's effort to learn (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994b, p. 30). The interactions among students allow students to clarify their ideas, to create a common consensus, or to negotiate responsibilities.
3. Interpersonal and Small-Group Skills: This has to do with how students relate to others (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994b, p. 20). Students may know them as life skills. The way they treat others, the way they listen to others, and the tone they use in a conversation can influence positively or negatively the manner in which students can perform and their willingness to help each other learn. I thought of a situation in real life: a librarian and a library user. The library user in need of certain books demands the librarian to tell him if her library has the book that he is looking for. He sounds authoritarian and serious. The librarian tells him that she may not be able to assist him in this matter but the catalogue in the computer will resolve this matter. The library user is not well-versed in the use of the electronic catalogue; he walks away and leaves without the book he is looking for. A second library user approaches the librarian. The library user greets the librarian and asks her

how she is doing. Then, he asks nicely and politely for a book that he is looking for. The library user and the librarian start to talk about general and assorted topics. The librarian looks up the book in the electronic catalogue. She shows the library user the shelf in which the book is located. He smiles and thanks the librarian.

4. Individual Accountability: This occurs when students are given a grade to each team member individually. When students are not accountable for their own performance within the team, teachers may face the challenge of what Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1994b) and Putman (1997) called "the hitchhiker phenomenon", in which "an individual did not complete his or her work and the other group members had to compensate" (Putman, 1997, p. 12). Moreover, Kagan (2009, Chapter 5, p.11) suggests that individual accountability must be done regularly to assess the contributions of all of the students as well as the learning gains. Additionally, Slavin (1995, pp. 5-7) proposes individual accountability during the work done in the team through self-assessments and peer-assessments, and most importantly, he emphasizes formative assessment after the CL team work in order to verify whether or not each student mastered the content.
5. Group Processing: It can be described in two parts: 1) as a reflection about helpful and unhelpful actions performed by team members; and 2) as a decision to keep actions that work and to change actions that prevent students from learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994a, p. 33). This characteristic allows students to self-assess their own performance. In the same way, it provides students with opportunities to share their experiences or frustrations which will lead to more proactive behavior for future CL group work.

Challenges in the Classroom after Twelve Years of Implementing Cooperative Learning

The following pages are divided into two sections. Section One describes four topics related to the challenges that participant teachers at this bilingual middle school encountered throughout the use of CL over the past twelve years. Section Two portrays the recommendations that participant teachers have made to those schools that would like to incorporate CL methods as part of a common instructional approach in their schools. All of the data presented in Sections One and Two was taken from part three of the survey described in the methodology.

Section One

Challenge 1: We Are on the Same Boat!

There are students who participate more than others, a teacher observed. Other teachers made the following comments:

- T3: Some students find it difficult to contribute to the activity as they are shy about working with strong students.
- T4: Mexicans do not like to co-operate. It is hard to give and take and to pay attention to what the other members of the team have to say or do.
- T6: Lack of trust: students sometimes don't trust their own classmates to learn from them.

Based on this input, it can be said that a common challenge was to deal with unequal participation and distribution of work and responsibilities during the CL activities. The teachers' perceptions suggest the causes for such imbalance have to do with: 1) a student's personality; 2) a student's cultural background; and 3) a student's lack of trust.

Challenge 2: My Way or the Highway!

Three teachers commented that they find it challenging to deal with group conflicts. These perceptions were also related to classroom management:

- T1: The major challenge is to cope with different characters and personalities. In other words, strong-character students take more time when reaching an agreement. On the other side, weak personality students alienate themselves and let the others do the work because they don't feel comfortable at giving opinions.
- T3: Some students want to work only with students of their choice. Sometimes some students discriminate against others (strong ones) or prefer working on their own.
- T6: They become isolated and always want to exclude everybody.

Teachers show that there are three causes for which students have conflicts in their groups: 1) conflict in coming to an agreement; 2) conflict in dealing with different personalities/characters in the team; and 3) conflict in choosing members (or to be chosen) to form a CL group.

Challenge 3: It's All About Me!

Teachers perceived that some students prefer to work competitively or individually rather than cooperatively. The following data represents this:

- T6: Students become too competitive and only care about being the first to finish, the best student, or getting the 'prize', when sometimes the objective is not the competition itself. Students defend the right to work alone above all things.
- T4: It was challenging to make them work in teams because they were used to working individually.
- T7: It is difficult to change paradigms and the way we are used to work individually or as a team.

Challenge 4: Order! Order in the Courtroom!

Teachers expressed that classroom order can be challenging not only with teams in which members do not get along (as seen in Challenge 2), but in groups where students like each other:

- T2: Some teams finish earlier and start doing different activities, which may distract the others.
- T5: Many times individuals don't get the whole idea. The dynamics become a distraction sometimes to the actual content, and students can't concentrate enough to learn. Maintaining order when everyone is working is

hard because sometimes one or two students work well. Others do a poor and quick job and start playing-results can get messy.

- T4: Definitely I would say that discipline has been one challenge I have encountered. It has been a difficult challenge to make my students understand and feel that cooperative learning teams are not just about talking in teams; it has been by practicing that they have understood that cooperative learning is not free time, but about individual as well as team responsibility.

These comments show that four issues give rise to the classroom management concerns: 1) students' difficulty to manage time when working in teams; 2) students' difficulty in concentrating; 3) students' inconsistency in the quality of the assignments; and 4) and students' waste of instructional time because they tend to socialize.

Section Two

Why Didn't You Tell Me This Before? Training and Lesson Planning

This section describes the recommendations that the participants in the survey give to schools that want to incorporate CL methods in their classrooms. Their perceptions were classified in four main groups: 1) incorporating CL progressively and consistently; 2) training teacher and students; 3) planning lessons collaboratively; and 4) adopting a CL philosophy.

First, participants suggested teachers should be patient in the incorporation of CL. They think that teachers need to start by introducing simple CL activities, and then progressively introduce more complex ones. Furthermore, the participants mentioned that frustration may arise when the experience of CL does not turn out as expected, but when this may happen, they also advised to not give up, to keep trying, and, most importantly, to be consistent.

Second, participants perceive that training both teachers and students is an essential key to success. On the one hand, teachers also need to attend conventions and workshops to learn more about CL on a regular basis. On the other hand, participants expressed that teachers should also train students on how to work cooperatively, establishing expectations, consequences and expected behaviors during CL time.

Regarding lesson planning, working collaboratively to design lesson plans is recommended. Having teachers plan lessons together saves time and energy.

Finally, participants suggested that CL go beyond an instructional strategy, and should be adopted as a shared teaching philosophy by the entire school, including students, faculty, staff, paraprofessionals and administrators.

Discussion and Implication for Further Research

The following section provides discussions and implications for further research based on the findings reported in the survey. The discussions are related to the four challenges that the participants reported, which were described in this paper. After the discussions, a conclusion is presented.

Discussion 1: Are We All on the Same Boat?

It is believed that teenagers have difficulty working in teams due to the emotional changes that occur as part of their adolescence. We were all in that same position once; however, is this the only age in which students find it hard to work cooperatively? Unequal participation and/or unequal work load in CL groups have been described as a major challenge. Three causes were identified with regard to this: 1) student's personality; 2) student's cultural background, and 3) student's lack of trust. The first challenge perceived by teachers is that some students do not like to cooperate.

Based on my experiences as a high school student, I recall that some teachers encouraged group work in answering questionnaires about the history of Egypt, translating texts from English into Spanish, and giving presentations about Stoic philosophy. In retrospect, I do remember being uninterested and even bothered by the idea of working in groups. Cooperative learning methods require teachers to structure the activities in such manner that the five CL characteristics take place. Yet, hardly ever do I remember my teachers structuring group work in such a way. I wonder if the essence of cooperation is related to students' personality, or if it is the behavior that is usually associated with teenage years.

Are these feelings of rejecting to work in teams only associated with teenagers, or does it spread to college students? Throughout my own college experience as student, I do recall assignments that were group work in nature, but they were approached more from a collaborative perspective rather than a cooperative one. In other words, the five characteristics of CL were not in place, nor were the ones suggested by Vatterott (2007) about what cooperative learning *is*. For example, professors would let students make their own teams, and would assign a topic to each team. The oral presentations would then be prepared. Students would give the presentation , and provide the class with a summary of the presentation, a list of references and a worksheet for the class to answer during the presentations. I presume that at college level, professors took for granted that students knew how to work collaboratively in groups –assuming that professors care about these skills. Within each team, issues regarding assigning tasks and delegating responsibilities arose. It would be interesting to find out what the perceptions of both professors and students in college are concerning working in collaborative groups. Are teenagers and college students on the same boat when it comes to working collaboratively? Are college professors aware of the difficulty that students have when working in teams?

The second conception previously mentioned had to do with the relationship between their unwillingness to cooperate and the students' cultural backgrounds. One teacher's perception stated that "Mexicans do not like to co-operate." I could not find any research to support or reject this premise. There is no research to state that the unwillingness to cooperate is merely a Mexican attitude. It would be enlightening, however, to develop research in this regard. In my experience as a graduate student in the USA, I had the opportunity to take classes with culturally diverse alumni comprised of international exchange teachers from Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Romania, the United States, and Venezuela. As part of the assignments, I was sometimes required to work in teams, specifically to give

presentations or to prepare a whole differentiated instruction manual for ESL reading novels. Although I could mention little about the implementation of CL, I do recall that it was sometimes difficult to reach an agreement and to designate tasks and responsibilities. Needless to say, there were students in the teams that did not have a Mexican background, and yet they struggled to work in teams. In the end, despite friction, discomfort, negotiation, time and energy, the team would eventually resolve their conflicts and succeed in their assignments. This led me to wonder whether the willingness to cooperate is actually related to students' cultural backgrounds.

The last perception related to unequal participation is that students do not trust their classmates at times. Some of you may remember being in college and having a professor ask you to give a presentation in teams. You may remember your team being comprised of classmates whose work ethics were not to your standards, and thinking: "I will have to do all the research on this topic on my own because their presentation is terrible", assuming you were a good college student. It would be interesting to interview or survey students in secondary school and college to find out why some do not trust others. It would be equally interesting to determine if secondary school students share the same ideas as college students about this issue. Does the willingness to work with others depend on how much students trust the work ethics of others? Could having your own grade being dependent on others create this anxiety?

Discussion 2: Do I Have To Do It Your Way?

It is common knowledge that some students have strong tempers. Teachers have expressed how personality traits affect the interaction of students within a team. Research shows that true CL strategies include the development of interpersonal and small-group skills to solve conflicts. Although seen as a challenge, it seems to be part of the process of working in groups. However, I wonder how these skills are taught or explained to students at school. Does explicit teaching of these skills affect the students' tempers and/or behavior when working in CL teams? Is group processing effective?

Discussion 3: Is It Really All about Me?

Teachers perceive that students struggle to work in teams because they are placed in a system where learning competitively and individually is favored. It seems that teachers find it easy to keep on teaching the way they were taught rather than trying new ways, in this case CL. I myself have favored a competitive and individualistic approach for many reasons: I am more comfortable with it as a teacher and as a learner, and it is easier to handle. That is how my teachers taught me.

Teachers claim that even with CL it is hard to change the mentality of students because they still want to be on the team that finishes first, or they would just rather work individually. Does the success of working cooperatively depend on the exposure students have had to this type of instructional method? It would be interesting to carry out a study in this regard. How often do teachers in elementary or middle schools implement CL? Do students with more exposure to CL tend to like it more? What type of learning (individually, competitively, and cooperatively) do

teachers prefer to use the most today and why? Assuming that teachers favor learning individually or competitively, why do teachers feel more comfortable with these modes of learning? These are questions to explore.

Discussion 4: Is There Really Order in the Courtroom?

Classroom management was a recurrent challenge mentioned by teachers. According to the data, they are related to four main causes: 1) students' difficulty to manage time when working in teams; 2) students' difficulty in concentrating; 3) students' inconsistency in the quality of the assignments; and 4) students' tendency to socialize.

In Cooperative Learning methods, the teacher empowers students with being in charge of their own learning. Lesson planning is essential to keep things running smoothly. When things do not come out according to plan, there is a natural feeling of anxiety. Not all students work at the same pace. Some will work quickly and diligently, while others wait for someone else to work. I think that rather than challenges, these are an example of authentic situations that could be faced in real life contexts. Not every person in a company (or a school) works as collaboratively and effectively as they should, and such behavior defines the type of service the company is known for and this reputation of companies also defines your choices as costumers because you know what to expect as a client. For example, you know what restaurant to go to on the weekend if you want quick service, and what restaurant is a good choice because the service is slow and all you want to do with your friends is to have a lot of time to talk. Don't you hate it when you go to the supermarket and you choose the counter with the shorter line, thinking it would be faster to get out and then you realize that you got the slowest cashier? The reason why the line is short is perhaps because everyone else noticed and moved to another counter!

Some people work faster than others and that is part of life. Teachers cannot control this all of the time. Sometimes it is hard to let that go, when as teachers we are used to controlling and managing time in the classroom. This led me to wonder how similar classroom conditions are compared to out-of-school contexts. It would be informative to interview students who were instructed under CL and see how meaningful these experiences were when they find a job.

Regardless of the instructional methods that teachers may use, it is generally known that classroom management is a problem that every teacher faces. With this in mind, two questions occurred to me: Do teachers face more classroom management issues when using CL as opposed to other instructional methods? or Do teachers face classroom management issues only at the beginning of the implementation of CL?

Conclusions

In spite of the limitations of this study to provide generalizations about the use of CL in a bilingual school context, valuable information was brought to light. The teachers at this bilingual middle school have been using CL methods since 1995. The voice and perceptions of these teachers not only describe part of the reality they deal with, but also the effort to incorporate innovative instructional methods into bilingual schools in Mexico. The challenges these teachers have dealt with

throughout these years, the wisdom that they have acquired, and the improvement they have accomplished in the use of CL methods may lead other schools to make instructional changes, or to adopt new learning methods not only in EFL but as an instructional method for any subject. In fact, the school I currently work for incorporated CL in 2009, specifically using the approach suggested by Kagan, with positive results.

The benefits and challenges described in this paper could be in many ways new to some colleagues. For others this may not be new, but a mirror of what is occurring in their own classrooms. Whatever your position, one must bear in mind that CL is not the answer to EFL/ESL teaching, but just another instructional tool that has proved to be effective.

There is no perfect teaching method that will fulfill the needs of every teacher or student. Every classroom is a complex reality, yet, there is always a need to improve our teaching practices by trying new approaches like those of cooperative learning. Every year, teachers get a chance to start afresh. They are rested from the summer vacation and full of energy and with a willingness to try new things. There is a shared feeling that the new school year will be better. Soon teachers attend staff development meetings, where they are introduced to the latest trends in teaching methods such as CL. Then they take what they learn enthusiastically and go to the classroom ready to put into practice their new teaching skills. Unsurprisingly, teachers put into practice CL or any other new teaching trend and come to realize that it does not work as they thought it might. The classroom turns into a chaotic place and causes the teacher to become desperate. Any feelings of passion and motivation suddenly disappear. Teachers quickly put the new material into a folder and file it away, and immediately return to the chaos-free traditional teaching methods that they have used for many years because they are effective, safe and risk free.

This paper shows that the implementation of something new is always challenging. In fact, challenges will always be there, even after years of practice. In a rapidly changing world and with the appearance of new technologies, students need to be empowered with collaborative skills to succeed in any work environment. Companies collaborate with one another to improve their products, schools work together to create improvement plans, and teachers create partnerships with schools in other countries to share cultural and educational perspectives. Teleconferences gather experts and employees to discuss business, and social networks, such as Facebook, Wikis, Blogs and LinkedIn, disseminate information rapidly and become the new way to communicate. A collaborative approach is present everywhere and students need these skills more than ever. Our commitment as teachers is to educate. The incorporation of cooperative learning in the classrooms may not be easy, but one must keep on trying until one feels comfortable with it. The hardest step to take in making a change in the world is your own first step.

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