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High school English teachers' perceptions of out-of-class teamwork

Jesús Humberto Villegas-López
Master´s Degree in Humanities Candidate
Universidad de Sonora
Quintana Roo 128 C, San Benito
Hermosillo, 83190, Sonora, México
leijesusvillegas79@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5958-7745

Elizabeth Ruiz-Esparza
Full-Time Professor and Research Group Coordinator
Universidad de Sonora
Cerrada San Fernando 7, Capistrano Residencial
Hermosillo, 83249, Sonora, México
elizabeth.ruiz@unison.mx
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5254-6919

Abstract

This paper presents a study that aimed to find out how teachers of English perceive teamwork outside the classroom in the context of upper secondary education in Mexico. The study focused on the way teachers are implementing or encouraging this collaborative work and the results that are obtained with teamwork. The research design was structured within a mixed mode methodology. For the quantitative face, a Likert-type survey designed by Ruiz Esparza, Medrano, and Zepeda (2016) was implemented while the qualitative phase comprised two focus groups. The questions for these focus groups were designed according to the data obtained in the quantitative phase. Results evidence the need for teachers to have clear guidelines on follow up strategies after they assign collaborative tasks outside the classroom and on the need to train students for teamwork to be effective for learning. The relevance of this study lies in the fact that it provides insights into the teachers' perceptions and implementation of teamwork outside the classroom as well as, the results that are obtained by these teachers. The study hopes to serve as reference for other disciplines and further research on the topic of out-of-class teamwork at regional or national levels and to contribute information and data to international studies by providing a new context, that of Mexico and upper secondary education.

Percepciones de profesores de inglés de enseñanza media superior acerca del trabajo en equipo fuera del salón de clase

Resumen

Este trabajo presenta un estudio que se dirigió a conocer cómo perciben los profesores el trabajo en equipo fuera del aula en el contexto de educación media superior. Se enfocó en la manera en que los profesores están implementándolo o fomentando este trabajo colaborativo y en los resultados que se obtuvieron con el trabajo en equipo. Este estudio se estructuró dentro de una metodología mixta. Para la fase cuantitativa, se implementó una encuesta tipo Likert diseñada por Ruiz Esparza, Medrano y Zepeda (2016) mientras que la fase cualitativa consistió dos grupos focales. Las preguntas para estos grupos focales se diseñaron de acuerdo con los datos obtenidos en la etapa cuantitativa. Los resultados evidencian la necesidad para los profesores de tener guías claras en las estrategias a seguir después de asignar trabajos colaborativos fuera del salón de clase y en la necesidad de capacitar a los alumnos para que el trabajo en equipo sea efectivo para el aprendizaje. La relevancia de este estudio reside en que aporta conocimientos de la percepción del trabajo en equipo fuera del aula como también, los resultados que son obtenidos por el docente. Los resultados del estudio sirven como referencia para realizar más investigaciones de este tema en niveles regionales o nacionales y aportar información y datos a estudios de corte internacional proporcionando un nuevo contexto, de Mexico y de educación media superior.

Palabras clave: percepción de profesores de inglés, trabajo en equipo fuera de clase, enseñanza media superior

Introduction

Currently in education, constructivist approaches, and particularly socio-constructivism, establish that students learn better when working together. When interacting in a team, there is an exchange of information, opinions, corrections, and feedback among members. According to Rojas-Drummont and Mercer (2003) and Webb (2009), this promotes learning since students take ownership of the content. The authors add that this appropriation is reflected in the project or work to be presented and this whole process leads to a satisfactory evaluation. In addition, Johnson and Johnson (1993) describe cooperative work as the use of strategies to promote the development of mixed

skills in which learning, personal growth and social development happen. Finally, Glinz (2005) shares that teamwork encourages members to learn together to solve the problems presented, thus fostering communication, trust and leadership.

Although the benefits of teamwork explained in these studies are not new, literature shows that the implementation of teamwork still presents several problems. Alfares (2017) claims problems in motivation in mixed ability groups while Wilson, Brickman and Brame (2018) state that students work individually and just add their pieces to the work. Moreover, Aguilar and Martínez (2014) show that teamwork continues to be difficult in the classroom. As the classroom is a teacher-controlled environment, problems in uncontrolled environments can be more serious for the teacher to manage as in the case of out-of-class teamwork. Therefore, it is crucial to research this type of work, particularly in Mexico, which has a long-standing history of traditional teaching. Therefore, this study explored Mexican upper secondary teachers' perceptions, implementation and results being obtained with out-of-class teamwork. Another purpose of this study was to integrate data, but now from high school education, to the research project about the perception of university teachers about teamwork outside the classroom which is being carried out by several researchers from Mexican universities members of the National Network of Research Groups in Foreign Languages.

Literature Review

Fundamentals of Cooperative Learning

Alarcon, Sepulveda and Madrid (2018) say that cooperative learning makes the teaching-learning process more participatory and dynamic through a set of teaching methods, techniques and strategies. Barrera (2014) views cooperative learning as "a systematic way of organizing the performance of tasks in small groups"(p.36). The author adds that in cooperative learning one learns through help and interactions among students while Sanchez (2015) explains cooperative learning as follows:

> As a process of acquiring knowledge and skills, through the active and sustained help of another or other peers of similar status, where learning tasks are usually executed in a teamwork context, in which the efforts of all participants are combined with the purpose of achieving a common goal, known and shared by all its members. (p. 111).

For the authors, learning as a group means working cooperatively in the search for information, sharing and discussing the information, analyzing, criticizing, and reworking it as a group. Therefore, in this section we saw about the basis of cooperative learning.

In the following section, we will continue with what refers to collaborative learning and work.

Fundamentals of Learning and Collaborative Work

Salmerón, Rodríguez-Fernández and Gutiérrez-Braojos (2010) explain the concepts of cooperative and collaborative learning. The authors start from the idea that we are trained in cooperation to generate and acquire a culture of collaboration. That is, according to the authors, cooperative learning precedes collaborative learning because the latter demands more autonomy and control over learning. The authors describe that cooperative learning is a teaching-learning system based on a controlled system, while in collaborative learning, the teacher and the student become learners to build knowledge together.

Teamwork Problems

Azorín (2018) explains the difficulties in applying cooperative learning. First, he states that there is a lack of training in this regard. This would be the confusion between cooperative learning with group work where it is not just placing students in groups and telling them to work together. Then, he adds that there is the idea that teaching is using only traditional methods, such as teacher-centered methods.

Fernández-Río (2017) states that in initial teacher training, implementing cooperative learning needs special skills. The author also mentions the refusal to change from a teacher-centered role to a student-centered one because it is viewed as losing control in class; because cooperating is talking, discussing and reflecting out loud which leads to the teacher not being able to control the class.

Ruiz Esparza, Medrano and Zepeda (2016) describe organization and training as problems in teamwork. The authors say that in organization it is complicated to integrate the problematic students into teams. They also explain that organizing the activity in teams requires more time. Regarding training, Ruiz Esparza et al. mention the incipient ability of the teacher to organize teamwork due to the fact that mostly the prefer student-led teams which may cause other problems related to friendships and the role students are used to play.

Therefore, studies show that problems in the organization and implementation of teamwork still exist. It is imperative to research this topic in Mexico and to raise awareness of its importance for effective learning to occur.

Methodology

This research work is based on the quantitative and qualitative paradigms because the research has a mixed-mode approach. In the first two approaches, empirical, methodical and meticulous processes are used in order to generate knowledge. As mentioned by Hernández-Sampieri, Fernández Collado and Baptista Lucio (2014), both approaches are valuable in research because of their contributions, since on the one hand, quantitative research allows the generalization of results in a broad way, offers control in the phenomena investigated and the point of view resides in count and size. On the other hand, the authors affirm that qualitative research offers depth in the data, dissemination, interpretative richness, context, experiences and exclusive details.

In mixed research, Hernández-Sampieri, et al. (2014) explain that the purpose of mixed research is not to replace quantitative or qualitative research, but to take advantage of the strengths of both, to combine them and to be able to reduce potential errors. The authors state that mixed research is composed of ways of collecting, reviewing and merging qualitative and quantitative data in a study to answer the research questions.

Research Questions

Finally, the research questions that guided the present study were:

1. What perceptions do upper secondary school teachers of English have about teamwork?

2. How do teachers of English use teamwork?

3. How do teachers of English perceive teamwork outside the classroom?

4. What do teachers of English suggest for the best effectiveness of teamwork outside the classroom?

Participants

The present study was carried out in four campuses of upper secondary education. They are called subsystems because the main system is higher secondary education, which is subdivided into general or technical schooling systems. The participants were from these four centers, that is, 58 teachers from COBACH, 23 teachers from CBTIS, 12 teachers from CECYTES and 5 teachers from CETMAR, totaling 98 teachers of English.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data was collected in two phases. The first phase consisted of the quantitative data gathered by the application of the survey designed by Ruiz Esparza, Medrano, and Zepeda (2016) to the 98 high school teachers of English. The results from the first phase informed the design of the questions for the second phase or qualitative part of the study which consisted of the implementation of focus group interviews.

For the first phase, an appointment was made with the principals of each school to obtain authorization to enter the schools and apply the survey to the teachers of English who were interested in participating. The surveyed sample corresponded to a total of 98 teachers. Then the information from the surveys was entered in the statistical program SPSS, version 24. Afterwards, reliability was determined, which yielded a Cronbach's alpha index of .911 for consistency. According to Best and Khan (1998), this index means that the reliability of the data was high. The descriptive analyses of the mean and standard deviation were performed to determine the trend of the results of the first phase of this study.

After analyzing the information from the teachers' surveys, for the second phase of the research, the questions for the focus group interview were designed to compare and expand the information obtained in the first phase. These were the following:

1) What problems have you had in implementing out-of-class teamwork?

2) How much do the subject and type of course depend on the teacher's pedagogical initiative to assign out-of-class teamwork? Why?

3) In what ways do you make sure that all team members worked?

4) What other strategies might work to make sure that all team members worked?

5) When requiring follow-up from the teacher, in what ways do you do it?

6) What strategies have you implemented to promote collaboration, integration and interaction among team members?

7) Why is it perceived that students do not know how to work in teams?

8) What suggestions can you give for students to do effective teamwork?

9) What suggestions could you offer to other teachers in implementing teamwork to make it really work?

For the selection of participants, aspects such as academic degree, age range, professional experience and subjects taught were reviewed to include different perspectives and characteristics such as years of experience, age and subjects taught.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Phase

The statistical data which ranged from 1 (total disagreement) to 6 (total agreement) suggests that teachers perceive that teamwork promotes collaboration, interaction and integration among students. Those results suggest that teachers perceive that there is dialogue and exchange of ideas for the elaboration and later presentation of the project or task since most of the means are close to 5, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table1

Analysis of Section A: Questions A1 -17: Teamwork

Teamwork outside the classroom	Campus 1		Campus 2		Campus 3		Campus 4	
	Mean	**Standard Deviation**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
1. Promotes collaboration	**4.98**	**0.982**	**4.65**	**1.112**	**4.92**	**0.996**	**4.80**	**1.304**
2. Promotes student integration.	4.98	1.017	4.87	1.058	5.50	0.674	5.00	1.414
3. Promotes interaction	5.19	0.888	4.70	1.222	5.33	0.778	4.60	1.673
4. Prepares for professional life	4.84	1.056	4.96	0.976	5.08	0.669	3.80	1.095
6. Develops social skills	5.24	0.904	5.26	0.915	5.08	0.515	3.60	0.894
7. Develops cognitive skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem solving, strategies).	4.71	1.108	4.87	1.014	5.17	0.577	4.00	1.414

Aguilar and Martínez, 2014; Ángel Uribe and Cano Vásquez, 2011; Glinz, 2005; Laal and Ghodsi, 2012; and Zarate and Moiraghi de Perez, 2004, highlight that the basis of working in teams is in sharing points of view, explanations and interaction, which results in the acquisition of new knowledge. The authors also highlight that working together develops social skills and improves the quality of learning.

Although teachers are also aware of the benefits of teamwork in Tables 1 and 2, in item 18 in Table 2, the lower means suggests a neutrality between individual and teamwork. Teachers believe that students in teams do not necessary carry out a better work as it should in agreement with the previous authors. On the other hand, item 20

shows higher means for the belief that the work carried out in teams puts theory into practice while item 21 evidences the awareness of the impact of the grade for individual members of the group.

Table2

Analysis of Section B: Questions B18-21: The Task

The Task	Campus 1		Campus 2		Campus 3		Campus 4	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
18. It is of better quality than the individual	3.93	1.137	4.52	1.31	4.33	1.073	3.8	1.304
19. Exploits the potential of each team member.	4.48	0.922	4.7	1.105	4.92	1.084	4	2
20. Reflects the application of theory in practice.	4.67	0.825	4.78	1.126	5	0.739	4	1.871
21. Impacts the individual qualification	5	0.879	4.7	1.146	4.75	1.357	4	2.345

Although teachers believe in the benefits of teamwork such as promoting collaboration, interaction, integration and the development of social and cognitive skills, items in Table 3 contradict these perceptions. The analysis showed that teachers are aware that not all members participate or work and when developing a teamwork project or task, teachers think that the members of the team divide the work into parts and then put it together. This suggests that there are no opinions or dialogue among the members themselves during the process and for the improvement of the project. Therefore, group members just learn their part and partial learning happens, as observed in Table 3.

Table 3

Analysis of Section D: Questions D25-33: The Students

The Students	Campus 1		Campus 2		Campus 3		Campus 4	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
25. The hardest workers are the ones who learn the most.	4.83	1.115	5.17	0.887	4.83	1.115	4.00	1.581

26. They know how to work in a team	4.33	1.073	3.48	1.163	4.33	1.073	3.60	0.548
27. They have socio-cognitive skills								
(e.g., discussing and adding ideas, experiences and knowledge, arguing, etc.).	4.67	0.985	3.65	1.434	4.67	0.985	4.00	0.707
28. They work better as a team than individually.	4.67	1.231	4.22	1.085	4.67	1.231	3.60	1.140
29. They are able to work in teams	4.25	1.215	3.48	1.377	4.25	1.215	3.40	1.140
30. Even in teams, some work individually	5.17	0.937	4.57	0.992	5.17	0.937	4.20	1.483
31. They divide up what needs to be done and then put it together.	**5.08**	**0.515**	**4.43**	**1.376**	**5.08**	**0.515**	**4.40**	**1.517**
32. They regroup within the group.	4.75	0.754	4.13	1.546	4.75	0.754	4.00	1.414
33. Tend to report that everyone worked the same even if it is not true.	**5.33**	**0.888**	**4.91**	**1.203**	**5.33**	**0.888**	**4.20**	**2.049**

According to Muñiz (2011) the essential elements of teamwork are: responsibility, communication and self-evaluation. Teachers believe that students are prepared to work in teams but they come with little knowledge of how to work in teams; therefore, socio-cognitive skills are not fully developed. That is to say, there are no meetings among the members where each one exposes his or her point of view, where there are suggestions, arguments or exchange of ideas. This is related to what Aguilar and Martínez (2014) stated "where students must develop interaction skills, know what it means to work in a team for a common goal and the ability to collaborate with others" (p.49). Also, it is

evident that in the absence of teacher intervention there is regrouping within the team or lack of collaboration among them, resulting in individual work, which would represent the grade for all team members even if they have not worked, which would lead to delays or lower quality work. This issue suggests the need for teacher training in the implementation of teamwork. Moreover, there is a great need to train students in what working together as a team implies.

Finally, Table 4 shows the answers for the use of teamwork. This issue will be relevant in the results of the qualitative phase.

Table 4

Analysis of Section C: Questions C22-24: Use of Teamwork Outside the Classroom

Frequency	Campus 1		Campus 2		Campus 3		Campus 4	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
22. Depends on the topic	4.97	1.169	4.91	1.203	4.92	1.379	4.6	2.074
23. Depends on the subject	4.69	1.217	4.78	1.126	4.75	1.288	4.6	2.074
24. Depends on the organization of the program content	4.91	0.996	5.22	1.043	5.17	1.03	4.6	1.673

Qualitative Phase

The discussion in this section is based on teacher follow-up, strategies to foster collaboration, interaction and integration. It also explains how to apply teamwork, why students do not know how to work in teams and the suggestions given by teachers.

Regarding teacher follow-up, the teachers expressed that this is done with weekly reports or progress in case the project is to be carried out in several sessions. Along with this, in the presentations of the assigned topic questions can be asked to the presenters. The reason why there is no teacher initiative to assign teamwork, teachers state that it is a requirement of the curriculum. Campus 1, Teacher 2 says: "I think one of the main reasons is to do something that is already in place. First we look at what the curricula are and what it suggests to us."

In addition, they comment that it is part of the educational reform which promotes training by competencies, and this includes working in teams. This would indicate that

the use of this dynamic depends mainly on the subject, the topic, and the curriculum and not on the initiative or modification of the teacher.

Regarding the teachers' perception that students do not know how to work in teams, the teachers say that teamwork is only dividing the work and putting it together at the end. They also comment that it has not been given a correct application from basic levels such as elementary school. Then, the teachers express that the students see this way of working as a filler, while the students themselves comment to the teachers that their classmates do not attend the meetings or that there is no responsibility in the tasks. According to what Teacher 6 from Campus 1 said: "They think that working as a team means dividing the work, each one doing it and then putting it together to see what comes out. So I think that since elementary school they have not been focused on what teamwork is."

Regarding suggestions, teachers believe that teamwork should be used from the elementary level. Also, it should be applied at least once a week to adapt students to this way of working. Teachers suggest looking for topics that attract the students' attention and not for them to be topics of obligation. In relation with this, teacher 2 from campus 2 said: "A suggestion could be to the other teachers that once a week we do teamwork. In this way, breaking the pattern that we are not used to using, including myself, to work as a team. Then, once a week, the students will identify themselves with what teamwork is and how to carry it out."

Conclusions

After reviewing the theoretical aspects and fundamentals of teamwork, this modality is found to be valuable and at the same time little exploited and used. First, working in teams offers the possibility of helping each other with the various school tasks. There is an exchange of opinions among the members, which results in important feedback, and finally, each member increases his or her knowledge with the support of the others. This based on the studies of Aziz and Hossain, 2010; Glinz, 2005; Laal and Ghodsi, 2012 and Toremen and Karakus, 2007.

However, it is explained why it is little exploited and used since it starts from the little knowledge of knowing how to work in teams on the part of students. Teamwork is applied in a mechanical way, that is to say, a part of the work is distributed to each member, they carry it out, put it together and deliver the product. However, the benefits of teamwork are not achieved since there was no exchange of comments and opinions and each member only did his or her part of the work, it can be said that the project was developed

without paying attention and only to fulfill a project. There was also a lack of organization within the teams and the lack of commitment of some members, which is consistent with the views of authors such as Aguilar and Martinez, 2014; Beck and Malley, 2003.

The results of the study indicate that there are important aspects to highlight for the functioning of teamwork. First, there is the need to reinforce members' responsibility and honesty. This means, each member must research or perform the corresponding part of the task, discuss it with the others and decide together who would carry out the work. Then, communication should follow since it is important to exchange opinions, offer constructive criticism and feedback. In this way, everyone supports each other and clarifies doubts about the work or task to be delivered. Finally, there needs to be good organization. It is important to establish dates for sending work, meetings for modifications and the part of the work to be done that corresponds to each member. Although in the present study, teachers came up with some suggestions and ideas to implement an efficient teamwork, the need for training teachers and students in carrying it out but in a systematic way aroused.

More research on teamwork is needed, especially outside the classroom; there are studies in the exploration phase and the present research provides more data. This may help to contribute to possible guidelines or ways of conducting teamwork, especially outside the classroom, to work properly and contribute to its expansion in terms of implementation and achieving deep learning instead of a partial one.

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