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Parga Herrera, Fernando  
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# Cooperative Structures of Interaction in a Public School EFL Classroom in Bogotá\*

## Estructuras cooperativas de interacción en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera de un colegio público de Bogotá

**Fernando Parga Herrera**

Language teacher  
at IED Fabio Lozano Simonelli, ESP teacher  
at Uniempresarial.Bogotá, Colombia  
E-mail: iedfalosi@gmail.com

### Abstract

In deprived socio cultural contexts like those characterizing the suburbs of Bogotá, cooperative learning (CL) appears as an alternative to cope with student problems of interpersonal communication and conflict derived largely from gossiping, information distortion, and verbal aggressiveness that result in an inappropriate learning environment. As a result of implementing this action research study with 8<sup>th</sup> graders in a public school of Usme, in the southeast of Bogotá, students' original negative influence over their peers turned into positive mediation, featured by peer monitoring, peer correction, and peer feedback. Such a change, which was evident in class audio and video recordings, as well as successful CL task development, occurred thanks to the joint establishment of rules for cooperative interaction with their corresponding roles, functions, times, and spaces immersed in the implemented CL structures of interaction. This way, students raised awareness of the crucial factors involved in effective oral communication and the importance of reporting information accurately for well-informed opinions and decisions. Students' improvement in the oral communication processes contributed significantly to a better classroom social environment for learning.

**Key words:** cooperative learning structures of interaction, mediation, conflict reduction

### Resumen

En contextos socioculturales que brindan pocas oportunidades de promoción social como los que caracterizan a los suburbios Bogotá, el aprendizaje cooperativo aparece como una alternativa para afrontar los problemas estudiantiles de comunicación y conflicto interpersonal, ocasionados en gran medida por el chisme, la distorsión de información, y la agresividad verbal, que dan como resultado ambientes inapropiados de aprendizaje. Como resultado de la implementación de este estudio de investigación- acción, con estudiantes de 8<sup>o</sup> grado de un colegio público de Usme, al suroriente de Bogotá, la influencia negativa inicial de los estudiantes sobre sus compañeros, se transformó en mediación positiva, caracterizada por monitoreo, corrección y retroalimentación de pares. Tal cambio, que se hizo evidente en grabaciones de audio y video como en el desarrollo exitoso de tareas de trabajo cooperativo, se dio gracias al establecimiento conjunto de reglas para la interacción cooperativa, con sus correspondientes roles, funciones, tiempos y espacios, inmersos en las estructuras cooperativas de interacción implementadas. De esta manera, los estudiantes reconocieron los factores cruciales que hacen parte de una comunicación oral efectiva así como la importancia de la precisión en la información para llegar a opiniones y decisiones bien informadas. En ese proceso, los estudiantes recurrieron a una amplia gama de estrategias verbales y no verbales de presentación oral que les hizo desarrollar sub-habilidades necesarias para la presentación oral exitosa de información. El progreso en los procesos de comunicación oral de los estudiantes contribuyó significativamente a un mejor clima social en el salón de clase para el aprendizaje.

**Palabras clave:** estructuras cooperativas de interacción, mediación, habilidades de presentación oral, reducción del conflicto.

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## Introduction

The social reality in the classroom of public schools in Bogotá does not differ much from Colombia's current difficult social situation. In socially deprived localities, social problems are even harder and more complicated, especially for young people. This action research study took place in the locality of Usme, in the southeast of Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. Usme's youngsters are the most affected by the lack of opportunities for social promotion, the economic crisis, and an increasing phenomenon of urban violence (Guzmán, 2006). These complex social issues are reflected in the public school classroom in students' tendency towards confrontation, expressed in the way facts and opinions are mixed up and information is naturally or deliberately distorted. It can also be seen in the tendency of some male students to take the floor in oral interactions to try to forcefully impose unsupported ideas on their classmates in their mother tongue as well as in the foreign language. Such tendencies result in inappropriate oral communication and classroom social environments.

Therefore, considering how this situation was negatively affecting my 8<sup>th</sup> grade EFL students, I decided to conduct an action research study in which participants could carry out a self-reflective inquiry on their classroom social situation and take part in a proposal to solve oral communication problems in accordance with basic action research principles (Kemmis and Mac Taggart, 1988, 1990; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2003). The purpose of the study was to determine whether the application of cooperative learning structures of interaction could affect the development of students' oral presentation skills in EFL.

## Literature Review

Cooperative learning (CL) is one of the many options that educators have to develop in students the ability of working in groups of mutual support

and putting group interests ahead of individual interests. I used CL in order to cope with 8<sup>th</sup> grade students' oral communication problems. This study considers language acquisition a social process that recognizes the role of peer interaction as well as scaffolding and conceived in this study as the mediation of more knowledgeable or skillful language users to help learners with a lower level of either knowledge or skills.

By means of speech, voice management, gestures, body language, drawings, written pieces of key information, among other contextual clues, a more skillful participant can create supportive conditions in which the less skillful participant can take part and extend both current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence. Some features that benefit scaffolded help (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976; Greenfield, 1984) include recruiting interest in the task, simplifying the task, maintaining pursuit of the goal, and demonstrating an idealized version of the act to be performed. These were taken into account in order to distribute the participants, and particularly the distribution of leaders, and assign roles in cooperative group work thus facilitating peer scaffolding.

Following Donato and Lantolf (1990) and Rogoff (1990), by working collaboratively in small groups, students construct a collective scaffold for each other. During interaction students are both individual novices, like pupils or learners, and collective experts, like teachers or instructors, who provide orientation and guidance in complex linguistic problem solving.

In addition, CL researchers discovered that students' cultural and linguistic diversity largely determines interactions among students, thus affecting the classroom learning environment, (McGroarty, 1993; Kozulin, 1988; and Coelho 1988). As a result, strategies to manage cultural and linguistic diversity in positive ways are required so that peer influence can be channeled into a



positive force for improving school performance. Consequently, without a careful organization of the students' classroom interaction in order to promote positive interactions and strategies for improving relationships, students may stay disconnected from each other and unable to benefit from the resources or enlightening sources of knowledge their peers represent.

The research studies on CL have ranged from a focus on how to maximize second language acquisition, to how to master content, to how to develop interpersonal skills. These studies have accounted for the popularity and success of CL in language teaching, and more precisely, the CL structural model. According to Olsen and Kagan (as cited in Kessler, 1992), some of the reasons that account for the CL structural model's popularity are related to the variety it adds to the teacher's repertoire, the help it provides teachers for the management of large classes of students with diverse needs, its contribution to students' academic achievement and social development, the preparation it gives students for increasingly interactive workplaces, and its contribution to creating supportive environments for learning. These advantages suggest that CL may lead to friendship and support among peers, thereby preventing students from dropping out and instead motivating them to succeed academically and socially.

Taking into account the strong links that exist between CL, the cooperative learning structures of interaction (CLSI), and the socio cultural theory proposed by Vygotsky, this research study dealt with the application of Vygotsky's concept of mediation in SLA and more precisely, the role of peers in foreign language learning within the context of a public school in Bogotá. Peer mediation appears in several CL studies with different purposes: to improve academic performance (Slavin, 1990), to lead to greater motivation to learn (Webb, 1988), to increase time on-task (Cohen, 1986), to improve self-esteem (Johnson and Johnson, 1987), to promote

more positive social behaviors (Coelho, 1988), to promote language acquisition by providing comprehensible input in developmentally appropriate ways in a supportive and motivating environment (Kagan, 1994), to integrate social skills and academic tasks in order to improve a specific language skill (Johnson and Johnson, 1992), or most recently in Eastern Europe, to help prepare new generations for democracy and the free enterprise system.

The learners's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) can be promoted when peer mediation is carefully organized by distributing students' heterogeneity and taking advantage of differences in language proficiency or ability, ethnicity, age, and leadership, and by including key CL principles (Kessler, 1992) related to small heterogeneous grouping like positive interdependence, individual and group accountability, purposeful talk, and group skills.

Recent CL research studies (Mendoza and Johnson, 1994; Lantolf, 2001, Prieto 2006, Guerrero, 2007) confirmed that peer mediation in the way of revision, correction, and feedback together with the accompanying dialogue leads students to develop multiple strategies to help them improve their language development. Peer mediation also allows students to favor a classroom atmosphere free of anxiety by helping students overcome shyness about speaking in English and giving them more opportunities for oral practice where they can express themselves without the pressure of grades and other students' criticism.

Young people in many public schools in Bogotá are now turning to violence to solve their conflicts inside and outside classrooms, ignoring other traditional ways of dealing with conflict such as evasion, negotiation, agreement, or cooperation, and alternative ways such as mediation, arbitration, and conciliation (Mossavi, 2003). My research dealt with cooperation as a key strategy to diminish students' conflict in



the classroom caused by students' problems of oral communication when telling or reporting information to each other in both L1 and L2.

## Methodology

The small-scale pedagogical intervention followed the action research (AR) model proposed by Cohen and Manion (2003), for which I followed the following eight-stage model: problem identification; discussion and negotiation of my pedagogical proposal with both 8<sup>th</sup> graders and their parents; revision of the literature review available on the issue; problem restatement with underlying hypothesis; selection of research procedures, resources, materials, and methods; selection of evaluation procedures; data collection, data analysis and feedback; reflection for data interpretation, inference-making processes, and evaluation for future changes and possible further cycles of implementation.

### *Research population and context*

The research population consisted of thirty-eight 8<sup>th</sup> graders in the morning shift at a public school. The students were comprised of 20 girls and 18 boys. They presented similarities of low language proficiency, age, ethnicity, and low socioeconomic conditions, but differences in type of personality and leadership. Their low level of proficiency may be the result of an English intensity of two hours a week during their primary education, the use of non-communicative English teaching methods, and only one specialized English teacher for a school that serves approximately 3,000 students.

As a full time English teacher at the school where I conducted this research study, my roles as a teacher researcher and the home room teacher of this particular group of students, went hand in hand with the design and implementation of a pedagogical proposal based on CL. This proposal was intended to help students solve problems of oral communication and thus

improve relationships and the classroom social atmosphere for learning.

### *Ethical considerations*

The students' parents were told about the issue during the first parents' meeting at school and CL was suggested as a strategy to cope with the problem. They agreed and authorized their children to take part in the research. Later the parents were informed of the research process, advances, and preliminary findings and results when receiving periodic academic reports. Support was received from the school administrative staff as well as feedback and constructive criticism from colleagues in the school language department and my university, and the acceptance and commitment from the student research population.

### *Validity and reliability*

The information elicited from my field notes, the students' videos, and the audio recordings were triangulated to understand students' verbal and non-verbal behaviours while interacting in structured cooperative group work. The information gathered from these three sources coincided and complemented each other, and answered the research question "How does the implementation of cooperative learning structures of interaction affect the development of students' oral communication skills, particularly their oral presentation skills, in a public school EFL classroom?"

The focus and sufficiency of the data obtained, rather than saturation, were the aspects kept in mind to determine whether or not the research question was solved. In order to reach reliability, all the data was consistently and systematically placed in categories determined or created for each cycle of implementation, highlighting the information that showed students' improvement in their oral communication skills as well as the most used oral presentation



strategies and sub-skills. With minor changes this intervention could also be applied in another public school EFL class in another deprived locality in Bogotá that has a homogeneous low-class population, a very low English proficiency, conflictive interpersonal relationships, and serious problems of oral communication both in L1 and L2

### *Data gathering tools*

For the data collection stage during the implementation of the CLSI, students' verbal behaviors were recorded with audio and their non-verbal behaviors were recorded with video. The audio and videorecordings were accompanied by their corresponding transcriptions, the researcher's fieldnotes, and some student artifacts. Following Lankshear and Knobel (2004), fieldnotes provided descriptive accounts of observed events, physical settings, group structures, and interactions among participants, and contained data about the participants' group work behaviors and the researcher's reflections about them.

For the audio recording literal transcriptions, Gee's guidelines and conventions for discourse analysis were followed (2005). The discourse analysis model by Sinclair and Coulthard (as cited by McCarthy, 1991) was used, which analyses student classroom exchanges according to speech acts and the language functions they transmit, without neglecting different discourse levels or dimensions such as sounds (stress, pitch, intonation), gestures, syntax, lexicon, style, rhetoric, meanings, speech acts, moves, strategies, turns. For the video recording descriptive transcriptions, the assessment form for public speaking by Yamashiro and Johnson (1997) was used. This form evaluates the speaker's voice control, body language, content of oral presentation, and effectiveness while reporting information.

### *Action plan*

From a wide list of CLSI, those that were selected fostered participation among students and a positive learning environment for the development of oral skills. These were: "Numbered Heads Together" (Kagan, 1989b), "Jigsaw" (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997), "Inside-Outside Circle" (Kagan, 1989a), "Telephone" (an adaptation of the traditional telephone game to be played cooperatively), "Cooperative Odd One Out" (an adaptation from Group Discussion) and "Multi-Step Group Discussion" (an adaptation from Group Discussion) (Sharan & Sharan, 1976, Kagan, 1989b, Slavin, 1990).

Numbered Heads Together leads students to support their ideas with arguments. In Jigsaw, first students have to report facts accurately and then, based on the summary of the main facts, present a point of view with supporting ideas for the solution of a problem. Similarly, in Inside-Outside Circle, the success of the oral communication task depends on the students' accurate report of information. The same is true of Telephone, but in Telephone summarizing or paraphrasing appropriately can also lead to a successful outcome in terms of communication. In Cooperative Odd One Out, students tried to convince or persuade their workmates with arguments. Finally, Group Discussion emphasizes the presentation of ideas or opinions supported with arguments, making students put into practice oral presentation sub-skills of separating facts from opinions, reporting facts accurately, summarizing facts, and supporting ideas with arguments. The table below illustrates the implemented CLSI with their corresponding emphasized oral communication skills and sub-skills.



**Table 1.** Implemented CLSI and related oral communication skills and sub-skills

COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRUCTURE OF INTERACTION	FOCUSED ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILL	ORAL COMMUNICATION SUB-SKILLS
Numbered Heads Together	Supporting ideas with arguments	Reporting facts accurately. Separating facts from opinions. Constructing arguments from facts. Elaborating from others' opinions.
Jigsaw	Problem solving by articulating complementary pieces of factual information	Reporting facts accurately. Summarizing facts. Separating facts from opinions. Constructing arguments from facts. Elaborating from others' opinions.
Inside-Outside Circle	Reporting information accurately	Reporting facts accurately. Registering factual information accurately.
Telephone	Reporting information as accurately as possible	Reporting facts accurately. Summarizing facts.
Cooperative Odd One Out	Presenting ideas or opinions supported with arguments to persuade others.	Separating facts from opinions. Constructing arguments from facts. Elaborating from others' opinions
Group discussion	Presenting ideas or opinions supported with arguments to persuade others.	Separating facts from opinions. Reporting facts accurately Constructing arguments from facts. Elaborating own arguments from others' information or opinions.

The implementation of the six selected CLSI was planned for two-week cycles, starting from the middle of September to the end of November 2008, one structure every two weeks in the same order they were mentioned before. However, space and flexibility for changes and adjustments was open, especially after the joint revision with students at the end of each cycle or implementation stage.

### *The Pedagogical Implementation*

In this section, the CLSI implemented is described, which were selected deliberately to promote the development of students' oral presentation skills. The accompanying student

quotes, collected after their performance in the implemented CL activities, inform from student's perspectives how cooperation helped them fulfil the tasks successfully. The audio transcription entries related to oral presentation strategies and their corresponding oral presentation sub-skills were registered, encoded, and counted. The first CLSI was Numbered Heads Together (NHT). It aimed at increasing students' class participation and motivation. It promoted the debate and discussion of ideas in an argumentative way and made students separate facts from opinions in order to persuade others. The time limit for each of the questions prevented students' digressions or gossiping. NHT incorporated the CL element



of positive interdependence among students because in each group interaction the gains of each member were associated with the gains of other members.

“Se aprende más y se puede trabajar con otras personas, aunque a veces peleamos por el deseo de ganar, hay groserías y no podemos ponernos de acuerdo. En ocasiones no nos queremos hacer con personas que no sean de nuestro grupo de amigos. Sin embargo, Debería hacerse este tipo de actividades en las otras materias también”. (Comentarios de Viviana sobre Numbered Heads Together)

*“We learn more and can work with other people although we sometimes fight for the desire of winning. There are rude words and we can’t get to an agreement. Occasionally, we don’t want to work with people outside our group of friends. However, there should be this kind of activities in the other subjects too”. (Viviana’s comments about Numbered Heads Together)*

The second implemented CLSI was a jigsaw on palmistry. It was meant to lead students to construct arguments and develop their reasoning once the facts were clearly understood. This jigsaw promoted positive interdependence through the assignment of student roles, texts, and responsibilities as both explainers and checkers in an equal work division that made different groups need one another to reconstruct and interpret an original whole text.

“Este año el método cooperativo me ha llamado más la atención porque ya no trabajo tanto por la nota sino por aprender y disfrutar lo que hago. Con todos los compañeros la relación ha cambiado mucho para bien, por los trabajos en grupo. Me he relacionado y he trabajado con personas que no son mis amigas. Es bueno no siempre trabajar con la misma gente”. (Comentarios de Faizulli sobre Jigsaw I)

*“This year, the cooperative method has gotten my attention because now I don’t work for the grade but for learning and enjoying what I do. My relationship with all my classmates has improved a lot. I have worked and dealt with people that aren’t my friends. It’s good not to work always with the same people. (Faizulli’s comments on Jigsaw I).*

The third implemented CLS in this study was “Inside-Outside Circle”. It was meant to focus students on the accurate reporting of information rather than on summarizing or supporting ideas with arguments. In this CLSI, positive interdependence was structured through both the students’ roles as journalists and celebrities. This CLSI used information cards for the former and information tables to complete for the latter. Half of the students (female students as reporters, in the inner circle) had to complete a table with the information provided by the other half (the male students as celebrities, in the outer circle). The reporters wrote down the key information through note-taking and accurate exchange of factual information to complete a table of facts.

“Con la actividad de Inside-Outside Circle aprendimos a comunicarnos mejor, aprendimos más y hablamos mejor en inglés. Además, perdimos la timidez con los otros y llegamos a conocernos mejor. Aunque a veces se burlaban de mis errores”. (Comentarios de Geraldine sobre Inside-Outside Circle)

“In Inside-Outside Circle we learned to communicate better with each other. With these activities we learned more and spoke in English more. Besides, we lost our shyness with the others and got to know ourselves better. However, my classmates sometimes made fun of my mistakes”. (Geraldine’s comments on Inside-Outside Circle)

For the fourth stage of implementation, the CLS called Cooperative Odd One Out was





applied as a vocabulary review. This structure made students support their ideas with arguments by finding the word that was different in groups of four words representing similar and different categories. It was meant to promote students' discussion and persuasion through the exchange of arguments based on factual information. Positive interdependence was encouraged by the task structure itself and the reward of having presented the most convincing and persuasive argument.

“Yo he aprendido a compartir mis ideas con todos mis compañeros y a dejar el miedo atrás”. (Angie's comments on Cooperative Odd One Out)

“I've learned to share my ideas with all my classmates and leave the fear behind”. (Comentarios de Angie sobre Cooperative Odd One Out)

For Cooperative Telephone, in the fifth stage of implementation, the arguments provided by the students in the previous CL Odd One Out were focused on when talking about geographical facts, clothes, food, and music. The new CLS was conducted as a cooperative contest in lines of five students each. By whispering, students had to report arguments as accurately as possible. In this case, CL positive interdependence was structured through rules, roles, and functions for whisperers and listeners and rewards as each line member was cooperating with the others while competing with other lines.

“La ventaja es tener la oportunidad que nos graben en video, y luego vernos para saber como trabajamos en clase. Lo negativo es que a pesar del esfuerzo del profesor, algunas personas no saben valorar las actividades realizadas en clase”. (Comentarios de Sandra sobre Cooperative Telephone)

“With these cooperative activities the advantage is to have the opportunity of being filmed and then to have the chance

to see the video recording to know how we work in class. The negative thing is that, despite the teacher's efforts, some of my classmates don't value the activities developed in class”. (Sandra's comments on Cooperative Telephone)

For the 6<sup>th</sup> stage of implementation, a structure that mixed Kagan's Three-Step Interview and Group Discussion (1989b) was devised and called Multi-Step Group discussion, with the purpose of promoting discussion through exchanging and contrasting ideas and validating arguments. Students had to form questions to complete a personal information conversation coherently. Then, information was contrasted and discussed in pairs until a consensus was reached. Then, the information was discussed with other pairs in groups of four and so on until the entire class reached a final general consensus. In this CL structure, positive interdependence was organized around rules for gradually increased interaction through discussion with the goal of achieving a final general consensus after accepting the most convincing and persuasive arguments.

“La actividad fue adecuada porque nos permitió aprender de los demás”. (Comentarios de Johan sobre Multi-Step Group Discussion)

“The activity was appropriate because it allowed us to learn from the others”. (Johans' comments on Multi-Step Group Discussion)

For the last stage of implementation, a final jigsaw was implemented to check students' improvement in their oral production in L2, as measured by the students' successful development and performance in a simulated interview with the famous Colombian pop singer *Juanes*. Students' confidence and security to talk in the foreign language also counted as indicators of students' development of their oral presentation skills. In this closing CL structure,



positive interdependence was favoured by means of the roles and functions of either journalists or the Colombian celebrity, with the goal of coming up with a coherent and interesting simulated 10-minute interview with Juanes.

“Hemos perdido el miedo de pasar a hablar delante de un grupo de compañeros. Participamos más y hemos hecho más amistades. Creo que el curso ha mejorado la disciplina”. (Comentarios de Carlos sobre Jigsaw Interview with Juanes )

“Now we aren't afraid of speaking in front of a group of classmates. We participate more and we have made more friends. I think the class has improved discipline”. (Carlos' comments sobre Jigsaw Interview)

After having described the pedagogical activities that implemented the specific CLSI that developed students' oral presentation skills, the next section will explain how the data collected was analyzed.

## Data analysis

The initial data analysis was conducted based on an a priori approach, considering Kagan's theory (1989a) about oral communication skills and their corresponding oral communication strategies. Kagan linked specific communicative acts with a list of related cooperative skills he called “Oral Communication Skills”, previously called “Language Functional Categories” by Finocchiaro (1983). Separating Facts from Opinions (“Reporting Facts”), Summarizing, and Supporting Ideas with Arguments from Kagan's taxonomy were selected as related to oral communication skills as precategories. For the oral communication strategies, the information about oral expression strategies presented in the Common European Framework for Languages

(2001) and their corresponding specific strategies linked to oral presentation skills, such as “reading a written text aloud”, “speaking using notes, a written text or visual aids”, “performing a rehearsed role”, “speaking spontaneously or improvising”, as presubcategories were included

McKernan's five stages for analysing action research data (1996) were followed. For assembling the data, the data was scanned from the field notes and the audio and video recordings in order to find patterns in students' oral communication strategies. As for coding the data, it was reduced to two a priori main categories: *oral presentation strategies and oral presentation sub-skills*. Later, recurring emerging forms gave rise to new categories. After comparing the data, the recurring patterns of the dominant students' oral presentation strategies were identified and the strategies regrouped into verbal oral presentation strategies and non-verbal oral presentation strategies. The former includes repetitions, word stress, voice pitch, intonation, speed of speech delivery, hesitation devices, translation, code-switching, reading, etc., while the latter involves body language, pointing out or indicating the referent, keeping eye contact, shrugging shoulders, nodding or shaking the head, etc.

To report outcomes, frequency tables of students' behaviours, both verbal and non-verbal, were made and related to specific oral presentation strategies and their corresponding oral presentation sub-skills. The registered behaviours were supported by particular speech instances and body language expressions, including the number of occurrences and the transcription lines where they appeared.

*A general chart of students' most frequently used oral presentation strategies and corresponding oral presentation sub-skills is presented below:*



ORAL PRESENTATION STRATEGIES (ENTRIES)	RELATED ORAL PRESENTATION SUB-SKILLS
Pointing out to the referent (prompting the interlocutor) (20)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supporting ideas with arguments (8)</li> <li>Keeping the interlocutor attentive or on task (6)</li> <li>Reporting facts accurately (5)</li> <li>Proposing a topic for discussion (1)</li> </ul>
Code-switching (16)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arguing (10)</li> <li>Reporting facts accurately (assuring the interlocutor's understanding) (6)</li> </ul>
Stressing key words, raising pitch or tone of voice, and adjusting speed of speech delivery (16)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summarizing and reporting facts accurately (7)</li> <li>Introducing a point of view and clarifying meaning (5)</li> <li>Reporting facts accurately (highlighting meaning) (4)</li> <li>Supporting ideas (1)</li> <li>Getting the interlocutor's attention(1)</li> </ul>
Correcting oneself and correcting others during speech delivery (11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately (5)</li> <li>Supporting ideas or arguing(5)</li> <li>Contextualizing the interlocutor or the audience (1)</li> </ul>
Translating (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately (assuring the interlocutor's understanding) (7)</li> <li>Summarizing (1)</li> </ul>
Using dictation (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately (7)</li> </ul>
Repeating (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately (doubt or misunderstanding clarification) (6)</li> </ul>
Looking up and saying (reading aloud from consulting source of information)(6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately, or summarizing once in a while (6)</li> </ul>
Spanish pronunciation of English words (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keeping the speech fluency (5)</li> <li>Reporting facts accurately (1)</li> </ul>
Outlining speech (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summarizing facts and contextualizing information (5)</li> </ul>
Exchanging printed or written material (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately (4)</li> </ul>
Spelling difficult words (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately (4)</li> </ul>
Comparing and contrasting information in speech delivery (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately and summarizing (3)</li> </ul>
Using hesitation devices (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gaining time to elaborate ideas and keep the speech fluent (2)</li> <li>Reassuming speech (1)</li> </ul>
Using notes to report information (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately (2)</li> </ul>
Using analogies (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supporting ideas with arguments</li> </ul>
Singing (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contextualizing the interlocutor or the audience (2)</li> </ul>
Rehearsing together (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately (1)</li> </ul>
Reporting information from memory (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting facts accurately (1)</li> </ul>



For building interpretations and making sense of the meaning of the data, basic CL underlying principles and specific CLS of interaction were articulated for the implementation with the students' use of certain strategies and their progress as oral communicators in EFL. Each CLS was analysed and reflected upon with the students soon after its implementation, and the conclusions allowed the researcher to make some necessary adjustments for the implementation of the next cycle of CLS. To understand how meaning was situated by students in their classroom oral exchanges while engaged in CL activities, the reflexivity proper of language, as described in Gee's cultural model of discourse analysis (2005), was taken into account. It states that there is an important reciprocity between language and reality because language simultaneously reflects reality.

With regard to the findings, the students' most frequently used oral presentation skill behind their verbal and non-verbal strategies was accurate fact reporting. In all the implemented CLSI students had to report information accurately, separating facts from opinions, and only in the most complex structures around low consensus questions or tasks involving problem solving thinking skills, such as Numbered heads Together, Jigsaw, and Multi-Step Group, did they have to support their ideas with arguments. It could be observed that the three principal oral presentation skills used by the students in structured cooperative group work were interrelated and complemented each other to achieve the speakers' final goal of making themselves understood. This was especially true in CL activities involving complex CLSI, and the students' successful task development is another sign of improvement in oral communication.

In complex CLSI, students first had to clearly separate facts from opinions. Then, from the main facts, they constructed a summary in order to establish relationships and finally they had to take

a stand supported by the same facts that became part of their arguments. Consequently, students' high-level thinking functions for separating facts from opinions and summarizing and supporting ideas can be developed thanks to the new challenges, interaction, and creativity they were exposed to in the modifying active environment like the one constructed in a structured CL classroom, in agreement with Feuerstein's theory of mediated learning (2007).

Similarly, students can be led from high-consensus to low-consensus CL tasks until they are ready to tolerate and respect different opinions and defend their own; for example, Inside-Outside Circle and Cooperative Telephone at the beginning, following with Jigsaw, and finishing with Multi-Step Group Discussion. High-thinking skills can be developed gradually. For instance, from comparing and contrasting in Cooperative Odd One Out, to supporting ideas with arguments in Multi-Step Group Discussion.

## Discussion of findings

Implementing classroom interaction based on teacher-fronted classroom activities in large classes of public schools where the tendency of confliction is the trend do not seem to have contributed significantly to solve the problematic situation. This is particularly true if we consider that interaction is a fundamental pedagogical fact in the EFL classroom. Therefore, teachers should take advantage of the rich diversity or heterogeneity in the classroom, not only of language proficiency or aptitude but also of age, interests, and personality, to design student-centered activities that promote students' face-to-face interaction in peer work, in pairs or small groups.

However, not all the forms of group work result in students' cognitive or social skills development. Structured group work involving positive interdependence among the participants



centered around common goals, rewards, roles, materials, and/or rules leads to cooperation (Kessler, 1992). Other interaction related aspects such as team formation, accountability, and social skills also lead to cooperation. Consequently, in certain pedagogical interventions like the one carried out in this study, some CL components like structuring and structures, positive interdependence, and team formation can be emphasized over others.

On the other hand, cooperation and negotiation are more constructive and fruitful ways of dealing with confrontation. In classroom environments like the one researched that are characterized by student problems of communication which contribute to an attitude of conflict and confrontation, social interaction can be structured while taking into account spaces, times, roles, functions, and rules proposed by the teacher and negotiated with students. All this has to be done in order to recover the respect, balance, and equity of the oral communication processes by using the organization of interaction regulation aspects such as turn taking, control of interruptions, respect for the required speech delivery time, respect for others' ideas, respect for others' spaces, raising a hand to ask for a turn, to comply with both individual and group commitments, to give credit to what others say and build concepts based on that, and not to shout or offend others in order to defend a personal point of view.

The students' assumptions of specific roles to perform, functions, tasks, and assignments, in clearly determined times and spaces, involved in the implemented CLSI, supports Goffman's metaphor (1993) of human interactions as theater performances that can also justify the remarkable progress in verbal production of some shy students.

On the other hand, Kagan's (1989a) cooperative learning structural model provides teachers with a complete array of structures

of interaction which are content-free ways of organizing classroom social interaction by a series of steps. They can be selected, sequenced, customized, and implemented according to the students' learning or social needs, the stage of a class, a unit of contents, or an academic period. Structures may be used repeatedly with almost any subject matter at a wide range of grade levels, and at different moments in a lesson and for different purposes.

When the social environment in public school classrooms is featured by students' problems of communication that lead to confrontation, teachers can select certain cooperative learning structures of interaction that may help students develop a particular required oral communication skill. These skills include the ability to present or report knowledge, information, opinion, and ideas in an accurate, coherent, and assertive way. Therefore, a good selection and sequence of structures are likely to enhance interactions among students in regard to talking time, turn taking, and respect for others' ideas. As a result, social relationships in the classroom, as well as learning are expected to improve.

Consequently, if the mediation of peers is facilitated by a carefully structured cooperative group work activity, concurrent phenomena such as peer revision, peer correction, and peer feedback will appear naturally, reinforcing the concept of learning as a social construction. SLA is a social process which depends to a large extent on the role of peer interaction, especially with more advanced users of language because an appropriate type of assistance or scaffolding fosters the creation of a Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) that leads to learning. In addition to the organized steps of student interaction involved in each of the CL structures, the ZPD is created by the carefully selected and adapted verbal and non-verbal strategies used by the most knowledgeable students with their peers.



## Conclusions

In EFL classrooms with teenage students, there are heterogeneity factors other than English proficiency or language aptitude that include age, sex, ethnicity, size, personality, popularity, and leadership that are important to take into account. According to my research population, leadership was the main factor that was distributed equally in the different CL groups in order that students were able to have successful outcomes in structured cooperative group work.

About the specific research objective of identifying the oral communication strategies most frequently used by students when taking part in structured cooperative group work in the EFL classroom, the strategy was pointing out the referent, a non-verbal strategy corresponding to a paralinguistic skill. This happened principally because of students' low English proficiency level as most individuals in this research population needed to see the things their interlocutors were talking about to be able to understand them.

The verbal strategies of code-switching, and translating were second and third in occurrence. They characterize the resourcefulness of these low-proficiency students, who were aware of their limitations in English, time restraints, and task complexity of the CL activities. Code-switching, translating or other similar strategies were used by students to keep their speech fluent and assure the interlocutor's understanding of their messages. EFL students use these strategies very frequently when they have not been exposed consistently to any communicative language teaching method. However, it is clear that the excessive use of translation and code-switching keeps students from developing necessary thinking skills to become fluent speakers in English, including skills such as deducing, inferring, or making analogies and hypotheses. Translating, in particular, facilitates understanding but hinders or slows down the development of oral

production skills. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile mentioning the important role that L1 has in L2 learning, as semiotic mediation, particularly for teenagers who have developed a certain mental maturity, permits them to contrast the target language with the mother tongue to learn the foreign language.

The high occurrence of pronunciation-related strategies when students had to present information to their classmates mean that these students were aware of how to highlight meaning through pronunciation related features such as stress, pitch (the highness or lowness of the voice), volume (the loudness or softness of the voice), or rate (the speed of your speech delivery). This was a skill they transferred positively from their mother tongue, which was evident in the audio recordings. Furthermore, students accompanied these voice management aspects with important body language aspects such as posture (standing with back straight and looking relaxed), eye contact (looking each audience member in the eye), and gesture (using few, well-timed non-distracting gestures). This was evident in the video recordings analyzed and evaluated according to the assessment analytical scale for speech delivery proposed by Yamashiro and Johnson (1997).

The wide variety of verbal and non-verbal oral strategies used by students when presenting information to each other aimed mainly at guaranteeing the audience's follow-up and understanding, clarifying, illustrating, or explaining the content of what they were talking about. Students' most frequently used strategies such as code-switching, pointing out a referent, stressing key words, and translation of a predominant verbal nature, were employed for accurate fact reporting and summarizing. More non-verbal strategies, rather than formal argumentation, related to body language (pointing out) and voice management (stressing key words,



speech or speed of speech delivery) were used by students as persuasive mechanisms to support their ideas. In addition, students now recognize the importance of mentioning referents clearly, separating facts from opinions to construct unbiased and persuasive points of view, and the need to prepare a basic organizational speech plan including verbal and non-verbal strategies, as well as the need to rehearse with others for a successful oral presentation.

Therefore, the systematic application of CL structures in the EFL classroom raised students' awareness of all factors verbal and not verbal involved in oral communication processes. Verbal or rhetoric strategies were combined by students with non-verbal communicative strategies, like body language, as complementary persuasion mechanisms. In addition, students gained awareness of the importance of mentioning referents clearly, paraphrasing to facilitate comprehension, separating facts from opinions to construct unbiased points of view, and rehearsing and preparing a basic plan to follow for a successful oral presentation.

With regard to the general research objective of determining how the application of cooperative learning structures of interaction affected the development of 8<sup>th</sup> grade EFL students' oral presentation skills, it is worthwhile mentioning that some students who, at the beginning of the implementation were reluctant to speak in English and work cooperatively in groups with different classmates, improved their verbal and social behavior progressively in such a way that for the last cycle of the implementation they were engaged in their cooperative learning groups and committed to speak in English more willingly and confidently. This was evidence of the students' improvement in their oral communication skills. The fact that students did not resort to any kind of intimidation, harassment, or bullying as strategies to persuade others when exchanging

views in discussions is more evidence of students' oral communication skills development. Similarly, as more demanding CLSI were implemented, new and more complex oral presentation strategies during speech delivery emerged. Some strategies used included comparing and contrasting, using analogies to support ideas, or rehearsing together. These showed the progress in students' skills as oral communicators. The tendency was improvement simultaneously of social skills and oral communication skills as more CLS of interaction and CL activities were implemented in class, as a result achieving a better social classroom atmosphere for learning.

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#### THE AUTHOR

**FERNANDO PARGA** holds a B.A in Philology and Languages from Universidad Libre, and a masters degree in Applied Linguistics to TEFL from Universidad Distrital. He is an official translator and language teacher for the Secretary of Education in Bogotá at IED Fabio Lozano Simonelli, and teaches ESP at Uniempresarial.

