

Using action research to improve ESL students' social bonding through cooperative learning

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Abstract: This action research study aims to investigate the role and effects of social bonding inherent in cooperative learning on the students studying English as an L2 or second language (ESL) in large ESL classes. Cooperative learning was used in large BS-II ESL class at a Pakistani University. Qualitative approach was used and data were collected through classroom observation, interviews and free-text questionnaires. Analysis was conducted with the help of deductive content analysis method. The results indicate that social bonding associated to cooperative learning improved students' participation, confidence, and eagerness to accept responsibility for their own and others' learning. This study shows that social skills created by cooperative learning is very effective for language learning and skill development of learners. The elements such as positive interdependence and face to face interaction enhance social bonding among students themselves and with the teacher. Hence, it strengthened their friendship. Moreover, the use of action research helped me positively change from a principally traditional teacher-centered methods to a student-centered cooperative and facilitative pedagogy and I became a mentor and facilitator for student learning.

Keywords: cooperative, learning, action, research, higher education

Utilizando la investigación-acción para mejorar la interacción social de los estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua mediante el aprendizaje cooperativo

Resumen en español: Este estudio de investigación-acción tiene como objetivo investigar el rol y los efectos del vínculo social inherente al aprendizaje cooperativo en estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua (ESL) en clases numerosas. El aprendizaje cooperativo se implementó en una clase numerosa de ESL de segundo año de licenciatura en una universidad pakistaní. Se empleó un enfoque cualitativo y se recopilaron datos mediante observación en el aula, entrevistas y cuestionarios de texto libre. El análisis se realizó mediante el método de análisis de contenido deductivo. Los resultados indican que el vínculo social asociado al aprendizaje cooperativo mejoró la participación, la confianza y la disposición de los estudiantes para asumir la responsabilidad de su propio aprendizaje y el de sus compañeros. Este estudio demuestra que las habilidades sociales generadas por el aprendizaje cooperativo son muy efectivas para el aprendizaje de idiomas y el desarrollo de habilidades de los estudiantes. Elementos como la interdependencia positiva y la interacción cara a cara fortalecen el vínculo social entre los estudiantes y con el profesor, lo que a su vez refuerza su amistad. Además, el uso de la investigación-acción me ayudó a transitar positivamente de métodos tradicionales centrados en el profesor a una pedagogía cooperativa y facilitadora centrada en el estudiante, convirtiéndome en mentor y facilitador del aprendizaje estudiantil.

Palabras clave: cooperativo, aprendizaje, acción, investigación, educación superior

1. Introduction

This paper is a classroom-based action-research study conducted in a Pakistani university with the aim of enhancing students' social bonding and exploring its influence on students and their learning in the English language support classes. I work as a professor in the same university. In these English language classes, English is taught as a Second Language (ESL). Since in the university, English is used as the medium of instruction throughout, ESL courses are offered to all students. Pakistani public universities have overcrowded classes, with student 100 or more students in each ESL class, and in developing countries like Pakistan it is very much common in such classes (Panhwar, 2016; Panhwar & Bell, 2023). The research studies conducted in developing countries like Pakistan show that because of large size of these ESL classes, ESL teachers feel discouraged to use teaching methods which engage students in interaction or communication with one another. Student engagement with learning process might be helpful to enhance socialisation among students (Panhwar & Bell, 2023), which might in turn augment their English proficiency. Hence, the teachers feel compelled to use traditional methods such as lecturing. Panhwar and Bell (2023) based the findings argue that lecturing does not help enhance learners' social bonding which is important for the development of language skills because in lecturing only one teacher speaks and students passively listen to him/her and they do not engage in speaking with teachers and one another.

I hypothesise that this lack of social bonding among students in these classes is not because of the large number of students, but it is due to the traditional lecture method, the use of which creates difficulties for students to bond socially (MacMullin, 1995; Nunan & Lamb, 1996). Hence, the goal of this study is to address the issue of lack of social bonding within the framework of action research to explore the subsequent research question:

How can I improve my students' social bonding through cooperative learning and see its effects on their learning in large ESL classes at the university level?

2. Action Research

Based on the context and objectives of the present study, action research was considered as a suitable methodological approach for two main reasons. First, action research enables the teacher to take on the dual role of practitioner and researcher, allowing for systematic reflection on one's own teaching practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Second, existing literature suggests that conventional positivist research methods may be less effective for educational research. Instead, approaches that are context-sensitive and grounded in self-reflection such as action research are considered more applicable when the aim is to improve pedagogical practices (Somekh, 2006; Baumfield, Hall, & Wall, 2013). Therefore, I consider that action research was chiefly well aligned with the objectives of the present study, as it focused on cultivating my own instructional practices and nurturing students' social bonding, which I propose contributes positively to learning within my institutional context. Norton (2019) argues, educational action research is the two-pronged critical investigation of teachers' own teaching practices that is improving teaching practices and contributing to pedagogical knowledge. Hence, the use of cooperative learning in the present study was not