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Cooperative Learning as an Effective Tool in Teaching EFL Reading
Comprehension and in Multi-level Classes

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Introducción.

Our experience as teachers of a public university with multi-level classes with students of different levels of English knowledge, abilities or backgrounds; where educators must face the challenge of multi-level classrooms, such as finding the appropriate teaching strategy, resources and materials; showed that it was necessary to explore the benefits of Cooperative Learning as a way to transform the multi-level class from a challenge into an advantage. In the present paper, the role of Cooperative Learning as an effective tool to teach reading in an EFL multi-level class is investigated. The following literature review attempts to demonstrate this theory and hopes that the information gathered from this study would assist educational authorities to review the curriculum with the aim of incorporating reading comprehension cooperative learning strategies in multilevel classes.

It is important to start by saying that the way that reading is perceived has changed. As well as continuing with a description of cooperative learning and to explain why this teaching strategy should be considered to teach reading in an EFL multi-level class. Adams (as cited in Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014) emphasized that reading is no longer known as a receptive skill. The author suggested that scholars agree that reading is a process in which students interact with a text. On the other hand, Johnson (as cited in Taqi & Al-Nouh, 2014) claimed that cooperative learning is a teaching strategy that offer multi-level students the opportunity to interact among them and work together in small groups to learn subject content. In this process, each learner is accountable for his or her own learning. Then, Taqi and Al-Nouh, (2014) added that adult students learn more when they interact and work in teams, and that learning happens when a stronger adult pass the

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knowledge to a weaker student who by working individually would not be able to completed the task. If Adams as Taqui and Al-Nouh perspective of reading and cooperative learning were accurate, cooperative learning should be the strategy to work when teaching reading to adult university students that has different levels of English in the same class.

Some authors agree with Taqui and Al-Nouh, and consider that cooperative learning can be used as an effective tool to work with EFL University – level learners to develop the student reading comprehension skill. This is the case of Zoghi, Mustapha, and Tg Nor Rizan (2010), who suggested that students of a L2 language should become independent learners and strategic readers. In other words, students should be able to learn by themselves using aids that will help them to improve the reading comprehension ability and understand a word or sentence in a text. In order to master this skill, the author added that strategic reading should be combined with cooperative learning, because this learning strategy will aloud the students in a group to interact, work, share information and knowledge that will lead them to a better understanding and solve any comprehension difficulties when reading a text. Finally, the author claimed that as shown in the findings of several researches, cooperative group learning is an effective teaching methodology to improve reading comprehension, which has provided excellent results in university-level learners who wanted to have a good grade on English reading courses. With this assertion, the author reaffirms that many knowledgeable people in the field reached the same conclusion, that cooperative learning is an effective strategy to develop reading comprehension, and provided more credibility to this claim.

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As these investigators confirmed that cooperative learning would develop reading comprehension, other academics added that vocabulary learning, which is a main part in the process that contributes to the understanding of a text, could be improved by cooperative learning. Accordingly, Zarei and Keshavarz (2011) emphasized that specialists in the field all around the world acknowledge cooperative learning as an effective way to teach an L2 language in schools, college and universities. These authors also recognized that vocabulary plays a key role in reading comprehension. The same thinking was shared by Lee (as cited in Zarei & Keshavarz, 2011), who reported in a research that took place in Vietnam, that the university students who used cooperative learning instead of the traditional method, improved the ability to remember the new vocabulary in English because of the discussion and interaction with the members of the group. With these results, scholars provided clear examples and reasons why cooperative learning should be used with students that need to improve vocabulary and reading comprehension.

In regard of the cooperative learning methods, it is time to explore which one to use in order to improve the students vocabulary and reading comprehension, in a class of students with different English levels and abilities. According to Maddinabeita (as cited in Zarei & Keshavarz, 2011), among the cooperative learning methods, Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRQ) and Student Teams - Achievement Divisions (STAD) are of main interest in this field. The first method (CIRQ), consist in students working cooperatively in teams that have different English reading levels, the learner will read to each other, predict how stories will end, summarize, answer questions asked by a teacher, spell words and new vocabulary. These methods give students the opportunity to practice comprehension and understanding of the main idea. The second method (STAD) is a cooperative learning strategy in which learners with different levels of abilities work

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in teams to reach a learning goal; at the end, all students take a quiz to make sure the individual responsibility of each student. As was previously stated, both methods can be used as an EFL teaching methodology to help students improve reading comprehension and vocabulary in multi-level classes.

Consequently, after covering two different reading comprehension and vocabulary methodologies, the following question remains: are these cooperative learning strategies effective? According to Zarei and Keshavarz (2011), the cooperative learning models had a positive effect on the elementary level students. These authors have a positive experience when using cooperative learning activities in a National English academy in Iran where the participants were 132 EFL female students. In this study, the class employed for a full semester the (STAD) and the (CIRQ) cooperative learning strategies, these learners were measured through a post-test that compared the data collected from the experimental group (the students that received the class with the CIRQ and STAD) against the control group (these class did not use the CIRQ and STAD methodology). With this research, the author provided a positive experience when using cooperative learning activities.

Following this further, it is important to know as teachers, what are the main principles that are needed to obtain a positive result when using cooperative learning in a reading class with EFL students. As Ching-Ying Pan and Hui-Yi Wu (2013) showed in a study done on 44 students (the experimental group) receiving a cooperative learning instruction, and 34 learners (the control group) receiving a traditional learning instruction, that cooperative learning instructions provided the best results when compare against the traditional instruction method. This was especially a

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good learning environment for those students with low and medium level of English knowledge. All the participants were enrolled in a Freshman English reading class. Moreover, this author claimed that several studies proved the efficacy of using cooperative learning with EFL university students who took a reading course. Then, the author pointed out the role of the teacher who becomes a facilitator and follows the learner center approach, instead of being just a source that transmit knowledge to the students. The author also recommended that in order to avoid problems with those students that contributed less, the teacher should clarify the rules and ask each member of the group to rate the team member's contribution. In brief, if teachers are facilitators, have a multi-level classes with university students and applied the recommendations to avoid the lack of cooperation of some learners within a group, these professors should obtain a positive result when teaching in an EFL reading class.

As previously mentioned, a cooperative environment class need to meet some conditions in order to achieve a positive result. Farzaneh and Nejadansari (2014) added another condition, the student's attitude toward cooperative learning. This assumption was supported by the findings of the authors' study in a class of 139 middle class boys, selected from four secondary schools in Saudi Arabia. The researcher's main purpose was to measure the effectiveness of using cooperative learning on teaching English to EFL students in comparison to the traditional teaching approach. Seventy students were chosen for the experimental group, that received classes with the cooperative learning strategy, and 69 learners were selected for the control group, who received English classes with the traditional method. The results favor the cooperative learning teaching methodology. Farzaneh and Nejadansari observed two possible reasons for this positive result with the experimental group. First, cooperative learning allowed the participants to consult and debate

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about the different tasks. Second, the weaker students relied on stronger classmate instead of the teacher. Also, Liao (as cited in Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014), confirmed in a study done on 42 EFL college students, that cooperative learning, increase the learner motivation and as a consequence the learners' English grammar improved. Therefore, the results of these studies showed that the EFL students' accomplishment was the result of the increase on learners' motivation when using the cooperative learning methodology.

At this point, researchers have shown the positive relationship between cooperative learning and motivation, equally important is to investigate the effects that cooperative learning has on English reading comprehension and motivation. With this in mind, Ching-Ying Pan and Hui-Yi Wu (2013) in a study previously mentioned in this paper used reciprocal cooperative learning (RCL) on 44 freshman students who took an English reading course, where learners received two hours of lessons per week during a semester. A total of 78 students between the experimental group and the control group, received an English-reading performance test and were measured through an English learning motivation scale. The results showed that to incorporate the reciprocal cooperative learning promoted a more positive learning environment and motivation, improving the learners reading comprehension on the experimental group.

Ching-Ying Pan and Hui-Yi Wu (2013) attributed the success of the reciprocal cooperative learning instruction to several factors. Even though that (RCL) needed more planning in advance in comparison to the traditional teaching approach, "RCL instruction created a significantly positive promotion in the student learning motivation, particularly in liking, dedication, self-efficacy, and extrinsic motivation" (Ching-Ying Pan & Hui-Yi Wu, 2013, p.11). According to

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these authors, learners reading comprehension can be nurtured by the cognitive process of cooperative learning, creating a positive environment which encourages team discussions, where classmates interact with each other, peers ask for explanation with the purpose of having a clear understanding of the text, and are motivated and encouraged to ask for help in a not threatening environment. The authors also noted, that 86% of the students perceived that the team discussion during the reciprocal cooperative learning instruction help them to understand the text, improved the scores and also had a positive effect on the learners confidence. In other words, the cognitive process of the reciprocal cooperative learning created a positive learning environment, in which students felt motivated because they were able to understand the readings through peer interaction and group discussion.

In another interesting study about the benefits of group discussion in reading comprehension, Fu-Yuan Shen (2013) observed that L2 learners were able to have a high level of reading comprehension of a text when they employed group discussions. In this study done in Taiwan on 160 non-English-major EFL College students of a public university, the learners who were part of the experimental group, received classes using three different teaching methods of reading comprehension. These methods were the Book Club, the Literature Circles and Instructional Conversations. All of these approaches employ the small group discussion approach, in which readers have to use different cognitive exercises such as interpretation, reading between the lines, summarize different points of view in one main idea, criticize and do reflections about the text. The experimental group was compared against the control group who received the reading classes with the traditional approach. All the participants read the same texts based on five American short stories. The students that were part of the experimental group were divided by the

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professor in five groups of eight learners of different abilities and gender. The students were allowed to communicate in English and Chinese. As a result, the experimental group outperformed the control group. Even though that this study did not cover the motivation aspect, the findings can encourage teachers to use the group discussion methodology as part of multilevel classes to improve the students' reading comprehension. This study demonstrated that to have a class with students of different abilities and using a cooperative learning strategy through group discussion will be an ideal scenario to an effective reading comprehension class.

Other authors also considered that group discussion have a positive effect on learning an L2 language and therefore in reading comprehension due to the reduction of the anxiety levels of students. For example, Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2010) claimed in a study realized on 40 EFL sophomore students of the Bangkok University, who received English classes through the cooperative learning method that the learners' level of anxiety was reduced and the participants achieved higher scores. Besides, six of these students participated in a survey that answered questions about how the learners felt when receiving English classes that employed the cooperative learning approach. All the students were in favor of the collaborative class environment. Four of the six students enjoyed the Think-Pair-Share activity, because by working in pairs students felt relaxed and enjoyed the task. All of the interviewees agreed to feel relax and having fun of the Numbered Heads Together task, an activity to improve the reading comprehension skill, in which students formed a team of four, each member of the group received a number from 1 to 4, questions were given to the group and the learners discussed the best answers. Then, the teacher asked a question and said a number. Finally, the student that had the number had to provide the answer of the question. The students reported that this activity was more like a game, in which each team

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help each other to find the correct answer, and considered that these kind of activities should be included in other courses. Thus, the authors suggested that the reasons for the reduction of the learner's level of anxiety resulted as a consequence of the opportunities that the cooperative learning environment provided. For example, students that worked in small groups were able to support each other, worked in teams, though, and discussed a topic in groups instead of using a whole class approach. Within a more friendly class environment with less levels of anxiety students were able to create and explore new ideas. For these reasons, it is important as educators to consider the anxiety factor when teaching, and the way to decrease the anxiety levels in the students, especially in a multilevel class where a weaker student can feel anxious of not knowing the correct answer and not having the support of a stronger student. As the previous research showed, when students feel more relaxed due to the team support, learners can concentrate better and focus on learning. Most importantly, students have a positive attitude in regard of cooperative learning methodology, which contributed to a better performance, improve and facilitated the learners' knowledge and language acquisition.

Indeed, according to Luu (2010), cooperative learning reinforces and improve the EFL students' performance in the classroom and the future employee performance in the workplace. Luu reported having realized a study on 77 EFL students of the University in Ho Chi who were enrolled in two reading classes. In one class, the students in the experimental group learned through cooperative learning activities. In the second class, the students of the control group received lectures and some pair and group work. For this study, the researcher wanted to have heterogeneous students with different kinds of abilities. The results of the surveys showed that 89.19% of the participants of the experimental group had a positive reaction to the cooperative

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learning activities and acknowledged that after having accomplished these activities, the reading comprehension of students in the class had improved. One of the participants observed, "This class is different from any I've been in before. Usually you just end up knowing a couple of classmates - here I know everyone in the class. Working in Cooperative Learning groups does this." (Luu, 2010,p.12). The author findings shows the important role that cooperative learning plays, not just in developing reading comprehension in a multilevel class, but in the preparation of the students to face a new job in which partners are assigned not choose by the employee. Moreover, the importance to learn to socialize and embrace the difference abilities of the students to work as an effective group inside the classroom and in a company.

This research review's purpose was to find out the efficacy of using cooperative learning on English reading comprehension and on EFL students in multi-level classes. It has been shown from the research reviewed that the concept of reading has changed from being considered a receptive skill to be known as an interactive process between the learner and the text. Cooperative learning is a strategy that facilitates this interaction and improve the students reading comprehension through different activities, such as the Cooperative Integrated Reading (CIRQ), the Students Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD), the Reciprocal Cooperative Learning (RCL) and the Numbered Heads Together tasks among others. In which students of different levels of English, abilities or backgrounds are desirable, because this creates the perfect cooperative learning environment and the student's level of anxiety decreases. Learners can discuss the best answers in groups, where the stronger student can support the weaker learner, obtain better scores and gain a factual and high-level understanding of the reading. Teachers act as facilitators and create the conditions needed in a cooperative learning class, in order to obtain a positive outcome.

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As a result, the student gain confidence, an increase in motivation, develop social and teamwork skills, that will lead them to a better performance in the classroom and in the future workplace. Even though, that there are few studies that covered the use of cooperative learning and the multilevel classes, and more investigation need to be done, the positive results of these studies will serve as a background to reduce the hesitation of the EFL teachers in using cooperative learning activities in the multi-level classroom. The findings showed the need that the educational authorities review the curriculum and included cooperative learning as an effective tool to be used in EFL reading comprehension of multi-level classes.

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