THE STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND TRADITIONAL LEARNING IN ESP. EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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Abstract:This paper deals with the benefits of cooperative learning, and emphasizes the contrast between this teaching method as a modern, alternative approach and the traditional teaching methods. In order to analyze the students' attitudes towards the Cooperative Learning Method in ESP classes, and to examine their cooperative behaviors, we conducted an experiment accompanied by a questionnaire. The results reveal the students' attitude towards the application of Cooperative Learning techniques before and after the experiment, with a focus on their speaking and reading skills. The main conclusion revealed by our experiment is that Cooperative Learning is an appropriate method for improving oral production and reading comprehension. Thus, the application of this modern method helped students gradually improve their reading, communication and interaction skills. During the experiment, students found reasons to express themselves orally and ways of using their previous knowledge through active learning. Moreover, they were shown that reading and speaking can be fun and easy if they work with their peers, practise their language skills cooperatively, and cherish values such as respect, tolerance, team spirit, and the importance of interacting with others. Therefore, our students were able to establish new relationships with their classmates through cooperative learning, and felt encouraged to express their ideas and opinions in an anxiety and pressure-free environment.

Keywords: ESP, Cooperative Learning, students, questionnaire, experiment

1. Introduction

The learning environment, which refers to where the learning process actually takes place, plays a very important role in ESP. Besides the fact that the classroom should be pleasant and comfortable, another important factor influencing the roles and relationships is represented by the setting**,** which refers to the classroom arrangements specified or implied in the task. In this regard, David Nunan (1995: 93) calls it "social setting", when activities involve the whole class, small groups or individuals. According to Stănișoară (2003: 18-19) classroom management involves both actions (i.e. what is done in the classroom) and decisions (i.e. whether to do the respective actions, when to do them, how to do them, who will do them). From this perspective, in classroom management, it is very important to be able to make the appropriate decisions in order to perform effective and efficient actions (Scrivener, 2005: 80). Moreover, classroom interactions also play a vital role in the teaching and learning processes. In a whole-class activity, students and teacher interact, and students accept the authority of the teacher as their class manager.

2. Traditional vs. Cooperative Classrooms

Traditional classrooms are characterized by teacher-centered activities (based on methods such as the Grammar Translation Method or the Audio-Lingual Method) that usually involve teacher-students, teacher-student or student-initiated interactions (it should be noted that student-student interactions are minimal). Students sit in separate desks or are placed in pairs and the teacher is

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thus situated at the center of the classroom, as a controller of the teaching process, assessor of the students' performance, major source of knowledge, assistance, feedback, reinforcement and support. Traditional Methods view language learning as a passive process of memorizing grammar and vocabulary rules and items in order to acquire the ability to understand and employ the morphology and syntax of the respective foreign language. This type of learning is centered on activities such as knowledge recall and review, phrasal or sentence pattern practice, role play and translation (Vizental, 2007).

On the other hand, when working together cooperatively, students are responsible for their own behavior and learning, while the teacher monitors them and helps them work independently, giving them feedback; moreover, s/he organizes and counsels group work, facilitates the communication tasks and intervenes in order to teach collaborative skills (Bawn, 2007). At first, some students may be too dependent on their teacher and expect to be helped, corrected, and encouraged all the time. In this case, in order to increase their level of independence, the teacher can place them into collaborative small groups with less teacher-dependent students, or pair them up with students that are more independent. Thus, if in traditional language learning, the students' interdependence is viewed as negative, the learner being only a receiver or a performer, in cooperative learning, interdependence plays a positive role, as the learner is active and autonomous. In terms of materials, the teacher provides each student with a complete set for materials, in order to make them work together, in a collaborative way (Stone, 2007).

Before carrying out cooperative learning activities with students, it is important to establish team or group norms that show how group members agree to work together. In cooperative learning, these norms or rules tend to be very different from the ones applied in traditional classrooms, as they are aimed at creating a safe and supportive atmosphere. For instance, in traditional classrooms, students perform their own part of the task; in cooperative classrooms, they work with others in order to perform all the tasks (Sanchez, 2010; Wilwert, 2015). Moreover, in cooperative classrooms, they discuss and develop the rules that they would have to respect during group work (Adams, 2013). Such team rules should be based on the idea of respect, encouragement of others' new ideas, consideration of others' suggestions, justification of one's opinions, making decisions at the team level, respect of one's team role assigned by the teacher or picked up by each team member (such as organizer, recorder, checker, questioner, assessor, encourager, summarizer, spokesperson, timekeeper, team facilitator, elaborator, research runner) (Harmer, 2003: 58-61). It is noteworthy that these roles should be rotated within the teams so that students experience a variety of responsibilities. In order to create a cooperative atmosphere in the class and to maximize student practice, teachers should use a variety of student groupings (pairs and groups). Cooperative language learning performs instructional activities, mainly group work, in order to engage learners in communication, involving processes like information sharing, negotiation of meaning and interaction (Gillies and Ashman, 2003; Zhang, 2010). In terms of materials, in cooperative learning, these are arranged according to the purpose of the lesson and, usually, one group shares a complete set of materials. Moreover, another very important aspect related to ESP materials is represented by the fact that these should be focused on specialized terminology (and on its lexical and even grammatical particularities), form the students' field of study, in order to raise their interest and meet their learning needs (see Buzarna-Tihenea, 2015; Buzarna-Tihenea, 2016).

3. Survey on the students' attitude towards cooperative learning

3.1. Research design, methods, aims and hypothesis

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This paper is part of a comprehensive study whose purpose was to analyze the students' attitudes towards the cooperative learning method and the traditional teaching methods used in ESP classes and to examine the students' cooperative behaviors. The main focus of this paper is represented by the results of a questionnaire aimed atidentifying the students' responses towards the application of the cooperative learning method and of traditional teaching methods and at measuring the students' attitudes towards these methods for learning and developing their speaking and reading skills. The main hypothesis of the research was that cooperative learning activities have a positive impact on the students' attitudes, enhancing their speaking and reading ESP skills at a faster pace, compared to traditional teaching activities. The methods employed in this study were the experiment, the observation and the survey.

For this purpose, the students in the first year of study, majoring in Business Economy (Faculty of Economic Sciences, *Ovidius* University of Constanta) were divided into two groups, i.e. the experimental group (consisting of 20 students), and the control group (made up of 25 students). The experiment lasted one month (the first semester of the 2016-2017 academic year) and it consisted in the following steps: both groups of students took an initial ESP test. Afterwards, they were taught two ESP Units ("Tomorrow's World" and "Job Interviews"), the experimental group benefitting from cooperative learning activities (see Carruba, 2013; Hollingsworth et al., 2007; Macpherson, 2007; Miaz, 2015; Permanasari, 2014; Saifuddin, 2013), while the control group was taught through traditional methods. At the end of the experiment, both groups passed the final test (for the teacher to assess the level of their newly acquired reading and speaking ESP skills and knowledge). Moreover, both groups had to answer a questionnaire that evaluated the students' attitudes towards cooperative and traditional learning. This section of the study tackles the results obtained in this questionnaire, which consisted of 14 closed questions organized in a logical order, requiring students to pick up the appropriate answer from a number of choices, or to choose *yes or no* answers followed by brief justification whenever necessary. The questionnaire was divided into two sections, i.e. one focused on the students' perception on the speaking and reading skills (questions 1-7) and the other on the methods and activities used in ESP teaching, during the experiment.

3.2. Questionnaire structure and results

The first question tackled the students' opinion on their English speaking skills (i.e. how difficult ESP speaking is). The answers to this question are shown in Table 1.

Table no. 1. Students' answers to Question no. 1

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	Very easy	2	10%
	Easy	8	40%
	Difficult	6	30%
	Very difficult	4	20%
Control group	Very easy	2	8%
	Easy	1	4%
	Difficult	10	40%
	Very difficult	12	48%

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Source: Author's own processing

Table 1 above reveals that speaking is difficult and very difficult for the students from the control group. On the whole, only 4 students (9%) find speaking very easy, while 9 students (20%) believe that English speaking is easy. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are good enough or fluent speakers. 16 participants in the survey find English speaking very difficult, and other 16 students believe that English speaking is difficult. Those students may rarely participate or communicate in English either inside or outside the classroom and they need to practise more in order to develop their oral performance. However, it is obvious that more students from the experimental group find ESP speaking easy or very easy (10 students), compared to the control group (where there are only 3 such students).

The second question deals with the emphasis on developing speaking and reading skills.

Table no. 2. Students' answers to Question no. 2

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	Speaking	16	80%
	Reading	4	20%
Control group	Speaking	17	68%
	Reading	8	32%

Source: Author's own processing

The answers presented in Table 2 above show that the speaking skill is considered the most difficult and important for many students (73% considered it to be the most important skill that should be developed, because in order to communicate effectively they need to speak fluently first). Some students say that speaking is important in real communication to express ideas and thoughts, so that it should be developed along with other skills. However, only 27% believe that reading should be developed before any other skill, because they think that it provides them with a large amount of vocabulary.

The third question dealt with the students' participation in classroom activities (i.e. How often do you participate in the classroom activities without being asked by the teacher?).

Table no. 3. Students' answers to Question no. 3

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage%
Experimental group	Frequently	7	35%
	Sometimes	10	50%
	Rarely	2	10%
	Never	1	5%
Control group	Frequently	2	8%
	Sometimes	5	20%
	Rarely	15	60%
	Never	3	12%

Source: Author's own processing

As it is shown by Table 3 above, 35% of the students from the experimental group state that they frequently participate because they are highly motivated, while half of them (i.e. 50%) claim that

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they sometimes participate in the classroom and only 15% state that they rarely or never participate in the classroom. They believe that they do not need to participate frequently, but whenever necessary, for reasons such as: to correct mistakes, to assess their level of English, to develop self-confidence and overcome anxiety. However, as far as the students from the control group are concerned, 72% state that they rarely or never participate because of reasons such as: anxiety and fear of making mistakes, lack of motivation and self confidence, they feel shy and afraid in front of their teachers and friends, they participate only when they know the right answer. This reveals the success of the cooperative activities applied with the experimental group, which enhanced the students' self-confidence and active participation in the ESP classroom.

Table 4 shows the answers to the fourth question, which tackled the reasons for the students' inability to speak and read.

Table no. 4. The students' answers to question no. 4

Groups	Option	No of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	Fear of making grammatical mistakes	8	40%
	Fear of making pronunciation mistakes	6	30%
	Poor vocabulary	2	10%
	Lack of self-confidence	3	15%
	Fear of teachers' negative feedback	1	5%
Control group	Fear of making grammatical mistakes	7	28%
	Fear of making pronunciation mistakes	5	20%
	Poor vocabulary	3	12%
	Lack of self-confidence	8	32%
	Fear of teachers' negative feedback	2	8%

Source: Author's own processing

Thus, students were asked why they did not participate in the classroom and they were provided with a set of possible choices: to choose those which best described their reasons for their inability to speak and read aloud a text. Many students (33%) indicated that they were afraid of making grammatical mistakes, whereas 11 students (24%) stated that they did not participate in the classroom because of their fear to make pronunciation mistakes. Besides, 5 students (11%) were not talkative because they had a poor vocabulary. Also, 11 students (24%) mentioned that they lacked self-confidence, while the teachers' negative feedback was not a problem since only 3 students (7%) chose this pre-established answer. All these difficulties may inhibit the students' classroom participation, and they cannot overcome all of them by themselves. Thus, it is the teacher's responsibility to create a friendly atmosphere in order to determine them to speak and read aloud a text.

The fifth question was aimed at revealing the students' feelings when participating in speaking activities. The results are shown in Table 5 below:

Table no. 5. The students' answers to question no. 5

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage%
Experimental group	Comfortable	16	80%

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	Uncomfortable	4	20%
Control group	Comfortable	11	44%
	Uncomfortable	14	56%

Source: Author's own processing

As illustrated in the table, the majority of the students from the experimental group 16 (80%) indicated that they felt comfortable when they participated in speaking activities, while only 4 (20%) said that they felt uncomfortable, revealing, once again, the effectiveness of cooperative activities. As far as the control group is concerned, 44% said that they felt comfortable and 56% stated that they felt uncomfortable. Those who felt comfortable were obviously talkative, with a high self-confidence level and did not feel inhibited at all. On the other hand, the students who felt uncomfortable were usually silent, shy and afraid; moreover, they had low self-confidence, and felt inhibited by their teachers and classmates.

The sixth question dealt with the reasons for the students' feeling uncomfortable.

Table 6. Students' answers to question no. 6

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	The teacher	7	35%
	Your classes	3	15%
	The different classroom activities	10	50%
Control group	The teacher	9	36%
	Your classes	2	8%
	The different classroom activities	14	56%

Source: Author's own processing

The majority (53%) admitted that they felt uncomfortable because of the different classroom activities implemented by teachers. Students obviously felt bored and lost their interest if the teacher kept using the same techniques. 36% confirmed that they felt uncomfortable because of their teacher's presence, while only 5 students (11%) declared that their classmates represented the reason for their feeling uncomfortable.

The seventh question was centered on students' opinion on the influence of speaking activities in learning a foreign language.

Table no. 7. The students' answers to question no. 7

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	Strongly agree	15	75%
	Agree	3	15%
	Disagree	2	10%
	Strongly disagree	-	-
Control group	Strongly agree	9	36%
	Agree	13	52%
	Disagree	1	4%

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	Strongly disagree	2	8%

Source: Author's own processing

Most of the students from the experimental group (75%) strongly agree that anyone who wants to learn a foreign language has to speak it first since it is a signal that s/he is aware of its importance and is capable enough to learn it; 15% agree and only 10% disagree. As far as the control group is concerned, only 36% strongly agree on the vital importance of speaking activities in ESP learning, while more than a half (52%) agree, and 12% disagree and strongly disagree; in their opinion, speaking a language does not necessarily mean that one can learn it. These results emphasize the fact that the students who experienced cooperative learning place a greater emphasis on speaking activities than the ones who were taught through traditional learning methods.

The eighth question tackled the students' opinion on usefulness of the cooperative learning method, compared to traditional teaching methods.

Table no. 8. Students' answers to question no. 8

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	**Yes**	**18**	**90%**
	No	**2**	**10%**
Control group	**Yes**	**12**	**48%**
	No	**13**	**52%**

Source: Author's own processing

The statistics show that the majority of students from the experimental group (90%) considers cooperative learning as more useful than traditional learning, as they have been exposed to this teaching method. On the other hand, the students from the control group are divided into almost two equal groups, i.e. 48% consider cooperative learning useful (although they have not been exposed to this type of learning, they have only been presented this method), while 52% believe that traditional learning is more useful. In other words, these results are an indication that Cooperative Language Learning had a positive effect on the students exposed to this method, as they improved their attitude towards work and enhanced socialization. More students from the experimental group, who were taught through cooperative learning techniques, find it more useful that the students from the control group, who were taught through traditional learning methods.

The ninth question dealt with the students' preferences in speaking activities, in terms of class organization (i.e. individual work, pair work and group work).

Table no. 9. Students' answers to question no. 9

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	Individual work	2	10%
	Pair work	5	25%
	Group work	13	65%
Control Group	Individual work	14	56%
	Pair work	3	12%
	Group work	8	32%

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Source: Author's own processing

More than half of the students from the experimental group (65%) indicated that they preferred group work instead of individual and pair work, for reasons such as: they were relaxed and comfortable when working in groups; they could help each other during discussions, they could exchange ideas, give and take advice and information; they could correct each other's mistakes and acquire new vocabulary items; students felt more motivated to speak the language appropriately (especially the shy and silent ones), by overcoming their anxiety and developing their self-esteem. On the other hand, more than half of the students from the control group stated that they preferred working individually (56%) – compared to only 10% of the students from the experimental group who chose this type of work. Their main reasons included: their preference for working on their own; they disliked group members' noise; they did not have the same ESP level. Moreover, if a student feels that s/he has a high ESP level, it will be difficult for him/her to be collaborate with another partner especially if the latter is a weak student. Consequently, s/he feels more relaxed or secure when working individually than working with a partner. 25% of the students from the experimental group and 12% of those from the control group stated that pair work was more comfortable. These students are also likely to be sociable.

The tenth question aimed at revealing the difficulties encountered in group working classes. The answers to this question are shown in table no. 10.

Table no. 10. Students' answers to question 10

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	Yes	3	15%
	No	17	85%
Control Group	Yes	11	44%
	No	14	56%

Source: Author's own processing

As revealed by Table 10, the majority of the students from the experimental group (85%) declared that they did not have any difficulties when they worked together with their classmates. They have a high self-esteem level and prefer to work cooperatively when they want to convey their ideas and thoughts. However, 3 students (15%) from the experimental group and 11 students (44%) from the control group indicated that they had problems when working together. One possible interpretation is that they are in favor of individual work. It is noteworthy that many students exposed to cooperative learning found group working easy, while many students from the control group (exposed to traditional teaching methods) found group working difficult.

The eleventh question aimed at identifying the students' problems encountered in group work activities.

Table no. 11. The students' answers to question no. 11

Groups	Option	No of students	Percentage%
Experimental group	Fear of making mistakes	2	10%
	I find it difficult to explain my ideas to the group members	1	5%
	I do not like when students in my group correct my mistakes	1	5%

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	Imposing points of view	11	55%
	Group members' noise	5	25%
Control Group	Fear of making mistakes	7	26%
	I find it difficult to explain my ideas to the group members	3	12%
	I do not like when students in my group correct my mistakes	3	12%
	Imposing points of view	9	36%
	Group members' noise	3	12%

Source: Author's own processing

A quick glance at Table 11 above reveals that imposing points of view and groups' noise are considered the most important problems that students face when working in groups. 44% of the students indicated that imposing points of view represented a group work problem, while 8 students (18%) indicated group members' noise. Different personalities lead to disagreement and misunderstanding and even to personal conflicts. Also, 9 students (20%) said that they were afraid of making mistakes, others found it difficult to express their ideas directly to their teammates (9%), while two students (9%) did not want to be put in a situation where another teammate corrects his/her mistakes.

The twelfth question dealt with the students' feelings when working in groups.

Table no. 12. Students' answers to question no. 12.

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	Strongly motivated	13	65%
	Motivated	4	20%
	Less motivated	3	15%
	Not motivated	-	-
Control Group	Strongly motivated	3	12%
	Motivated	7	28%
	Less motivated	10	40%
	Not motivated	5	20%

Source: Author's own processing

As Table 12 shows, as far as the experimental group is concerned, 17 students (85%) indicated that they felt motivated and strongly motivated when they worked in groups; only 3 students stated that they felt less motivated, while none said that s/he was not motivated. Thus, the students from the experimental group felt more confident and comfortable to speak; they helped each other in the interactional classroom environment. However, as far as the control group is concerned, only 10 students (40%) stated that they felt strongly motivated and motivated by group work. The percentage of the less motivated and not motivated ones is higher (60%) in the control group maybe because they preferred to work individually and because the traditional teaching activities did not encourage group work.

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The thirteenth question aimed at revealing the students' opinions on the benefits of cooperative group work.

Table no. 13. Students' answers to question no. 13

Groups	Option	No of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	Ask and respond to more questions	7	35%
	Learn to listen to different opinions	9	45%
	Evaluate your peers' performance	2	10%
	Explain your ideas to convince others	1	5%
	Feel more comfortable	1	5%
Control group	Ask and respond to more questions	6	24%
	Learn to listen to different opinions	9	36%
	Evaluate your peers' performance	1	4%
	Explain your ideas to convince others	1	4%
	Feel more comfortable	8	32%

Source: Author's own processing

Table 13 reveals that 40% of the students believe that group work helps them to listen to different opinions, each team member having his/her own allotted time and role to play. In addition, 29% find that group work helps them to ask and answer to more questions in interactional situations, whereas 20% believe that cooperative group work makes them feel more comfortable since it develops their self-confidence, and the students have the opportunity to speak. In addition, 7% said it helped them to assess their peers' performance and 4% thought that it helped them to explain their ideas in order to convince others, highlighting thus the effectiveness of group work.

The last question dealt with the students' opinion about the effectiveness of cooperative group work in improving their speaking and reading skills.

Table no. 14. Students' answers to question no. 14

Groups	Option	Number of students	Percentage %
Experimental group	Yes	18	90%
	No	2	10%
Control group	Yes	8	32%
	No	17	68%

Source: Author's own processing

As Table 14 reveals, only 10% of the students from the experimental group and 68% of those from the control group believe that cooperative group work does not help them to improve their speaking and reading comprehension skills because they prefer to work individually and to avoid any conflict or imposed points of view. On the other hand, the majority of the students from the experimental group (90%) and only 32% of the students from the control group value the importance of cooperative group activities, stating that it helps them to improve their speaking performance and reading comprehension skills. The reasons given by these students are the following: cooperative group work helps English foreign language learners to develop their speaking skills because it gives them the chance to communicate and exchange ideas and

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information with each other; it develops the students' confidence and decreases their inhibition; cooperative group work offers the opportunity to correct each other's mistakes; students have more opportunities to speak, to get new experiences, and enrich their vocabulary; while reading a text, cooperative learning helps students make predictions successfully, identify the setting, make a connection, identify the main characters, the problem, and the solution. It is also noteworthy that the number of the students who considered cooperative group work beneficial to their speaking and reading comprehension skills is higher in the experimental group, compared to the control group, as the former was exposed to cooperative learning activities based on group work, while the latter carried out activities based on traditional learning methods that encouraged individual work.

4. Conclusion

The results of the students' questionnaire show that the students from the experimental group were more motivated and interested to learn English. These students valued the speaking activities since they considered them the first and most important means of communication in ESP learning. Some students seemed to be comfortable and highly motivated to participate in classroom speaking activities while others did not because they felt shy and afraid of making grammatical or pronunciation mistakes, or because they lacked self-confidence. In addition, the collected answers about the students' preferences indicated that the majority of the students was willing to work in groups or in pairs in order to help each other and exchange ideas, while others preferred to work on their own in order to avoid group members' noise or other problems.

Nowadays, in the modern ESP classroom, the teacher's role is to increase the students' participation by designing appropriate strategies, which depend on the nature of tasks and on the students' ESP level. The majority of the surveyed students from the experimental group agreed that cooperative learning helped them to improve their oral performance through several benefits such as the exchange of ideas and pieces of information, the opportunity to practice the language and to use it appropriately, the development of their self-esteem and reduction of their shyness.

The results of the questionnaire showed that the students from the experimental group displayed a high degree of dedication, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation. The views of the students from the experimental group expressed in the questionnaire indicated that in the cooperative reading and speaking class, besides listening to the teacher's instructions and lectures, they had more opportunities to actively learn by previewing the text, interacting with other group members, and helping each other during group discussions. Thus, the students developed their reading comprehension skills, which enabled them to achieve high self-efficacy. During group discussions, the students obtained peer support and encouragement, which made them willing to devote more time to studying. They enjoyed cooperative learning activities more than listening to their teacher's lectures. By comparing the methods, the experimental group students admitted that the reassurance received from their peers urged them to use more time to preview and study materials in greater depth.

The success of cooperative learning in promoting student reading comprehension can be attributed to the cognitive processes of cooperative learning. Group discussions enhance the students' reading comprehension skills by creating a supportive learning atmosphere. Thus, students have more opportunities in terms of explanation, understanding by means of logical inference, and debates, in order to solve their reading tasks. The results of the study in general, and the results of this questionnaire, in particular, prove that cooperative learning encourages the students' active and interactive learning, by creating a positive learning atmosphere. Students

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enjoy and engage in their study of English reading and speaking activities, while their confidence and motivation increase significantly. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire indicate that the students from the experimental group, being exposed to cooperative learning activities, displayed a positive reaction to the implementation of cooperative strategies in the teaching and learning process.

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