Students' Thinking about Out-of-Class Teamwork

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Abstract
This study is part of a large mixed-mode research being held at four state universities in Mexico that investigates teachers' and students' thinking about out-of-class teamwork. This paper presents the quantitative part of the study which focused on researching 178 students of the Bachelor of Arts in English Language Teaching program from a state university in the Northwestern part of the country. The method of data collection was a 6-point Likert scale questionnaire that included 44 statements. Descriptive statistics were conducted. Among the results are that students are well aware of the theoretical benefits of teamwork, in particular of the development of social and high-order thinking skills, but that group member's attitudes can regulate their degree of development. Moreover, students think that teachers do not intervene, make changes or provide assistance when necessary.

Keywords: Out-of-class, teamwork, student thinking, perceptions;

1. Introduction
Current approaches to education emphasize students' active participation at every step of their learning in which teamwork becomes a vital strategy for teachers to implement. However, studies evidence that the implementation of teamwork continues to be problematic [1]. Moreover, lecturing remains the most common way of teaching and it is the activity that uses most of the class time [2]. In Mexican universities, higher education teachers have been making a change from traditional teaching to modern pedagogy, thus implementing teamwork. This change has been challenging. Therefore, there is the need to discover what teachers and students think about out-of-class teamwork, particularly in programs where students are formed to be future teachers. Because of the great dimensions of students' research, this paper will limit to describe one study of the four universities.

2. Studies on collaborative work
Socio-constructivism, collaborative, cooperative and active learning emphasize the use of activities to be carried out in collaboration with other students in the group to pursue the goal of promoting a more profound and significant learning [3] but this is not just a matter of placing students into groups [4]. In this respect, authors claims the need for teachers to engage their students in a critical exchange of ideas in which they challenge, discuss and propose alternative ideas before reaching agreements [5]. Therefore, educational authorities and policy makers should place this learning strategy central in education [6]. Moreover, working in teams has been regarded as an important skill for the workplace and it is part of the 21st century skills for the new millennium [7].

However, some problems have been identified in the literature regarding teamwork and its implementation. First, students do not come with interpersonal and management skills [8] against higher education teacher expectations. A second problem refers to group formation since teacher-led selection is suggested in the literature [9] and it is not met. An additional problem relates to student degree of commitment. "Free riders" are team members that take advantage of the team's work who also cause "social loafing" or a reduction of effort in the group [10]. A last problem refers to students dividing the task and working individually without discussing any ideas [11]. These problems prevent effective learning to happen since the theories behind modern approaches are not being achieved. This study will present what 178 undergraduate students of the Bachelor in English Language Teaching's students of a state university from the Northwestern part of Mexico think about these problems.

3. Research questions
The study focused on discovering the answer to the following four questions:
   a) What do undergraduate students think about teamwork in general?
   b) What do undergraduate students think about out-of-class tasks?
   c) What do undergraduate students think of their performance as team members?
   d) What do undergraduate students think of their teachers' guidance?

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4. Method

As this study planned on surveying a great number of students, the quantitative approach was used to ask and collect quantifiable specific information from a large number of participants. The method of data collection consisted of a 6-point Likert-scale questionnaire. Respondents were asked to rate 44 statements in terms of their agreement. The scale ranged from 1 which corresponded to "totally disagree" to 6 "totally agree". The purpose of the items was to obtain the information to answer the four research questions. The students' responses were entered in a data file in the SPSS Statistics version 20 for Windows which was screened for errors and outlier cases. The reliability of the scale showed a Cronbach's Alpha of .85, greater than the recommended .7. Finally, data was subjected to descriptive statistics analysis.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 What do undergraduate students think about teamwork in general?

Table 1 evidences that the students agreed (from a range of 1 to 6) that teamwork develops cognitive and social skills and promotes interaction and integration among team members. They think teamwork is a skill needed in their future employment. Therefore, these students who are to become the future teachers are aware of the theory behind the approaches that encourage students' active participation. On the other hand, the lowest scores for these set of items suggest that team members do not discuss thoroughly their ideas and evidence the presence of "free riders" [10].

Table 1. Items for agreement on benefits of teamwork

Highest scored items	Mean	St. Dev.
Teamwork develops social skills.	5.11	0.88
Teamwok develops cognitive abilities.	4.86	0.962
Teamwork promotes interaction.	4.82	1.024
Teamwork prepares for the professional life.	4.76	1.086
Teamwork promotes the integration of team members.	4.55	1.058
Lowest scored items		
Teamwork is a good reflection of the development of homogeneous knowledge of the team members	3.98	1.278
Teamwork makes all of the students work	3.12	1.319

5.2 What do undergraduate students think about out-of-class tasks?

Noteworthy results are shown on Table 2. The first statement was the highest scored item in the whole questionnaire which evidences that students think that committed team members are crucial for teamwork to be effective since they need to work together in order to reach a common goal [2]. The second item shows that students are aware of the impact of team members' attitude on their individual grades, while the next one states the importance of teacher supervision. A worrisome result was the last item in this section which verifies that the students think the task should be divided in parts to be worked individually and later just put together [11]. The danger of using this strategy is that deep learning is at stake since only partial learning is being achieved contradicting the theory behind collaborative tasks [3]. On the other hand, the lowest means for agreement were two items which also reinforce the interpretation about the importance of team member commitment and real interaction between members to ensure good quality outcomes.

Table 2. Items for agreement of out-of-class tasks

Highest scored items	Mean	St. Dev.
Task performance depends on members' attitude	5.29	0.941
Teamwork impacts individual grades	4.79	1.106
Teamwork requires teacher's supervision	4.75	1.156
Task should be divided in parts between team members	4.47	1.354
Lowest scored items		

Tasks take advantage of each of the members' potential	3.86	1.215
Teamwork tasks are of better quality than individual tasks	3.56	1.23

5.3 What do undergraduate students think of their performance as team members?

The first item on Table 3 evidences the students' awareness of the need to work together, be committed and contribute as team members. Although they expressed having the skills to discuss and argument ideas, the results of the rest of the items evidence the opposite. It can be said that the students do not know what it is required as team members [8] because they divide the task to work individually and do not dare to report "free riders".

Table 3. Items for members' performance

Highest scored items	Mean	St. Dev.
The team members that work more are the ones that learn more.	4.96	1.126
Some prefer to work individually.	4.74	1.086
We divide the work and then we put it together.	4.74	0.918
We report that we all worked the same although it might not be true.	4.54	1.054
We know how to discuss, argument, add knowledge and experiences.	4.52	1.132
Lowest scored items	Mean	St. Dev.
We know how to work in teams	3.88	1.224
We present a better work in teams than individually	3.78	1.191
We are capable of working in teams	3.78	1.177

5.4 What do undergraduate students think of their teacher's guidance?

Students agreed that teachers explain well tasks and criteria used to evaluate teams (see Table 4). They also ask students to carry out tasks to be performed in class which is contrary to lecture-type lessons proving the teachers' move to a more collaborative pedagogy. However, concerning issues are that team formation is highly student-led which may cause the same people to share same points of views. Students also think that teachers do not prepare them for the tasks, supervise them or intervene when necessary which can be seen as a lack of interest on the teacher's part. The least agreed item evidences the importance for teachers to ensure that all of team members worked to prevent "free-riders" keeping the same attitude in future tasks.

Table 4. items for teachers' guidance

Highest scored items	Mean	St. Dev.
Teachers ask us to prepare oral presentations of a class theme.	4.85	0.986
Teachers explain the criteria to be graded since the beginning.	4.71	1.095
Teachers explain well when giving task instructions.	4.54	0.892
Lowest scored items		
Teachers carry out preparation practices in class before assigning tasks.	3.88	1.08
Teachers are the ones who select the members of the teams.	3.82	1.012
Teachers Intervene if necesary and change team members if necessary.	3.23	1.201
Teachers ensure that every team member contributed to the task.	2.98	1.21

6. Conclusion

The study evidenced that the problems regarding the implementation of teamwork stated in the international literature [1] are also present in Mexico. Teachers need to be aware that the goals behind the current methodologies they are pursuing are not being met since only partial learning is achieved. The implications that can be made from this study are that teachers need to develop the skills and abilities in students to carry out successfully out-of-class-tasks [6]. The second one is to guide the

students in the process during the task by setting team tutorial sessions to revise what the students are doing and how they are proceeding, offer guidance and intervene. And the last one is for curriculum developers to offer the spaces to enable teachers to carry out this strategies for effective and deep learning to take place since it will be time consuming.

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