

# Aprendizaje colaborativo aplicado a la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en Bogotá

## Collaborative learning applied to EFL in Bogotá

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## **Resumen**

Este artículo es un estudio documental sobre el impacto del aprendizaje colaborativo, que pretende determinar su efectividad aplicado en el contexto de la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en Bogotá, Colombia; ya que es considerado uno de los enfoques más adecuados para fomentar procesos de aprendizaje significativo de lengua en estudiantes de distintos antecedentes. Es imperativo diversificar los enfoques empleados actualmente en el aula y aumentar el interés de los estudiantes por el inglés como lengua extranjera. Debido a los diferentes ambientes para el aprendizaje colaborativo, se ha cometido un error al generalizar metodologías y adoptar otras extranjeras que no están diseñadas adecuadamente para el contexto colombiano. Por ello, el aprendizaje colaborativo puede ser un fructífero escenario de aprendizaje que una tanto contexto como enseñanza de lengua. La recolección de la información se centró en artículos de investigación publicados por universidades locales que desarrollaron sus propuestas en aulas reales. Los resultados muestran que el enfoque en aprendizaje colaborativo les permite a los estudiantes acercarse mucho más a

experiencias reales con el inglés debido a que es un método considerado con las necesidades de los estos, lo que les permite mejorar su desempeño en el idioma.

**Palabras clave:** Inglés como lengua extranjera, Aprendizaje colaborativo, Enfoque de aprendizaje, Bogotá

## Abstract

This paper is a documentary study regarding the impact of collaborative learning. It intends to determine the effectiveness of collaborative learning applied within the EFL context in Bogotá, Colombia, as it is considered one of the most adequate approaches to foster meaningful language learning processes in students from different backgrounds. It is imperative to diversify the approaches currently used in the classroom and enhance students' interest in EFL. Regarding the different environment and settings for meaningful learning, generalizing has been a recurrent mistake in EFL teaching along with the repetitive use of foreign methods which are not accurately designed for the Colombian context. Thus, collaborative learning can provide a fruitful learning scenario which combines context and language teaching. Data collection was centered in research articles and papers published by local universities which conducted, in most situations, case studies in real classrooms. Results are prone to demonstrate the success of the collaborative learning approach, as it is a mindful method which enables students to draw closer to more real experiences with EFL and enhance their performance with the language.

**Keywords:** EFL, Collaborative Learning, Learning approach, Bogotá

## Introduction

"Human capital is one of the most important axes of social development" (Sánchez, 2013). No doubt, in the globalized world we live in, that capital is in need mainly of soft skills and language dominance. Those are crucial abilities required for successfully participating in society nowadays. As far as language, English has positioned itself as the lingua franca par excellence. Thus, learning it has become an urge and necessity rather than a luxury as it is the chosen means of communication for intercultural exchanges in a variety of contexts. (Cogo, 2022). For that purpose, Colombia has designed different bilingual education programs throughout the country.

However, according to the EF English Proficiency Index (EPI) developed by EF Education First in 2019, Colombia went from being in the 60th position in 2018 to the 68th, ranging English level in the country as low, too close to the very low area (Portafolio, 2019). These preoccupying results reflect a difficult situation within the EFL teaching context in the country, and of course, the city. The traditional educational approaches are not providing the desired results and are insufficient for the 21st-century paradigm.

According to Scott (2015), the pedagogical frame for the present day has shifted considerably and is no longer compatible with memorization processes and simple procedures. As of now, critical thinking and problem-solving skills are crucial in the modern world. Thus, there is a need to enhance students' new competencies in metacognition and help them acquire knowledge by integrating it into their existing conceptual frameworks (meaningful learning). "Metacognitive development is also encouraged by problem-based learning activities that require peer collaboration. The process of collaboration provokes learners to consider new uses for knowledge with their peers and develop new insights for future application" (p. 3) Noticing Colombia's language development results, it is evident new methodologies are to be explored in order to enhance the country's performance in the FL. Then, collaborative learning applied in the EFL context in Bogotá, Colombia, might be one of the most effective approaches to address meaningful language learning in the classroom.

Particularly, collaborative learning "is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual efforts by students, or students and teachers together" (Smith and MacGregor, 1992, p. 11). This implies a responsible, conscientious, and cooperative knowledge-building process. As peer work is the foundation of the approach, both linguistic and contextual elements are combined to create a meaningful learning environment (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). In that scenario, "[...] students are actively involved in interacting with each other on a regular basis in an instructed mode." (Johnson, R.T. & Johnson, D.W., 1985). Thus, they are able to comprehend their differences which allows them to easily resolve social issues and conflicts that may emerge. The context here is vital, as well as the cultural characteristics of each individual. By fostering diversity acknowledgment and strengthening supportive environments, it aids in changing traditional settings in which rudeness and competitive behaviours are frequent.

As Contreras and Chapetón (2017) successfully described, some EFL teaching scenarios in public schools in Bogotá are very challenging. According to their “systematic preliminary observation of the EFL class at the public school” (of their interest), besides linguistic difficulties, they also encountered conduct problems. “First, it was noticeable that the students tended to be disrespectful and rude to each other and sometimes to the teacher. Second, students found it difficult to work in groups, to listen to each other, to help each other to accomplish a goal or to commit and engage in the activities proposed by the teacher, that is, group work problems—which have been widely acknowledged” (p. 136)<sup>1</sup>. Addressing and surpassing these situations needs a different approach in the classroom that allows tackling diversity and content at the same time. Dialogical techniques and focus groups are great strategies that can help to solve internal conflicts in the classroom and improve the learning atmosphere. Unfortunately, applying collaborative learning techniques is not sufficient to fully cover the students’ needs. It is also important to have adequate materials, resources, and syllabi so they can identify its communicative importance within their social surroundings.

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For instance, since 2006, Colombia has established associations with the British Council for instituting the “Basic Standards of Competence in Foreign Languages: English”. This framework establishes the expected competence level acquired by the students according to their school grade and level. These standards also set different requirements for ELT graduates who, in case of not complying with the international examinations and certificates, need to follow training courses designed by the Council and Cambridge University (Le Gal, 2018). The consequences of not having national certification processes and specialized training courses include the continuation of damaging colonialist discourses in the classroom, the obliteration of sociological and cultural specificities which may encourage fondness for the language in the students, and the commodification and corporatization of ELT materials and methodologies. (p. 163) For Colombia this situation means having “missed the opportunity to take ownership of its educational system by a long-term investment in its local community of ELT scholars and language teaching specialists” (p. 159).

According to Le Gal, materials are also part of the conflict. Most of the textbooks are edited in the U.S. and Great Britain, “[...] Therefore, they are not adapted to Colombian learners’ linguistic (syntactic, morphological), phonetic (phonologic),

<sup>1</sup> Also cited: Ruiz-Esparza, E., Medrano, C. A., & Zepeda, J. H. K. (2016). Exploring university teacher perceptions about out-ofclass teamwork. *Profile Issues in Teachers’ Professional Development*, 18 (2), 29-45. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/profile.v18n2.53364>

pragmatic, and sociocultural specific needs.” (p. 159). The incidence of both, methods and resources, end up creating teaching approaches and models that are not mindful of the student’s necessities and everyday context. This, along with other factors which vary from personal conflicts to age and living conditions in some cases, interact lowering the students’ motivation levels and discouraging them from continuing their learning pathway. Hence, the results found by EF Education First start to come together and are structurally justified. ELTs face the challenge of adapting their lessons and classrooms to the students’ necessities, sometimes with very little success due to the lack of proper training for that objective (p. 160).

The overall goal then, if Colombia wants to improve its bilingualism levels, is for students to access environments that enable a meaningful and comprehensive language approach. In the long run, those students will be able to fulfill active social roles with good FL skills, providing them with tools for higher social growth not only in the country but abroad. Meaningful learning is key in that sense. This concept involves “substantive, non-arbitrary incorporation of concepts and propositions into cognitive structure.” (Novak, 2002) That incorporation is situated within a continuum in which new knowledge is not only learned but articulated with already existing knowledge in the cognoscitive structure.

Ideally, these new concepts will go beyond the situated cognition traditionally found in rote learning. When learners are not able to transfer concepts acquired to different situations from the original learning one, knowledge becomes static, and it is not meaningful as the learner cannot adapt and shift it as needed. This fixation is heavily damaging to language learning. If language is the tool humans have to code meanings for events and objects around them, situated cognition will prevent the FL from being of any real use to learners (Novak, 2002). The ability to use knowledge comes from need and practice in its use. Collaborative learning comes into play again as it poses a great opportunity for using the FL in context. It may well be the classroom or a field trip from school the ones facilitating cultural traits to be involved in the learning process, creating a need to use the new knowledge. By shifting scenarios and reinforcing language usage in each, students will be more prone to actively participate in the process and meaningfully acquire it in their everyday lives. (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

## **Methodology**

According to this project aims, this article is within the qualitative research framework. As it intends to understand a phenomenon through documentary revision, the overall process is a descriptive one. Qualitative research normally adheres to the premise of reality laying in different angles depending on the subject involved in a phenomenon. Meaning that there are multiple standpoints for a given event (Kielmann, et al., 2012). As the experience in each classroom in Bogotá is different, the effectiveness intended to be described may vary and cannot be explained under a statistical and mathematical lens by only revising data from previous descriptive studies. This focus also allows to give broader explanations on social inquiries and to identify meaning-relevant “kinds of things” in the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Therefore, this study’s approach is inductive as it is an adequate one. In this case, the data collection process needs to be organized as it includes extensive and varied information. By summarizing it into brief formats, the revision task becomes easier and direct. This permits to establish clear connections between the research objectives and the findings from the data collection in a cross-referencing analysis. (Thomas, 2006).

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In this case, the effectiveness of collaborative learning applied within the EFL context in Bogotá is determined through a data review of previous research. Hence, specific criteria were set to select the data for analysis. The pertinent information needed to be included in studies that must have been conducted by researchers associated with a university institution. Moreover, each study must have been conducted in Bogotá, Colombia, following a case study in a school either private or public, and the research must be dated after 2011. After contrasting 3 article studies, the findings of the review are discussed as follows.

## Discussion

The first research study analyzed was *Collaborative Inquiry in the EFL Classroom:*

*exploring a school-related topic with fifth graders* by Gómez, J. (2018). This study was carried out at Codema School with a group of 36 fifth-grade students between 10 and 12 years of age. The study was organized in cycles which allowed the researcher to implement an inquiry project related to a student’s topic of interest in the language classroom. The second one was, *Transforming EFL Classroom Practices and Promoting Students’ Empowerment: Collaborative Learning from a Dialogical Approach* by Contreras, J. and Chapetón, C. (2017). It was conducted

in Bravo Páez IED public school. In the study, 30 students from seventh grade between the ages of 12 and 15 with basic/low English level, participated during sixteen weeks in a pedagogical intervention. The final study corresponded to *Cooperative Structures of Interaction in a Public-School EFL Classroom in Bogotá* by Parga, F. (2011). This research included a large group of students from eighth grade. With a total of 38 participants, the goal set was to implement cooperative or collaborative learning as a tool to cope with behavioral and social conflicts presented in the class and help them enhance their oral skills.

### **Healthier learning environments**

In all three cases, findings are intimately related to classroom environment enhancement. Peer and group work allowed students to both, reinforce language skills, mainly oral, and repair or create better coexistence relations which by the end of the studies, fostered a healthier learning scenario in every participating classroom. Constant feedback from the students played a key part in the results. In that sense, assertive communication was also a target to address in every case. Students' comments aid in directing and analyzing the effectiveness of the approach adopted in all three schools. In Parga (2011), students expressed a significant improvement in their learning process when they diversified their normal work partners. It increased their motivation and interest to learn English<sup>2</sup>. For example, a student asserted: "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" (p. 26).

In Gómez (2018), students expressed that organization was key to successfully accomplishing all the activities: "Aprendimos que tubimos que trabajar en equipo para organizarnos y estar bien todos isimos nuestra parte y todo salió bien" (Data source 1, p. 255)<sup>3</sup>. The inquiry technique applied by the author, allowed her to observe clear improvements in the classroom environment: "Collaborative inquiry promoted peaceful attitudes between students as it allowed them to acknowledge the others and their interventions as important" (p. 255). Soft skills such as attentive listening became relevant for students. They acknowledged throughout the learning process the importance of taking into consideration others' opinions as they were working as a team towards the same objectives. All three authors in this regard, agreed that responsibilities and differences need to be clear so they can be mediated between all other aspects and the goal stu-

<sup>2</sup> Students' remarks were registered in both L1 (Spanish) and L2 (English), this to facilitate them to express themselves and to communicate accurately their thoughts on the activities they carried out. in Gómez, J. (2018) and Parga (2011)

dents need to achieve in the required task. This elicits peer recognition and cooperative attitudes that help to improve learning outcomes.

Another important dimension for problem-solving purposes, as discussed by Contreras and Chapetón (2017), is the dialogical one. When ideas and thoughts are expressed with the clear goal of co-constructing knowledge, is necessary to deviate from the traditional teacher-centered or grammar-centered practices. This compels the entire class dynamic to move to student-centered methods, turning each student into active participants in their learning process. For this, during their cycles' implementation, authors encouraged students to express themselves either in L1 or L2 (due to their low L2 proficiency). Their findings are consistent with those of the other two researchers. Particularly, the authors highlighted:

[...] the teacher guided and provided spaces where the students could participate, express their opinions, and reflect; promoting a dialogical process where all participants contribute to make decisions and develop a mutual learning process that transforms the classroom into a place of social construction and equal participation. (p. 140)

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Also, students expressed feeling more comfortable and secure in the classroom. They felt important to the teacher and expressed that, for the very first time, a teacher was mindful of what they needed and were thinking about. (p. 139).

All of these considerations aim in the same direction: mindful and caring classroom environments prone students to be more attentive and open to participate and get involved in their learning process, in this case with the foreign language. The advantage of working with languages is that, as discussed above, they are the tools humans have to code meanings for events around them. This scenario poses a perfect opportunity to reinforce oral communicative skills, and depending on the activity, written skills as well. As students showed more willingness and compromise with the process because they felt important in it, linguistic and communicative goals were easier to meet. Learning, then, goes from being a routine obligation at school to being something interesting and fun to do, allowing students to smoothly integrate new concepts into their pre-existing structures.

## Changing paradigms and tools

<sup>3</sup> "We learnt that we had to work as team to organize ourselves and be okay together. We did our part, and everything turned out good". (Article author's translation. There is no English version in the original publication).



After setting great opportunities for openness in class, it is also recommended to modify subjects and how they are developed so as to comply with the approach proposal. Contreras and

Chapetón also emphasize on the importance of drawing closer the topics to each student's reality. In their proposal, they not only addressed the seventh-grade traditional content on the syllabus but also included ones related to personal and social issues. For instance, topics such as personal information, likes and dislikes, and professions were more challenging and interesting for them as they needed to retrieve their own perspectives so as to participate in the class work. Of course, this also required putting aside a few traditional textbooks and materials not accurately designed for these types of scenarios in which language teaching needs to go beyond the linguistic elements.

On Parga's part, in his research (2011), he found it is very important to analyze both, students' verbal and non-verbal language to better understand and glimpse how the process is carried out by each one of them. These observations are useful for determining the most appropriate course of action in class development under the teacher's guidance. According to these observations, it is necessary to redirect the learning process, if needed, and use it to improve future lessons and group work exercises. The author does not make any specific remarks regarding textbooks materials used during the pedagogical intervention, however, in none of the activities implemented during the collaborative cycles, materials of that nature were included whatsoever. It is not clear why that is, but it is possible it might be due to the incompatibility of the materials and their objectives with enhancing primarily oral skills and sub-skills in students which also happen to have serious coexistence issues in the classroom.

Gómez, J. (2018) does not incorporate this topic during her considerations and research with her 5th-grade students. Her interest lies in the improvement of classroom dynamic and peer interaction to foster meaningful learning scenarios which will aid the students to have a better understanding and appropriation of English during their lessons. The literacy considerations the author poses are unrelated to the means used to work these abilities and are rather focused on the student's competence to convey meaning<sup>4</sup>.

## **Meaningful learning**

Like the first convergence discussion point for the three studies, meaningful

learning is the final cross-cutting finding among them, regardless of grade and school. All authors coincide on the significant importance of having an appropriate learning environment and classmates; if not perfect, at least peaceful interaction to address more effectively language learning. It also fosters meaningful experiences that will help students nurture a better relationship with the foreign language and possibly, not find later any disruptive situations which might draw apart the learner from the English language.

Some of the principles adopted by Gómez are clear on posing CL predominance over traditional practices which enables to “tak[e] language learning beyond linguistic structures via classes focused on personal and social knowledge.” (p. 251). This claim implies adopting Vygotskian notions on cognition where knowledge is “constructed and displayed by social and material contexts” (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, as cited in Gómez, 2018). The discussion brought by Parga in his group study also supports the importance of peer revision, peer correction, and peer feedback (social context) in reinforcing knowledge in non-traditional classrooms. Here, the concept of learning as a social construction circle back to the consideration of Vygotsky’s cognition ideas proposed in 1978; the most important one, the Zone of proximal development.

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Parga's results of the final cycle applied with his students show a significant improvement in their oral skills. Students were more proactive in speaking in front of their classmates and visibly made efforts to convey meaning using the resources and tools available to them in L2, and if necessary, in L1 or non-verbal communication. Students also improve their abilities to separate facts from opinions, summarizing, and supporting their ideas to a greater extent than before (2011, p. 30). Some of the most important speech traits developed are fluency and accuracy. It is important to mention that written skills are also important to reinforce, nevertheless, this is not the area the study was focused on.

To complement the previous, in Contreras and Chapetón’s study, researchers found:

“The analysis of data showed that the activities developed in this study broke with the traditional banking model of education (Freire, 2002; Freire & Shor, 1987) where knowledge was transmitted by the teacher and the classes were focused on linguistic components of the language. By means of dialogue, a meaningful learning environment was developed.” (p. 139)

<sup>4</sup> More importance giving to the communicative outcomes rather than to the physical means to obtain them.

In this pedagogical intervention, the authors not only changed the approach, but they also changed other variables in the teaching process. One of them was changing the traditional lesson venue (the classroom) and using other spaces in the school. By doing this, the authors observed that students were keener on participating in the activities and got more interested in classwork. They concluded this enabled them to “learn in a more meaningful way because they connected what they were learning with meaningful experiences” (p. 141). Another important aspect of this process is to effectively activate prior knowledge in the students. This is not only included in their “database” but also becomes relevant to the students, and that makes it more probable they will use the knowledge they have acquired, besides school, in their everyday life.

The final findings regarding students’ proficiency improvements are very similar to the ones obtained by Parga. Researchers were able to observe at the end of the intervention, significant differences compared with the students’ state at the beginning of the study. Assertive communication is strongly fostered in this approach. Notwithstanding, it was not an easy process at first. Due to negative experiences both, students and teachers had had with group work, during the initial stages, the process was not taken seriously by many of the students. This changed as time went by, leaving another important consideration for future implementations: it is important to empower students and create a sense of belonging from day 1, to facilitate cooperation and openness to try new strategies in teaching and learning.

## **Conclusions**

As discussed, language is a social process and product that needs to be taught bearing in mind the students’ background and needs if we intend to meaningfully incorporate it into their daily lives. To meet this goal, it is necessary to examine the current EFL teaching context and implement distinct approaches from the traditional ones. Collaborative learning is a great strategy that might improve and motivate students in their learning process as it fosters peer work, contextualized instruction, and equates language teaching with useful social tools that aid in problem-solving scenarios.

Considering results obtained from all three case studies, it is clear that collaborative learning is an effective approach, not only to language learning but also to cope with different challenges presented in the classroom product of distinct

backgrounds, misunderstandings, and deteriorated relationships between students and teachers. Accurately implemented, CL offers a great opportunity for fostering critical and social thinking in the students, and at the same time, allows to address fluency and accuracy in the foreign language. It compels all those involved in the classroom to pay attention to the other and themselves to better participate in the learning process. As Contreras and Chapetón found: "The students' interest, participation, and engagement in the different activities were more evident because their voices, knowledge, and experiences were recognized and taken into account in the English class" (2017, p. 140). When students recognize each other as active participants in everyone's learning process, they take responsibility and interest in it. Decision-making is an important part of the progress as shows students are not passive agents in their knowledge acquisition and construction.

The transdisciplinary usages of language allow the English classroom to be turned it a caring space in which students can express themselves and work together towards the same goal. In this process, as Contreras and Chapetón found, qualities such as autonomy, self-control, and leadership are fostered in parallel to the language proficiency skills required for each grade level.

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In that sense, is possible to adapt the system's design to the specific needs in the classroom. For that, teachers and students have the liberty to intervene according to their roles and expectations.

Thus, students, as Gómez accurately described, "[...] became co-constructors in the process of adjusting the language curriculum to the communities." (p. 259).

The meaningful learning evidenced in the studies shows CL effectiveness as well. Following Gómez's remarks: "What happened in the language classroom transcended the boundaries of school because students had become inquirers for life." (p. 259). It is possible to infer the resources developed in language lessons were implemented also in other scenarios. Skills reinforced in Parga's study are easily adapted to other contexts at school and in real life. He is confident that "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." (p. 33). With this evidence, is accurate to affirm CL fosters meaningful learning and even though it is situational it does

not remain situated.

Finally, it is important to mention the lack of evidence these studies showed regarding the EFL teaching context in the country. With the information here presented, it is not possible to determine the specific incidence or affectation of the materials, poor teachers' training, and imported design of the EFL teaching practice in students' learning deficiencies, hence, it is not possible to corroborate the initial standpoint in this regard. Withal, the necessity of changing traditional paradigms in English classrooms to respond to the new students' requirements, is reason enough to suggest the insufficiency of the models to successfully meet bilingual goals in Colombia. To further discuss this idea, is necessary to conduct a specific research project. No doubt, it is imperative to keep fostering and facilitating thoughtful learning experiences and environments for students to eventually, be able to overcome and significantly improve results like those obtained by the country in 2019.

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