

## Improving ESL Teaching and Learning Through Living Educational Theory Research at the University Level

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### Abstract

The present inquiry is based on the data, text and findings from my Ph.D. project. I have used the Living Educational Theory approach to improve my English as a Second Language (ESL henceforth) teaching practice and produce knowledge from questions such as How do I improve what I am doing? This paper reports a classroom-based action-research study conducted in a university in Pakistan, where I teach ESL in large compulsory language support classes. I aim to find an accessible solution to the problem that the majority of students are not autonomous or motivated and do not actively engage with the learning process in these classes and, therefore, they fail to make satisfactory progress with their language learning.

Through this inquiry, I narrate the processes and procedures, which were used to improve the situation with my students and colleagues. The findings come from two phases: the situational analysis and the intervention. I used a highly structured approach to group work, involving permanent groups and carefully selected cooperative learning activities and, hence, helped students to increase their motivation and engagement in English language support classes at the University level. From the overall inquiry and the use of Living Educational Theory research, I claim that a living-educational-theory may be a very effective methodological approach for improving one's own academic practices and also student autonomy, motivation and engagement with ESL learning activities.

**Keywords:** living-educational-theory; Living Educational Theory research; English; ESL; Improvement; Action research.

## 1. Introduction

This paper presents an account of using an action research living-theory approach to improving my teaching of English language in order to enhance student motivation and autonomy in Language support classes at the University of Sindh, Pakistan. I started to teach at the Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro Pakistan in 2003 as a visiting ESL teacher. I was required to teach English language support classes to undergraduates in various disciplines at the university. In 2005, I became a Research Associate on contract. In 2007, I became a permanent lecturer and would teach English literature and English language support classes.

Before embarking on my action research-based Ph.D. on how to improve my ESL teaching and my students' motivation and autonomy with ESL learning, I always asked myself similar kind of questions to Whitehead's (2009) question, i.e., *How do I improve what I am doing?* The questions I asked myself might be different but had the same underlying idea. For example, I asked myself:

"Why does my teaching not make a difference? Why do my ESL students remain passive and lack motivation? Why do my students not improve their English Language skills? How can I improve my teaching methods and students' motivation within ESL learning? Why do my students not take responsibility for their ESL learning and why do they depend on teachers most of the time?"

I assessed my teaching and my students' learning by following Whitehead's (2009) idea of a Living Educational Theory approach to action research. According to Whitehead (2009), Living Theory begins with the values that affect practitioner-researchers, who then engage in an investigation into how those values might be experienced and practised more effectively. They evaluate their actions through the accounts they provide of their learning, using evidence gained in the process of their inquiry to validate their account. By adopting a Living Theory approach in my research, I will offer an account elaborating what concerned me, and why; what I selected to do and how I assessed the educational impact of my actions; and, lastly, what I concluded and what the results of my evaluation were, and what evidence I could offer to authenticate my results (*cf.* Whitehead & McNiff, 2006).

According to Whitehead and McNiff (2006, p. 25), the initiating point of our research is when "...we experience ourselves as living contradictions when our values are denied in our practice". It was when I found that my English Language teaching was not making any substantial difference. I always used to think that the methods applied in western countries such as role-plays, group/pair works were effective. However, when I attempted to use these, I faced disappointment. It persuaded me to go back to lecturing. I felt that, since the number of students in ESL classes of Pakistani Public universities was very large (70 or more students in each class), it would be difficult to use the methods practised in western countries, where the number of students in ESL classes is much smaller.

This inquiry follows the basic framework of action research. It starts with Reconnaissance. Reconnaissance in the present study includes my personal critical thinking and observation, literature review and the empirical situational analysis (Student-teacher interviews). Based on the results and reflection gained from Reconnaissance, I selected and

adapted the two strategies of cooperative learning, namely *Student Team Achievement Divisions* (STAD) and *Think Pair Share* (TPS) for intervention. In the Action phase (intervention), I first orientate students and teachers for the intervention. After the orientation, I implement these two strategies in my ESL class for a whole semester (18 classes in total). At the end of intervention, I conducted final evaluations with the help of student-group interviews and then present my research claims and their significance.

## 2. Reconnaissance: Critical Thinking

I always observed that only a few frontbenchers were motivated to learn, and others were not. I thought their lack of motivation might be due to the influence of the teaching method used. I actually thought that an interactive method of teaching might change their attitude and motivate them to learn English. Since I teach English in the contexts where teaching is done through the traditional teaching methods such as the lecture and grammar translation methods, and the teacher plays as an authoritative leader and students submit to him/her, it is important to introduce learner autonomy. Through learner autonomy, students are empowered to contribute fully, and to encourage others in the group to do the same (Walton, 2011). I planned to enhance students' autonomy through the use of cooperative learning, which is a structured approach to group work. I believe that learner autonomy motivates students to engage with learning and hence can collectively facilitate a process that engenders real development; this can only authentically be achieved in an environment where everyone has equal rights and opportunities to participate in decision-making. However, the challenge was how to use interactive methods with such a large number of students in one class to promote learner autonomy and disengage from the traditional lecture-style of teaching.

My living-educational-theory actually springs from my use of action research in my Ph.D. project as Whitehead (2008, p. 107) argues:

“One of the distinguishing characteristics of action research from action learning is that the researcher must make public the story of their research in a way that is open to others to evaluate its validity. A living theory methodology includes the processes of validation.”

In 2011, I was sent to Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, England, to do my Ph.D. under the Faculty Development Program by the University of Sindh, Jamshoro where I currently work as an associate professor. This gave me the opportunity to investigate my teaching and learning. My initial study and meetings with my supervisors led me to the idea of using action research. This is where my commitment to action research and Living Educational Theory began. My supervisors gained the understanding that I actually wanted to improve the situation of ESL teaching at my university, which was directly related to my colleagues and my teaching. Therefore, my supervisors suggested that I use action research because it aims to improve teachers' teaching and students' learning. However, in the beginning when I started to read about action research, I was anxious about the generalization (wider application) of my research work. Fortunately, later, when I delved deep into Living Educational Theory methodology, I found that it actually helps to look into one's own educational practices and narrate the story of change we bring in our practices, thus, creating a theory (Whitehead, 2009). Hence, my attitude to action research changed

because I was going to tell how I attempted to bring a positive change into my own pedagogical practices.

### 3. Research Design

For this inquiry, I use qualitative data from my Ph.D. project gained through student interviews, lesson evaluation forms, class observations and pictures as the evidence of my practices. This was an action research project; therefore, I aimed to enhance my own teaching and student engagement and motivation in the language-learning process in large ESL classes in a Pakistani university. Through the present study, I show how I have improved my own pedagogical practices and student autonomy, motivation and participation with English learning processes at a Pakistani university where I work as an associate professor. My initial understanding, questions and exploration (See Section 1 Introduction) led me to discover that, due to my own teaching practices which rarely involved students in the learning process, the students were rendered dependent, unmotivated and therefore disengaged. I, therefore, am chiefly addressing the following research question:

“How can I change my teaching practice to improve students’ motivation and participation with the learning process in my large university ESL classes?”

I began to understand my teaching in terms of Freire (1972) who argues that the oppressed must select and name their world. In my situation of teaching and learning, I would say lecturing can make the teacher as the authoritative ruler, and the students as the oppressed without the right to speak and interact. My research focus is personal, on me and my participating students; and Freire (1972) convincingly argues that participants need to use a thoughtful posture by examining and experiencing their situations critically, and by inquiring and construing personal experience through dialogues with others.

Furthermore, Bruner’s (1996) theory of learning (people making sense of themselves through language) helps me in my study. According to Bruner (1996), by narrating our stories about our lives, we may construct our lives. Hence, the one who knows this is indivisibly connected to the knowledge-making process and this process of knowledge-making is known as a dynamic, creative, interpretative process. By using this process of narrating and re-narrating of stories as a research method, I facilitated a model to construct professional educational knowledge (See Beattie, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In addition, by introducing the lens of literature to the cyclical narrative process, I developed my professional knowledge. Theory and practice are integral to my approach because, as Zwozdiak-Myers (2009) argues, personal sense and comprehensions are interpreted when we place them alongside concepts and accounts of practice and theories. Thus, with this kind of narrative research investigation, I and my participants can make our teaching-learning experiences in education heard and lived (Beattie, 2000; Clandinin, 1986). These kinds of researchers openly challenge the old-fashioned perspective of educational training, in which becoming proficient in some methods of teaching based on an external theory is given precedence over internal theory based on personal experience (Whitehead, 2009; Elliot, 1991).

For example, Sullivan (2006) reports the narrative accounts of her teaching of traveller children through an action research methodology and finds how she:

“...enabled them to take ownership of that knowledge, and how this resulted in an improvement in their learning, as well as in the emergence of a more confident attitude in their approach to learning. In the process, I came to a realisation of the value of enabling children to contribute to their own learning, as opposed to presenting them with a body of ready-made facts to be assimilated” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 9).

By obtaining experience, confidence and learning to challenge, interact, probe and rationalize their lived practices and experiences (Whitehead, 2008; 2009), teacher-researchers may bring change in their teaching approaches, beliefs, perceptions, concepts and principles. I therefore followed Whitehead’s Living Educational Theory and created my own living-educational-theory by narrating my experience of engaging my students in the learning of language through the use of cooperative learning within the framework of action research. However, throughout the conduct of the project, I was often guided by the research question recommended by Whitehead (2008; 2009), “*How do I improve what I am doing?*”

In western countries, education is constantly changing and developing to meet students’ needs (Sakui, 2004; Khan, 2007; Hiep, 2007). I believe it to be essential to adopt such an approach to education in Pakistan, to transform the current out-dated and disadvantageous educational practices, which are detrimental to students’ learning because they focus on teacher-centred pedagogical approaches. Therefore, learners remain passive and dependent, and do not become autonomous. I have attempted to generate my own practical theory of how a more democratically comprehensive practice of education can have a transformative effect on my teaching and students’ learning (*cf.* Sullivan, 2006). For the evidence of the current study please see sections 6, 8 and 9 below.

The theoretical influence on my approach to action research was Living Educational Theory. According to Whitehead (2008):

“A living-theory is an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work” (p. 104).

In discussing the notion of Living Educational Theory, Whitehead (2008, p. 112) explains that an action research cycle is initiated when the teacher-researcher notices a discrepancy between their educational values, *i.e.*, how they believe education, and their actual practice, should proceed.

In my own case, for example, my action research project grew out of my awareness that, although I believe that students develop their language skills through practice with feedback, I was not finding a way of enabling the majority of them to practise their language skills in order to improve the target language in my classroom. In the process of investigation, action-researchers articulate and clarify their own values; these “values flow with a life-affirming energy and are expressed in the relational dynamics of educational relationships” (Whitehead, 2008, p. 112). This view underscores the significance of the distinctiveness of each individual’s living learning and teaching theory in refining practice

and producing knowledge (Whitehead, 1989; 2008). The Living Educational Theory in action research emphasises the prominence of 'individual creativity' in contributing to enhancing the practitioner's practice and understanding of "... historical and cultural opportunities and constraints in the social contexts of the individual's life and work" (Whitehead, 2008, p. 103). In my case, how I emphasised my individual creativity can be seen in sections 6, 8 and 9.

I intended to improve my teaching and students' learning in relation to the acceptance of the fact that these cannot be separated from societal values and norms. I probed into my own practices and looked for better models of teaching that would fit my context. I also investigated the English language teaching and learning practices in large classes mostly at the institution where I teach. I found that the existing pedagogical methods could not significantly improve students' language skills and concluded that an adapted student-centred approach could help enhance student autonomy, motivation and participation (see sections 4 & 6 for evidence). I believed that student autonomy and motivation might lead them to an enhanced participation. Therefore, when student participation with the target language learning increases, it improves their knowledge and language skills.

Finally, in the process of my study, I have tried to follow the advice of McNiff (2007) who argues that, by researching their own practice, practitioners can:

"... show the potential significance of their work for innovative forms of practice, and for showing the methodological rigour of the research processes they used to investigate how they could improve their practice. By extension, they can explain how they are defining themselves as morally committed practitioner researchers, who are realising their capacity to contribute to debates about quality in practice..." (p. 24).

Accordingly, action research served me in three ways: firstly, it helped me to address the problematic educational settings in my own institution; secondly, it improved my personal knowledge; and thirdly, it assisted me in bringing vitality to the natural settings and conditions in which I work.

Action research was used to implement and evaluate cooperative learning in ESL classes at the university where I teach, through the cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. I based the study on the approach of McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead (2003). I started my project from the general recognition that my teaching did not sufficiently help students engage in language learning processes. I found that many students were dependent on teachers even in terms of language learning. Moreover, due to a traditional lecture-style of teaching, students remained passive and did not attempt to engage with language learning by asking or participating. I then considered what I was doing, how I was teaching my ESL classes, why my teaching was not helping enhance students' participation in learning, and what I could do to improve my teaching and student participation given the available resources. My assumption was that participation is a prerequisite for successful learning. Thus, this process, based on my students' and my lived experiences, helped me to probe the weaknesses of my educational practices and improve them with newer and more effective methods (see sections 4, 6, 8 and 9 for details and evidence).



## 4. Reconnaissance: Literature Review

I began the planning of an action-research cycle with reconnaissance, a term that was introduced by Lewin (1946). In the present study, following Tripp (2005), my reconnaissance included both a thorough review of the literature and a situation analysis, in which I analysed the immediate context/situation of the project. I began to understand my current situation by examining the literature on ESL teaching and on co-operative learning in large classes, as I shall now explain.

### 4.1 Large Classes and ESL Teaching

In the context of where I teach, the classes are very large with more than 70 students in each English language class. Therefore, I initially started with a review of literature on large class teaching and learning to understand the phenomenon completely and to reach a solution. The literature on large classes concluded that the large size of these classes creates management issues for both teachers and learners, and teachers were unable to use student-centred learning methods which could enhance student engagement (Kumar, 1992; Shamim, 1993; Panhwar *et al.*, 2018). Due to these issues, teachers could not use student-centred learning methods and so used lecturing, even for teaching language classes (Shamim, 2011; Ahmed, 2012; Panhwar, 2016). However, both teachers' and students' perceptions suggested that group work could be the best solution to addressing the problem of student passivity (Panhwar, 2016; Panhwar *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, the literature suggested that teachers did not use group work very often because it created class management (discipline) issues (Jimakorn & Singhasiri, 2006; Bughio, 2013).

From the literature on large classes, I hypothesised that perhaps a more structured approach to group work might address the problem, thinking that cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994), which is a very structured approach with groups, might be the solution. In the next step, I reviewed the literature on cooperative learning. This review positively concluded that cooperative learning could be a more effective solution for improving student engagement and motivation for learning (Kyndt *et al.*, 2013; Kagan, 2014). However, both of these reviews suggested that, before the implementation of cooperative learning, its contextual adaptation is necessary (Opdecam & Everaert, 2018).

### 4.2 Cooperative Learning for Large Classes

The review concluded that cooperative learning enhances students' engagement and motivation with learning processes, which help students to share the responsibility for their own learning in organised ways. However, since cooperative learning was developed in the western world, it cannot be used in exactly the same form in other culturally different educational settings (Hiep, 2007). The review indicated that any Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method needs contextual adaptation before its adoption in different cultural settings, and many advocates of CLT emphasise the need for a careful situation analysis before deciding how to implement it in cultural settings other than the western culture (Harmer, 2007; Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1987). To further understand the situation, I decided to carry out a situational needs analysis of the large compulsory ESL classes at the university where I teach these classes.

## 5. Reconnaissance: Situational Analysis

The needs analysis constituted the third stage of my reconnaissance; it consisted of an exploration of the immediate context in which the intervention was to be carried out. I investigated the teaching and learning environment from the point of view of my learners and colleagues through semi-structured interviews from 21 ESL students studying in ESL classes of various disciplines and 11 ESL teachers teaching in various disciplines in the university. Interviews of students and teachers were used to explore their experiences of learning and teaching and their views about teaching methods, in order to understand the socio-cultural and the ESL learning and teaching environment in these classes.

## 6. Findings from the Situational Analysis

### 6.1 Traditional Teaching: Uninteresting Teaching Methods Used

The students of the English Language Support class, which I was given to teach were interviewed before the start of the intervention. The student views were consistent with the results of the literature review. The majority of students found teaching and learning of English boring and ineffective because it was conducted through traditional teaching methods, specifically lecturing (See Image 1 below). The following lines from students' interviews represent the ideas stated:

"...the teacher can't manage the class and understand the students and interact all students and can't give individual attention. Because if sometimes I want to participate or answer any question, the teacher can't see me or he ignores me. This happens because of the noise and mess in the class" (Male Student, Interview 1).

"The teacher should use activities and interesting exercise to engage students instead of reading from book and explaining. And other thing that the teachers should use group activities because the use of group work creates unity among the members of the group and the members take interest to compete with other groups and raise the name of their group" (Male Student, Interview, 7).



**Image 1:** Students being taught English language through lecturing



## 6.2 Group Work Suggested

However, the majority of students and teachers suggested that group work can be an effective method for making their English learning more interesting and successful. But my experience as stated earlier suggested that, whenever I tried to use group work, it introduced discipline problems in terms of disorderliness and noise due to the large size of the class.

“The teacher should use activities and interesting exercise to engage students instead of reading from book and explaining. And other thing that the teachers should use group activities because the use of group work creates unity among the members of the group and the members take interest to compete with other groups and raise the name of their group” (Female student, Interview 2).

“Pair work seems most useful, group is also useful and I do give them group work but the faulty seating arrangement makes it a bit difficult for me because the seats are fixed and not moveable we don't have space but again some three or four of them would be discussing sitting just in the horizontal rows there so they do discuss things there whereas pair work activities are ideal for because they can even be done with this seating arrangement, some two of them would be discussing things, doing their activities there and when they come up with their answers they share with the other pairs or the whole class and then the class discussion is there” (Male teacher, Interview 2).

An analysis of the situation allowed me to finalise the initial planning step for action, *i.e.*, the implementation of cooperative learning. I intended to investigate and plan an effective teaching and learning method for large ESL classes at my university as a solution. The analysis of the situation helped me in planning the initial action research cycle. Ultimately, based on the results of the situational analysis, I selected and adapted two cooperative learning strategies, namely *Student Team Achievement Divisions* (STAD) and *Think Pair Share* (TPS). I implemented these through action research cycles, as follows.

## 6.3 Adaptation and Orientation after Situational Analysis

The strategies I chose were STAD (Slavin, 1980) and TPS (Lyman, 1987). STAD is probably the most commonly used cooperative learning technique (Kagan, 2014; Johnson & Johnson, 1998, van Wyk, 2012). I took the basic stages of STAD as a foundation for the regular routine of my classes. I planned that each class would start with a short (5-minute) mini-lecture given by me, in which I would introduce the text to be studied and clarify the task to be carried out. Then the students would work in groups to complete the tasks provided in the course book or on a separate worksheet. Rather than finishing the class with a quiz, however, I decided to finish with 5-minute student presentations, in which group representatives, chosen at random, would present the answers agreed by their group or, where relevant, an account of their group discussion.

My second choice of strategy, *Think-Pair-Share* (TPS) (Lyman, 1987), is a development of pair work. In this TPS technique, students listen to “...a question or presentation, have time to think individually, talk to each other in pairs, and finally share responses with the larger group” (McTighe and Lyman, 1988, p. 19).

I chose to use a pair-based strategy as a way of maximising opportunities for all students to participate in the classes for two reasons. The first reason was that the main aim of my intervention was specifically to increase participation. The second was because I hypothesised that maximising participation would keep students involved and, thereby, reduce disruptive behaviour.

## **7. Taking Action**

In this section, first, I give details about the orientation given to the students and teacher-observers and then I describe and discuss how I conducted the intervention of cooperative learning with the repeated cycles of action research – and what I discovered.

### **7.1 Orientation**

Participants were oriented before the intervention. Orientation was used to introduce and train the student-participants about how the contextually formulated cooperative learning strategies would be implemented. Besides the students, teacher-colleagues were also introduced to the ways of class observation during implementation of the cooperative learning techniques because the teachers were asked to be the observers and witness the process of the intervention. The teacher-colleagues who consented to be observers were briefed on the observation instrument. The teacher-observations strengthened the trustworthiness and dependability of the inquiry because findings were not solely based on my own observations, but shared with others to make them more trustworthy and dependable.

The main participants were the students of my own compulsory English class at the Institute of English Language and Literature where I teach ESL classes. The student-participants numbered about 80 students. After that, the team-building process was carried out, in which the groups of participants were formed for the intervention.

### **7.2 Intervention-evaluation**

In the action stage of the study, I implemented cooperative learning through 18 cycles of action, observation, reflection and adaptation. In each cycle, I implemented STAD and TPS, and then used information from various sources in my reflections and evaluation. These sources of information included student lesson-evaluation forms, qualitative responses from other teachers who observed the lessons, video recordings of the classes and my own subjective experiences recorded in a diary. Using these various instruments, I observed, reflected on, and evaluated the process of implementation with my teacher colleagues and students, and finally planned the next cycle based on our combined reflection and evaluation. These well-organised cycles allowed me to investigate the classes stepwise in an iterative and developmental way.

## **8. Intervention and Results**

The flexibility of involving participants' views and reflection is likely to be the most effective aspect of action research to allow me to understand the phenomenon in a better way. Therefore, perhaps, the intervention of any new approach and method gives

satisfactory results when all the actors are involved in the process of reflection and change. All those involved in research conducted through action research are both participants and researchers in the reflective process, aiming at improvement of a specific practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Elliot, 1991; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Action research, unlike traditional research, does not separate the participants but rather it values their views and reflections (Elliot, 1991; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). The views and suggestions from observers and students did not influence the course of my research, but rather guided me to take the proper decisions while changing/improving the cycle and re-implementing it.

### **8.1 Students' and Observers' Overall Feedback**

In the present inquiry, regular feedback on the intervention from students and teacher-observers helped me to reflect and revise the next cycle. Daily lesson-evaluation forms were completed by students at the end of each lesson. This regular feedback helped me to reflect on the process with the student-participants and bring positive changes to it. The comments of the students and observers strengthened the reflective process and consequently directed me to improve the next cycle of the intervention process. In this manner, the validity and reliability of the study were further enhanced. Thus, throughout the intervention, I was assisted by the participants who facilitated the changes accordingly. The following are some of the comments that helped me to bring effective change to the process:

- Simple and short tasks/activities should be given, because of the limited class time.
- Cooperative learning should be made permanent and compulsory.
- Handouts should be explained clearly by the leader or the teacher.
- Students should be advised to show seriousness and responsibility
- Absence of some group members should be noted.
- At the end of the class the teacher should give mini lecture.
- Please suggest students to bring books. ...

### **8.2 Teacher-observers' Suggestions:**

- It takes a little long to set things up on. This must be controlled to utilize the whole time properly. Students must be shown this video to make them realise the time they miss out in the beginning (Observer 5)
- Few students were not sharing. Students were flexible to ask questions (Observer 6).
- Well, I think there is still need for some more improvement because there was a little gap between teacher and students (Observer 4)
- There in cooperative learning, the participants should all be equally involved in discussion and some of them are not into active discussion. The teacher should encourage them to share their views (Observer 11)
- Yes, the teacher is moving about the class, thus students' attention remains intact. The activity engages all levels of students. There isn't any off task learner at all. I find this activity very effective. It should be followed in all classes (Observer 12).

The quotations above by the student participants and teacher-observers helped me to refocus and revise my actions. This, along with my own reflective feedback recorded in my diary, further helped me to improve my next cycle. I felt after five or six iterations that the cycles did not need substantial improvement. The students and I started to enjoy

working through cooperative learning. From the intervention and its evaluation, the following themes emerged.

## 9. Evaluation of Intervention-results

After the intervention was over, the students of the intervention class were interviewed in groups. In total, five groups (with six students in each) were randomly invited for the interviews. These interviews added further insight about the intervention process, such as the use of action research and cooperative learning in ESL classes.

### 9.1 Increased Equal Participation and Interaction

Cooperative learning strategies and settings made it possible to give everyone a chance to participate. Students in the present inquiry reported that cooperative learning strategies enhanced all students' participation to "the greatest level" (EAB, male student, Interview 2). A lack of student participation was perhaps one of the main problems that both the literature and I found in the more traditional lecture-style of teaching. In traditional teaching, only a few bright students get a chance to participate because the teacher likes them or believes that only they have the knowledge, and others are not so bright:

"...in traditional class only those students are given chances to participate who are considered good by teachers or preferred by teachers" (ECE, female Student, Interview, 5).

Therefore, cooperative learning provided equal opportunities to all students for participation which is not possible in a conventional teaching style. Another student reported that cooperative learning:

"...is much better because...it gave equal opportunities to every student, but in traditional classes, only few good students were given chances to participate" (EBB, male student, Interview, 2).

The following comments represent the experience in more detail:

"...there was more and more student-student interaction which is absent in lecture class because in that students are only facing the teacher and listening, but in cooperative learning students in groups are facing to each other and interacting. And... also students interacted more in cooperative learning because they were not feeling shy to discuss before six students, but [in the] traditional class, they feel shy to speak before hundred students. And also the teacher (you) tried to interact with students all times, whenever they wanted you..." (EMF, female student, Interview, 3).

Similarly, many studies on cooperative learning are in line with this finding (*e.g.*, Cooper & Robinson, 2000; Smith, 2000). The use of cooperative learning within the framework of action research increased student participation and engagement with the teaching and learning processes, which resulted in the development of their language skills (See image 2 below).



**Image 2:** The cooperative learning setting engaged students in the learning process

## **9.2 Liberating Students from Traditional Methods and Establishing Learner Autonomy**

Therefore, through my own living-educational-theory, I liberated students from the more traditional methods of teaching a language and used instead a new method that created interest among students. Learners became more autonomous and were encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. The findings of the study suggest that cooperative learning enhanced a communicative environment that encouraged students to engage in the learning process in a significantly large ESL class of students. Every individual member has a responsibility to complete his/her own part of the task, and the discussion with his/her group members became an on-going process for further clarification.

The strategies were also designed so that every member was required to first work alone and then share and discuss with the whole group. A student stated:

“...they all performed their individual task well. We felt that we have three responsibilities..., first doing work individually, then in pair and then in group” (ECD, male student, Interview 4).

In their large traditional class, the seating arrangement (chairs facing the teacher) deprived students of communicating easily with one another. However, in their cooperative learning class, the group seating-arrangements and the steps of the techniques were specifically aimed at improving communication among students (see Image 3 below). They were more dependent on one another for their learning and asked for the teacher’s attention only when needed (*cf.* Johnson and Johnson, 2009). As argued by Thanasoulas (2000) the less the teacher power becomes, the more the learners learn confidently. Thus, cooperative learning proved to be one of the best CLT approaches to maximise student engagement in the learning process.

The following student comments from their interviews clearly reinforce the stated evidence practically:

“...in cooperative learning, students do not need teacher attention more because it is cooperation between students and also it tries to make us independent learners, you cannot be with us everywhere. As we all know that before cooperative learning, there were so many students who never interacted with one another and also with teacher, but cooperative learning strategies made it possible and student-student and student-teacher both interactions increased” (EAM, Male Student, Interview, 2).

“Cooperative learning was different from traditional classes because in traditional classes we only listened to the teachers or the few good students who always participated and dominated the class, but in cooperative learning strategies the weaker students were given chances to participate or let’s say everyone was given a chance to participate and share” (ECM, Male Student, Interview, 2).



**Image 3:** The teacher facilitating the learning process

### **9.3 Sharing is Gaining**

Students believed that when they shared ideas, they gained knowledge and imparted knowledge. During the sharing processes, students acquired a variety of new ideas which enhanced their knowledge. One student reported: “In cooperative group work, I learnt a lot by sharing my knowledge and getting knowledge from friends” (ESP, female student, Interview, 5). Students began to regard it as prestigious for them to share and gain knowledge. By contrast, in traditional class learning, they rarely shared and gained (see Image 1 above). A student reported:

“...it became the case of our prestige that...we should share and that really helps the group” (EDD, female student, Interview 4). Some students reported that by sharing their ideas they understood things more clearly: “...we share ideas with each other and we can easily understand the things” (ESN, female student, Interview, 4).

### **9.4 Strengthening Friendship**

Cooperative learning not only enhanced student academic skills and knowledge, but it also strengthened social connections in the shape of friendship. Students recurrently reported that it helped them make new friends and enhance social understanding with friends that made them feel good. A student reported that “I felt really good because I make a few new and nice friends” (JES, female student, Interview 2). Similarly, Cooper and Robinson (2000), in their meta-analysis, find that through cooperative learning, students strengthen community and friendship bonds while learning.

### **9.5 Motivation**

The use of cooperative learning motivated students to learn and encouraged them to assist one another in that aim, which ultimately resulted in enhanced learning (see Image 2 and 3). Cooperative learning strategies not only enhanced students’ knowledge and communicative skills, but it also motivated them to enjoy it and work harder. Students reported that they enjoyed working through a variety of activities. A student stated that he



enjoyed "...and got variety of activities which did not bore us' (EEB, male student, Interview, 2). On the other hand, from a lecture style, they became bored by listening to just one person's lecture, and they did not have any variety in either ideas or activities (see Image 1). The effect of working in cooperative learning was so motivating that students felt impelled to work, even if they were not in the mood to study: "...in cooperative learning I can say sometimes when you are even not in [*sic*] mood to learn you have to learn" (EFD, female student, Interview 4). The following student comments further detail evidence of how the use of cooperative learning motivated students:

"...in the first few classes we felt boring, but you kept motivating us, and when you gave us the gift of appreciation on our position we became motivated to learn more and work hard for the better results. Of course the activities like Think Pair Share and Student-Team Achievement Division were also very motivating activities. So the whole setting was motivating in the cooperative learning class" (EAF, female student, Interview 4).

"And sir the main difference between cooperative learning and lecture was that in the lecture teaching method we get bored in facing the same teaching style every day in which teachers come and speak, but in cooperative learning we did a variety of activities which we enjoyed, and did not get bored" (EEB, male student, Interview 2).

"Cooperative learning motivated me to learn and share. Negative point was that sometimes, activities were very easy so we did them before the time and then we had nothing to do, But when we compare cooperative learning with the traditional lecture style classes, it is much better because cooperative learning, because it gave equal opportunities to every student but in traditional classes, only few good students were given chances to participate" (EFD, male student, Interview 3).

In addition, the literature on cooperative learning is also highly supportive of this finding (*e.g.*, Cooper & Robinson, 2000; Smith, 2000; Tran & Lewis, 2012). For example, Chen (2006) finds through a Motivational Questionnaire that students enjoyed working in cooperative learning which reduced their fear and anxiety about participating in the whole-class teaching and that they were provided with a more relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. Long and Porter (1985) argue:

"Many students, especially the shy or linguistically insecure, experience considerable stress when called upon in the public arena of the lockstep classroom... In contrast to the public atmosphere of lockstep instruction, a small group of peers provides a relatively intimate setting and, usually, a more supportive environment in which to try out embryonic SL skills" (p. 211).

## 10. Discussion

In this section, I outline the discussion on how, with help of Living Educational Theory, I improve the situation *i.e.*, the ways of my teaching and student learning with the use of cooperative learning within the framework of action research.

### 10.1 Change and Improvement in Pedagogical Practices in Higher Education

The main contribution of this inquiry is about positive change in action brought about by action research. Through it, I claim that I have made an original contribution to the

implementation of cooperative learning through action research cycles (*cf.* Hughes, 1996; Sullivan, 2006). The use of Living Educational Theory in the present project, the action (implementation of cooperative learning) and understanding, together with its uses in collaboration through students and colleagues, have created new knowledge about pedagogical practices at my university. We found that the use of cooperative learning within the framework of Living Educational Theory and action research may effectively benefit our teaching and learning of English as a second language.

The students and I, as co-researchers, were part of the process of knowledge-generation because students were not merely participants but researchers, and were researching to find out better methods for their learning (*cf.* McTaggart, 1997). However, the knowledge created was internal and contextual. This may limit its generalization, but cannot entirely restrict generalizability in similar contexts (*e.g.*, Somekh, 2006; Gustavsen, 2008; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). McNiff and Whitehead (2010) argue that in “action research, the knowledge is knowledge of practice” (p. 187). The theory is embedded in the practice, and the practice itself offers explanation for why it takes the form it does. When the practitioner-researcher says that he has learnt something, he is making an original claim to the knowledge which was unknown before (Elliott, 1991; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

I have adopted a method, cooperative learning, to develop my own teaching practices. Cooperative learning has helped me to make my teaching more effective. Hence, I have created insight and theoretical understanding about pedagogical knowledge and Living Educational Theory by offering a fresh understanding of the implementation of cooperative learning through action research cycles, which can have resilient impact on my own and others’ teaching and learning practices (see Sections 6, 8 and 9). The knowledge generated through the processes is the knowledge of practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; 2010). Discovering how the action has furthered improvement becomes a method to generate knowledge (McTaggart, 1997; McNiff, 2007). I have contributed to knowledge because now I feel that I know something about cooperative learning, its use and benefits.

McNiff and Whitehead (2002) argue that claims of knowledge made in action research projects revolve around whether researchers and participants feel they know something in the end that they were not acquainted with before and can authenticate that knowledge. Although the knowledge gained might not be new for other people in other places, it is definitely new knowledge for me and my students. Therefore, I also contribute to the larger body of knowledge in the area of research related to teaching when I claim that I understand my teaching better than I did before (*cf.* McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). For example, my living-educational-theory is contextual and tries to address the research gap of a specific context connected to the researcher and the participants. Moreover, teachers and students having similar kind of situations and issues may benefit from my research. Thus, I can say that this research project is not only limited to my context and only benefit us *i.e.*, me, my students and my colleagues.

The rigorous methodology of action research coupled with Living Educational Theory has helped me to provide evidence to support my claims to knowledge. Action research methodological rigour in any study helps to strengthen the originality in claims to knowledge (*cf.* McNiff, 2007). McNiff and Whitehead (2002) argue that, when practitioners make claims of improvement in their practices, they are required to support their claims with evidence of

how they have improved and by what criteria they are making the claim. Thus, the well organised Living Educational Theory methodology in the present study provided evidence from a variety of instruments to support my claims.

Researchers and participants involved in action research theorise about their practices by asking questions about settings, action, and results and come to comprehend the associations between them (Whitehead, 2008). McTaggart (1997) notes that the theories developed by action researchers may be conveyed firstly in “the form of rationales for practices” (p. 36) and later, these initial rationales are subjected to critical examination through their collaborative action research processes. We (my students and I) created knowledge about our own practice and demonstrated “the transformative process of coming to know” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 104). I have illuminated what I expected to accomplish from the implementation of cooperative learning through action research and how I felt about what I have attained by citing critical examples from the data as evidence. Thus, I have presented my findings and explained how my students and I have generated our personal theories of practice from within the practice (*cf.* McNiff & Whitehead, 2002).

I involved my colleagues to further strengthen and validate my theories. Action research and Living Educational Theory, being systematic approaches to research, always require evidence from others such as students. The theories produced by action-researchers remain conjecture if they do not provide evidence for them which has been confirmed by others such as colleagues and students. McNiff & Whitehead (2002, pp. 97–108) argue that, in action research, the involvement of others as critical friends and validators is important for the validity and reliability of the data and findings. These critical others should function as critical examiners of the data. Based on their critical scrutiny, original claims to knowledge are made. The feedback given by my colleagues during the process of intervention worked as critical feedback and evidence to support my theories.

## **10.2 Significance**

The significance of this inquiry has emerged by challenging the large traditional class-teaching with the adoption of cooperative learning through action research. Many studies (*e.g.*, Coleman, 1989a; 1989b; LoCastro, 1989; McKeachie, 1986; Bughio, 2013) have found that the lecture-method keeps students disengaged and creates an impersonal atmosphere that makes them feel that they are disowned. Ultimately, students feel demotivated and lose their interest in learning. The cooperative learning strategies, STAD and TPS on the other hand, acknowledge student interaction and participation and allow them to perform as both teachers and learners at the same time (see Sections 8 and 9). Thus, the present inquiry is contributing to the scholarship of cooperative learning in two ways: first, through presenting the adapted forms of its two strategies, which can arguably be used in different settings of large ESL classes, especially higher education; secondly, the study might be taken as an initial step to encourage further adaptation and innovation in other cooperative learning strategies.

## **10.3 Adapted Cooperative Learning**

In addition, this inquiry has contributed to knowledge by presenting new adapted versions of STAD and TPS. Since cooperative learning strategies are aimed at small classes,

they need a careful contextual adaptation before their adoption in large language classes. The majority of the studies conducted on the implementation of cooperative learning did not adapt the strategies of cooperative learning contextually, which might have prevented the studies from gaining the desired results. To achieve the maximum benefit of these two cooperative learning strategies, they were contextually adapted, based on the results of the situational analysis. The contextual adaptation, for example the inclusion of presentations, tests and pair-work (TPS), in the basic structure of STAD, ignited the students' enthusiasm. Presentations were perhaps ultimately the most favoured form of adaptation. Students enjoyed presenting their group efforts in front of the whole class (see sections 6 & 8).

#### **10.4 CLT: Student Engagement and Learner Autonomy**

In addition, this inquiry has contributed to the field of communicative language teaching (CLT) in large classes. A closer inspection of the findings reveals that the cooperative learning techniques *i.e.*, STAD and TPS have been found to be some of the most effective CLT group work methods focusing on achieving the two basic objectives of CLT *i.e.*, communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and engagement (Allwright, 1984). Learning of a language always needs a communicative environment in which learners can involve and interact recurrently with one another and with the teacher to improve their language skills (Allwright, 1984; Savignon, 2002; Richards, 2006). The organisation of these strategies in the present study trained students to be sufficiently fluent and competent, so that they could convey their message effectively in the target language. These strategies allowed learners to take responsibility for their own learning (Littlewood, 1981; Allwright, 1984; Thanasoulas, 2000) in organised and structured ways. Students did not depend on the teacher and his/her notes, but rather they depended on one another for their learning. The structures and steps of the cooperative learning strategies encouraged students to engage in the learning process in order to learn and teach themselves, instead of simply relying on the teacher-lecture.

This inquiry thus implies that, although the teaching of ESL classes at my university comes with a constellation of problems, it can be made more effective with some effort on the part of teachers. For example, despite being a successful process, the inquiry was affected by many management problems. The management issues, which directly affected the process of intervention in the class, were concerned with classroom rules and routines. These issues included an uncooperative attitude of some group members, for example students not bringing their course book into the classroom, noise and other management issues, such as students' leaving and entering the room during the class. With the strict observance of the rules and routines, these problems were brought under control to a satisfactory level.

### **11. Conclusion**

The overall results indicate that I was able to establish a largely successful environment with the implementation of cooperative learning in the ESL class. I discovered that a fully planned implementation of cooperative learning can improve students' experience of and engagement with learning processes in large ESL/EFL classes. The structured nature of cooperative learning techniques helped and motivated the learners to interact with one another and with me more easily. With the help of cooperative learning, I

enhanced the autonomy of students and motivated them to learn and discuss; they felt encouraged to take responsibility for their own and others' learning. Therefore, all the students tried to master the subject-matter in two ways: firstly, they studied and reflected on topics individually as much as possible; secondly, they discussed the topics with their own group members. Moreover, due to the organised steps of these techniques, I was able to offer individual attention and feedback in a large-size class, which is very unlikely when lecturing. The study's results indicate that I was sufficiently free to give attention to those students who needed it. The assessment of my intervention offers strong evidence that, in comparison to the existing lecture method and with the help of cooperative learning techniques, I improved student engagement, motivation and autonomy in the large ESL classes at my university. I have also shown that there is the potential for positive change within the constraints of my pedagogic situation, and I look forward to building on this achievement in future research. Moreover, the Living Educational Theory and action research processes could be useful and successful for other researchers who are teaching large classes in similarly challenging circumstances.

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