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The purpose of this study was to determine the impact cooperative learning had on ESL students' participation in a second grade classroom, and to examine ESL students' attitudes toward cooperative learning. Key influences included: co-teachers, students, and researchers such as Johnson & Johnson (1999), Kagan (1995), and Ellis (2002). Four ESL students were observed over four weeks during both whole and cooperative learning group instruction. They were also interviewed after each observation to get a sense of students' attitudes toward cooperative learning. The data collection techniques included: observations and student interviews. Field notes, audio recordings, and observational rubrics were also used to document all verbal interactions made by ESL students and to record the frequency of their verbal participation. The results of the study indicated that ESL students participated more frequently during cooperative group learning than in the whole group; and students also increased their use of academic language during cooperative learning instruction.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND  
ESL STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION

by

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Cooperative learning continues to gain momentum as an effective classroom structure across the United States. More educators are valuing the benefits of cooperative learning strategies over those of a traditional teacher-centered classroom. Cooperative learning is the instructional model of students interacting together in small cooperative groups to achieve a common learning goal (Emmer & Gerwels, 2002). This type of student interaction is essential to the language development of ESL students. Cooperative learning allows English language learners (ELLs) to acquire language by negotiating for meaning and it gives ELLs the interactive learning structure to develop their academic language in content area classes (Ellis, 2005).

I have been interested in language development through mainstream content for many years. I'm especially interested in language learning in conjunction with literacy development because solid literacy skills are the foundation for learning in math, science and social studies. I've spent the last ten years as an ESL teacher in three public schools across the country. My teaching role, throughout the majority of these years, has been that of an ESL co-teacher in a collaborative setting. I'm a

firm believer in ESL/mainstream collaboration. Through collaboration, ESL teachers are able to gain a better understanding of the daily grade level routines, standards and academic expectations. As an ESL teacher, collaboration has taught me to hold my ESL students to the same high expectations as their native speaking peers. I also feel that ESL/mainstream collaboration is most effective during literacy instruction, especially in the primary grades. The literacy block at my school encompasses word work, phonics, strategy-based guided reading, individual reading conferences, reader's response journals, grammar, oral language, and listening centers. I have seen the positive effects of well-planned collaboration and co-teaching for teachers and students alike.

Currently I teach in a growing suburban school district that is trying its best to keep up with enrollment and a growing population of second language learners. This research takes place in a second-grade reading class that is co-taught by a mainstream teacher and me, the ESL teacher. The class is comprised of 22 students in total with a cluster of five ELLs. Most of the ELLs in this class are intermediate-level language learners that often struggle to meet the high demands of typical, grade-level, content material. The other 17 students are native English speakers. Although these 17 students encompass a wide range of academic skills, they are all fluent English speakers with fairly well-

developed language skills. I believe that these native speakers are developmentally appropriate models to assist the ELLs in further developing their English language proficiency because all the students in this class are the same age, with similar social skills and academic capabilities.

During the last school year, I observed limited interaction among all of the students in this class. I soon started to wonder how my co-teacher and I could work to increase student interaction in order to improve overall student achievement and more specifically, to further develop the English language proficiency of my ESL students. It is my hope, as well as that of my co-teacher, that purposeful cooperative learning strategies will move this second-grade, teacher-centered room to that of a student-centered class. Cooperative learning is important to the language development of ELLs because it gives them the interactive learning structure needed to improve their cognitive academic language proficiency (Ellis, 2005). In addition, research also shows that high levels of thinking and learning occur during cooperative learning activities (Kagan, 1994). This chapter describes the overlapping domain of cooperative learning and ELLs, my biases, and states the research questions.

## Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a student-led instructional model of students working in small cooperative groups to achieve a common learning goal (Emmer & Gerwels, 2002). In an article by Johnson and Johnson (1999), the authors described formal and informal cooperative learning. Formal cooperative learning groups can last for a class period, or for an entire unit of study. The goal of formal cooperative learning groups is often to complete a long-term project with the same group of peers. These formal groups are usually selected by the teacher and include students of varied ability levels. In informal cooperative groups, students work on a short-term goal. Students grouped in informal cooperative learning groups are usually selected on the spot by the teacher or by students themselves. Informal cooperative learning groups are often used to clarify a concept, answer a question, or to review a lesson. These temporary groups can last anywhere from one minute to an entire class period.

The benefits of a cooperatively-structured classroom far outweigh those of a non-cooperatively-structured classroom. Some specific benefits of cooperative learning described by Johnson and Johnson (1999) include: students exerting more academic effort, increased use of higher order thinking skills, greater retention of information, and the development of more positive relationships with peers.

Cooperative learning strategies are especially useful to ELLs in their acquisition of English because cooperative learning gives students a greater amount of language output than a typical teacher-centered classroom. For instance, Kagan (1995) argued that it would take over an hour to provide just 30 students with one minute of talk time. In contrast, if the students were in cooperative learning pairs, it would only take two minutes for every student to talk. Clearly, the amount of language output in a cooperative learning classroom far exceeds that of a traditional classroom.

Cooperative learning has also been shown to increase language development in ELLs. Second language learners engaged in cooperative learning simply have more language learning opportunities. Cooperative groups naturally modify language input, increase language output, and provide students the opportunity to negotiate for meaning (Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick & Wheeler, 1996). Cooperative learning used in content area learning also aids the in the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) of ELLs because students are interacting in an academic setting using content specific vocabulary (Ellis, 2005).

#### Research Biases

I am studying student interaction in the mainstream classroom because there seems to be limited interaction among students, especially ELLs, in a traditional teacher-centered classroom. This is important

because cooperative learning gives ELLs the interaction needed to develop their academic language abilities and more opportunities for higher levels of thinking and learning to occur (Ellis, 2005, Kagan, 1994). The goal for my language teaching this year is to increase the amount of time students spend interacting with each other on learning tasks. I, along with the support of my co-teacher, want to move this second-grade, co-taught classroom from a mostly teacher-centered model of instruction to a student-centered classroom. My hope is that through purposeful cooperative learning, ESL students will improve their English language proficiency and higher order thinking skills.

Clearly, I am biased toward the benefits of cooperative learning. I do believe that students engaged in purposeful, well-planned, cooperative learning indeed learn more and improve their interpersonal and academic language proficiency. I think cooperative learning is especially important in classrooms with second language learners. For example, a study by Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick and Wheeler (1996) found that English language learners engaged in cooperative learning received help with academic terms and concepts, produced academic language using specific content vocabulary, and received help with writing conventions. I believe that cooperative learning is a solid scaffolding technique to bridge the gap between what students already know and what they need to know to be successful in their grade-level learning. Cohen (as cited in

Emmer & Gerwels, 2002) emphasized the importance of students being able to make mistakes and to learn with their peers without unnecessary teacher interference. I think cooperative learning, in many cases, is more effective than teacher-led instruction.

### Research Questions

This research will investigate two main questions: 1) What impact does cooperative learning have on ELLs' participation in a second-grade, ESL/mainstream, collaborative reading class? and 2) What are ELLs' attitudes toward cooperative learning? These research questions provide the basis for my research.

### Summary

In this study I focus on the role of cooperative learning in one second-grade reading class. I, in collaboration with my co-teacher, want to move this class from a teacher-centered class to one in which students partake in cooperative learning on a regular basis. I want to find out how cooperative learning affects ELLs' participation in class. I also want to gain some insight into students' attitudes about different types of learning. It is my hope that this research ultimately provides us-mainstream, ESL and all educators-a greater understanding of the value of purposeful cooperative learning.

## Chapter Overviews

Chapter One introduced the research by establishing the purpose, significance and rationale for the study. Chapter Two provides a literature review of cooperative learning and second language learners. Some areas discussed include the important elements of cooperative learning, the benefits of cooperative learning in classrooms with second language learners, and some limitations of cooperative learning. Chapter Three describes the design of the research and the methods used to guide this study. Chapter Four reports the results of this study. Chapter Five reflects on the limitations of the study, the implications for future research and discusses my recommendations for the use of cooperative learning in classrooms with second language learners.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to determine how cooperative learning impacts English language learners' participation in the classroom and to investigate ELLs' attitudes toward cooperative learning. In the second-grade class in which I co-teach, there is limited interaction among students, especially ELLs. My purpose is to increase student interaction in this predominantly teacher-centered classroom. This is important because student interaction allows English language learners to acquire language by negotiating for meaning and it gives ELLs the interactive structure needed to develop their academic language (Ellis, 2005). In addition, numerous research studies show that high levels of thinking and learning occur during student interaction (Kagan, 1994).

This literature review describes cooperative learning and its essential elements. It also discusses the benefits and limitations of cooperative learning in the classroom and its role in language acquisition. Finally, this chapter identifies the gap in research that this study examines.

### What is Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative learning is the instructional model of students working in small cooperative groups to achieve a common learning goal (Emmer &

Gerwels, 2002). Student interaction is the key feature that sets cooperative learning apart from other types of learning. In cooperative learning students work in groups; in other instances, students receive a lesson in a whole group with the instruction primarily coming from the teacher (Webb, 1982). This type of instruction is referred to as teacher-centered instruction.

Johnson and Johnson's study (1999) described formal and informal cooperative learning. Formal cooperative learning groups can last for an entire class period or for many weeks. The goal of formal cooperative learning is most often to complete an assignment such as an experiment, learn new vocabulary, or to complete an entire unit of study. Another necessary part of formal cooperative learning is assigning students formal roles within the group (Kagan, 1994).

In informal cooperative groups, students work on a short-term goal. These temporary groups can last anywhere from one minute to an entire class period. Moreover, informal groups can be used to focus students' attention on a specific point, to check for understanding, or to summarize and close a lesson.

### Introducing Formal Cooperative Learning

The way in which formal cooperative learning is introduced to a class is critical to its success (Kagan, 1994). Clear behavior expectations need to be explained to students before engaging in cooperative learning

activities. Some of these expectations include: appropriate noise level, the importance of equal participation and the willingness to assist group members in learning (Cooperative Learning, n.d.). Assigning students various functions within a group is another essential part of introducing formal cooperative learning. In his book *Cooperative Learning* (1994), Kagan acknowledged the value of each student having a role. He stated that these roles need to change often to ensure each student has the opportunity to practice each function. There are a variety of cooperative roles students can have to facilitate a positive group experience. These roles are usually determined based on the overall learning task. Some common cooperative learning roles mentioned by Kagan include: taskmaster, reporter, recorder and encourager (Kagan, 1994). In addition, clear teacher-led instructions, learning objectives, and timelines are important components in the introduction of cooperative learning (Cooperative Learning, n.d.). Teacher and/or student modeling of the learning task and appropriate student behaviors will support students' understanding of these expectations. Finally, Kagan stated, "Teams of four are ideal" (1994, p. 4:2). He explained that teams larger than four tend to limit group participation and may become more difficult to manage (1994).

### Essential Elements

The essential elements of cooperative learning are well-researched, yet there are some variations among researchers. Several studies address these important elements and how they contribute to successful cooperative learning.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) identified five factors that impact the success of cooperative learning. They first described positive group interdependence as the perceived connection to others in a way that we cannot succeed unless they do. The second major component was individual accountability. This means that every individual plays a part in the success or failure of the overall group. Third, face-to-face promotive interaction occurs when individuals foster the success of others by helping, supporting and encouraging them. Fourth, interpersonal social skills of students contribute to a successful cooperative experience. Finally, they described group processing as the verbal interactions of individuals and the effect they have on achieving group goals.

Kagan (1994) noted four key elements of cooperative learning. First, he discussed the positive interdependence of individual students and groups. He also listed simultaneous interaction, equal participation by all members of the group, and individual accountability as essential elements of effective cooperative learning.

Slavin (1980) reviewed 28 studies conducted in elementary and secondary classrooms. He found that positive interdependence between individuals and groups is an essential element of cooperative learning. This type of group reward structure moves a classroom from a typical competitive reward structure to a cooperative one. He stated that in cooperative learning “one student’s success helps another to be successful” (Slavin, 1980, p. 316).

All three studies on cooperative learning share commonalities in their descriptions of the important elements of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan, 1994; Slavin, 1980). The major identified themes of cooperative learning are positive group interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous group interaction. A common acronym used for this learning structure is “PIES” (Kagan, 1995).

### Benefits of Cooperative Learning

The benefits of cooperative learning are documented in various research studies spanning decades. Research dating back to the 1920s studied the positive effects of cooperative learning on performance (Maller, as cited in Slavin, 1980). Johnson and Johnson (1999) noted that over 375 studies on cooperation in the classroom have been

conducted in the past century. They stated the following on cooperative learning:

Working together to achieve a common goal produces higher achievement and greater productivity than does working alone. This is so well-confirmed by so much research that it stands as one of the strongest principals of social and organizational psychology (1999, p. 72).

These authors also added increased use of higher order thinking skills, greater retention of information, and the development of more positive relationships with peers as other major benefits of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

One study conducted in a sixth-grade class found that cooperative learning enhances student motivation and learning. The researchers found that this increase in learning happens as a result of the reciprocal verbal interactions involving the exchange of ideas among students in a group (Cohen, Lotan, Abram, Scarloss & Schultz, 2002). Another benefit of cooperative learning in this study was that students were allowed to make mistakes without teacher interference (as cited in Emmer & Gerwels, 2002). This allows students the opportunities to naturally negotiate for meaning by modifying their speech accordingly (Ellis, 2005).

### Limitations of Cooperative Learning

Not all studies report positive findings when students engage in cooperative learning. Many studies report mixed findings and some studies find that cooperative groups are not successful in certain situations. For instance, in a meta-analysis of numerous studies of within-class grouping, researchers found that cooperative learning had mostly positive effects on student achievement when achievement was measured by teacher-created tests. But, when student achievement was measured by standardized tests, the achievement gained was insignificant. The researchers did acknowledge that the teacher-created tests may be easier than standardized tests and reflect specific instructional objectives better than standardized tests. Nevertheless, this analysis of research still showed that student achievement on standardized tests remained unchanged with or without cooperative learning leaning (Lou, Adrami, Spence, Poulsen, Chambers & d'Apollonia, 1996).

In a different study of high school Chinese ESL students, Liang (2004) reported that students have conflicting views about the value of classroom cooperative learning tasks. Liang observed and interviewed the students to determine their behaviors in cooperative groups and to get their opinions on this type of learning. Through his observations he found behaviors that showed the “opposite of cooperation” (p. 651).

His interview data indicated a mixture of likes and dislikes for cooperative learning for these Chinese students. For example, the students who enjoyed their cooperative learning experiences (43%) stated that they liked cooperative learning because it gave them the opportunity to generate more and different ideas. In contrast, twenty-four percent of the students reported that it was difficult to reach a consensus because there were too many ideas in one group. Other reasons for students' negative opinions about cooperative learning include an uneven distribution of the workload, a high noise level and not being able to show their individual abilities (Liang, 2004).

Liang offered one possible reason for his research findings that show some Chinese students' have negative opinions toward cooperative learning. In his article, he noted prior research that found Chinese people are becoming more westernized. Many modern Chinese are now placing more value on the individual and less on society as a group (Yang, as cited in Liang, 2004). This modern way of thinking contrasts with traditional Chinese culture which favors family, community and the larger society working together for a common purpose.

Another study conducted by Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick and Wheeler (1996) showed mixed results on cooperative learning. It researched a sixth-grade social studies class which contained a cluster of ELLs. Researchers found that cooperative groups helped the ELLs

decode content area vocabulary, but students missed other opportunities for language acquisition. For instance, when one second language learner asked for clarification of the term “factors”, none of the native speakers in the group responded to him. The group simply moved on to another student’s question. Researchers also observed two instances of negative input during these cooperative groups. The study revealed one ESL student being criticized for asking for help and another ESL student being laughed at by a native speaker for his inability to understand. Overall, the researchers stated that cooperative learning is not a “silver bullet,” but that it should not be tossed out either because instructional strategies, like specific language objectives, can make cooperative learning effective for language acquisition (Jacob, et al., 1996).

Finally, a study of first grade Hispanic ELLs reported that ELLs engaged in cooperative learning literacy activities had no advantage over ESL students in the direct instruction group (Cohen & Rodriguez as cited in Genesee & Riches, 2007). In fact, students in the direct instruction group scored higher than the cooperative learning group in reading comprehension on state standardized tests. This study is particularly significant because it directly compared two different models of instruction, direct/teacher-led instruction and an indirect/cooperative learning model.

## Cooperative Learning and ELLs

### Academic Language

Cooperative learning is also a well-documented strategy for the development of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) in ELLs. CALP refers to formal academic language learning in a content area. It is an important part of language learning in school and it is essential to the success of ELLs in academic areas. In fact, students must master academic English in order to understand text books, generate reports and perform well on tests (Hill & Flynn, 2006). In addition, cooperative learning may involve higher critical thinking skills, such as synthesizing, evaluating and inferring. Cooperative learning in a classroom setting plays a major role in developing ELLs' CALP because academic content is the focus of the student interaction (Haynes, n.d.).

Ellis (2005) outlined 10 principles for learning a second language. Through his review of research, Ellis found that interaction is a primary source of learning a second language. He further suggested that small group interaction is an important part of acquiring a second language in a classroom setting. He cited Michael Long's Interaction Hypothesis as interaction that "fosters acquisition when a communication problem arises and learners are engaged in the negotiation of meaning" (Long, as cited in Ellis, 2005, p. 219). In the classroom, when second language learners are in cooperative groups with their native speaking peers, the

ELLs are forced to negotiate for meaning and their peers naturally adjust their speech to make it more comprehensible. According to Long's hypothesis, interaction makes ELLs more aware of their own language gaps and helps them perform new functions in the target language (Ellis, 2005).

Kagan (1995) delved further into the benefits of cooperative learning for ELLs by examining the language input, output and the supportive context of cooperative learning. He noted that language acquisition is cultivated when language input is comprehensible and developmentally appropriate. Language input in a small cooperative group is often more comprehensible than in a large group, because in a small cooperative learning group, a listener can negotiate for meaning by asking questions and the speaker can adjust his or her speech to meet the needs of the group. Kagan (1995) also explained the importance of language output in the acquisition of language. He stated that "students learn to speak by speaking" (1995, p. 2) and that cooperative learning increases the amount of student output. Finally, Kagan (1995) addressed the importance of a support context for students learning a language. Cooperative learning groups allow students the opportunity to receive large amounts of feedback from their peers. Kagan (1995) explained that a student involved in a 20-minute whole class discussion usually gets only one feedback opportunity; however, a student working in a small

cooperative learning group for 20 minutes usually receives 12 rich feedback opportunities. Clearly, the amount of language exchange for individual students in a cooperative learning classroom far exceeds that of a traditional classroom.

### Oral Language Development and Literacy

Cooperative learning is also an effective instructional strategy to support the development of literacy skills in ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006). The National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth found that oral language proficiency in English directly correlates with higher-level reading skills. Its review of research suggested that ELLs often perform at the same level as their native English speaking peers on word-level skills such as decoding and word recognition; however, ELLs usually do not obtain the same level of proficiency on the text-level skills of reading comprehension and writing. The Panel stated that the most successful literacy instructional programs for ELLs combine 'high-quality' literacy instruction with oral language development (August & Shanahan, 2006). The National Council of Teachers of English agrees with this philosophy on literacy and oral language proficiency. This Council also found targeted academic oral language instruction to be an essential part of effective literacy instruction for ELLs (Herrera & Murry, 2005).

## Gap in Research

Decades of research have been conducted on cooperative learning in classrooms around the world (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Slavin 1980). Most of this research has focused on intermediate, secondary and post-secondary monolingual classrooms. There has been little research done on primary level classrooms that includes second language learners (Jacob, et al., 1996). The goal of my research is to fill this need by specifically looking at an inclusive second-grade classroom engaged in everyday cooperative learning activities, and explore how these interactions affect ELLs. My study will attempt to address this gap in research by answering the following questions: What impact does cooperative learning have on ELLs' participation in class? and What are ELLs' attitudes toward cooperative learning?

## Summary

Student interaction is essential to the language development of ESL students. Cooperative learning groups allow ELLs to acquire language by negotiating for meaning and give ELLs the academic learning structure to develop their CALP in content area classes (Ellis, 2005). This chapter reviewed the literature on the important elements of cooperative learning, the benefits and limitations of cooperative learning, and the role of interaction in second language acquisition. This chapter also identified the gap in research and how this particular study will

attempt to fill that gap. Finally, it presented the applicable research questions. The next chapter will discuss the methodology I will use for my research study.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to explore cooperative learning in a mainstream reading class with a cluster of ESL students. Cooperative learning is important to the language development of ELLs because it gives them the interactive approach needed to improve their cognitive academic language proficiency (Ellis, 2005). In this study, I specifically looked at how cooperative learning impacted English language learners' (ELLs) participation in class and the ELLs' attitudes toward cooperative learning. These research questions provided the basis for my research in a second-grade, ESL/mainstream, collaborative reading class.

I used descriptive research for this study. I chose this particular method because I wanted to describe the impact of adding cooperative learning to this second-grade reading class. I implemented cooperative learning activities over a four week period to determine if ESL students increased their class participation. I wanted to move this traditional classroom to one with a focus on cooperative learning. The goal of this research was to provide some insight on the importance of student interaction in classrooms that contain ELLs and native English speakers.

## Overview of the Chapter

This chapter discusses the methods used in this study. First, the rationale and description of the research is presented along with descriptions of both the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. Second, the methods used to collect the data are described. Third, the method used for data analysis is described and the verification of data is discussed. Last, I describe the ethical considerations I used while conducting this study.

## Research Paradigms

Education is a field that often employs qualitative research because of its rich description and interpretation of a situation. A key component of applied qualitative research is the desire to improve one's practice in a particular area. Qualitative research was well-suited for my study because I wanted to depict what existed in this classroom after I implemented cooperative learning. Qualitative research also occurs in a natural setting with the researcher as a possible participant, interprets people's experiences, and offers rich descriptive data (Merriam, 2009). All of these characteristics were components of my study, and thus, made it compatible with qualitative research.

In this study I also quantified my data in order to measure the frequency of student interactions in both cooperative learning and whole group discussions. Quantitative research was appropriate for my study

because it offered precise numerical data, such as the frequency of ESL students' participation in various activities. By using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, I was able to triangulate my findings to gain a deeper understanding of how cooperative learning impacted ELLs' participation in class (Merriam, 2009).

### Descriptive Research

I used descriptive research in this study because I wanted to depict the level of cooperative learning in this classroom after I implemented the change from a mostly teacher-centered classroom to a cooperatively structured one (Van Wagner, n.d.). The overall goal of this research was to describe the frequency and types of interactions that occurred among four of the five ESL students during teacher-centered whole group instruction and in small group cooperative learning activities. I also used two-minute student interviews throughout the study and a final interview at the end to investigate ESL students' attitudes about cooperative learning. I wanted to move this mostly teacher-fronted class to one with a greater student focus. This shift in instruction was important because numerous research studies show the positive effects student interaction has on learning, especially in the acquisition of a second language (Cohen, et al., 2002; Jacob, et al., 1996; Kagan, 1995, Ellis, 2005). In addition, I was the researcher and a co-teacher in this

class. This type of familiarity allowed my findings to be immediate and relevant to the instruction of my co-teacher and me (Sagor, 2005).

### Data Collection

#### Participants

This research was conducted with four ESL students within a second-grade mainstream reading class. The class had a total of 22 students. The participants in this study were selected based on their placement in this second-grade class and were a sample of convenience. Most of the ESL students in this class were early intermediate and intermediate-level language learners that sometimes struggled to meet the demands of grade-level content material. They were from various language backgrounds including Bengali, Spanish, and Hmong. The remaining 18 students included one advanced-level ELL and 17 native English speakers. Pseudonyms were used throughout this research process in place of actual student names as a means to protect participants' identities. *Table 3.1* offers further descriptions of the ESL students in my study.

Table 3.1

*Descriptions of Students*

Students	Gender	Home Language	LAS – Overall Language Proficiency Levels
Koua	Boy	Hmong	Level 2
Baru	Boy	Bengali	Level 3
Maria	Girl	Spanish	Level 3
Carlos	Boy	Spanish	Level 3

Language Proficiency Levels of ELLs

The *LAS Links* is the English language proficiency assessment used in my school district to measure the social and academic language of ESL students. The *LAS Links* is divided into four categories of language, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It is aligned with the TESOL standards and the ELL learning standards of some states (*LAS Links Interpretation Guide*, 2005).

Three of the four ESL students in this study scored in the intermediate-level (level 3) on their overall language proficiency. According to the *LAS Links Interpretation Guide* (2005), students at this level of English language proficiency typically are developing their cognitive academic language (CALP) at a grade appropriate level. They

sometimes make errors that interfere with communication and comprehension and opportunities to negotiate for meaning are needed. One student in this study scored in the early intermediate-level (level 2) of language proficiency. As described in the *Interpretation Guide* (2005), students in this stage of language development are usually beginning to develop academic language. Their errors sometimes interfere with basic communication and comprehension.

### Setting

This research was set in a Midwest, suburban elementary school. The study took place in a second-grade class that was co-taught by a mainstream teacher and me, the ESL teacher. Last year, my school district implemented an inclusive model for ELL instruction. This meant that the ESL students remained in the mainstream classroom the entire day. They were not taken out for sheltered ESL instruction, but instead are taught in “inclusive” classrooms by a mainstream and an ESL specialist teacher. Half of the grade levels used inclusion for their ESL model of service and the other half used a traditional pull-out model. The total student population of this school was about 600, which included 30 ESL students.

In this particular second-grade class, the ESL/mainstream collaboration model used involved an equal partnership between both

teachers. My co-teacher and I worked collaboratively to:

- plan detailed lessons based on content and language objectives
- teach whole group reading lessons
- lead small guided reading groups
- conduct reading conferences with students
- assess students, correct student work and determine grades.

#### Data Collection Technique 1: Observation

A participant observer is able to observe a setting firsthand. The observer then uses his or her expertise in an area to interpret what was observed (Merriam, 2009). Teachers often use observations to gain insight into their students. For this research study, I became an unobtrusive participant observer while my co-teacher led the class in whole group and cooperative learning lessons. The purpose of my research was to study how cooperative learning impacted ESL students' participation in class and to gain insight into ELLs' attitudes toward cooperative learning.

I observed students when they were participating in both cooperative learning and whole group activities. During whole group learning, I observed all four ESL students closely, but during cooperative learning activities I focused my observation on one group comprised of two ESL students and two native speakers per day. This allowed me to script accurate and descriptive field notes. I wrote field notes by scripting

everything said by the ESL students that I was observing. I also used an audio recorder to record students working in their cooperative learning groups. This audio recording was simply used as a means to verify my field notes.

After I clearly identified all verbal interactions by ESL students, I used the student engagement rubrics (see Appendices A and B) to categorize student interactions according to predetermined categories. The rubrics helped me identify the type of verbal interaction students used, the frequency of these interactions, and to note any off-task comments made by an ESL student. The field notes were also used to document any outstanding comments made by native English speakers. These comments included any positive, rude, or off-task remarks directed toward their ESL peers.

The rubrics presented two main types of verbal interaction including *asking relevant questions* and *offering relevant comments or suggestions*. I further differentiated these types of verbal interactions into evidence of learning categories. These learning categories were part of the daily reading instruction of this second-grade class. They were reoccurring skills in their Houghton Mifflin reading series. For the *Whole*

*Group Observation Rubric* (see Appendix A) the evidence of learning categories were:

-Makes connections with prior learning. These comments included any relevant reference to past learning in reading or other content areas. It also included connections made to a book or to a personal life experience.

-Uses content vocabulary. The vocabulary I looked for included reading content area vocabulary, story specific vocabulary and the vocabulary of cooperative learning, such as using the terms for the various student roles.

-Shows evidence of reflective thinking. Reflective thinking is purposeful thinking about your thinking. For a second grader, reflective thinking involved students describing the reasons why they think a certain way. The *Cooperative Learning Observation Rubric* included all of the above categories, as well as one additional category:

-Shows evidence of a well-functioning cooperative group. Evidence of a well-functioning group included observations of the group working collaboratively to complete a group task. I specifically looked to see if students understood their roles and if they effectively performed their group duties.

Both of the rubrics also included a section to note:

-Off-task or irrelevant comments. This included incorrect answers to questions or incorrect suggestions offered during cooperative learning instruction.

-Outstanding native speakers' comments. These comments included any positive, rude, or off-task remarks directed toward an ELL.

I also used the student engagement rubrics to tally the frequency of each type of verbal interaction. These tally marks were then coded into categories indicating the frequency of each type of interaction.

One challenge with this type of observation was to concentrate and observe intently without bias (McKay, 2008). In an effort to minimize biases, I needed to be highly descriptive in my field notes and I documented as much information as possible, including the layout of the room and direct student quotes. This descriptive data collection was necessary in order for readers to feel as if they actually studied this classroom through the use of my observations. I also compiled these notes in a narrative form soon after the observations were completed (Merriam, 2009).

#### Data Collection Technique 2: Two-Minute Interviews

Informal interviews often accompany observations in data collection (Merriam, 2009). Interviews are used to gain insight into the perspectives of the participants in the study (Freeman, 1998). The

purpose of using interviews in my research was to understand how students responded to different types of learning (i.e. cooperative learning and whole group instruction).

I used the two-minute interviews outlined by Freeman (1998) for my study because they offered an authentic form of interviewing for a classroom setting. After all cooperative learning and whole group reading lessons, I interviewed the participants using the following questions:

1a. What did you like best about today's reading class?

1b. Why did you like that part of the class?

2a. How did it make you feel when you talked in your cooperative learning group?

2b. Why do you think you felt \_\_\_\_\_ when you talked in your group? How do you feel when you talked in front of the whole class?

3b. Why do you think you felt \_\_\_\_\_ when cooperative learning group?

3a. How did it make you feel when you talked in front of the whole class?

One challenge a teacher faces when conducting interviews of his or her own students is that students will often say what they think the teacher wants to hear. I minimized this result by asking participants questions that were open-ended, followed by probing questions. McKay (2006) stated that open-ended questions are a viable tool to get participants to respond in their own way. Some examples of probing

questions I used were: *Will you tell me more about that?* and *What made you feel that way?*

### Data Collection Technique 3: Final Student Interviews

Interviews are sometimes used in qualitative research to gather information about the perceptions of participants (Freeman, 1998). I conducted a final interview of the four ESL students in my study one week after the last cooperative learning activity. This interview allowed me to ask students questions about their perceptions over the last four weeks of cooperative learning. I first analyzed my observational and two-minute interview data, and then I formulated questions based on each individual student's participation in class and his or her responses to the two-minute interview questions. For instance, I found that one student said he often felt proud when he talked in front of the whole class or in his cooperative group, so I asked the question: I noticed that most of the time when you talked in class you said you felt proud. Why do you think you felt proud talking in front of the whole class and in your cooperative learning group? This final interview provided closure to the study and acted as another means to triangulate my findings.

#### Procedure

This research occurred over four consecutive weeks (20 instructional days) during reading instruction in this second-grade class. The data collection took place during 12 of these reading periods, but

students were engaged in various cooperative learning activities throughout the entire four weeks of research.

### Introducing Cooperative Learning

This particular second-grade class had limited experience with cooperative learning activities. The majority of class time, prior to my study, was teacher-led whole group instruction and teacher-led small group instruction. The cooperative learning strategies that were implemented in this study were new to most students. My co-teacher and I introduced this new learning structure with a lesson on behavior expectations before students began any cooperative learning activities. I led the class in a student-generated brainstorm list of expected behaviors. Some of these behavior expectations included: appropriate noise level, equal participation of all students, active listening and sharing of ideas, and effective ways to resolve conflict (Cooperative Learning, n.d.).

In his book, Kagan (1994) suggested assigning students various roles within a group in order to facilitate effective cooperative learning. In this study, group roles were determined based on the particular learning task. Some of the cooperative learning roles I used included the leader, checker, writer and cheerleader. The leader was responsible for getting the group started, keeping everyone on task, and ensuring that all of the group's members understood the assignment. The checker

reviewed the group's work throughout the cooperative learning task and was in charge of submitting the completed assignment to the teachers. The writer's role was to write and record all relevant information regarding the learning task; and the cheerleader kept everyone involved and provided encouragement and support through the cooperative learning instruction. These roles changed often in order to give each student the opportunity to experience every role. A mini-lesson describing and modeling each role was taught prior to students actually engaging in this type of formal cooperative learning.

In addition, for each cooperative learning activity throughout this study, my co-teacher and I gave clear instructions and learning objectives. We taught and modeled the reading tasks and appropriate student behaviors in order to support students' understanding of the cooperative learning expectations.

Finally, the first week of this study was cooperative learning practice for the students. I carefully examined the observational data from the first week to determine if students understood the functions of cooperative learning and their roles within each group. I wanted to ensure that their understanding of the group process did not interfere with their participation.

## The Study

The first day of this study was a whole group reading lesson and discussion taught by my co-teacher. My role was to take descriptive field notes and I use the *Whole Group Observation Rubric* (see Appendix A) to observe the types of interactions made by ELLs in the class and the frequency of these interactions. This gave me a baseline measure of ELLs' interactions in a whole group setting.

The second, third, and fourth days of instruction involved both whole group discussion and cooperative learning. During each week's second and fourth days of instruction, I scripted field notes, used an audio recorder and the *Cooperative Learning Group Observation Rubric* (see Appendix B) to observe the interactions of two ELLs in their small cooperative learning group. I observed one ELL/mainstream group during their cooperative learning instruction every week on day two, and the second weekly cooperative group observation day was spent with the other group. This gave me cooperative learning observational data on all four of the ELLs in this study every week. These small cooperative groups focused on similar vocabulary and comprehension objectives that were addressed in day five's whole group discussion.

The fifth day of data collection involved a whole group discussion and observation. I used field notes and the *Whole Group Observation*

*Rubric* on the fifth day. This gave me data on student interactions within a whole group that I used to compare with the first day of instruction.

This same procedure was followed during the second, third and fourth weeks of data collection. The three additional weeks of data collection allowed me more time to collect data on the target population of four ESL students. I also compared the fourth week's data with the first week's findings. I was especially interested in comparing the first day of whole group observation with the twentieth day.

Table 3.2

*Procedure Timeline*

<p><i>Day 1</i> Whole group reading instruction with no formal observation.</p> <p>Exception: The <b>first day</b> of research was used as a baseline measure for the study. I did a <b>formal observation</b> of all four ELLs during whole group instruction.</p>	<p><i>Day 2</i> Small cooperative learning group activity with a <b>formal observation</b> of two ELLs during their cooperative learning group. <b>Two-minute interview</b> with the students observed also accompanied the observations.</p>	<p><i>Day 3</i> Whole group instruction and small cooperative learning group activity with no formal observation.</p>	<p><i>Day 4</i> Small cooperative learning group activity with a <b>formal observation</b> of two ELLs during their cooperative learning group. <b>Two-minute interview</b> with the students observed also accompanied the observations.</p>	<p><i>Day 5</i> Whole group reading instruction with <b>formal observations</b> of all four ELLs. <b>Two-minute interviews</b> also accompanied the observations.</p> <p>Exception: This whole group formal observation and interviews were conducted on day one during the first week of this study.</p>
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*This procedure was repeated over all four weeks of data collection.*

Students were also given a two-minute interview immediately following the lessons on days two, four, and five of each week. This data gave me a sense of ESL students' attitudes toward cooperative learning. In addition, a final student interview with the four students studied was conducted one week after the completion of this study. This allowed me to investigate the overall student perceptions of cooperative learning and their personal participation in class.

### Participants

The participants in this study were selected based on their placement in this second-grade class and were a sample of convenience. I collected the data from four of the five ESL students in this class during their mainstream reading class. The cooperative learning groups observed were composed of two native English speakers and two ELLs. For this study, students were assigned to work in the same heterogeneous groups of four for the duration of the study. These cooperative learning groups were determined by my co-teacher and me and were comprised of an equal representation of girls and boys with a mixture of reading ability levels. For instance, one group observed included one ESL boy and girl and one native English speaking boy and girl. The other group that I observed was comprised of two ESL boys and two native English speaking girls. Both groups included at least one below grade-level reader, some at grade-level readers, and one above

grade-level reader. The goal of these formal cooperative groups was to finish an assignment such as reading a story, completing a graphic organizer, learning new vocabulary, or answering comprehension questions.

### Practice Classroom Observations and Interviews

One week before the first observation of the second-grade class, I observed a fourth-grade class with ESL students. I practiced taking descriptive field notes, using the audio recorder, and I piloted the observational rubrics to ensure they met the demands of the study. I observed students in both cooperative and whole group learning.

Before conducting the first interview, I practiced the interview questions on ESL students in a fourth-grade class. I did this to ensure that students understood the questions, offered thorough answers and to determine possible probing questions.

### Materials

The Houghton Mifflin reading series for primary grades (see [www.hmhschool.com](http://www.hmhschool.com) for more information) was the curriculum used in this second-grade class, and it was also the material I used for this study. A typical reading lesson included building background, vocabulary development, and comprehension. This was also the content used for this study's cooperative and whole group learning. Although the units studied each week did change, this was not a significant variable in

this study because this class was well-versed in following the routine activities of reading.

### Data Analysis

I analyzed my observational data (field notes) both qualitatively and quantitatively. I analyzed the raw data from my descriptive field notes and audio recordings and placed it into the predetermined categories on the *Whole Group and Cooperative Learning Group Observation Rubrics* (see Appendices A and B). These rubrics provided the foundation for my analysis by allowing me to interpret the types of verbal interactions ESL students were having during their cooperative learning and whole group discussions. I selected representative data, rather than unusual observations, in an effort to support my conclusions (McKay, 2008).

Quantitatively, I used my classroom observation numerical data to measure the frequency of ESL students' interactions. This data was then coded into categories that showed the frequency of these interactions. I analyzed this quantitative data to see if ESL students' interactions increased or decreased over the duration of this research, and to determine if ELLs contributed more or less in cooperative learning groups versus whole group discussions.

Overall, I used the qualitative and quantitative observational data to compare ESL students' interactions between the first and twentieth

lessons. Over these twenty days, ESL students were formally observed 12 times, four times in whole discussions and eight times in their cooperative learning groups. I analyzed these results to conclude whether or not cooperative learning impacted ELLs' class participation. I also interpreted the data to find out what types of interactions ELLs made and to check for interactions that exhibited any evidence of learning (see Appendices A and B for details). Using both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms naturally enhanced the reliability of my results.

I also analyzed the two-minute student interviews and the final interviews by coding student responses into categories (categories were determined during the review of data). I then examined these categories in a search for overall themes (Merriam, 2009). This allowed me insight into ELLs' attitudes toward cooperative learning. I also compared the interview data with the observational data and noted any changes in student attitudes as their interactions increased or decreased over time.

#### Verification of Data

I employed several strategies to gain internal validity in this study. First, I used two data collection methods: 1) classroom observation through scripting, audio recordings and the use of rubrics and 2) student interviews including two-minute interviews and the final interview. Second, I used both qualitative and quantitative data collecting methods for the classroom observations. My observer field notes and audio

recordings provided qualitative descriptions of students' verbal interactions and the numerical tally marks gave the quantitative measurement of the frequency of interaction. By using multiple data sources, I triangulated my findings and gained a deeper understanding into how cooperative learning impacted ESL students' participation in class (Merriam, 2009). I also acknowledged my research bias of believing that cooperative learning is a viable strategy to help scaffold ELLs in their acquisition of language and content area learning.

### Ethics

Numerous measures were taken throughout this study that ensured the rights of participants and their families. First, participants' parents signed a written consent form which informed them about the study, guaranteed their child's rights and made sure that everyone was a willing participant. Second, I obtained written permission from my school district and Hamline University to study human subjects in my research. Third, participants' identities and any materials regarding my study were protected and secured at all times. All paper and audio materials were secured in a locked closet and all computer files were stored on a password protected personal computer.

## Conclusion

This chapter described the methods and procedures I used to conduct my research. The next chapter examines the results of the observational rubrics and student interviews and discusses my findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The focus of this study was to determine how cooperative learning impacted English language learners' participation in the classroom and to examine ELLs' attitudes toward cooperative learning. This type of interactive learning structure is essential to the academic language development of ELLs in content area classes. My study was conducted with four ESL students within the second-grade reading class in which I co-teach. The study involved observing students during both whole and small cooperative learning group instruction. For this study, I sought to find answers to the following research questions: 1) What impact does cooperative learning have on ELLs' participation in class? and 2) What are ELLs' attitudes toward cooperative learning?

I used three data collection techniques for this study. First, I used teacher observation and observational rubrics to determine the type and frequency of ESL students' verbal interactions during both whole and cooperative learning group instruction. I also used two-minute interviews to gain immediate insight into participants' attitudes toward cooperative learning. Last, I used final student interviews which allowed me to ask

reflective questions about the ELLs' perceptions of cooperative learning over the entire four week study.

This chapter presents the results of my observational and interview data on ELL participation and their attitudes toward cooperative learning. First, I explain how I collected the observational data and describe the various tools used in this process. Then, I show the results of each observational data point and offer a discussion of my findings. Finally, I present the student interview data collection technique, data, and the findings of the student interviews regarding their attitudes toward cooperative learning.

#### Preparation

One week before I began data collection in the second-grade classroom in which my research took place, I practiced observing a fourth grade literacy class. I observed the students while they were working in both whole and small cooperative learning groups. During this 'practice' observation I was able to effectively script field notes, use an audio recorder and pilot the observation rubrics (see Appendices A and B). I also practiced the interview questions on some of the ESL students in this fourth-grade class. These students showed that they understood the questions and they offered thorough answers.

### Explanation of Observational Data Collection

I collected my observational data during both cooperative learning and whole group activities. During whole group learning, I observed all four ELLs at one time, but during cooperative learning I focused my observations on one group comprised of two ESL students and two native speakers. Each of the four ELLs was observed one time per week in the whole group and one time per week in his or her cooperative learning group. During the observations, I scripted descriptive field notes of everything said by the ELLs, and I used audio recordings as a means to verify my field notes. After I scripted all of the verbal interactions of the ESL students in my field notes, I used the *Observation Rubrics* (see Appendices A and B) to tally the frequency and record the types of verbal interactions observed. The categories I created on the rubrics included:

-Asks relevant questions

-Offers relevant comments or suggestions

-Makes off-task or irrelevant comments

-Outstanding comments made by native English speakers. These comments included any positive, rude, or off-task remarks directed toward an ELL.

-Makes connections with prior learning. These comments included any relevant reference to past learning in reading or other content areas. It

also included connections made to a book, or to a personal life experience.

-Uses content vocabulary. This vocabulary included reading content area vocabulary, story specific vocabulary and the vocabulary of cooperative learning, such as using the terms for the various student roles.

-Shows evidence of reflective thinking. Reflective thinking is purposeful thinking about your thinking. For a second grader, reflective thinking involves students describing the reasons why they think a certain way. The *Cooperative Learning Group Observation Rubric* included all of the above categories, as well as one additional category:

-Shows evidence of a well-functioning cooperative group. Evidence of a well-functioning group included observations of the group working collaboratively to complete a cooperative learning task. This also specifically looked at whether students understood their roles and if they effectively performed their group duties.

#### Results of Participation Over Time

*Table 4.1* presents the data on the frequency with which the four ELLs participated over the duration of my study. It compares their participation during the four week study in whole and cooperative learning group instruction. The table also lists the various instructional activities for each week.

For my study, I observed each ELL one time per week in his or her cooperative learning group and one time a week during whole group instruction. I scripted everything they said in my field notes and used an audio recording as a means to verify my data. During the data analysis, I tallied all of the times an ELL verbally participated during both whole and cooperative learning group instruction. The numbers in *Table 4.1* represent the total number of times each student participated. This participation included all verbal interactions from a single word to a complete thought. For example, one student could simply say “yes” while another student offered a detailed answer to an inferential question about the story by saying, “I think they’re mad because the walls are plain and old.” Both of these responses were considered significant for a second-grade ESL student to articulate, and they were both counted as one instance of participation in the *Table 4.1*.

Table 4.1

*Student Contributions Over the Duration of the Study*

Week	Whole Group Activity	Number of Contributions in the Whole Group	Cooperative Learning Group Activity	Number of Contributions in Cooperative Learning Group
Week 1	Introducing Vocabulary	8	List Writing/ Inferential Questions	33
Week 2	Venn Diagram	5	Word Sort/ Designed a Flyer	33
Week 3	Venn Diagram	3	List Writing/ Story Details	43
Week 4	Story Summary	11	Venn Diagram/ Main Idea and Details	26

Findings and Discussion

My results showed that the frequency of ESL student participation fluctuated from week to week during both whole and cooperative learning group instruction. It was not a steady weekly incline as I had anticipated. However, I did find a significant increase in the amount of ELL participation during cooperative learning instruction versus that of the whole group.

One explanation for the drop in participation during weeks two and three of whole group instruction may be due to the content of the instructional activities. As *Table 4.1* indicates, weeks two and three of

whole group learning involved creating a Venn diagram which compared and contrasted two stories or two characters. In addition, week four's cooperative learning group instruction also involved students completing a Venn diagram. This week also showed the lowest participation during cooperative learning group instruction. Therefore, the data indicated that ELLs participated the least during the three weeks in which they were expected to complete a Venn diagram. This may explain the fluctuation in whole group participation over the four weeks and the decrease in participation during week four of cooperative group learning.

#### Results of Participation in Whole and Cooperative Groups

*Table 4.2* compares the frequency of individual ELL participation during whole and cooperative learning group instruction. The numbers represent the total number of times each student participated in both whole and cooperative group learning. This participation included all verbal interactions from just a one word utterance to full sentence explanations. The 'Percentage of Total Participation' was calculated by dividing the total participation by the sum of participation during whole and cooperative learning group instruction.

Table 4.2

*Student Contributions in Whole and Cooperative Learning Groups*

Students	Number of Contributions in the Whole Group	Number of Contributions in Cooperative Learning Groups
Koua	3	24
Baru	17	46
Maria	3	18
Carlos	4	47
Percentage of Total Participation	17%	83%

Findings and Discussion

My study found that the frequency of ELLs' participation in small cooperative learning groups far exceeded their participation during whole group instruction. I found that the amount of language output by ESL students was 66% greater when working collaboratively in a cooperative learning group than in the whole group.

Kagan's (1995) research found similar results. His data showed that students have many more opportunities to speak in a cooperative learning based classroom than in a traditional teacher-centered one. In his article, he stated that this interaction is important because students learn language by speaking and by receiving rich comprehensible

feedback (Kagan, 1995). In my study, I observed numerous instances where the native English speakers were giving rich meaningful feedback to the ELLs in their cooperative learning group. The native English speakers were positive, patient, and supportive of the ESL students' learning.

#### Results of Participation by Type of Verbal Interaction

The *Table 4.3* presents the data showing the frequency with which the four ESL students participated by using one of seven specific verbal interactions. The numbers signify the total number of times each student participated based on the type of verbal interaction. Just as in the previous tables, participation included all verbal interactions. The numbers in the 'Variance Between Whole and Cooperative Learning Group' column were calculated by subtracting the whole group results from the cooperative learning group results for each category.

Table 4.3

*Total Student Contributions by Type of Verbal Interaction*

Types of Verbal Interactions	Number of Contributions in the Whole Group	Number of Contributions in Cooperative Learning Groups	Variance in Contributions Between Whole and Cooperative Group
Offers relevant comments	17	70	+53
Uses content vocabulary	6	26	+20
Asks relevant questions	0	16	+16
Makes connections to prior learning	3	2	-1
Shows evidence of reflective thinking	1	0	-1

Findings and Discussion

Overall, there were two types of verbal interactions that showed a significant increase during cooperative learning group instruction. ESL students participated 53 more times when making relevant comments in their cooperative group, and they increased their use of content specific vocabulary by 20 more times in their cooperative learning group over that of the whole group. On the other hand, my study found no examples of ESL students becoming reflective thinkers in their cooperative learning groups, and only one example of this type of higher order thinking in the

whole group. I anticipated more of this in my study since prior research indicates that student interaction may increase high order thinking (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). One possible reason for this finding is that the four students in my study were only seven years old and not linguistically or developmentally ready for this type of higher order thinking. During data collection for this research, the participants were Level 2 and Level 3 ELLs who were all reading below grade level.

Finally, my original *Observational Rubrics* (see Appendices A and B) also included a category to denote any ‘Outstanding comments made by native English speakers.’ These comments were to include any positive, rude, or off-task remarks directed toward an ELL. Although I expected to collect this data along with the data collection of the ELLs’ verbal interactions, I found it too difficult to observe and script all four students at one time. As a result, no data was collected on *specific* native speakers’ comments that were directed toward ELLs. However, the overall comments and general feeling I observed of the ELLs and native speakers working together in cooperative groups was positive. The native English speakers were supportive of the ELLs’ learning and they offered many encouraging words.

#### Participation by Negotiating for Meaning

Another interesting result was the frequency in which ESL students engaged in interactions that allowed them to negotiate for

meaning. This element was not part of my original observation rubrics, but as I analyzed my field notes I found three clear examples of ELLs negotiating for meaning during cooperative learning discussions, and three missed opportunities to negotiate for meaning in the whole group. One example of a negotiation for meaning occurred when four students were working together to complete a graphic organizer on the main idea and details of the nonfiction story *Ants*. One ELL was performing the role of the writer, and he engaged a native speaker in his group by asking, “So, how can I put that into a sentence?” The native speaker responded by telling the ELL that ants use teamwork to get things done. The ELL then asked for clarification by saying, “Like when one ant can’t do it, another ant comes?”

Three total examples of negotiation for meaning occurred while students worked in their cooperative learning groups and three missed opportunities happened in the whole group. An example of a missed opportunity occurred during whole group instruction when the teacher was pre-teaching vocabulary words that appeared in a story that took place in a New York subway station. The teacher was explaining the meaning of a subway station *teller*, when an ELL raised his hand and said, “a teller tells you what to do with a ticket.” Here the ELL does not clearly understand that a *teller* is the person that sells subway tickets. The teacher did not address this student’s misunderstanding of the word

by asking further questions to help him discover the meaning of the word, instead she simply moved on to the next student who had the correct answer. This is an example of a missed opportunity to negotiate for meaning.

When ELLs interact with their peers and teachers by negotiating for meaning they ask questions to gain a better understanding of the academic content. In turn, native speakers, or higher level ELLs, naturally adjust their speech to meet the needs of the language learner (Ellis, 2005). These opportunities to negotiate for meaning are important to ELLs in achieving academic success because they directly impact the development of their cognitive academic language proficiency (Hill & Flynn, 2006).

#### Results of Participation by Language Proficiency Levels

The *LAS Links* was the English language proficiency assessment used in this study to determine the various language levels of the participants. I did not initially anticipate investigating the language proficiency levels of the ELLs, but it emerged as a significant finding during my data analysis. The students observed in my study included one Level 2 ELL and three Level 3 ELLs. According to the *LAS Links Interpretation Guide* (2005), students at a Level 2, early intermediate-level of language proficiency, are usually beginning to develop academic language. Their errors sometimes interfere with basic communication.

Students at a Level 3, intermediate level, are developing their cognitive academic language (CALP) at a grade appropriate level (*LAS Links Interpretation Guide*, 2005). The numbers on *Table 4.4* again indicate the total number of times each ESL student observed participated overall in both whole and cooperative learning group instruction. *Table 4.4* also differentiates the Level 2 student from the Level 3 students. The ‘Overall Percentage of Participation per Student’ was calculated by the sum of participation in the whole and cooperative groups of an individual student divided by the total participation of all students.

Table 4.4

*Student Contributions by Language Proficiency Levels*

Students	Number of Contributions in the Whole Group	Number of Contributions in Cooperative Learning Groups	Overall Percentage of Contributions per Student
Koua Level 2	3	24	17%
Maria Level 3	3	18	13%
Carlos Level 3	4	47	31%
Baru Level 3	17	46	39%

## Findings and Discussion

This study revealed that the least amount of participation came from a student with a Level 3 English language proficiency, not the Level 2 student. The Level 3 student participated 3% less than her Level 2 peer. However, I would like to note that this particular Level 3 ELL was the only female observed in this study, and this particular piece of data appeared to be an irregularity. In comparison, the other two Level 3 students were male and they participated nearly two-times as much as the male Level 2 student. Therefore, my findings showed that ELLs with higher English language proficiencies levels participated more than the student with the lower language proficiency level.

### Results of Participation by Cooperative Learning Role

The *Table 4.4* presents the results of the frequency with which each of the four ESL students participated while performing one of the assigned cooperative learning roles in his or her group. The four roles included: leader, checker, cheerleader and writer. Further explanation of the student responsibilities involved with each role is described in Chapter 3.

The numbers in *Table 4.5* represent the total number of times each student participated while performing the given role. This participation included all cooperative learning group verbal interactions from just a simple phrase to full sentence explanations. For instance, one student

said “I agree” while another student kindly explained an error made by a peer by saying, “I think you made a mistake. *Her* is a one syllable word, not two. Some of them can be tricky.” Both of these utterances are counted as one instance of participation in the *Table 4.5*. Finally, the ‘Percentage of Total Participation’ was calculated by dividing the total participation by the sum of participation in each role.

Table 4.5

*Student Contributions by Assigned Role during Cooperative Learning  
Group Instruction*

Students	Leader	Checker	Cheerleader	Writer
Koua	11	9	3	1
Baru	16	12	10	8
Maria	4	11	No results/ absent	3
Carlos	13	18	11	5
Percentage of Total Participation	33%	37%	18%	13%

Findings and Discussion

In his book *Cooperative Learning* (1994), Kagan discussed the importance of each student having a role in a cooperative group as a means to support positive group functionality. Kagan mentioned that assigned student roles lead to greater student accountability during

cooperative learning tasks (Kagan, 1994). This proved to be true in my study also.

The overall results of my study showed an increase in student participation and accountability when students undertook the roles of leader or checker within their cooperative learning groups. In fact, the greatest amount of verbal participation for all of the students occurred when they carried out the roles of leader or checker. In contrast, the smallest amount of verbal participation occurred when students were assigned the role of writer. Over my four week observation of students in the role of writer, I noticed that the writers were less engaged in thoughtful cooperative conversation and more focused on capturing everyone's ideas on paper, proper spelling, and the grammatical components of writing.

The results showed that two students participated the most as the leader and two as the checker. All observed students participated the least as the writer. Overall, students verbally participated 67% of the time when performing the roles of the leader or checker and only 13% of the time in the role of the writer. The role of the cheerleader yielded 18% of the total verbal participation.

#### Evidence of a Well-Functioning Group

For the data analysis of this section, I focused on instances showing that students understood the learning objective, performed their

cooperative learning roles effectively, and were able to successfully complete the literacy-based activity. I found that all of the cooperative learning groups observed in my study were able to meet these goals and function effectively.

An example of students working together and appropriately performing their group roles occurred when one group created a flyer advertising the school's upcoming 'Family Fun Night.' One ELL observed did particularly well in performing his role as the checker. He asked questions to guide his group in the creation of the flyer and checked the work over as it was being completed. He initially got his group focused by asking questions like "What information do we need?", and when his group was slightly off-task he questioned, "What's happening?" He also read parts of the flyer over several times to ensure all of the information was correct. Students performing their assigned jobs effectively and completing the assignment is one example of a well-functioning group.

In another cooperative group, students were working on answering questions from the text about the story details. One ELL I observed stated a story detail, "Never take someone else's medicine." When another student said, "What, what are you talking about?" the ELL then said, "Look on page. . . Look, it says it right there." In this example, the student was using evidence from the text to support his answer and

share it with another student. Both of these examples showed evidence of a well-functioning group.

#### Explanation of Two-Minute Interview Data Collection

I used informal two-minute interviews after all cooperative and whole group reading lessons as a way to understand participants' feelings and attitudes toward different types of learning (i.e. cooperative and whole group learning). Questions 1a and 1b were used to interview the ELL after each time they were observed. Questions 2a and 2b were asked after cooperative learning group observations and questions 3a and 3b were used after whole group lessons.

1a. What did you like best about today's reading class?

1b. Why did you like that part of the class?

2a. How did it make you feel when you talked in your small group?

2b. Why do you think you felt \_\_\_\_\_ when you talked in your small group?

3a. How did it make you feel when you talked in front of the whole class?

3b. Why do you think you felt \_\_\_\_\_ when you talked in front of the whole class?

#### Results of the Two-Minute Interviews on Students' Attitudes

Over the course of four weeks, I conducted a total of 30 interviews with each student being interviewed eight times (one student was absent twice) about his or her feelings toward cooperative learning. Students

were asked a series of four questions (listed above) immediately following each observation.

*Table 4.6* presents the data in response to questions 2a and 3a regarding how students felt when they talked in front of the whole group and in their small cooperative learning groups. The numbers represent the total number of times students reported feelings of happiness, nervousness, or dislike about participating during whole and cooperative learning activities. These three categories emerged during the data analysis and all responses fit into one of these categories. For instance, students responding with feeling “proud” or “good” about speaking in front of his or her group were included under the ‘feelings of happiness/excitement’ category.

Table 4.6

*Students' Attitudes Toward Their Participation*

Students' Feelings	Total Number of Times Whole Group	Total Number of Times Cooperative Learning Group	Total Number of Times in both Whole and Cooperative Learning Group
Happiness/ Excitement	6	8	14
Nervousness	4	7	11
Dislike for the activity	0	0	0
No verbal participation	5	0	5
Total number of interviews	15	15	30

Findings and Discussion

In the interviews, ELLs reported feelings of happiness and/or excitement 14 times when they spoke in front of the whole class and in their cooperative learning group. They also said they felt nervous speaking in front of their cooperative learning group 7 times in the interviews, but only 4 of the interviews indicated a feeling of nervousness when speaking in front of the entire class. This increase of 'nervousness' in their cooperative group could be due to the fact that the ELLs simply

participated more during the cooperative learning activities. They may have felt more nervous talking in their cooperative learning group because each student knew that they had to participate in order to complete the assignment, whereas in the whole group their participation was optional. Also, none of the ELLs indicated feelings of dislike for any whole or cooperative learning group activity throughout this research process.

In addition, the results of the two-minute interviews revealed that ESL students generally enjoyed their cooperative learning experiences. Students were asked question 1a, what they liked best about the reading class, on the days when they worked in their cooperative learning group. I found that 87% of the time, students reported the part they liked the best about class was working in their cooperative learning groups. Some examples of student responses to this question included:

“I liked that we got to work with our groups again, and we also got to change jobs.”

“I liked when we all came together and worked together.”

“I liked when we all read together in our group.”

#### Explanation of Final Student Interview Data Collection

The final student interviews were conducted one week after the last cooperative learning activity. In this final interview I asked the four ESL students questions about their perceptions over the last four weeks of

cooperative learning. These final questions gave students the opportunity to reflect on their experiences over the course of the study and gave me additional insight into their feelings toward cooperative learning.

#### Results of the Final Interviews on Students' Attitudes

The final student interviews consisted of six questions. Three of the questions were customized for individual students and three questions were the same for all participants. I created the customized questions for individual students after I analyzed the observational and two-minute interview data on each student's participation. One of the customized questions was based on individual students' responses to a two-minute interview question about his or her overall feelings on class participation. The customized questions and student answers are below.

**Customized Question:** *Every time* you talked, or gave an answer in front of the whole class you said you felt *happy*. Why do you think you felt *happy* doing this?

**Koua:** Because I don't usually talk in front of the whole class. It made me feel happy when I talked in front of everyone.

**Customized Question:** I noticed that *most of the time* when you talked in front of the whole class or in your cooperative learning group you said you felt *proud*. Why do you think you felt *proud* when talking in front of the whole class or in your cooperative learning group?

**Baru:** I felt proud because I was thinking a lot and I knew my answer made sense. I didn't make a mistake. My answer was ok.

**Customized Question:** I noticed you *usually* felt a *mixture of happiness and nervousness* when you talked in front of the whole class or in your cooperative learning group. Can you tell me what made you feel *nervous* and what made you feel *happy*?

**Maria:** I felt nervous because I didn't really know that much stuff. I just felt that I didn't know the story that much. I felt happy because I felt like I knew the answer.

**Teacher/Researcher:** What made you feel like you knew the answer?

**Maria:** We got to go over the story again with my team. I liked that.

**Customized Question:** I noticed you felt a *mixture of happiness and nervousness* when you talked in front of the whole class or in your cooperative learning group. Can you tell me what made you feel *nervous* and what made you feel *happy*?

**Carlos:** Nervous because we all talked a lot and I wanted to get to share my ideas too. I felt happy when I got to share my ideas.

The next question I asked all of the students: *Did working in your cooperative learning group help you feel better or worse about talking in front of the whole class? Why?*

**Koua:** It made me feel better because working in our cooperative learning group is easier than working with the whole class. The group helped me understand the story.

**Baru:** Yes, it made me feel better because they [my cooperative learning group] were telling me that I could do it, and I had time to practice talking in my group.

**Maria:** I felt better because I got information from my group first, and I got to go over the story again with my group.

**Carlos:** I felt better. We didn't need to work alone. I liked getting help from my group.

Other data revealed in the final student interviews involved the various student roles ELLs were assigned during their cooperative learning activities. Two of the students reported their favorite role was that of checker, one student said it was the leader and one said that he favored the role of the writer because "I don't have to talk that much." The observational data showed that all of the ELLs participated the least in the role of the writer of the group. When asked why this happened, they all responded by saying that they were busy writing their teammates' ideas and that they did not have time to talk.

### Findings and Discussion

The final student interviews revealed three significant findings. First, the customized question about students' overall feelings on

participation indicated that students generally felt that working in their cooperative learning group was helpful and gave them more confidence to speak in front of the whole group. The second question asked of all the participants, regarding how they felt about talking in front of the whole class after time spent working in their cooperative learning group, showed similar results as the customized question. Here, all of the students indicated that working in their small cooperative learning group made them feel better about later participating in the whole group. Student responses to a third question on why they participated the least in the role of the writer showed that they participated so little because they were more concerned with writing their group's ideas than sharing their own thoughts.

### Conclusion

This chapter examined the results of my observational rubrics on ELL participation and the two types of student interviews regarding students' attitudes toward cooperative learning. My analysis showed that the frequency of ELL participation fluctuated from week to week during both whole and cooperative learning group instruction. ELL participation did not steadily increase over the duration of my study as I had anticipated. Nevertheless, my findings clearly showed that overall ELL participation was significantly greater when learning in a cooperative group than in the whole group. Specifically, ESL students made 53 more

relevant comments and used content vocabulary 20 more times in their cooperative learning groups over that of the whole group. I also found that the greatest amount of ELL participation occurred when students carried out the roles of leader and checker during cooperative learning group activities. Finally, the student interviews indicated that the ELLs generally liked working and learning in cooperative learning groups. English language learners expressed feelings of happiness or excitement when speaking in class more than feelings of nervousness. The interviews also revealed that students felt better and more prepared for whole group participation after working in their small cooperative learning groups.

Chapter five will present my study's major findings and limitations. It will also discuss some classroom implications and offer suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the impact cooperative learning had on English language learners' participation in a second grade reading class. It also examined ELLs' attitudes toward cooperative learning. The two main questions addressed in this research were: 1) What impact does cooperative learning have on ELLs' participation in class? and 2) What are ELLs' attitudes toward cooperative learning?

Chapter four presented the results of my student observational rubrics, two-minute interviews and final student interviews. This chapter summarizes the major findings of my research and discusses its educational implications. Chapter five will also address the limitations of the study, suggest ideas for future research and discuss how the findings of this research will be utilized.

### Major Findings

#### What Impact did Cooperative Learning have on ELLs' Participation in Class?

The results of my study indicated that cooperative learning can be a powerful tool in eliciting ESL student participation in the classroom. First, my study revealed that ELLs participated dramatically more in their cooperative learning groups than during whole group instruction.

However, I did find that over the duration of my study that the overall ELL participation fluctuated from week to week. It did not steadily increase over time with the implementation of formal cooperative learning. I attribute this fluctuation to the nature of one instructional activity: completing a Venn diagram. During the three weeks with the lowest ELL participation, students were assigned this task. One possible reason for the ELLs' limited participation in the creation of the Venn diagrams could be the comprehension skills of comparing and contrasting that are the foundation of this activity. Since the Venn diagram activity showed the lowest participation across the board, it appears to be an irregularity in the data.

I was not surprised to find that ELLs participated more in their cooperative groups because during this time, ELLs simply had more opportunities to interact and they had cooperative activities planned to elicit academic language. On the other hand, I did anticipate ESL students' participation to increase over the course of this four week study, but instead my data showed a fluctuation in participation. The Venn diagram activity does appear to offer some explanation for this irregularity in data.

The third major research finding involved the type of verbal interactions ELLs used when participating in whole and cooperative learning group activities. In my study, ELLs increased their use of

content specific vocabulary by 62% in their cooperative learning group over that of the whole group. This was a significant finding because content specific vocabulary is a major part of academic language. Also in examining my field notes, I found three apparent examples of ELLs negotiating for meaning during cooperative learning discussions, and three missed opportunities to negotiate for meaning in the whole group. Although I was not looking for such instances during my original observations, this finding also did not surprise me. When ELLs were given the time and opportunity to discuss academic content with their peers, the negotiation for meaning naturally occurred.

Fourth, my study showed that ELLs with higher English language proficiency levels participated more frequently during cooperative learning activities than the student with the lower English language level. In fact, the Level 3 ELLs participated twice as much as the Level 2 ELL in my study. I predicted that this might occur because ELLs that score a Level 2 on the *LAS* are just beginning to develop their academic language, and thus have a limited understanding of classroom content material (*LAS Links Interpretation Guide*, 2005).

Finally, I was surprised by the impact the various assigned cooperative learning roles had on participation. My study revealed that all of the ELLs observed participated the least as the writer and the most in the roles of leader and checker. Throughout my classroom

observations I noticed that students assigned the role of the writer were less engaged in discussion and more focused on listening to their group's ideas and writing them on paper. Therefore, classroom teachers wanting to further the oral language development of ESL students should assign ELLs the roles of leader or checker in an effort to provide maximum verbal interactions.

#### What were ELLs' Attitudes Toward Cooperative Learning?

The results of the Two-Minute Interviews on Students' Attitudes and Final Student Interviews indicated that overall (87% of the time) ESL students favored working in their cooperative learning groups more than in the whole group. They felt that the work done with their cooperative learning peers was helpful and made them feel more comfortable and confident about later participating in the whole group. During my cooperative learning group observations, I had a sense that the student interviews would reveal positive feelings about students' time spent working in cooperative learning groups. Throughout my observations I saw many smiling faces and affirming comments.

#### Educational Implications

Implementing student interaction activities in the classroom through the use of cooperative learning will likely increase student participation. This opportunity for formal discussion will in turn support the acquisition of academic language (Ellis, 2005; Kagan, 1995). In

addition, student interaction has also shown to improve the reading comprehension and writing skills of ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006).

It is essential for teachers of second language learners to purposefully plan and apply instructional activities that allow students to interact in cooperative learning groups with their peers. The suggested cooperative group arrangement includes a mixture of ELLs and native English speakers with no more than four students per group (Kagan, 1994). Formal cooperative learning groups with assigned student roles also prove to be an effective arrangement (Kagan, 1994).

It is also important for teachers to remember that ELLs with lower English language proficiency levels (LAS Levels 1 and 2) will likely participate less during both whole and cooperative learning instruction. These ELLs are just beginning to develop their academic language skills. It would be beneficial to group lower level English language learners with proficient native English speakers or high level ELLs.

#### Limitations

One major limitation of this study was its small sample size. Only four participants were observed during this study, and they were all from one specific classroom. My data collection was also limited to the days the participants actually attended school. For instance, one student was absent two of the days of data collection, and as a result, the sample size on those days was limited to three participants. Finally, my study

employed only one researcher to perform the observations and data analysis. The inter-rater reliability of this study could have been improved by using more than one researcher to collect and examine the data (McKay, 2008). For example, in the 'Student Participation by Verbal Interaction' section of my capstone, I found it difficult to categorize every instance of participation using the predetermined categories by myself. In the future, I would use another researcher's expertise to assist in categorizing the comments that could have fit well under more than one category.

#### Future Research

Although cooperative learning is among the most well-researched topics in education, there are still opportunities for further research (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Future studies could involve a larger sample size and various grade levels. My study only observed one second grade classroom, but it would be interesting to compare ELL participation across grade levels. I suspect even more participation, teamwork and higher order thinking would occur with older students. I also think future research could be conducted over a longer period of time. My study was only four weeks in length and it did not show a clear increase in student participation. I speculate that if a study was longer, one might find a significant increase in participation in both whole and cooperative learning group instruction.

Another possible study could observe the interactions among native English speakers and ELLs while in cooperative learning groups. This type of study would require data to be collected on all participants in the group. This study could examine the impact native speakers have on the learning and language acquisition of ELLs.

### Utilizing the Results

I intend to present the results of my study to ELL and classroom teachers through a district-wide staff development session. This type of staff development will be especially useful to classroom teachers that work with clusters of ESL students all day. In this presentation, I will share my findings, discuss their classroom implications and offer practical examples of ways to incorporate cooperative learning into the classroom. In addition, I am part of a group of teachers in my school district whose classrooms are used as 'learning labs' for other teachers to observe best practice instruction in action. I plan to focus many of the upcoming 'learning lab' observations on student interaction through cooperative learning in the mainstream/ELL classrooms in which I co-teach.

### Summary

I have done an immense amount of professional reading, classroom observing and synthesizing of information in researching the impact cooperative learning has on ELLs' participation in the classroom.

Through this process, I learned a great deal about the role student interaction plays in ELLs' learning and acquisition of language. This project affirmed my belief in the importance of purposeful student interaction. I have learned to limit my teacher-talk time and focus my efforts on increasing the amount of time my co-teachers and I plan for classroom instruction through cooperative learning.

Appendix A  
Whole Group Observation Rubric

## Whole Group Observation Rubric

Observation criteria for <b>whole group</b> student engagement	Observer's field notes	Scale			
		Original tally marks	Some (1-2 times)	A fair amount (3-4 times)	Most of the time (5+ times)
<b>Types of Verbal Interactions</b>	Observer's field notes				
-Asks relevant questions					
-Offers relevant comments/suggestions					
-Makes off-task or irrelevant comments					
-Outstanding native speakers' comments					

**Whole Group Observation Rubric**  
**Continued**

<b>Evidence of Learning</b>	Observer's field notes				
-Makes connections with prior learning					
-Uses content vocabulary					
-Shows evidence of reflective thinking					

Appendix B

Cooperative Learning Group Observation Rubric

## Cooperative Learning Group Observation Rubric

Observation criteria for <b>cooperative learning group</b> student engagement	Observer's field notes	Scale			
		Original tally marks	Some (1-2 times)	A fair amount (3-4 times)	Most of the time (5+ times)
<b>Types of Verbal Interactions</b>	Observer's field notes				
-Asks relevant questions					
-Offers relevant comments/suggestions					
-Makes off-task or irrelevant comments					
-Outstanding native speakers' comments					

## Cooperative Learning Group Observation Rubric Continued

<b>Evidence of Learning</b>	Observer's field notes				
-Makes connections with prior learning					
-Uses content vocabulary					
-Shows evidence of reflective thinking					
-Shows evidence of a well-functioning group by working collaboratively to complete group task					

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