

# **Enhancing student engagement in large ESL classes at a Pakistani university**

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# **Enhancing student engagement in large ESL classes at a Pakistani university**

This study addresses lack of student engagement in large English as a second language (ESL) classes at a Pakistani university, using cooperative learning within the framework of participatory action research. A reconnaissance of the literature and thorough situation analysis led to an initial plan based on two cooperative learning strategies: Student-Teams-Achievement-Divisions and Think-Pair-Share. Over a semester, a second-year undergraduate compulsory ESL class was delivered as a series of mini action-research cycles refining this plan. The intervention was evaluated using classroom observation, student questionnaires and semi-structured group interviews. The results indicate that cooperative learning enhanced students' behavioural, cognitive and emotional engagement relative to their previous experience of learning in lecture-style classes. In addition, the study demonstrates that action research can be used by individual practitioners in even highly problematic teaching environments as a way of emancipating themselves and their students from the helplessness associated with institutional and cultural constraints.

Keywords: student engagement; cooperative learning; large classes; action research; English as a second language; higher education

## **Introduction**

This paper reports a classroom-based action-research study conducted in the University of Sindh, Jamshoro Pakistan (henceforth UoSJP) to address problems experienced by students and teachers in the English language support classes there. The first author is one such teacher, and the paper describes the cyclical process by which he changed his teaching practice with the aim of improving his students' experience of and engagement with the learning process. Author (2020b) is a personal account of this experience couched in the framework of living theory. The present paper represents a more critical and, as far as possible, objective evaluation of the project.

The medium of instruction in Pakistani universities is almost exclusively English. Students from elite English-medium schools are well equipped for this, but most students are from public vernacular-medium schools and therefore lack the English proficiency needed for study at tertiary level (Shamim, 2008). To address this issue, the universities provide tuition in English as a second language (ESL) but there is evidence that this is largely ineffective (e.g. British Council, 2016). The main reason identified in the literature is that ESL teachers in these institutions generally lack adequate training, not only in language teaching pedagogy but even in English language as an academic discipline (Pathan, 2012). However, another issue is the large size of the classes, with usually between 100 and 300 students per class.

Several previous studies have investigated the language support classes at UoSJP. Summarising the findings, Rind and Kadiwal (2016, p.3) concluded that the classes had 'unsatisfactory results in terms of teachers' teaching approaches and students' learning strategies', which accords with the experience of our first author at the start of this study (Author et al. 2018). The most obvious problem was that only a small proportion of students - those sitting at the front - actively participated in the classes. This was partly attributable to the large class size, but mainly to the fact that teaching was delivered as lectures, in stark contrast to received wisdom that successful language teaching requires interactive methods that involve students actively using the language for communicative purposes (e.g. Richards, 2006). Bughio (2013) attempted to address this situation using groupwork and other elements of communicative language teaching. However, despite positive feedback from students, he concluded that administrative responsibilities, teaching load and lack of professional development made it impractical for teachers to habitually use groupwork in the context of UoSJP.

The present study addresses the issue highlighted in the previous paragraph: namely, how can ESL classes at UoSJP be made more effective, given the considerable constraints of the situation? We agree that institutional changes, especially a reduction in administrative duties and teaching load, as well as additional training, would help teachers improve the learning experience in these large classes. But the issue of large classes arises because of lack of funding for the public universities, and this same lack of funding means that neither a reduction in workload nor additional teacher training are likely in the foreseeable future. The aim of this study is therefore to investigate how, within this reality, an individual teacher can find ways of changing their classroom behaviour to improve student engagement, without the procedure becoming unsustainably demanding or time-consuming for the teacher.

There is significant evidence that student engagement is essential for academic achievement (see Christensen et al., 2012 for an overview). This includes behavioural engagement, i.e. participation in class and extra-curricular activities; emotional engagement, i.e. positive feelings towards teachers, classmates and the institution; and cognitive engagement, i.e. a willingness to grapple with complex ideas in order to understand them, or to persist in mastering difficult skills. At the beginning of our study, most students were manifesting disengagement with their ESL classes at the most basic behavioural level: even when physically present in class, they participated to a negligible degree (Author et al. 2018, 2020a).

Student engagement depends on factors at both individual and institutional levels. An important individual factor is self-efficacy: a student's belief that they will be able to succeed. At institutional level, engagement is enhanced by teaching strategies that maximise time on task and facilitate engagement at deeper cognitive levels. Behavioural engagement also increases when teachers emphasise collaboration and

positive interpersonal relationships both between students and between students and teacher (Guthrie, Wigfield & You, 2012). Overall, engagement is enhanced in learning situations that satisfy fundamental human needs: '...to feel secure and respected, be active and autonomous, experience success, feel competent ... be related to others' (Janosz, 2012, p. 699).

One institutional factor that might negatively affect student engagement is class size. There is clear consensus amongst teachers and learners that large classes can be challenging; in the context of English language teaching, classes become problematically large at above 40 students (Todd, 2006). In a seminal study on class size in language teaching, teachers reported that in large classes it was difficult for them to remember learners' names, to create rapport, to assess learners' mood or interest, and to maintain eye contact (McLeod, 1989). Given the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in promoting engagement, the difficulties experienced by teachers of large language classes clearly have the potential to negatively impact their students' engagement and hence achievement. However, evidence for a direct relationship between class size reduction and improved learning outcomes, particularly at university level, is inconclusive. Where smaller classes are associated with improved achievement, this seems to be mediated by differences in teacher behaviour (Pedder, 2006): smaller classes improve learning by facilitating behaviours that promote student engagement at the emotional and perhaps cognitive levels. The aim of this study is to explore ways of achieving these positive aspects of teacher behaviour, a factor within the control of the individual teacher-researcher, without class size reduction, a factor outside their control.

The literature on teaching English to speakers of other languages suggests that adverse effects of large classes can be minimised using groupwork. By allowing learners to work simultaneously, groupwork not only maximises students' language-

practice time, but also means they are actively involved and therefore less likely to become uninterested or bored. There is also some empirical evidence that pair and groupwork can enhance language learning at university level. For example, Teng (2017) found that Chinese university students who were taught English phrasal verbs through pairwork learnt more than those who worked individually, and that students who were taught through groupwork learnt even more than those who worked in pairs.

In higher education contexts other than language teaching, there is considerable research on cooperative learning, a highly structured approach to groupwork originating in the work of Johnson and Johnson (e.g. 1986), Kagan (e.g. 2014) and Slavin (e.g. 1980). Students work together in mixed-ability groups to complete a particular task or assignment in such a manner that students help one another learn and all members of the group benefit equally from their teamwork. Advocates of this system argue that learning is enhanced when students work cooperatively, rather than individually or in competition with one another. The defining characteristics of cooperative learning are positive interdependence (students need to work together to complete a task) and individual accountability (each student is responsible for their own performance). These characteristics create an expectation that all students will engage in classroom activities, at least behaviourally. Echoing the literature on language teaching, Kagan (2014) argues that every student should have equal opportunity to participate, and that cooperative learning maximises this opportunity by allowing students to participate simultaneously. In addition, the approach encourages engagement at the deeper cognitive levels required, for example, to explain a point or understand someone else's, to seek or provide clarification, or to synthesise different ideas.

Despite extensive research demonstrating advantages of cooperative learning, and many accounts of its successful implementation (summarised by e.g. Gillies 2016),

the approach is by no means problem free. Opdecam and Everaert (2018) point out that putting students into groups does not automatically turn them into effective teams, and there is disagreement about how much class time should be spent on explicit teamwork training, especially at tertiary level. Furthermore, some students dislike working in teams and there is evidence that groupwork, and especially group assessment, can have a negative impact on university students' satisfaction ratings. There will always be some students who contribute less than others and may be seen as unfairly benefitting from their classmates' efforts; this can demotivate stronger students who may feel they are being taken advantage of. Finally, teachers can underestimate the amount of time and effort needed to facilitate successful groupwork. Overall, Opdecam and Everaert (2018) conclude that many problems with cooperative learning are caused by poor implementation and argue that teachers need to thoroughly understand the underlying principles to use it effectively. In the present study, the teacher-researcher (our first author) had developed such an understanding through a painstaking review of the literature, which both explains the principles and describes a highly structured set of activities, which he felt he would be able to follow.

In summary, our reconnaissance suggested that groupwork could increase student engagement in the compulsory ESL classes at UoSJP and provide enhanced opportunities to develop language skills. Cooperative learning was selected as a suitable approach because it is claimed to improve engagement at all levels, and we expected its clear structure to mitigate the extra work involved in introducing groupwork.

## **Materials and methods**

An action-research methodology was chosen because it allows the roles of teacher and researcher to be taken by the same person, and therefore enabled our first author to investigate how to improve his own teaching. Following the reconnaissance described

in the previous section, the teacher-researcher collaborated with his colleagues and students to identify the main challenges to be addressed, then developed an initial strategy to address them. A class was subsequently delivered as a series of mini action-research cycles and, at the end of semester, the intervention was evaluated in terms of its effects on student engagement.

Compulsory English classes are offered in every faculty at UoSJP, but to facilitate administration, the intervention was conducted in the teacher-researcher's home department, the Institute of English Language and Literature. The Head of Institute confirmed that cooperative learning could be implemented in a second-year second semester class; it was also arranged that students could transfer to a traditional class with the same fixed syllabus if they preferred. This institution-wide syllabus consisted entirely of reading texts from the coursebook. Although this is far from what would be considered in the west as a communicative language teaching syllabus, the teacher-researcher aimed to use the prescribed reading passages as a vehicle for discussion and interaction in the medium of English, enabling students to develop not only their speaking skills but also their vocabulary and global reading skills by better engaging with the material. The next step was to consider how cooperative learning techniques could be contextually adapted to achieve these aims.

Initial planning included a thorough situation analysis, published as Author et al. (2020a). Classroom observation of the ESL classes found that many students were off task, neither behaviourally nor cognitively engaged with the intended learning activities. Questionnaires and interviews also revealed emotional disengagement, with most students agreeing that overcrowding in the classes made them feel 'anxiously uncomfortable', that teachers couldn't remember their names and that brighter students received more attention than weaker students. Teachers expressed concerns that trying

to implement a more interactive approach would create class-management problems and waste time in setting up groups. Overall, the analysis confirmed the findings of Bughio (2013) and indicated that the situation had not improved since his study.

To minimise the time taken by group formation and establish groupwork as the default mode of working, it was decided to use permanent student groupings: students would work in the same group in each lesson and go directly to this seating arrangement on arrival. Each group would have a permanent leader as well as two rotating roles: inquirer and timekeeper (Johnson & Johnson, 1986). The roles were intended to enhance students' sense of individual accountability and hence increase participation. Group-leaders would manage and co-ordinate group discussions, listen to other members' concerns, and attempt to resolve them by interacting with the teacher. Inquirers would ask the teacher questions of clarification on behalf of their group, while timekeepers had responsibility for ensuring the groups were ready to present their work at the designated time. To address the issue of students at the back not being able to see or hear, it was decided that the teacher-researcher would give instructions from the centre of the room, where he could be seen and heard by the whole class. All the teacher-researcher's English-language teaching colleagues were invited as observers to monitor the process of intervention. These observers acted as 'critical friends', providing a useful point of reference against which the teacher-researcher could check his own perceptions and those of his students.

The literature on communicative language teaching suggests that behaviour problems can be reduced by regular classroom routines (Harmer, 2007). It was therefore decided to implement only a limited number of cooperative learning strategies, so that students could become thoroughly familiar with them. Two strategies were chosen – Student-Teams-Achievement-Divisions (STAD; Slavin, 1980) and Think-Pair-Share

(TPS; Lyman, 1981) – which lend themselves well to students working in fixed groups. In STAD, the teacher first introduces a subject, then students work in mixed-ability teams of 4-5 members to master the topic, before individually taking a quiz without conferring. Individual scores are summed to make the group score, so every student has an incentive to ensure that their teammates have understood the material. In TPS, students are first given a question or presentation to think about individually; they then discuss their responses in pairs before sharing them with the class.

The first two stages of STAD were used as the foundation of a regular routine. Each class would start with a 5-minute mini-lecture given by the teacher-researcher, introducing the text and explaining the tasks that students would then work in groups to complete. Tasks were provided in the coursebook or on a separate worksheet and included, for example, closed and open-ended comprehension questions, vocabulary exercises and language-awareness activities. Rather than ending the class with a quiz, it was decided to finish with 5-minute student presentations, with randomly selected students presenting the answers agreed by their group or, where relevant, an account of their group discussion. In the situation analysis, presentations were one of the most popular activities with students, and we expected that including a popular activity would increase the likelihood of students wanting to participate. Furthermore, since they would not know in advance who would be selected to present, everyone would need to be prepared, and therefore to have engaged with the activity.

The second strategy, TPS, was introduced to overcome concerns that only a few more able students would participate and that students who were not involved would tend to be disruptive. Compared to groupwork, where students can potentially ‘hide’ or dominate discussions, pairwork increases the amount of time each student can spend talking, i.e. practising the language. It also encourages them to stay focussed even when

not talking because they are the only listener and know the next turn will be theirs. Furthermore, in the situation analysis, some teachers suggested that pairwork keeps students calmer and more disciplined than groupwork, and we therefore hypothesised that it would contribute to the overall aim of improving participation without creating management problems. The last step of TPS was adapted by requiring students to share with their group after pairwork, rather than with the class as a whole; this was intended both to increase the level of simultaneous participation and reduce the extent to which shyer students might find the activity threatening.

The intervention consisted of a series of mini action-research cycles involving evaluation and adjustment of the plan after each lesson, based on the teacher-researcher's own reflection and his reading of qualitative comments made by the observers and students (instruments adapted from Grundman 2002). At the end of semester, a final evaluation was undertaken using a convergent parallel mixed-method design, with more detailed data-collection instruments than were possible after every lesson. These included student group interviews, student questionnaire and class observation form. The student questionnaire and observation form (both adapted from Grundman, 2002; Brown, 2008) contained mainly Likert-scale questions. The student group interview (adapted from Seng, 2006; Carpenter, 2006; Brown, 2008) generated qualitative data. Before use, all instruments were discussed with the teacher-researcher's colleagues and student group-leaders to check that no questions were ambiguous or misleading. Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately, and the results compared. Quantitative analysis involved calculating the median response for each Likert-style question and plotting the distribution of responses using box plots to facilitate visual identification of patterns in the data (cf. Author et al. 2108, 2020a). For the qualitative data, the teacher-researcher transcribed recordings of the interviews then

conducted content analysis using the constant comparative method to identify the most central and significant themes.

## **Results**

Compulsory English classes at UoSJP run for one hour, three times a week, theoretically for 16 weeks per semester. However, all 48 hours are rarely delivered because of student boycotts and other disruptions to teaching. In the semester reported here, only 23 classes took place. The first five were used for orientation, and the remaining 18 for cycles of action and reflection. This section describes the intervention as it evolved, and the results of the final evaluation. The full set of data is available at [www.XXX](http://www.XXX).

### ***Orientation***

During orientation, the students were introduced to the idea of action research and the importance of their input as participants in the process. They were also informed that their feedback might eventually contribute to a published article and were given the option of transferring to a lecture-style class if they preferred. In the first class, the teacher-researcher explained cooperative learning generally, and in the second class he focussed on STAD and TPS. The third class covered details of the intervention, including classroom routines. In the fourth class, the teacher-researcher and students negotiated rules of conduct, believed to facilitate the successful introduction of student-centred methods in large language classes (Harmer, 2007). They agreed that team-members should be given equal chances to contribute, that communication should be in English as far as possible, that students should behave politely towards one another, and that groups leaders and the teacher-researcher would be responsible for ensuring this code of conduct was observed. In the fifth class, the student groups were established.

Proponents of cooperative learning (e.g. Slavin, 1980) advocate using heterogeneous groups that reflect the makeup of a class in terms of e.g. ability and gender. However, male and female students usually sit separately at UoSJP, and the teacher-researcher was concerned that, in the cultural context of Pakistan, some female students would refuse to work in groups with men and might stop attending if he insisted they did so. During the orientation, this issue was discussed with the class. Overall, the male students were in favour of mixed-sex groups, but many of the women were against the idea. Since the main aim of the intervention was to improve participation in general, we wanted to avoid anything that might reduce attendance; it was therefore decided to use single-sex groupings.

The orientation lessons were attended by 70-80 students, despite there being 152 students on the register. Although the classes were deemed compulsory, before this study no record was kept of attendance and absenteeism was an on-going problem. For example, the marksheet for the previous semester showed that only 108 of the 152 registered students had taken the assessment. In the final orientation lesson, this marksheet was used to establish 13 mixed-ability groups. In STAD, mixed-ability grouping is intended to ensure that weaker-performing students can learn from stronger students and that every team can perform on an equal basis. The recommended group size for STAD is four or five students, but this would have led to too many groups to be able to arrange the chairs with enough space to move between them. It was therefore decided to use groups of six, with the even number also facilitating pairwork. To promote students' autonomy and sense of belonging, hence their emotional engagement, groups were asked to choose their own team names and select their own leaders.

### *Cycle 1*

In the first intervention lesson, it took about ten minutes to form the groups and

distribute handouts. During groupwork, the teacher-researcher constantly moved around the class answering students' queries, reinforcing the benefits of cooperative learning to students who were passively off task, and refocusing the attention of students who were actively off task. The observer's feedback was positive; he found that cooperative learning enhanced student participation and encouraged them to interact both with their peers and with the teacher. Feedback from students was also mainly positive and many of them reported enjoying the novel approach. Others appreciated the increased opportunity to participate, especially for quiet or shy students, and the benefits of sharing knowledge with their classmates. However, the students also identified several shortcomings of the experience, which needed to be addressed.

Figure 1 about here

The main issue was the uneven contribution of students to their groups. The teacher-researcher realised that it was very challenging for students to go directly into groupwork after the mini-lecture, especially the less linguistically-proficient students, whose lack of immediate understanding of the topic made them completely dependent on the understanding of more proficient teammates. This could potentially damage the self-efficacy of the weaker students or create resentment in the stronger students, so it was decided to add another step to the implementation of STAD, namely a short period of working individually on the task before the group discussion. This echoes the thinking stage of TPS, which is widely believed to help shy students address anxiety about participating and allow introverted students the time they need to formulate ideas (cf. Condon & Ruth-Sahd, 2013). In addition, the teacher-researcher held a short meeting with the group-leaders, asking them to continue encouraging the shy or passive members of their groups to contribute.

The remaining issues were noise and time-pressure. To reduce time-pressure, group-leaders were asked to form their groups before the teacher-researcher arrived, after which anyone still outside would not be allowed into the room. Secondly, two group-leaders were recruited to assist in distributing hand-outs. Regarding noise, however, the teacher-researcher judged this to be the inevitable product of group discussions and therefore more productive than destructive (cf. Nunan & Lamb, 1996).

### *Cycle 2*

To encourage the more reluctant students to participate, the teacher-researcher started the lesson by reiterating the benefits of cooperative learning and explaining that language skills would develop with practice. Students were reminded to help one another by clarifying and explaining the task to their teammates as required. In this lesson, the students settled down much more quickly and the designated group-leaders distributed the handouts during the teacher's introduction. Latecomers were informed that, if they came late to the next lesson, they would not be allowed into the room.

During groupwork, it became clear that, although more students were actively participating than was possible with the lecture format, some were still noticeably disengaged. The teacher-researcher therefore approached these students to try to understand what was happening for them. The main reason they gave for not participating was their poor English. Either they could not understand the text, or did not understand their teammates, or could not participate in discussion because they were not very fluent in English. The teacher-researcher encouraged them to seek clarification whenever necessary, either from him or from any member of their group, instead of sitting passively.

Student questionnaires revealed evidence of behavioural, cognitive and emotional engagement, and the observer commented that students were comfortable,

involved and were given feedback. However, he also pointed out that not everyone was actively engaged in the discussions, which he attributed to their lack of experience with interactive learning. It was clear that some students needed individual support to enable them to participate in the group activities. Because of this, the teacher-researcher decided to ask group-leaders to let him know if they noticed a member of their group was struggling. Students also raised a new problem: absenteeism. It was decided to address this by taking a register and only allowing students with at least 75% attendance to take the final examination.

### *Cycle 3*

The teacher-researcher was still kept busy moving around the class providing feedback and encouragement, but the process was already starting to feel more comfortable, and time-management was much improved. Student feedback and observer's comments were broadly similar to the previous lessons, but the students raised two new issues. Firstly, a group-leader pointed out that they could not openly identify disengaged students because this would affect their friendship with them and might cause hostility. The teacher-researcher therefore decided to hold a meeting with the group-leaders to find the most acceptable way of identifying and helping potentially disengaged students; in the meantime he redoubled his efforts to notice these students himself. Secondly, there was a complaint that some students did not bring their coursebooks, which made it more difficult for their group to complete the task. The teacher-researcher therefore lodged a photocopy of the materials for subsequent classes at the photocopy shop, which was just outside the classroom. Students were informed that, if they could not bring their book to a lesson, they should get a photocopy of the relevant material from the shop at the regular price.

#### *Cycle 4*

Feedback from student questionnaires and observer's notes was again mainly positive. Nevertheless, there were still complaints that some team members did not fully participate, either by not contributing ideas to group discussions, or simply by failing to turn up. Following this lesson, the teacher-researcher held a meeting with the group-leaders, intending to discuss how best to support students who were not actively participating. However, the group-leaders felt that some students failed to participate not because they were shy but because they didn't like cooperative learning and preferred lectures. Because of this, they either stayed away or, if they attended, were reluctant to join in. It transpired that some students, thought to be unhappy with the intervention process, had been absent from most of the lessons, and the group-leaders asked the teacher-researcher to adjust the groups to compensate for this. With the consent of the students involved, one of the original groups was therefore broken up and its members were distributed between five other groups, replacing the six students who had been most frequently absent.

#### *Cycles 5-18*

Students were reminded about the option of moving to another class, but none took this up, and once the groups were rearranged, complaints about absent team members noticeably decreased. However, despite the introduction of the attendance register, absenteeism continued to be an issue right to the end of the process. Sometimes, only one member of a group was present. To enable those present to continue working collaboratively with minimal impact on class management or their own time on task, the teacher-researcher instructed students in groups with only one or two members to join groups from which one to three members were absent, without asking him. However,

when half or more members were present in a group, they were asked to continue in their groups with the members available and allow students to join them from groups where more than half the members were absent.

The teacher-researcher found that, as he and the class became accustomed to the new approach, classroom-management issues diminished. The permanent groups and regular structured steps of STAD and TPS saved time in class because students knew what they needed to do; the regularity also reduced the amount of new planning needed for each lesson. Following the first four cycles, only lessons 7 and 11 were observed live, due to the availability of the teacher-researcher's colleagues; video recordings of the other classes were observed later. Although it was mentioned less frequently, lack of engagement continued to crop up in the feedback from both students and observers. The unresponsiveness of some group members frustrated their team-mates, even when they could see that this might be due to lack of confidence. But despite the issues of uneven attendance and participation, most feedback was very positive throughout these cycles. The observers commented favourably on the efforts of the teacher-researcher to involve all the students and reported that most students were at least behaviourally engaged. The main themes to emerge from the student questionnaires were the benefits of sharing knowledge and ideas, enhanced confidence and understanding, improved language skills, and enjoyment of the novel participatory approach.

### ***Final evaluation***

The detailed student questionnaire was circulated in the final intervention class. Eighty-three copies were returned, of which 74 were included in the analysis after exclusion of invalid returns (e.g. incomplete, the same rating used throughout, or multiple ratings per question). Observation forms were completed for all 18 intervention lessons, seven from live observation and 11 from video recordings, by 17 different colleagues with two to

16 years experience of teaching English language. Following the last lesson, the teacher-researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with five of the student groups, selected through systematic sampling: every second group on the list was asked to come for interview at a specified date and time, but one group did not turn up. Each interview took 90-120 minutes, and all groups opted to answer in English. The interviews were conducted over three days with, on average, two per day. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed evidence of student engagement at the behavioural, cognitive, and emotional levels, as well as evidence that engagement in all three areas had increased relative to the lecture format.

In terms of behavioural engagement, students reported spending more time actively practising their language skills, especially speaking. The following quotation is representative:

...there was more and more student-student interaction which is almost absent in lecture class because in that students are only facing the teacher and listening, but in cooperative learning groups students are facing to each other and interacting (male student, Interview 2).

The quantitative analysis corroborated this finding: 75% of students agreed or strongly agreed that cooperative learning 'helped learners participate actively in the teaching-learning process' and 'enhanced face to face interaction between learners'. All observers responded positively to the question: 'Are all the learners participating in the discussion?'

In the area of emotional engagement, the most frequently mentioned advantages of cooperative learning were enhancements in motivation and confidence. Many of the students reported that, in cooperative learning, their shyness started to diminish, they began to participate more assertively, and they enjoyed the variety of activities.

Conversely, in lecture-style classes the passivity and repetitiveness of only listening to lectures bored them. Qualitative evidence is typified by the following quotations:

... in cooperative learning we did a variety of activities which we enjoyed, and did not get bored...' (male student, Interview 2).

'In traditional class, we don't take any interest in study ... we get bored sometimes we sleep' (female student, Interview 5).

Again, this was supported by the quantitative analysis, with 75% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that cooperative learning 'made the class more fun and interesting for me', 'motivated me to learn more' and 'helped me feel more relaxed in the class'.

Alongside greater emotional engagement came evidence of improved self-efficacy. Most students agreed or strongly agreed that cooperative learning 'helped enhance my understanding/comprehension of English', 'enhanced my communication/interactive skills' and 'improved my academic performance'.

Qualitatively, this finding is summed up in the following remark:

... before cooperative learning class, I was not even able to speak in front of the whole class, but now I have built my confidence (female student, Interview 4).

Regarding cognitive engagement, students indicated that cooperative learning developed their critical thinking and problem-solving skills through the process of argumentation and the need to justify their ideas to their teammates. The following two comments summarise this process:

when we discussed, we argued which developed our thinking powers (male student, Interview 2).

[we give] reasons so our thinking faculty does increase... (female student, Interview 4).

On the questionnaires, 75% of students agreed or strongly agreed that cooperative

learning 'stimulated my cognitive skills (thinking, reasoning etc.)', 'helped us process information thoroughly in order to reach a consensus' and 'made problem-solving easier for me'. For some students, increased cognitive engagement was associated with an increase in perceived autonomy:

... we were compelled to work with our own, whereas in traditional class, most of students depend on the teacher... and it doesn't build up a sort of creativity in you (female student, Interview 4).

Conversely, for others, increased access to the teacher was an advantage of the new setup:

...because the teacher is not bound to lecture, he can easily communicate, he can easily walk here and there... when any student has problem...he comes and interacts (male student, Interview 1).

Overall, in the final evaluation, the feedback from both students and observers was mainly positive. Although the issues of absenteeism, uneven participation and time pressure still cropped up, the advantages of cooperative learning for student engagement were clearly identified.

## **Discussion**

The encouraging results described in the previous section need to be interpreted cautiously. A limitation of this kind of research is that the teacher-researcher's enthusiasm will always tend to have a positive effect on the learning experience, irrespective of the approach used; feedback may also be influenced by a desire not to offend the teacher-researcher. The overwhelmingly positive responses from students and observers in this study might therefore be partly attributable to the teacher-researcher's commitment and/or a wish to please him. Furthermore, students whose

questionnaires had to be excluded, and the group who failed to come for interview, were presumably less engaged than those whose responses were analysed. Nevertheless, the fact that multiple sources of data tell such a consistent story leaves little doubt that, for most students who attended regularly, the intervention process improved engagement.

Another positive outcome of the intervention was its impact on the self-efficacy of the teacher-researcher, whose previous experience of these classes had led to frustration and helplessness. He had been concerned about the lack of student participation and how little feedback he could give them. But when he attempted to improve things using groupwork, the resulting noise and chaos were discouraging and still only the stronger students participated. He had therefore returned to lecturing and setting work for students to complete individually. In contrast, the highly structured framework of cooperative learning gave him a more successful experience of groupwork and overcame most of the problems he had previously experienced. The process of action research also led to an increased sense of professional confidence and success. Reflecting regularly on his teaching practice allowed him to more clearly identify problems and devise strategies to address them. It also allowed him to experience a degree of professional autonomy despite the highly constrained institutional context.

Despite the successes of the intervention, it is a sobering thought that fewer than 50% of registered students were regular attenders. The marksheet from the previous semester showed that many students had already dropped out of the class before this study started. However, problems of absenteeism and uneven participation continued throughout the intervention, and this led to resentment. Students recognised that ‘if one group member is absent, it affects the whole group’ (female student, Interview 4). Some

students were perceived not to be genuinely contributing and other group members found it difficult to encourage these students to participate more fully:

Some students did not sincerely share the points, and this created problem during group work (male student, Interview 1).

... it was quite difficult to boost up all the students, especially, someone you are not familiar (female student, Interview 4).

Of course, in any class, some students participate less than others and some may be intolerant of others (cf. Wichadee, 2005). Furthermore, no pedagogic approach can ensure 100% participation. Nevertheless, it is important to consider possible reasons for the variable student engagement in this study, and what could be done differently to improve engagement even further.

Setting aside extraneous personal issues such as family commitments, paid work and transport problems, there are several factors that might have contributed to students' continued lack of engagement. Firstly, despite the thorough orientation stage, the change in classroom culture might have been too difficult or threatening for some students. In Pakistan, authoritarian teaching and rote learning are commonplace, even at tertiary level, so the students were accustomed to a more teacher-centred pedagogy. Since the new approach was part of a research project, some students may have thought it would not be used in future and was hence not worth the effort of adapting or committing to. The resistance of such students might be gradually overcome by more permanent and widespread use of cooperative learning, and a consequent evolution in cultural expectations of the classroom. However, more general introduction of cooperative learning or other student-centred approaches would itself require a shift of culture. Small action-research projects like this one, conducted by individual practitioners, can make a valuable contribution in chipping away at the status quo in a

bottom-up direction, complementing top-down initiatives such as the Language Teaching Reforms project (ELTR; British Council 2016).

A second issue that could negatively impact engagement relates to students' personalities: shy or introverted students find it harder to participate in class generally and may need more time to formulate their ideas. This was addressed in the intervention by using TPS and allowing time for individual work before group discussions.

However, there is increasing realisation that current Western participatory approaches to education may penalise students who are quiet either because of shyness or introversion. Condon and Ruth-Sahd (2013) argue that while some quiet students need help to speak up in class, for others it may always be too difficult, and such students need to be allowed to meet course requirements in other ways. This is more of a challenge in the language classroom than in many other subjects, because of the skills-based nature of the content and the need for communicative practice. Pairwork goes some way towards addressing the issue, by allowing students to speak in the least threatening situation. However, in this study, any student could be selected to present their group's work to the class. For some, this may have been very anxiety-provoking and could even have led to them staying away. Although students were offered the possibility of transferring to another class, they may have thought this would reflect badly on them. Furthermore, students who had already stopped attending may have been unaware of the option.

In the present context, a third factor affecting students' capacity for engagement is language proficiency. The intervention took place in the Institute of English Language and Literature, where many students are admitted as a fall-back option after failing to obtain the grades to study their subject of first choice. Perhaps because of this, students studying English at Pakistani universities tend to have English proficiency levels well below the average for students across all subjects (British Council, 2016).

This lack of proficiency may have prevented some students from participating in groupwork, as they struggled to understand not only the teacher's instructions but also their teammates' explanations. Because of this, the teacher-researcher allowed students to explain in Sindhi or Urdu as required, but clearly students who required such assistance would also struggle to contribute to the subsequent group discussion in English.

An additional consideration is that less proficient or less outgoing students may have become aware of the irritation felt by some of their more participatory teammates. This could have negatively affected their emotional engagement and further reduced their confidence and self-efficacy, so they started to feel even more anxious about contributing, possibly to the extent of staying away from class. The teacher-researcher's frequent emphasis on encouraging quieter group members may also have increased the pressure and anxiety experienced by shyer students. It is possible that asking more proficient students to help their less proficient classmates made the less proficient students feel embarrassed and therefore less able to join in. So for some students, the emphasis on participation and peer encouragement may have been counterproductive.

This study set out by asking how, within the constraints of the ESL classes at UoSJP, an individual teacher could change their classroom behaviour to improve student engagement, without the procedure becoming unsustainably demanding or time-consuming for the teacher. We found that cooperative learning, suitably adapted to the context, offered one possible solution. The highly structured groupwork, using permanent groups with regular routines, and including ample opportunity for individual reflection and pairwork, led to recognisable improvement in students' engagement compared with the previous lecture method, while avoiding the classroom-management problems experienced by the teacher-researcher in his previous attempts to use

communicative methods. The study offers insights that are applicable to the implementation of cooperative learning in other places, especially in majority world contexts where classes are large, and resources are scarce. Nevertheless, as the discussion in the preceding paragraphs indicates, there is scope to further develop the approach, especially in terms of engaging quieter and less proficient students.

Reflection on the intervention described in this study suggests several possible avenues for development. Firstly, less overt emphasis on group participation and peer encouragement might reduce the social anxiety experienced by some students and paradoxically allow them to participate more, in their own time and with a greater sense of autonomy. Secondly, although mixed-ability groups are the norm in cooperative learning, this might not be the best approach where language proficiency levels are so disparate that some students cannot effectively participate in the group task. In such cases, graded tasks might be more appropriate, so that each student can work in their own zone of proximal development. In this scenario, cooperative learning groups might be organised at two or three different levels, with groups at different levels performing differently graded tasks based on the same text. A third way forward might be to use even more elements of cooperative learning, for example combined group grades – at least for a small component of the overall mark - or explicit social skills training. Finally, it would be interesting to investigate whether cooperative learning has an impact on student achievement in these classes. In the present study, no meaningful comparison between the cooperative learning group and others was possible, because each teacher at UoSJP set their own exam.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the study is to the literature showing how individual practitioners, even in very challenging environments, can use action research to enhance their own self-efficacy and hence their practice. Furthermore, by

openly involving students and colleagues as participants in the process, the teacher-researcher can start to challenge the status quo in a constructive manner. As described in the introduction, there is a significant body of literature documenting the problems of Pakistani education in general and of English language teaching in particular. Many of the proposed solutions would need to happen at institutional, governmental, or even cultural levels, and it is therefore easy for teachers to feel powerless to change. However, small interventions such as the one described here are within the grasp of the individual and offer a more optimistic and emancipatory view.

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Figure 1. The teacher-researcher performing as a facilitator.