

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ON SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION STUDENTS IN AN EFL CLASS

EXPLORANDO EL IMPACTO DEL APRENDIZAJE COLABORATIVO EN ESTUDIANTES CON NECESIDADES EDUCATIVAS ESPECIALES EN CLASE DE INGLÉS

Felipe Ortega^{1*}

¹ Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas
pfortegap@correo.udistrital.edu.co

Carolina Ramos²

² Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas
lcramosr@correo.udistrital.edu.co

*Autor para la correspondencia

Fecha de recepción: marzo de 2022

Fecha de aceptación: junio de 2022

Resumen

Este artículo informa sobre un proyecto en curso desarrollado dentro de la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo explorar el impacto que tuvo el aprendizaje colaborativo en la promoción de inclusión en un aula con estudiantes de educación especial en una clase de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). Los participantes son estudiantes de sexto grado donde algunos estudiantes han sido diagnosticados con discapacidad intelectual leve de una institución pública en Bogotá, Colombia. La información se recopiló a través de indagación a través de una investigación documental. Los hallazgos iniciales revelaron que los estudiantes de sexto grado se sienten más cómodos cuando aprenden a través del modelo de aprendizaje colaborativo, lo que contribuyó a un crecimiento en los comportamientos inclusivos en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje Colaborativo, Discapacidad Intelectual, Escuela Secundaria, Inglés como Lengua Extranjera, Inclusión

Abstract

This paper reports an ongoing project developed within the Faculty of Education at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. This research aimed to explore the impact that collaborative learning had on the promotion of inclusion in a classroom with special needs education students' in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class. Participants are 6th-grade students where some students have been diagnosed with mild intellectual disability from a public institution in Bogota, Colombia. The information was collected through inquiry through documentary research. Initial findings revealed that sixth-grade students feel more comfortable when learning through the collaborative learning model, which contributed to growth in inclusive behaviors in the English as a foreign language classroom.

KeyWords: Collaborative Learning, English as a Foreign Language, Inclusion, Intellectual Disability, Middle School.

Introduction

The current pedagogical article pursues to explore if collaborative learning may or may not have an impact on special education needs students in 6th grade when learning English as a Foreign Language. Taking into account the number of people around the globe who present intellectual disabilities it is important to address inclusive education strategies in EFL to support education for all not only in Colombia but around the world. Then again, according to Strømme and Diseth (2000) as cited in Tural Hesapcioglu (2019) intellectual disability is present in 1-3% of the general population. It can be identified as mild, moderate, or severe. Most of the cases are classified as mild which represents 85% of the population with ID.

In Colombia, the Registry of Location and Characterization of People with Disabilities (2017) as cited in MinSalud (2017) identified that 2.6% of the total population in Colombia has some kind of disability. Additionally, DANE (2005) as cited in MinSalud (2017) had identified that 6.1 % of the population had some type of disability as well, compared to this percentage, DANE (2018) as cited in INCI (2018) reported a growth of 1.1% for a total of 7.2% which translates into about three and a half million people with disabilities.

Therefore, it is still unclear the exact data concerning the number of people with disabilities if the data from RLCPD and DANE are compared. However, it is evident that there has been an increase in the special needs population over the years. Hence, the importance of this article falls over the promotion and support of special needs education students.

Collaborative Learning (CL) plays an important role in this article as the pedagogical method and strategy to support inclusive education for students with mild intellectual disabilities. Laal & Laal (2012) defines CL as a teaching and learning approach that involves the organization of students into groups or pairs for the development of an activity.

Collaborative learning occurs when team members help each other learn, not when some students do the work of others. Each member must actively participate to develop the task together. According to Skopeliti and Riga (2021), the use of CL promotes the development of shared responsibility, peer-to-peer assistance, and fosters the creation of a friendly environment. Therefore, it was conceived that there is a lack of teaching research regarding the appropriate strategies and teaching methodologies to implement with special education needs students in the

English language learning process and with

education in general in our local context. Mosquera et al (2018) supported that idea by stating that “research to foster the adoption of the local expertise at the time of planning public policies is very much needed so that inclusive education becomes a reality in elt practices.” (p. 244). Even though they provide some examples in foreign countries, in the Colombian context it is often ignored for different reasons. Kamenopoulou (2018) stated that it was urgent and necessary to do more research on cultural and sensitive issues regarding inclusive education in the global South. So this article aims to propose a strategy to encourage inclusive education in ELT classrooms in Colombia as a reality.

The present article is composed first of an introduction where there is a contextualization of the research topic. Secondly, there is a literature review where the main constructs that support this research are conceptualized. Thirdly, the methodology describes the research design used to develop this proposal, the context, and the data collection instruments. Finally, the discussion presents the impact and how it might be useful. The next is the literature review where the main constructs (inclusive

education, collaborative learning, and mild intellectual disability) will be explored and defined to support the current composition.

Statement of the problema

Intellectual disability has been described by different authors (Jiu, et al. 2020; Burt, 2020; Tural Hesapçioğlu, et al. 2019) as a neurodevelopmental disorder identified by a deficit in mental ability and limitations in intellectual, adaptive, and communicative functioning such as problem-solving, reasoning, abstract thinking, academic learning, judgment, among others. Taking into account these aspects characteristic of Intellectual Disability it becomes necessary for teachers to implement adjustments to the curriculum and lesson plans as students with ID present limitations in different learning and communicative skills.

Adjustments like simplifying learning objectives and providing accommodations to the instruction design (Westwood, 2002 cited by Burt, 2020).

Even though intellectual disability has no found cure and it is defined as a life-long condition it can be managed through diverse

strategies to prevent deterioration, improve daily-life functioning, and support the individual to prosper in their life. Additionally, the treatment for each person is different, it has to be treated individually, and advised by healthcare professionals.

Based on different sources (APA, 2021; Lee, et al 2019) it is possible to find various multidisciplinary and individually tailored strategies to deal with ID. First, it is important to take into account that support provided for this population is focused on the individuals' strengths and needs, looking for their adaptation at home, school, work, and the community. These strategies consist of early intervention (infants and toddlers), special education, behavioral intervention, family education, government resources, psychopharmacologic interventions, family support, transition services from childhood to adulthood, vocational programs, day programs for adults, housing and residential options, and case management.

Literature Review

This proposal is supported by three constructs: inclusive education, collaborative learning, and mild intellectual disability.

Inclusive Education

Defined by Zagona, et-al. (2017) inclusive education offers the possibility to special needs education students to learn alongside typically developing counterparts in the normative education classroom.

Nevertheless, when referring to inclusive education there is a misconception related to people with disabilities as the only focus of inclusion but as Thomas (2013) as cited in Haug (2016) confirmed it involves all learners and marginalized communities, not simply those with disabilities. The fact that inclusion entangles education for all students no matter their traits is a key aspect of inclusive schooling that was necessary to clarify. Even though this article's core is centered on intellectual disability it is important to highlight that inclusion concerns every learner within a determined environment.

However, education for all depends in most part on the context and the aspects around it that influence it. Just as Thomas and Loxley (2007) as cited in Cornelius and Balakrishnan (2012) pointed out inclusive education also deals with a variety of

contexts related to the learners' and teachers' background such as psychological, educational, social, and political ones. Therefore, the inclusive education policies and development should be tailored to each specific context, avoiding bringing models from elsewhere where the necessities and arrangements are dissimilar compared to the local context. Consequently, inclusive education, inclusive policies, and teachers'

training must be thoroughly connected to provide a successful and accurate model to implement in schooling.

In their study, Molbaek (2018) addressed the significance of the relation between teachers' choices and inclusion. They argued that teachers' beliefs and choices before, during, and after the lessons had a great impact on all students' outcomes and in their participation in the learning process. So this idea relates with the importance of promoting teacher education strategies and training to educators so when they start teaching they have the option and resources to provide an inclusive environment in schools that fit the learners' needs and interests.

Similarly, Zagona et al (2017) explored as well these concepts regarding the importance of providing teachers with the knowledge about strategies, resources, and tools to create an inclusive environment in their classrooms. They mentioned the significance of teacher preparation and courses for them to have the chance to learn and put in practice such knowledge aiming at promoting inclusive practices inside the educational environments. Additionally, how at university the teacher education programs may enhance reflective thinking so future teachers can improve their inclusive

teaching practices by constructing, sharing, and promoting strategies, benefits, and positive practices in education for all.

Other important authors (Carrillo, 2020; Kamenopoulou, 2018) have addressed the implication that teacher preparation has on inclusive education within the Colombian context. A positive and meaningful teacher education that understands the historical, social and political context in the South-American and Colombian context is crucial to reinforce and strengthen the current inclusive approaches and policies to assemble an education scheme for all that is the cornerstone to the prosperous creation of

a society for all.

Collaborative Learning

Laal & Laal (2012) defines Collaborative Learning (CL) as a teaching and learning approach that involves the organization of students into pairs or groups for the development of an activity. Amalia (2018) citing Liu (2015) describes the key characteristics of CL, the first one involves students in collaborative independence, which consists of the achievement of learning goals simultaneously, objectives can vary depending on the learners' ability. The second one consists of the type of interaction

presented when CL is being implemented, there is communication between teacher and students and among students which promotes the development of communicative skills as well as problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Loes, et-al. (2018) considers that Collaborative Learning could promote intellectual growth because it implies that, to achieve group goals, each student assumes individual responsibilities. In addition, each member of the group is confronted with the diversity of thoughts of others, this process

is called by the author Disequilibrium. This process is beneficial to students as this new information joins the existing cognitive structures and enriches the student's knowledge. Misunderstandings about new ideas or concepts presented in class are likely to be corrected among students during CL activities, which promotes the achievement of learning objectives.

Another benefit is highlighted by Skopeliti & Riga (2021) who stated that the organization of the roles of students to develop the assigned task is adjusted to their needs and abilities, these roles are generally assigned by mutual agreement among the members of the group. These dynamics promote group work and organizational skills and also allow students to be aware of the importance of the support of others to respond to their role.

Skopeliti & Riga (2021) in their paper "Collaborative Learning and Its Positive Impact in the Cognitive Development of Children with Learning Disabilities" address the use of collaborative learning in students with learning disabilities to enhance their relationship with their environment and look for strategies to reduce anxiety caused by the pressure to improve their skills. This paper presents a repertoire of activities using CL and also includes Information and

Communication Technologies (ICTs), this last aspect is involved to engage students and increase their attention span. In conclusion, the implementation of CL techniques in inclusion classrooms has shown results around the social and emotional skills of learners with learning disabilities and neurotypical learners; students learned to accept differences and take advantage of them to achieve a group goal, their communication skills were influenced, as well as their sense of empathy, co-responsibility, and respect.

Mild Intellectual Disability

Intellectual disability has been addressed by APA (2021) as a neurodevelopmental disorder identified by implicating difficulties with cognitive abilities that affect two dimensions: intellectual and adaptive functioning. Therefore they present deficiencies in conceptual, social, and practical fields.

There are three categories of intellectual disability: mild, moderate, and severe. According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2015) as cited in Tural Hesapcioglu (2019) most people with this cognitive disorder are placed on mild intellectual disability which represents 85% of such community.

In their article, Saad and ElAdl (2019) described Intellectual Disability focusing on its main features and diagnosis. They describe some of the most important limitations present in the aforementioned disability. Firstly, they mentioned the conceptual domain that is related to the academic life of people involving remembering, speech, reading, writing, math logic, learning, problem-solving, etc. Secondly, the social domain where the main limitations were evidenced in empathy, understanding people's emotions, ideas, and experiences. Also, their communicative and social skills to interact and relate to others are involved. Finally, the practical domain is connected to self-management and taking care of oneself. The abilities present in this domain relate to task organization, responsibilities, personal care, among others.

The definition and characterization done in the other two paragraphs were necessary to understand the cognitive impairment and start picturing the challenges said population and their families may have gone through in their lives.

The educational field is one of the main challenges they have to face at an early age. Cornelius and Balakrishana (2012) gave us some insights into the evolution of inclusive education for special needs education students centered on learners with intellectual disabilities. They concluded that the evolution of inclusive education for all has been difficult and only in recent centuries has it started to take shape to what it is today. Since some psychologists commenced to contribute with learning theories society became somewhat mindful in enacting educational aims and laws for everyone. From that point on education for the special education needs community took great importance and numerous actions have taken place such as the development of innovative methods. One of the methods proposed has been collaborative learning which is addressed in this article as one of great significance to promote inclusive education.

Collaborative learning as mentioned before was one of the innovative teaching methodologies to enhance inclusive education. Muniro et. al. (2017) identified the positive impact of collaborative learning

of students with special education needs and even of regular students. It stimulated empathy, social sensitivity, and respect in the classroom. Social interaction and peer support increased inside the classroom due to the implementation of collaborative learning to support the learning process of special needs students.

Methodology

Throughout the next section it will be displayed a description of the research questions that this study aims to answer, and the objectives that will be conducted to answer that question regarding the implementation of collaborative learning in sixth-graders in an EFL class:

Research Question

What is the impact of Collaborative Learning regarding inclusive practices in an EFL teaching classroom? In order to answer this research question, this study will how the implementation of Collaborative Learning strategies in the EFL class may provide significant group learning and

participation which may be helpful to support ID students and create a safe learning environment for everyone. It will be

necessary to adjust the outcomes and goals of the students.

General Objective:

- To investigate the influence of collaborative learning on inclusive practices in an EFL teaching classroom.

Specific Objectives:

- To describe the collaborative learning methodology when teaching in an inclusive classroom.
- To analyze the impact collaborative learning may or not have in an inclusive environment.

Type of Study

The objective of the current research proposal is to investigate the influence that collaborative learning may or not have on inclusive practices in an EFL teaching classroom. To achieve this objective documentary research was conducted throughout the paper to understand the effectiveness of collaborative research in an inclusive classroom.

Then, documentary research is defined by Bailey (1994) as cited in Ahmed (2010) as the analysis of papers that are relevant to the investigation of a

phenomenon of interest. Payne and Payne (2004) as cited in Ahmed (2010) argued that documentary research is used to explore and categorize written documents no matter if they are from a public or private domain. In conclusion, it is possible to state that documentary research is the use of external sources, documents, to defend the hypothesis of a research paper. The operation of documentary research implicates conceptualizing, using, and assessing documents. The analysis of the documents can be both quantitative or qualitative analysis (Sanghera, 2007). The documents to be analyzed were categorized into three main constructs that will support this research proposal, first inclusive education, secondly, collaborative learning, and thirdly, mild intellectual disability. Added to other documents related to supporting the data provided in this article and the research design used in this study.

Data Collection Instruments

The strategies and data collection instruments used in this study to gather information were primarily the multidisciplinary databases available in the Districtal University digital library. In the said library there were databases with numerous journals, publications, thesis, dissertations, articles, documents, among

others similar.

The main search engines utilized were Taylor & Francis Group Business, Sage Journals and Publications, Oxford University Press, and ProQuest.

Furthermore, other external search engines outside the Distrital University such as ResearchGate and Google Scholar were used to complete the documentary research. The extraction of information from the diverse academic literature gathered was performed by two teacher-researchers, authors of the current research project. By analyzing and exploring the literature manually it was possible to focus on important aspects of each document that might support and add something relevant to the development of this research.

The documentary research had to fulfill some prerequisites in order to be considered: the year, access, field, keywords, language, and subject. First, the year range must be from 2015 to 2021 in most cases. Other literature was out of this range because of its relevance in the field. All of the research documents should have open full access. The criteria applied in each category were somewhat different from each other. Firstly, for inclusive education, the search was refined to articles with words such as

inclusive environment, inclusive classroom, inclusion, inclusive teaching, and inclusive learning.

Secondly, for the search of collaborative learning the filters applied were EFL, ESL, Additional Language Learning, Inclusion, Inclusive Teaching, Intellectual Disability, and Disabilities. Finally, for Intellectual Disability as it was not possible to find a big amount of relevant information it was decided not to limit the search with filters.

Discussion

This section of the research describes the impact that collaborative learning may or not have on the sample population in an EFL class. The sample population is sixth-grade students in a Colombian public school living in Bogota, the capital of the country. Inside the sample population, it is plausible to find two students with Mild Intellectual Disability. Their ages range from 10 to 14 years old. It is anticipated that collaborative learning has a positive learning impact on both regular and special needs students within the Colombian context due to the main characteristics of such teaching and learning methodology.

This idea was supported by Muniro et. al. (2017) when they concluded that

collaborative learning allowed students to produce partnership and social relations actively within the classroom with regular students and special needs students. Furthermore, it stimulated awareness of regular students about addressing and supporting the presence of special needs students not only in class but also in other contexts. Therefore, collaborative learning is a suitable technique to teach learners with mild intellectual disability in an EFL class thanks to its peer support and reflective strategies.

Likewise, in their study Skopeliti and Riga (2021) supported collaborative learning as an important methodology to teach special education students and promote inclusive education because it brought special education closer to society while assisting teachers and students to accomplish specific cognitive, social, and emotional goals. As a conclusion, this article explored the potential influence collaborative impact may have on special and inclusive education for all. It has many positive features that may support the learning and reflective thinking of all students within the classroom and create awareness of the importance of inclusive education in Colombian society

References

- Ahmed, J. U. (2010). Documentary Research Method: New Dimensions. *Indus Journal of Management & Social Sciences*, 4(1), 1–14. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.686.8844&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Amalia, E. R. (2018). *Collaborative Learning: The Concepts and Practices in the Classroom*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328464383_Collaborative_Learning_The_Concepts_and_Practices_in_the_Classroom
- American Psychiatric Association (APA). (2021). *What Is Intellectual Disability?* <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/intellectual-disability/what-is-intellectual-disability>
- Burt, C., Graham, L., & Hoang, T. (2020). Effectiveness of Computer-assisted Vocabulary Instruction for Secondary Students with Mild Intellectual Disability. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912x.2020.1776849>
- Carrillo, C.C. (2020). El filtro afectivo positivo como estrategia de estimulación neurocognitiva para la modificación de conductas negativas en un niño en condición de discapacidad. Recuperado de: <https://hdl.handle.net/10901/18678>.
- Cornelius, D., & Balakrishnan, J. (2012). Inclusive Education for Students with Intellectual Disability. *Disability, CBR & Inclusive Development*, 23(2), 81. <https://doi.org/10.5463/dcid.v23i2.111>
- Haug, P. (2016). Understanding inclusive education: ideals and reality. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 19(3), 206–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2016.1224778>

