

## **The Benefits of Cooperative Language Learning in ESP Classes at Spanish and Lithuanian Universities**

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**Abstract:** *Cooperative language learning at the university level combines the advantages of cooperative learning with language acquisition strategies, fostering an engaging and effective language learning environment. In this method, university students work together in small groups to enhance their language skills, deepen their understanding of the target language, and meet their learning objectives. This approach allows students to practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing in the target language with their peers. They can participate in meaningful conversations, offer feedback, and support each other's language development. This approach not only promotes active participation but also encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and the application of language skills in real-life contexts. By working together, university students can leverage their diverse backgrounds and experiences to enhance their language proficiency and cultural competence. Cooperative language learning at the university level creates a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that prepares students for effective communication in today's globalized world. Teaching English for specific purposes at university level is oriented towards foreign language specific to a subject and containing context bound items expressing curricular concepts and phenomena of a subject. The Cooperative learning method provides more opportunities for communication, and this influences the students' academic, cognitive and social development, which is crucial in the current world. The paper analyzes the attitude of Spanish and Lithuanian students towards cooperative language learning, highlights relations of cooperative learning and both language and social competences. The study results show that the implementation of the cooperative learning method promotes the development of the students' linguistic and social competences during the ESP studies. The majority of students identified that cooperative learning creates better studying opportunities, helps them understand culturally different peers, facilitates their desire to excell, helps students to be more marketable in the workforce, as well as improves their communication skills. Furthermore, the ability to cooperate is essential in the context of the current social instability.*

**Keywords:** *cooperative learning, ESP, university studies, critical thinking, communication skills*

## **Introduction**

Cooperative learning is an instructional approach that promotes active participation and collaboration among students in an educational setting, preparing them for success in both academic and real-world contexts. It is now an accepted and often the preferred teaching procedure at all education levels. The primary goal structure, which should be predominantly employed in learning situations, is cooperation. This paper presents a brief questionnaire evaluating the effectiveness of cooperative learning in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes at Vilnius Gediminas Technical University and Valencia Polytechnic University. It reviews various theories related to cooperative learning and examines students' attitudes towards its effectiveness. The results of the survey indicate that students prefer cooperative learning in the university and it should be promoted as it can stimulate their motivation, develop their potentials and critical ability, which are all crucial for the students' future academic development.

The education system is changing in different countries, including Lithuania and Spain. Its improvement is essential for the whole educational process. Moreover, it envisages advanced learning methods rather than teaching methods. The education is turning away from the central role of the teacher towards the learner, who has the main role in the learning process. There has been noticed a significant shift from teaching to learning, from the analysis of the teaching process to the analysis of the learning process. Most university foreign language teachers face a common problem: how to help students successfully overcome their language barrier and improve their foreign language skills.

## **Research Topic**

Traditional methods do not provide enough opportunities to develop communicative skills. Learners train their skills but not enough. Some students are shy and they are afraid to be laughed at, others do not like participating in the lessons and become passive observers. One of the best approaches to teach ESP is to use the cooperative learning method to fulfill the tasks in class. In this cooperative learning style the students dominate the English learning class, rather than the teacher. Research on cooperative learning has demonstrated several positive outcomes, including improved student relationships, enhanced self-esteem, better long-term retention, and a deeper understanding of course material (Duxbury, 2010; Felder, 2009). It is considered one of the most effective and constructive teaching strategies.

Despite extensive studies on cooperative learning across various subjects (Hutchinson, 2009; Levine, 2004), research specifically focused on its application in foreign language education is still relatively new and underdeveloped in countries like Lithuania and Spain. The potential of cooperative learning in foreign language classrooms remains largely untapped, highlighting the need for further exploration of its theories and characteristics.

Stepanovienė (2013) asserts that cooperative language learning is a highly effective pedagogical approach that fosters collaboration and active engagement among language learners. It involves students working together in pairs or small groups to develop their language skills and enhance their overall proficiency. Through cooperative language learning, students have the opportunity to engage in meaningful interactions, practice communication, and support each other's language development. This approach promotes a learner-centered environment where students take ownership of their learning and benefit from the diverse perspectives and knowledge of their peers. By working collaboratively, learners can engage in authentic language use, receive immediate feedback, and build their confidence in using the target language. Cooperative language learning not only fosters linguistic growth but also nurtures important social and interpersonal skills that are essential for effective communication in multicultural and multilingual contexts (Zhang, 2010).

The aims of the paper are to: (1) determine the success of the application of cooperative learning techniques in English language teaching; (2) analyze the influence of cooperative learning, and (3) discuss all the problems associated with this strategy. The objective of the paper is the innovative cooperative learning method brought into practice in language teaching/learning. The research methods are: a brief review of literature on cooperative learning and foreign language teaching, a questionnaire collecting the data from students and the interviews conducted with some students.

### **Literature Review**

In recent decades, cooperative learning has been advocated as an effective approach in foreign language education. This strategy enhances genuine communication among students and allows for the comprehensive integration of various language skills. Recognized as one of the most effective classroom techniques, cooperative learning is supported by several theoretical foundations for its implementation. According to Donahue (2022), motivational theory focuses on the impact of incentive structures such as group rewards and class rewards on learning. The fact that group rewards are given based on the behavior of group members is enough to induce students

to engage in behaviours which help the group to be rewarded. In order to maximize group learning outcomes, students are motivated not only to increase their own achievement but also the achievement of their peers. In addition to motivational theory, social interdependence theory is interrelated to the motivational perspectives. Jacobs (2013, 2016, 2022) claims that unlike motivational theorists who hold that students help their teammates because of incentive structures, social interdependence theorists emphasize that students help one another learn because they care for their group members. Cohesive groups are more productive than non-cohesive ones. In other words, positive interdependence results in promotive interaction as group members encourage and facilitate one another's efforts. The more time group members spend together, the higher the results achieved.

According to Shachar (2012), cooperative language learning is gaining popularity in language learning classrooms, because of its contributions to improving productivity and providing more communication opportunities. There are five basic elements in cooperative learning that when structured, help positive efforts and support the cooperative learning group in the achievement of their goal.

1. Diversity. Students gain experience working with various types of individuals. According to Paul et al. (2019), small group interactions provide numerous opportunities for students to reflect on and respond to the diverse answers their peers offer to posed questions. These groups enable students to share their perspectives on issues influenced by their cultural backgrounds, thereby enhancing their understanding of different cultures and viewpoints.
2. Acknowledgment of individual differences. Mayer & Alexander (2016) state that when questions arise, students offer a variety of responses. This diversity in answers helps the group create a product that encompasses a broad range of perspectives, resulting in a more thorough understanding of the topic.
3. Development of social skills. Working in groups helps students interact with their peers and others, fostering the development of social skills. This collaborative environment is particularly beneficial for students who struggle with social interactions, as it allows them to improve their cooperative abilities.
4. Active participation. Small group settings provide each member with the chance to contribute. Students become more engaged with the material and develop critical thinking skills regarding the issues at hand when they collaborate as a team.
5. Personal feedback. Increased exchanges in small groups lead to more personalized feedback on students' ideas and responses. Onaiba (2016) suggests that effective cooperative teaching strategies differ

from traditional methods because they promote greater accountability among individuals. Each participant plays a role in successfully completing the group task.

Powell & Powell (2015) state that cooperative learning can be conceptually defined as the field exploring the efficiency of cooperation in the learning process. Cooperative learning is a learning method intended for small groups of learners with various competences and needs who learn together to seek the common goal. Students learn in the group but at the same time they comprehend their personal responsibility to the achieved personal and group result. The Cooperative learning method suggests techniques that allow organizing students' group work in a way to improve achievements. Cooperative learning improves students' self-esteem, perception of tasks and peer comprehension. Besides, cooperative learning is particularly effective when creating social interaction, favourable for learning and acquisition, as it helps to overcome public speaking phobia very quickly. Alongside the theoretical studies, a lot of researches that focused on the cooperative learning method and examples of its successful application in the process of foreign language teaching were done. Azizi (2012) provides a detailed description of the evolution of this method's application in language teaching. The creation of a friendly group atmosphere reduces anxiety and eliminates the learner's phobia. Students in the cooperative learning environment first of all discuss the raised questions in their group, together look for the right answer and only then speak to the whole classroom. A relaxed environment gives such results as respect to various different opinions and tolerance towards differently thinking students. With cooperative language learning, students look for lacking words and necessary grammatical structures, find out the meanings and functions of language units, and this helps students to master language better and speak more fluently. Implementing various cooperative learning techniques, students improve their active listening, etiquette, support, giving opinion, argumentation, skills. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory gives background to cooperative learning as it allows stating that the learning process should be seen as a social process. This theory in the cooperative learning environment is implemented when students often get a chance to speak in their group and listen to other peers speaking a foreign language. Thus, the teacher's speaking time is reduced and the main attention is paid to the content and fluency of speech but not to correction of mistakes. Another detailed and wellgrounded research conducted by Ghaith & Awada (2022) perfectly revealing and substantiating the relation between language learning and integrated personal development, is worth mentioning. According to them, the cooperative learning methodology and the proposed techniques enable the

achievement of positive results in language learning. Gillies (2022) refers to method proposed by Eisenfeld (2019) to organize work by giving/distributing tasks in the classroom. All team members can be working with the same material; every member can receive different information about the topic; or tasks of different topics can be done in the classroom by every student. According to Edge (2016), tasks might be divided to parts whose number is equal to the number of group members. Also certain tasks can be oriented towards the accomplishment of the research and presentation of the obtained results. In this case, the task can be structured into 3 components: research, peer interaction and communication when searching for information, and interpretation.

Although idea of group work is not new, but researchers Yibre (2012), and Stobaugh (2019) claim that cooperative learning is crucially beneficial because the following aspects are particularly emphasized: favourable environment for cooperation and communication, personal responsibility and deposit, involvement and participation of all members in the learning (teaching) process as well as continuous interaction and communication. The quality of peer communication within group working improves when they have to share information. It encourages the involvement in group activity, it overcomes timidity, and it provides the opportunity to enhance speaking skills. Moreover, direct communication with group members allows students to use foreign language more creatively than speaking for the whole classroom. Furthermore, Klinger et al. (2012) state that cooperative learning and group work create a favourable environment for the integration of reading, listening, speaking and writing through interaction and communication in the classroom and, what is very important, it involves students in the communication behind the classroom.

According to Zhang (2010), while teaching professional foreign language, we have noticed that speaking skills are mastered worse than reading and listening skills. Sometimes students do not have enough opportunities to initiate a conversation in the classroom. It was also noticed that cooperative learning enhances interaction, communication, discussion and expression of opinions. In turn, interaction in the classroom encourages the students' academic, cognitive and social development. Thus students also learn from their peer colleagues. Participation in group discussions provides students with opportunities to use content based language in a meaningful context. Through discussion and negotiation they have a chance to paraphrase and explain the key concepts which aid in their learning. Group discussions enhance the cognition processes through thought provoking and challenging exchange of opinions. Students have to react immediately, shape ideas in their cognition processes. In addition, group work helps to increase motivation while creating real life situations where ideas are shared. In the

process of group dynamics students focus on peer interaction, developing social skills (active listening, giving opinions, encouragement, etc.) which shapes their interaction with the teacher as well. Communication becomes direct and friendly; an atmosphere of mutual confidence and cooperation is created. With reference to the above discussed theoretical presumptions and personal foresight, the main questions of the research were formulated.

### **Research Methodology**

The questionnaire was implemented in spring 2023 among VilniusTech university first and second year bachelor students enrolled at the Faculties of Creative Industries, Mechanics, Environmental Engineering, Business Management, and Architecture, as well as the students enrolled at Valencia Polytechnic University, who study Business and Organizational Leadership, Computing Technology and Software Development, Electrical, and Computer Engineering Technology in Spain. All in all, 115 respondents participated in the survey - 63 students from Lithuania and 52 students from Spain. 53% are female and 47% are male. They were presented with a questionnaire which they filled in anonymously, online. In the survey, 12 closed-ended and 2 open-ended questions were provided to gauge students' attitudes toward the advantages and disadvantages of cooperative learning. To collect information on the benefits of cooperative learning at the university level, mathematical calculations and questionnaire surveys were utilized. An analytical method was employed to analyze and interpret the survey results.

### **Research Results**

The questionnaire results indicate that a significant majority of respondents (77% of Lithuanian students and 84% of Spanish students) believe that a cooperative environment enhances learning opportunities. Only 4% of students reported that they did not find cooperative learning beneficial. This question aimed to determine whether students held a positive or negative view of cooperative learning. Given that most respondents expressed a positive attitude towards cooperative learning, it can be concluded that this approach is effective for developing and enhancing foreign language skills in ESP classes.

The students' motivation is more likely to be higher if they find activities and methods used in the learning process enjoyable. This is due to the fact that motivation plays a significant role in the teaching-learning process. The success of learning is determined by the students' motivation. The achievement of educational objectives depends on student motivation, which should be viewed as a core part of effective teaching. This suggests that student motivation is probably the most important learning element.

High student motivation can make any class enjoyable both for students and teachers, whereas low motivation can result in poor student performance and makes the study process a source of frustration and anxiety.

The overwhelming majority (89% of the respondents in both the countries) of the surveyed students agree that cooperative learning helps them better understand those who are culturally different, and only 9% of Lithuanians and 7% of Spanish students were not sure about that. When the respondents were asked about the benefits of cooperative learning in connection with the increase in their desire to excell, it was established that 66% of the Lithuanians and 55% of the Spanish students agree that cooperative learning helps them excell, whereas 9% of the respondents disagree. 25% of the Lithuanian students and 37% of the Spanish students are unsure about that (see Figure 1).

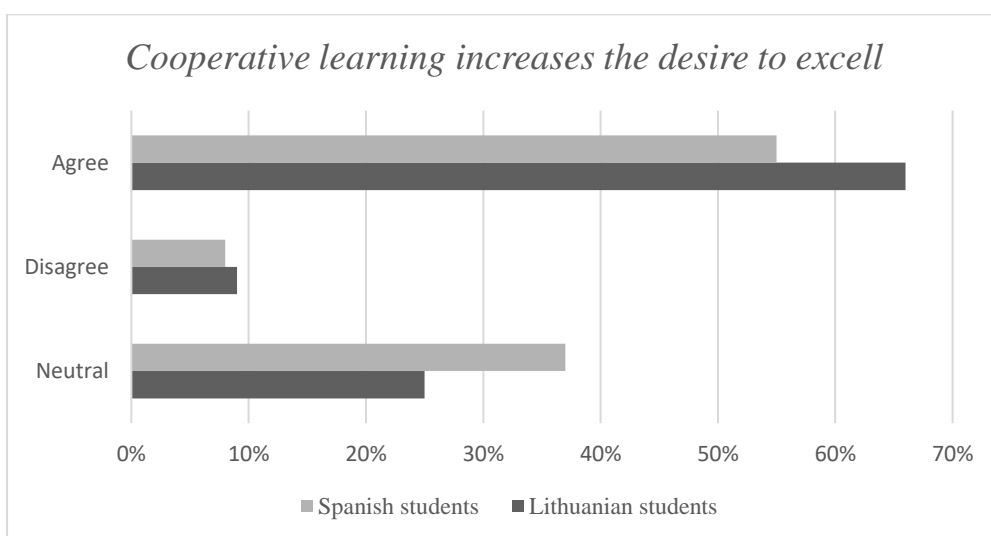


Figure 1 Distribution of the respondents' answers to the statement "Cooperative learning increases the desire to excell" [authors' contribution]

In terms of the benefits of cooperative learning to help them be more marketable in the workforce, 89% of the Lithuanian respondents and 80% of Spanish respondents find that cooperative learning will be beneficial at their workplaces in the future, and only 9%-19% of them respectively are not sure about that. The survey question on cooperative learning providing opportunities to learn the importance of teamwork, 89% of the students in both the countries find that cooperative learning teaches them teamwork skills. Students were asked if they felt that cooperative learning helps them develop better communication skills, and a vast majority (93% of the Lithuanians and 87% of the Spanish students) agreed that cooperative learning develops their communication skills and only a few respondents



disagreed. Afterwards, the respondents were asked if they think cooperative learning takes the teaching responsibility off teachers. 20% of the students from both countries agreed that cooperative learning takes the responsibility off teachers, 38% of the Lithuanians and 46% of the Spanish students disagreed, whereas 33% of Lithuanian respondents and 40% of Spanish respondents were unsure about that.

Another question was whether cooperative learning creates an atmosphere of chaos in the classroom, and 30% of the Lithuanian respondents and 23% of the Spanish respondents agreed that cooperative learning creates an atmosphere of chaos in the classroom, whereas 47% of the students in both the countries disagreed; 23% of Lithuanian respondents and 30% of Spanish respondents were not sure about that. However, half of the students (48% of the Lithuanians and 57% of the Spanish students) enjoy working collaboratively with other students, 43% of the Lithuanians and 36% of the Spanish students are not sure and only 9% of students from both the countries do not like collaborating with their peers.

Likewise, a large number of students (73% of the Lithuanians and 65% of the Spanish students) acknowledged that cooperative learning has helped them understand course material, some students (22% in Lithuania and 28% in Spain) were unsure about it, and only a handful disagreed with the statement (see Figure 2).

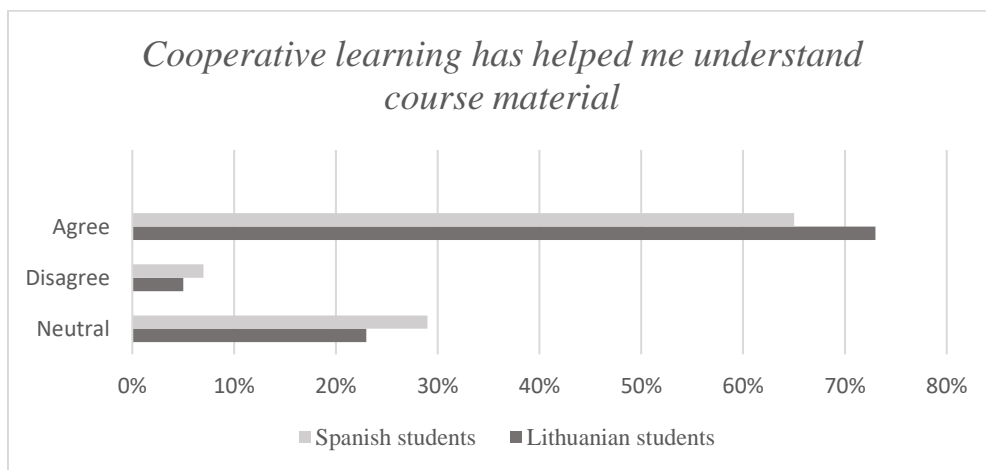


Figure 2 Distribution of the respondents' answers to the statement "Cooperative learning has helped me understand course material" [authors' contribution]

More than half of the respondents (52% in Lithuania and 50% in Spain) agreed that they prefer courses that have a cooperative learning component. However, some respondents (36% in Lithuania and 39% in

Spain) were unsure about that, and only a handful disagreed (see Figure 3). There are different personality types among the students, and it is natural that some young people prefer working on their own.

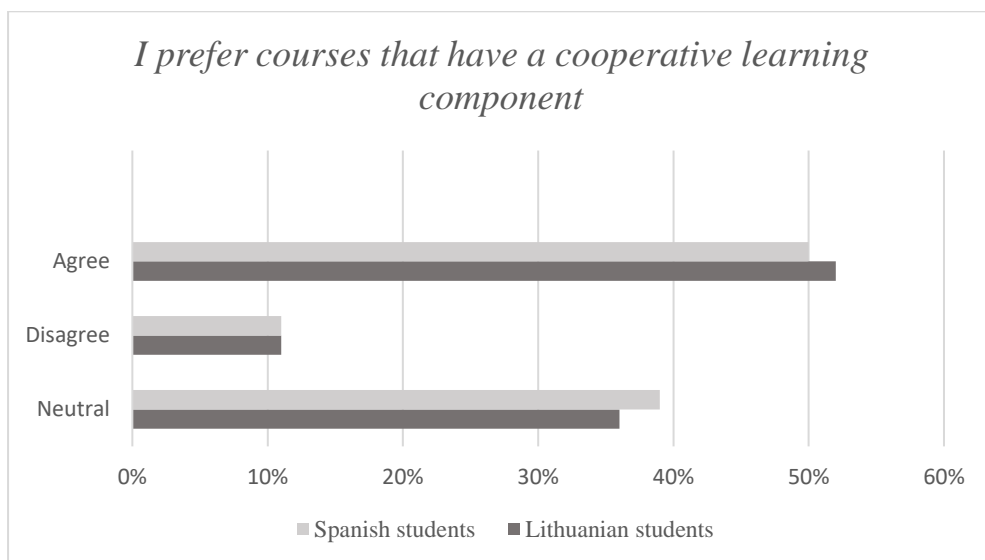


Figure 3 Distribution of the respondents' answers to the statement "I prefer courses that have a cooperative learning component" [authors' contribution]

The respondents were also asked if cooperative learning means a lack of the opportunities to demonstrate the personal ability in the class. The answers to this question varied greatly. According to the survey, 45% of the Lithuanian respondents and 42% of the Spanish respondents agree that cooperative learning entails less opportunities to demonstrate their personal ability in the class, 27% of the respondents in both the countries disagreed and the same share of students were unsure about that.

Similarly, 23% of the students in both the countries think that when working in groups they did not have enough chances to solve the problems individually. However, about 38% of the respondents in both countries disagreed, and the same share was unsure that cooperative learning does not give them enough chances to solve problems individually. A vast majority of the students (82% of the Lithuanian students and 75% of the Spanish students) get along with other team members, 18% of the Lithuanians and 24% of the Spanish students are unsure, and none of the respondents have complained about bad relationships with their peers. Conversely, there is a wider division of opinions when it comes to their preferences of taking a leadership role while conducting teamwork activities. A third of the respondents (36% of the Lithuanians and 42% of the Spanish respondents) expressed that they like having a leadership role during their teamwork

activities, 18% of the respondents from both countries did not prefer to lead the team, and 47% of the Lithuanian and 39% of the Spanish students were not sure about it.

Next, the respondents were given one more question, i.e., whether cooperative learning relies too much on particular group members. The division of opinions in this case is as follows: half of the students - 53% of the students from both the countries - expressed their agreement with the idea that cooperative learning relies too much on particular group members, 27% of the Lithuanians and 16% of the Spanish students expressed their disagreement with the statement, while 20% and 16% respectively were not sure about it. In addition, the respondents were asked, how easy or difficult it has been for them to communicate their opinions to the group; the majority found it quite easy (87%), and some found it a little bit difficult at times (14%). A similar question was asked, i.e., whether it was easy or difficult to agree on project decisions; a vast majority (88%) said that it was quite easy to do that, whereas some students (12%) said that it was rather difficult. The participants were asked what size team they prefer working in, and the most frequent answer was 2-4 people.

The respondents were also given 2 open-ended questions about things they liked the most and the least about working on team projects. These are some of the students' answers about the things that students like the most about teamwork: *"communication with each other", "to create video, games or draw", "that we can exchange our ideas and also our project will be done faster if we could work in teams", "the best part is that in a team we could split the duties", "the shared experience and the bond build-up" "it is funnier", "some problems are better solved in a team", "the brainstorming moments while searching for ideas", "that everyone has their own opinion, but when these opinions come together it is problematic to reach consensus", "sharing our different views and adding knowledge in different fields", "different opinions and thoughts make the work be done faster and way more interesting"*. These are the most common answers about the things that students like the least about teamwork: *"group members who do not take seriously their responsibilities of doing the team project", "sometimes some of the students do not work and do not communicate with others", "sometimes it is hard to decide on one or the other question", "sometimes some people are irresponsible", "everyone has their own vision", "some things will not be done the way you want", "conflicts might occur sometimes", "when one person is dominating", "I don't like people who don't want to listen to the other group members" , "when one or two members just sit and listen to others and expect getting the same grade as everyone who have done the work" , "time management, it's difficult when you're a*

*busy person", "my view is not always the view that other group members have".*

## **Conclusions**

Cooperative learning encourages students to work together in small groups, where they share ideas, solve problems, and learn from one another. In a cooperative learning environment, students are not merely passive recipients of information but rather become active contributors to their own learning process. This approach fosters the development of crucial skills such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork. By engaging in cooperative learning, students not only deepen their understanding of the subject matter but also enhance their social and interpersonal abilities. The analysis of survey results reveals that cooperative learning is attractive to learners. Cooperative language learning offers a range of benefits that contribute to the overall language acquisition process. Firstly, it fosters active engagement and participation among learners, allowing them to take an active role in their own language development. Through collaborative activities, students have more opportunities to practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing, which helps improve their overall language proficiency. Additionally, cooperative language learning promotes meaningful interactions and communication among students, enabling them to receive immediate feedback and correction from their peers. This feedback loop enhances language accuracy and fluency. Moreover, cooperative learning encourages the development of important interpersonal skills, such as teamwork, empathy, and respect for diverse perspectives. By working together, students learn to appreciate different cultural backgrounds and communication styles, thus improving their intercultural competence. Overall, cooperative language learning not only enhances language skills but also nurtures social skills and prepares learners for effective communication in multicultural contexts.

According to the survey of Lithuanian and Spanish students, the majority of the students stated that the cooperative environment creates a better opportunity for learning, helps them understand culturally different students, increases their desire to excel, helps students to be more marketable in the workforce, develops better communication skills. Despite some drawbacks of cooperative learning, such as relying too much on particular group members, offering a lack of the opportunities to demonstrate personal abilities or having less chances to solve problems individually, cooperative learning is still a beneficial tool to teach foreign languages, develop the students' communication skills in EFL classroom. Moreover, the most important benefit of cooperative learning is that it cultivates the students' ability to cooperate, which is crucial in the context of the current social instability.

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