COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND LEARNER PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN COLLEGE-LEVEL ESL CLASSROOMS

By

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To Mama and Daddy, who helped me start down this path, and to Cary, who helped me finish.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EFL	English as a foreign language
ESL	English as a second language
L1	*L* represents *language*, and the number following indicates whether the language in question is someone's first language, second language, and so on. L1 stands for first language, L2 stands for second language, etc.
NNS	Non-native speaker
NS	Native speaker
SLA	Second language acquisition
TL	Target language

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This study investigates the effects of cooperative learning on the perceptions and feelings of college-level ESL students. Specifically, this study looks at ESL students' perceptions of how much language they are acquiring in class, how useful they feel in-class activities to be, and how affective factors such as happiness and boredom are influenced by cooperative learning. It was hypothesized that students in a cooperative learning-based classroom would perceive greater language acquisition than students in a "non-cooperative" classroom, that they would also feel classroom activities to be more useful, and that they would report more positive feelings concerning affective factors such as happiness and boredom.

There were 20 participants in this study, all students at the University of Florida English Language Institute. 11 students were in an experimental group, a reading/writing class in which the teacher used Kagan's Structural Approach to cooperative learning, and nine were in a control group, also a reading/writing class, but one in which the teacher did not use cooperative learning. After three weeks of instruction, all participants were administered a survey that measured the feelings and perceptions described above. It was found that the students from the experimental (cooperative learning) group responded more negatively in all areas of perception and feeling than the control group, which was unexpected. The men in the experimental group were

particularly negative. It was put forth that these unexpected results could be due to a number of factors, such as teacher styles or personalities, student personalities, or a possible negative correlation between men and cooperative learning. Further research is required to determine with any certainty whether these factors were truly influential in the results of this study.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Overview

In ESL teacher-training courses at many universities today, beginning teachers are encouraged to use a communicative style of instruction, in which students work together and speak the target language in class. This trend in teacher training has come as a result of a significant body of research, conducted during the last 25 years, which indicates that communication in the target language is essential for second language acquisition. Krashen and Terrell (1983) suggest that hearing "comprehensible input," or instances of the target language just above the learner's current level of comprehension, is a key factor in acquisition. Swain (1985, 1993) and Pica, Holliday, Lewis, and Morgenthaler (1989) further this idea by suggesting that "comprehensible output," or attempted speech by the learner, is as necessary as comprehensible input for a learner to acquire a new language more completely. Additionally, many researchers have shown that interaction with both native and non-native speakers of the target language can be beneficial to language learners. Studies by Varonis and Gass (1985) and Long (1985) support learner-learner interaction in second language classrooms as a viable approach to facilitating acquisition, refuting the often-held belief that students will learn each other's errors if allowed to communicate with each other in the target language.

A number of instructional approaches have been created with learner-learner interaction in mind. One such approach is cooperative learning. There are several varieties of cooperative learning approaches, but in general, these approaches share the common goal of promoting positive interdependence and individual accountability among groups of students (Olsen and Kagan 1992). Cooperative learning is different from other types of group work in that the activities are more structured and require students to participate more equally than in group work

activities that do not assign specific roles to students or that give a simple directive such as "Discuss the following topic." Several researchers, such as Olsen and Kagan (1992), McGroarty (1989), and Ghaith and Yaghi (1998), have argued that this more equal participation and opportunity for interaction is beneficial to second language learners, and increases language acquisition as well as promotes the emotional wellbeing of learners.

The findings of these researchers will be discussed in more detail in the literature review section of this thesis, as they raise an important question for me. The question is this: research shows that second language learners should be acquiring more language in a cooperative learning classroom than in a non-cooperative learning classroom, but do the learners perceive this acquisition? That is, do they feel that they are acquiring more language? Do they notice a difference between cooperative and non-cooperative classrooms? This question is important because students' perceptions and feelings about their learning experience may affect how much language they actually acquire (and again, this will be discussed more in the literature review). In my thesis, I will attempt to answer this question.

This thesis takes a preliminary look at the questions mentioned above, as it investigates the perceptions of two small groups of college-level ESL students via a short survey. The results are not meant or expected to provide a definitive answer to these questions, but rather a set of initial findings that may lead to more exhaustive research in the future.

Literature Review

A fairly extensive amount of research has been conducted investigating second language acquisition, cooperative learning, and student perceptions of their own language learning experiences. It would be impossible to discuss all of the relevant research in this thesis, but in this literature review I will cover some of the better-known and more relevant studies.

Second Language Acquisition

One of the best-known researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) is Stephen Krashen, whose Monitor Theory has been the subject of both further research and criticism since its original publication in the late 1970s. I will begin here because so much additional SLA research has some relation to or was inspired by Krashen's work.

Krashen and the monitor theory

The Monitor Theory comprises five hypotheses: the acquisition-learning hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). Of these, the last two are of particular interest for this study, as will be explained in more detail later. For now, I will simply provide a brief explanation of each of the hypotheses.

The acquisition-learning hypothesis claims that there is a difference between acquiring a language and learning a language. Acquisition, according to Krashen and Terrell (1983), is "the 'natural' way to develop linguistic ability, and is a subconscious process," similar to the way children learn their first language. Learning describes more conscious knowledge and study of a language, as one might find in a classroom. This hypothesis also states that adults and children alike are capable of acquisition; the ability to acquire language does not abandon us at a certain age. For the purposes of this study, I will use a broader definition for "acquisition" that includes conscious and subconscious processes. From this point, when I use the term "acquisition," I mean the process of becoming able to use language with general accuracy and fluency, whether through subconscious mental processing or conscious, overt study.

The natural order hypothesis asserts that the grammatical structures of a target language (the language a second language learner is trying to master, abbreviated as TL) are generally acquired in the same order among all learners of that language. There is naturally some deviation

from this order among learners, but on the whole, they tend to follow the same order. For example, learners of English as a second language usually acquire plurals before articles, and articles before the irregular past, and so on.

The monitor hypothesis states that learned knowledge of a TL can act as a monitor, or editor, to the language production of a learner. Krashen and Terrell assert that speech in a TL is generated by the language that has been acquired by the speaker, and then is edited by the rules that have consciously been learned. Use of the monitor is most successful when the speaker has time to think about what s/he wants to say, when s/he is thinking about correctness, and when s/he already knows the necessary rule (Krashen and Terrell, 1983).

The last two hypotheses are significant with regard to this thesis. The first is the input hypothesis, which says that listening and reading are the most important skills for facilitating language acquisition, and that language is acquired when learners hear or read instances of the TL that are just a little beyond their current level of comprehension. The idea is that the parts of an utterance or text that learners *do* understand will provide a context in which the unfamiliar parts can be comprehended and acquired. Krashen refers to this type of linguistic input as comprehensible input, or $i + 1$, where i is the input that is at the level acquired by a learner, and 1 is the new or unfamiliar language. Comprehensible input can be provided by almost anyone – a teacher, a native speaker friend, or even another non-native speaker – and according to Krashen and Terrell, is essential for SLA.

The final hypothesis is the affective filter hypothesis, which says that a learner's feelings or attitudes toward second language learning and acquisition can affect his or her success in acquiring the TL. The "affective filter" is a way of referring to these feelings and attitudes. Learners with a low affective filter generally feel motivated to learn, have high self-esteem

regarding their language learning experience, and have low anxiety when required to use the TL. According to Krashen and Terrell, these learners are more open to acquisition, and will thus be more successful in the TL overall. Learners with a high affective filter may feel unmotivated, and may have lower self-esteem and/or higher anxiety regarding use of the TL. These learners will be less successful.

Comprehensible output

Krashen's Monitor Theory led to a significant amount of further SLA research. Another very well-known, related hypothesis is the comprehensible output hypothesis, first proposed and investigated by Swain (1985, 1993) and Swain and Lapkin (1995), and later supported by other researchers, such as Pica, Holliday, Lewis, and Morgenthaler (1989). In the original proposal of the comprehensible output hypothesis, Swain (1985) argues that "although comprehensible input (Krashen 1981b, 1982) may be essential to the acquisition of a second language, it is not enough to ensure that the outcome will be nativelike performance." To support this assertion, she described a study of native English-speaking students who were learning French in an immersion school. The students had received comprehensible input of French for seven years, and were still not native-like in their grammatical performance. Swain said that this could be attributed to the lack of opportunity to speak in school – most of the students' exposure to French came through listening to their teachers talk, not through conversation. She argued that in listening to comprehensible input, students may have been more focused on the meaning of what was being said, not the grammatical elements of the utterance, and so had not been able to process or acquire all of the grammar of the TL. As a result of these findings, she concluded that comprehensible input is important and useful in facilitating SLA, but that acquisition is incomplete without the opportunity to produce output in the TL. Swain and Lapkin (1995) further supported this hypothesis by conducting another study of French immersion students.

They found that L2 learners sometimes become aware of errors in their own linguistic output, and this awareness can lead to modified output, thus contributing to the acquisition of more native-like language.

Pica, Holliday, Lewis, and Morgenthaler (1989) also found evidence to support the usefulness of comprehensible output in facilitating language acquisition. They studied controlled interactions between native English speakers and non-native speakers, and found that the non-native speakers (NNS) frequently responded to native speaker (NS) explicit requests for clarification by modifying their linguistic output. That is, when the NSs were unable to follow what the NNSs said, and made this clear to the NNSs, the NNSs changed their utterances in some way, thus moving closer to more native-like speech, as well as showing that comprehensible output is helpful in this respect. Later, a study by Ellis and He (1999) found that students given the opportunity to produce modified output scored higher on comprehension and vocabulary tests than their peers who did not have the opportunity to produce output. Similar findings were reported by Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993) and McDonough (2005).

Interaction and negotiation for meaning

The body of research on comprehensible input and output has gone hand-in-hand with another large body of research on the role of interaction in SLA. NS-NNS interactions and NNS-NNS interactions have both been studied fairly extensively in the past 25 years or so, and many researchers have found that both types of interaction contribute positively to the acquisition of an L2. Long (1985, p. 388) suggested that SLA can be facilitated by “linguistic and conversational adjustments” made by NSs when addressing NNSs, as these types of adjustments make input more comprehensible. This idea was picked up by several other researchers interested in interaction and SLA, and has been termed “negotiation for meaning” (Varonis and Gass, 1985; Foster and Ohta, 2005). Negotiation for meaning can be defined as interactional adjustments

made in conversation by a speaker in order to make himself or herself better understood by his or her interlocutor.

The theme of negotiation for meaning pervades much interaction-based research. Varonis and Gass (1985) found that in a comparison of NS-NS, NS-NNS, and NNS-NNS interactions, the NNS-NNS pairs negotiated for meaning the most. Clearly, this increased negotiation may well be due to the fact that a conversation between two NNSs involves two people who are working with a less-familiar language. Varonis and Gass (1985, p. 84) also suggested that NNSs "recognize their 'shared incompetence'" and therefore are not anxious about asking for clarification or expressing a lack of comprehension. Whatever the cause, the result was that NNS-NNS interactions exhibited the most negotiation for meaning, and, presumably, the most comprehensible input and opportunities to make output more comprehensible.

A later study by Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, and Linnell (1996) disagrees somewhat with the assertions of Long and Varonis and Gass about the types of interactions that provide the most negotiation for meaning, comprehensible input, and comprehensible output. Pica et. al. found that NNSs do not tend to provide each other with ideal comprehensible input, in the sense that their input is not native-like in its comprehensibility. Native speakers, not surprisingly, were better at providing this kind of comprehensible input. This group of researchers did find, however, that NNSs produced around the same amount of output in interactions with NSs or other NNSs. They concluded that both types of interaction address the communicative needs of L2 learners, but that NS-NNS communication is more beneficial in terms of comprehensible input and feedback.

Empirical studies have also shown support for the importance of negotiation and interaction in the SLA process. One study by Pica (1991) found that negotiation is helpful in

aiding L2 comprehension, particularly for students with lower levels of general comprehension. Another study by Leeman (2003) found that some aspects of interaction – recasts and enhanced positive evidence – are especially useful for helping L2 learners acquire grammatical items. These studies give evidence that support Long's theoretical claims.

All in all, research on what is necessary for second language acquisition to occur suggests that opportunities to receive comprehensible input, produce comprehensible output, and interact, whether with NNSs or NSs, are essential. The question educators face in light of these findings is this: what approach to L2 instruction best provides learners with these opportunities?

Cooperative Learning

One approach to L2 instruction that has received quite a bit of attention from the SLA community is cooperative learning. Olsen and Kagan (1992, p. 8) give the following definition of cooperative learning:

> "Cooperative learning is group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others."

This definition includes all the key characteristics of cooperative learning: that it is structured, that students interact with each other, and that they depend upon each other for achievement and must be accountable for their own learning. It is important to stress that cooperative learning and group work are not necessarily the same thing. Where group work can consist of almost any activity completed in a group, regardless of who actually does the majority of the work, cooperative learning structures activities in such a way that all members of the group must contribute equally for the group to complete the task successfully. In this way, the success of one member is the success of all, rather than the failure of one student creating an opportunity for success for another, as often happens in traditional, non-cooperative classrooms.

Olsen and Kagan (1992) call this equal contribution "positive interdependence," and suggest that it can be created by assigning specific roles to individuals in the group, by offering rewards such as a group grade that is an average of all the individual grades of the group members, by limiting resources such as worksheets or pencils so that group members have to work together, or by creating rules that prevent groups from moving to a new task until all members have completed and understand the current task.

It is also important for students in cooperative learning groups to be individually accountable for their own learning. While the group might complete a task by working together, testing is individual. Olsen and Kagan describe an activity called Numbered Heads Together (1992, p. 19) in which students in a group work to answer a question together, at which point an individual from each group is called on by the teacher to give the group's answer. It is the responsibility of group members to make sure everyone in the group understands the answer (positive interdependence), and each member is responsible for solidifying his or her own understanding, in case he or she is called on to give the answer (individual accountability). If the individual succeeds, the group succeeds, so it is therefore in the best interest of everyone involved to work together to ensure group-wide comprehension. This activity illustrates the way positive interdependence and individual accountability each play a part in creating a cooperative learning environment.

Kagan's structural approach

Several models for implementing cooperative learning have been created over the past 25 or 30 years. Learning Together, Student Team Learning, and Group Investigation are a few (Olsen and Kagan, 1992). For this thesis, I will focus on Kagan's Structural Approach, for a number of reasons. First, it can be used with any subject matter, and is therefore ideal for classes that cover more than one English skill, such as the reading/writing classes studied here. This

approach is also relatively easy to understand, and can easily be incorporated into a lesson by a teacher to whom it is new. Furthermore, it is the approach that is most familiar to me, and was also the approach used by the person who trained the teacher who led the experimental group. For all these reasons, and as I was not familiar with any other certified teacher-trainers in any other approach, I decided the Structural Approach would be the best model for this study.

Kagan's Structural Approach derives its name from its use of *structures*, which Kagan (1989) defines as "content-free ways of organizing social interaction in the classroom." The difference between structures and activities is that activities are tied to the content of a lesson, where structures can be used with any lesson content. For example, Numbered Heads Together, described above, is a structure. An instructor can use it to test mastery of long division, quantum physics, or English grammar. The Structural Approach is made up of several structures, designed for different purposes, such as mastery, concept development, communication building, teambuilding, or classbuilding (Kagan, 1989). Some involve pair work, and some involve the whole group (which ideally has four students). For example, the structure Think-Pair-Share asks students to individually consider their own answer to a question (such as, "What is your favorite holiday in your country?"), then asks students to find a partner and gives each student a set amount of time to share their answer, during which their partner listens without talking. This structure can be very useful in an ESL classroom. It is therefore important for a teacher who wants to use this model of cooperative learning to be familiar with at least a few structures, and to be able to implement them in his or her classroom consistently.

Another important part of Kagan's Structural Approach is the placement of students in semi-permanent groups. In this approach, students are usually grouped heterogeneously by ability level, as well as gender and cultural background, when possible. Kagan (1992) lists three

reasons for heterogeneous grouping: more efficient classroom management (with higher level students helping lower level students when the teacher is unavailable), an opportunity to improve cross-gender and cross-cultural interaction, and more chances for students to help and encourage each other. In an ESL classroom that uses Kagan's Structural Approach, groups are situated so that the person with the highest English skills and the person with the lowest in each group are not sitting next to or across from each other. Consequently, when students are asked to work in pairs, these two learners are not paired together, which prevents a good bit of frustration that would result from such a pairing. Groups can be rearranged every five or six weeks, so that the same students are not always working together. While heterogeneity is not the only way to group students in cooperative classrooms, it is the method most favored in the Structural Approach, and is therefore the method that will be used in this study.

Cooperative learning has been shown by researchers to provide a number of benefits to learners, both native speakers and L2 learners. The next section of this literature review will describe these benefits.

Benefits of cooperative learning

The effects of cooperative learning on student attitudes, perceptions of learning, and achievement in SLA have been studied fairly extensively, and with mostly positive results. McGroarty (1989) reviewed the SLA research that had been done at the time of publication and determined that cooperative learning may provide six major benefits to L2 learners. The first is that working in small groups provides more opportunities for interaction and negotiation for meaning than would exist in a lecture-based class. Another benefit for students in bilingual classrooms is that cooperative learning may help them "draw on primary language resources as they develop second language skills" (McGroarty, 1989, p. 132). That is to say, students in bilingual classrooms can work together to complete a task using both their L1 and L2, and

students who are more advanced in the L2 may be able to help extend less advanced students' understanding of the L2.

McGroarty described a third benefit, which is the fact that cooperative learning can be used with any content area, and therefore content-based instruction can be combined with language instruction, which provides students with more interesting topics to discuss than a strictly language-based lesson might. She also asserted that the variety of structures promoted by cooperative learning demanded greater variety in the materials and technology used to implement them, which "tap spatial, visual, and manual abilities as well as verbal ones" and therefore interest a greater number of students (McGroarty, 1989).

The last two benefits listed by McGroarty have to do with the role of the teacher and the student in the classroom. One advantage is that cooperative learning expands the role of the teacher from simply an imparter of knowledge to a facilitator of discussion and a guide for student interaction. Complementary to this benefit is that students in cooperative learning classrooms become more active in their own language acquisition, helping each other progress in their linguistic development and depending on the teacher less. According to McGroarty, this type of interaction also promotes a sense of community in the classroom, as well as self-esteem among individual students.

A number of studies have found other advantages of cooperative learning for L2 learners. Ghaith and Yaghi (1998) tested acquisition of English rules and mechanics in children learning English as a second language and found that students in cooperative learning classrooms who were generally low-achieving were more successful than other low-achieving students in non-cooperative classrooms. This suggests that cooperative learning may be a useful tool in bringing lower achievers up to speed with their classmates.

Shaaban (2006) tested the effects of cooperative learning on EFL reading students in Lebanon and found that the Jigsaw II model of cooperative learning positively affected the degree to which students valued reading, as well as their impressions of themselves as readers and their motivation to read. He stated that because research in reading comprehension has shown a connection between motivation, self-concept, and achievement in reading, cooperative learning may well lead to greater reading abilities among L2 learners.

A study by Ghaith and Bouzeineddine (2003) builds on the findings of the two studies just mentioned. They found that low-achieving EFL reading students found more enjoyment in cooperative classrooms than high achievers, although the high achievers felt better about their own reading abilities and about school in general. They suggested that these findings show that lower achievers are more comfortable working in small cooperative groups than working in competition with the rest of the class, and that using a cooperative approach might be a good way to improve the self-perceptions and attitudes about school held by these students.

Another article by Kagan (1986) focused on the effects of cooperative learning in multicultural classrooms in the United States by summarizing a few of his own studies in this field. In an early study (1977) comparing Mexican-American and Anglo-American children, he found that Mexican-Americans grow more cooperative as they get older, and Anglo-Americans tend to become more competitive. A later study (1977) showed that third-generation Mexican-Americans tend to acculturate to the Anglo-American students by becoming more competitive. Interestingly, however, a third study (1980) found that the self-esteem of Mexican-American children was linked to cooperativeness – the more cooperative the students felt they were being, the higher their self-esteem. The exact opposite was true of Anglo-American children – they felt better about themselves when they were being competitive. As American schools are typically

more competitive than cooperative, Kagan noticed that this presented a problem for Mexican-American children, who clearly felt better about themselves when adhering to their own cultural norms. He suggested that cooperative learning may be an excellent tool for helping these students feel comfortable in school without encouraging them to abandon the values of their own culture. It stands to reason that cooperative learning might do the same for any L2 learner in a foreign environment who comes from a mainly cooperative culture.

The results of these studies seem to show that cooperative learning can be highly beneficial for L2 learners. The research mentioned above suggests that using cooperative learning in L2 classrooms may increase acquisition through increased opportunities for comprehensible input, interaction, and production of comprehensible output through more equal participation and opportunities to speak in general. The research also suggests that some L2 learners may enjoy improved self-esteem and attitudes about school in cooperative classrooms, which, following Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, would lower their affective filter and lead to increased acquisition as well. A review of the empirical literature on self-esteem and language learning by Dörnyei (2005) supports Krashen to some degree, suggesting that learners with high self-esteem may achieve greater language acquisition. The question these findings have raised for me is this: are L2 learners aware of this potentially increased acquisition? The next section discusses this issue.

Student Perceptions

In reviewing the literature in the field of student perceptions of their own education, I found one study of particular interest. The study was conducted by Christison and Krahnke (1986), and investigated the feelings of college-level ESL students about their English-learning experiences in the United States, the qualities of good English teachers, and how they used academic English in general. Christison and Krahnke held open interviews with the participants,

and found that the participants really valued English interaction, both out of class with native speakers, and in class with other students. These participants believed that such interaction was essential for their acquisition of English, and 70% of them wished their English classes provided more opportunities to speak.

Somewhat paradoxically, Christison and Krahnke also found that many college-level ESL students were hesitant to speak English with native or non-native speakers, generally because they were worried about the quality or accuracy of their own English. They suggested that this hesitancy reflects the fact that interactive activities are much more potentially embarrassing than sitting and listening to a lecture, and may not provide as much immediately noticeable linguistic improvement. Christison and Krahnke concluded their study by challenging ESL instructors to help their students overcome their hesitancy and encourage them to participate in the interactive activities that the students likely recognize as beneficial. The findings of this study suggest that students in more interactive ESL classes see the value in interactive activities, but may not notice increases in their own language acquisition as a result of interaction.

To summarize the literature reviewed for this thesis study, it seems apparent that comprehensible input, comprehensible output, and opportunities for interaction in the TL are necessary for second language acquisition to occur. Cooperative learning, particularly Kagan's Structural Approach, allows for input, output, and interaction to take place more frequently and equally than a traditional, lecture-based classroom, or even one in which the instructor uses unstructured group work. Cooperative learning may also provide affective benefits for L2 learners, particularly regarding self-esteem, sense of community, and motivation. The students themselves, in this case ESL students, may recognize the value of interactive activities like those

implemented by cooperative learning, but may not notice the improvement in their own linguistic development to which such activities lead.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The body of literature reviewed above raises some questions for me, which I hope will be answered by the results of this study. The primary question is this: Do college-level ESL students in a cooperative learning-based classroom feel that they are acquiring more English than their counterparts in a classroom that does not use cooperative learning techniques exclusively?

Based on the results of Christison and Krahnke's study (1986), I hypothesize that students in cooperative classrooms will notice more acquisition than the students in "non-cooperative" classrooms, as the structures used in cooperative classrooms meet students' perceived need for English interaction. (Here I put the term "non-cooperative" in quotation marks, as it is unlikely that any ESL classroom truly includes no cooperation between students.) It is true that Christison and Krahnke suggested that students in interactive classrooms may not perceive more language acquisition, but as both classes studied are interactive to some degree, it seems likely that students who are given the greatest number of interactive opportunities (i.e. the students in the cooperative learning classroom) are more likely to notice any acquisition at all. Whether or not they are *actually* acquiring more English is not of interest to this study; what I want to know is whether or not they *perceive* more acquisition, which I believe they will.

Another relevant question I hope to answer is whether ESL students in cooperative classrooms feel that the activities implemented by their instructors are more useful than those implemented by teachers in non-cooperative classrooms. Given the results of Christison and Krahnke's study, I believe that the students in cooperative classrooms will feel that the activities are more useful than their counterparts in non-cooperative classrooms, as they provide more opportunities for interaction.

Finally, I am interested in the effect of cooperative learning on other affective factors, such as overall happiness, interest in the class, motivation, and self-esteem. Considering the studies on the benefits of cooperative learning, I expect that the students in cooperative classrooms will report more positively on all of these affective factors than the students in non-cooperative classrooms.

In sum, my research questions are as follows:

- Do college-level ESL students in a cooperative learning-based classroom feel that they are acquiring more English than their counterparts in a classroom that does not use cooperative learning techniques exclusively?
- Do college-level ESL students in a cooperative learning-based classroom feel, more than their peers in a "non-cooperative" classroom, that the activities implemented by their instructors are useful?
- Does cooperative learning positively affect affective factors such as overall happiness, interest in the class, motivation, and self-esteem more in college-level ESL students who are in a cooperative learning classroom than in students in a "non-cooperative" classroom?
- What other factors influence the acquisition perceptions of college-level ESL students?

My hypotheses are as follows:

- College-level ESL students in a cooperative learning-based classroom will feel that they are acquiring more English than their non-cooperative learning-based counterparts.
- College-level ESL students in a cooperative learning-based classroom will feel, more than their peers in a "non-cooperative" classroom, that the activities implemented by their instructors are useful.
- Cooperative learning will positively affect affective factors in college-level ESL students who are in a cooperative learning classroom more than in students who are in a "non-cooperative" classroom.

CHAPTER 2
METHODS AND MATERIALS

Participants, Teachers, and Classes

Participants

In order to investigate the effects of cooperative learning on college-level ESL students, particularly on their perceptions of their own language acquisition and educational experience, I focused on two English reading and writing classes at the University of Florida English Language Institute. The participants in this study were students in these two classes. One class, used as the control group, was an intermediate reading and writing class. The other class, used as the experimental group, was a low-advanced reading and writing class. In the control group class, there were nine participants, ranging in age from 18-30, with a mean age of 24. There were five men and four women, which included one Brazilian, one Colombian, one Venezuelan, four Saudis, and two South Koreans. They had studied English for anywhere between one and 20 years, with a mean of 9.7 years. In the experimental group class, there were 11 participants (out of 13 students in the class), ranging in age from 18-34, with a mean age of 25.6. There were five men and six women, which included one Brazilian, one Colombian, one Venezuelan, three Saudis, and five South Koreans. They had studied English for anywhere between one and 15 years, with a mean of 6.9 years. That the participants were all from the same five countries was purely coincidental – the survey was simply distributed to the students who were in class on the day selected for survey administration. No students were rejected as participants in an attempt to control for nationality.

The first question of the survey administered in this study asked the participants about their history with group work in English classes. As the participants' answers provide important information about their educational backgrounds, I have chosen to include the responses to this

question here, rather than in the results chapter of the study. The question asked, “When you studied English in your home country, how often did your English teacher ask you to work in groups?” In the experimental group, 9.1% responded positively, saying that they often or always worked in groups. 54.5% responded negatively, saying that they never or almost never worked in groups. 36.4% were indifferent, indicating that they sometimes worked in groups. The one student who responded positively was a Latin-American woman, who comprised 16.7% of the women in the class, and 33.3% of the Latin-Americans. In the control group, 11.1% responded positively, 88.9% responded negatively, and 0% were indifferent. Again, the only positive response came from a Latin-American woman, who comprised 25% of the women in the class, and 33.3% of the Latin-Americans. In sum, nearly all of the participants had little or no experience working in groups prior to their arrival in the United States.

Teachers

The control group class was led by an instructor who reported using group work as part of her curriculum, but not structured group activities like those used in cooperative learning. The less-structured nature of the class meant that the likelihood of student participation and interaction being as equal as in a cooperative classroom was lower. This teacher was a 33-year-old woman, Caucasian, raised in Connecticut, and had eight years of ESL teaching experience. On the other hand, the experimental group class was led by an instructor who was trained in Kagan’s Structural Approach by a Kagan Cooperative Learning-certified teacher trainer. Her training included instruction in the various structures and when/how to use them, how to divide students into semi-permanent groups, and how to help students become familiar with the Structural Approach in general. She incorporated a couple of structures into each day’s lesson plan, and was observed regularly to make sure her use of structures and group divisions were appropriate. This observation will be described in more detail in the next section. This teacher

was a 26-year-old woman, Hispanic, born in Colombia and raised from the age of five in mostly Caucasian neighborhoods in Miami and Orlando, Florida, and had almost two years of ESL teaching experience. She was a native speaker of Spanish, but learned English as a child and spoke with native-like fluency and accent.

The use of two different teachers, rather than the same teacher for both classes, has both advantages and disadvantages. It is true that using a single teacher for both the control and experimental groups would control variables such as age, gender, experience, and personality, all of which might affect students' perceptions of the classes. However, the use of a single teacher increases the likelihood of cooperative structures accidentally being used in the control group class, or cooperative structures not being used in the experimental group class. In order to avoid this kind of accident, I decided to use two teachers. Two teachers may obviously vary in age, gender, experience, and personality, but it seemed that the possibility of exposing the control group to cooperative learning, or not exposing the experimental group to enough cooperative learning, was great enough that the use of two teachers was warranted.

To try to minimize the variables that come into play with two teachers, I tried to find two teachers who were similar in as many areas as possible. The two teachers involved in this study were both female and both in their mid twenties to early thirties. Both had taught at the ELI for several semesters. They were both teaching reading and writing classes during the semester in which this study was conducted, so the possibility of students reacting to their like or dislike of the class subject, rather than cooperative learning, was controlled.

Classes

As stated above, the control group class was not exposed to cooperative learning. The instructor for that class reported asking students to discuss topics in groups, but in a far less structured manner than used in Kagan's Structural Approach. The instructor for this class simply

taught as she normally would have for the duration of the study. The experimental group class, however, was exposed to cooperative learning as a result of the training undergone by their instructor. In the two class periods (once for one hour, once for two hours) during which I observed her, this teacher used structures like Timed-Pair-Share to facilitate discussion of various topics related to the day's lesson. She also heterogeneously grouped the students according to their scores on the diagnostic tests she conducted during the first week of class, according to the method described in the literature review of this study. The 13 students were divided into two groups of four and one group of five. Not every activity conducted in class was cooperative in nature, as the nature of a reading and writing class entails some individual practice by the students. The instructor provided opportunities for this individual practice, and also spent some time directly instructing the class, rather than having the students constantly interacting with each other. For example, in a typical class, she might begin by reading the ELI weekly newsletter out loud with the class, then ask them to do some individual reading, then have them do a Timed-Pair-Share about what they read, and so on. However, she was encouraged regularly by the researcher to incorporate as many cooperative structures as possible, and was given suggestions as to which structures might be the most useful for her class.

Procedure

Treatment and Data Collection

Students in both the control and experimental group classes were exposed to their respective instructors' teaching styles for four weeks, at the beginning of the semester. Both classes met five times a week, for two hours at a time. The instructors of both the control and experimental groups spent the majority of the first week of class conducting diagnostic testing, in order to determine the students' general English reading and writing abilities. The instructor of the experimental group also spent this week deciding how best to place her students into semi-

permanent cooperative groups. After four weeks, a survey was administered during regular class time in order to measure students' perceptions of their language learning experience. The students had therefore been exposed to their respective teachers' styles of instruction for three full weeks at the time of the survey, as the first week consisted mostly of diagnostic testing.

The survey was loosely based on a survey used by Ghaith and Bouzeineddine (2003) in their study of cooperative learning and attitudes about reading, and was administered approximately one-quarter of the way through the semester for a number of reasons. First, it was decided that it would be better for the experimental group to be exposed to only cooperative learning, rather than ask the instructor to change from another teaching style to cooperative learning halfway through the semester. Such a change in routine might influence students' reactions to cooperative learning, and cloud their perceptions about their cooperative learning experience. Another reason for giving the survey early in the semester was simply the time constraints placed on this particular study. An expanded version of this study, to possibly be conducted in the future, would most likely administer the survey after an entire semester or year had passed. This study takes a more preliminary look at student perceptions of language acquisition, with the idea of more thorough future research in mind.

One day before taking the survey, participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B), which explained to them the general purpose of the study, what they would be asked to do, the fact that the survey would be completely anonymous, and that participation was voluntary.

Survey

The survey (see Appendix A) consisted of nine questions concerning participants' perceptions about how often they were asked to participate in group activities (in the past and now), how much language they had acquired, how useful they found in-class activities, and how

happy and bored they felt in class. The majority of these questions referred to “improving your English,” as in “How useful is talking or working with your classmates for improving your English?” “Improving one’s English” is a term I have frequently heard English learners use, and would most likely be familiar to all participants. Additional questions, regarding the students’ educational backgrounds, ages, and genders, were included in case any of those variables had some correlation with the participants’ answers to the rest of the questions in the survey.

The answers were provided on a five-point Likert scale, with one being the lowest possible ranking, and five being the highest. For example, a question that asked, “How useful is talking or working with your classmates for improving your English?” could be answered anywhere between one (not useful) and five (very useful). The Likert scale was used in order to provide a quantifiable means by which all participants’ answers could be compared. The final question, “Is there anything your teacher could do to improve this class?” was left for open-ended answers, in case the participants wanted to express a perception or feeling about the class that they were unable to express through the Likert scale questions.

Analysis

After the administration of the survey, it was decided to analyze the results from a relatively descriptive perspective, rather than conduct a statistical analysis. It seemed as though there would not be enough participant responses to make a statistical analysis useful, as only 20 students completed surveys. Instead, the survey responses were looked at in terms of simple percentages, with the understanding that these results would serve to inform the creation of a more comprehensive future study. In such a study, the higher number of participants would yield better results in a statistical analysis.

Coding of Responses

The results were examined by the researcher in terms of responses to individual questions. As the responses came in the form of a Likert scale (1-5), the responses for each number on the scale were tallied for both the control and experimental groups. For example, if four people in the experimental group circled “5” as a response to question one, three people circled “4,” three people circled “3,” and one person circled “2,” their answers were recorded as such. The same process was repeated for each question, except for the final question, which was open-ended. The responses to each question were then categorized as positive (a response of four or five), negative (a response of one or two), or indifferent (a response of three). The only exception to this system of categorization was Question 9, which asked about boredom in class. The way the question was worded led students to circle one or two as a positive response, four or five as a negative response, and three as an indifferent response. Question 10, the open-ended question, was examined post-analysis in order to identify possible explanations for the results.

Analysis by Variable

In addition to analysis of the overall group, the data were examined in terms of gender and nationality of the participants. Both the control and experimental classes were divided into male and female groups, as well as groups of common nationalities: South Korean, Saudi, and Latin-American (as each class only had one student from each Latin-American country). The same process of sorting responses and determining percentages of positive, negative, and indifferent answers was applied to these gender and nationality.

The survey collected additional background information about the participants, such as age and number of years of English study. However, it was decided not to analyze the data in terms of these variables for a number of reasons. The participants were all young adults, relatively close in age, and were less likely to show a difference in responses by age than a class that

ranged in age from 18-50, for example. Additionally, the distribution of ages within each class did not allow for an easy division into equal-sized groups; the experimental group had one 18-year-old, two 19-year-olds, one 24-year-old, three 27-year-olds, three 29-year-olds, and one 34-year-old. The median age of this group was 26, but a division into groups of under-26 and over-26 would have left four students in the first group, and seven in the second. For these reasons, it was determined that an analysis by age would be difficult and the results would be somewhat arbitrary.

It was also decided not to conduct an analysis in terms of number of years of English study, mainly because of the confusion this question caused among the participants while they were taking the survey. A number of students were unsure if they should list the number of years they formally studied English or the number of years they had actually spoken English (without formal study), or the number of years they had studied at the English Language Institute. Because the participants made it clear that they did not understand the wording of the question, it seemed likely that they did not all answer the question in the same way – that is, some may have listed the total number of years they have spoken English, where other may have listed the number of years they have been at the English Language Institute. This likely discrepancy was enough to convince me that an analysis in terms of years of English study would not produce valid results. If this study were to be developed further in the future, the survey would be modified so that the question of English study was much clearer to the participants, and an analysis in terms of this variable would be able to be completed.

CHAPTER 3
RESULTS

Areas of Perception

The questions on the survey used in this study addressed five general areas of perception for participants: frequency of group work activities (Questions 1 and 2), usefulness of in-class activities (Questions 3 and 4), improvement of English (Questions 5, 6, and 7), affective factors such as happiness and boredom (Questions 8 and 9), and open-ended suggestions for improvement of the class (Question 10). In this chapter, I will address the results for each of these general areas of perception in terms of whole groups, gender, and nationality.

Frequency of Group Work Activities (Questions 1 and 2)

Questions 1 and 2 dealt with how often students perceived to have been asked to work in groups, both in their home country and in the United States, at UF's English Language Institute. Question 1, which asked about the participants' previous experience with group work, has already been addressed in the methodology chapter of this study, so here I will simply present the results of the second question.

Question 2 asked, "In this class, how often does your teacher ask you to work in groups?" In the experimental group, 100% responded positively, indicating that their teacher always or almost always asked them to work in groups. As the teacher of this group was implementing cooperative learning in the classroom, it makes sense that the students would have this perception. In the control group, 77.8% responded positively, and 22.2% were indifferent, indicating that they felt they were sometimes asked to work in groups. The two indifferent students were both Korean – one man and one woman. The man represented 20% of the men in the class, and the woman represented 25% of the women. Together, they comprised 100% of the

Koreans. Again, these results make sense, based on the control group teacher's self-report of the frequency and type of group activities she used in her class.

Usefulness of In-Class Activities (Questions 3 and 4)

Question 3 asked, "How useful is talking or working with your classmates for improving your English?" In the experimental group, 45.5% responded positively, saying that such activities were useful or very useful. 9.1% responded negatively, and 45.5% were indifferent. The student who responded negatively was a Latin-American man, who represented 20% of the men in the class, and 33.3% of the Latin-Americans. The indifferent students were two men and three women – one Korean, one Latin-American, and three Saudis. Percentage-wise, these numbers mean that 40% of the men and 50% of the women felt indifferent, as well as 20% of the Koreans, 100% of the Saudis, and 33.3% of the Latin-Americans. In the control group, 88.9% responded positively, and 11.1% were indifferent. The indifferent student was a Korean man, who represented 20% of the men in the class, and 50% of the Koreans.

Question 4 asked, "How useful are the activities you do in this class for improving your English?" In the experimental group, 72.7% responded positively, indicating that the activities were useful or very useful. 9.1% responded negatively, and 18.2% were indifferent. The student who responded negatively was a Korean man, and the indifferent students were men from Saudi Arabia and Latin America. The negative student represented 20% of the men in the class, as well as 20% of the Koreans. The indifferent students comprised 40% of the men in the class, 33.3% of the Saudis, and 33.3% of the Latin-Americans. In the control group, 88.9% responded positively, and 11.1% were indifferent. The indifferent student was a Saudi woman, who represented 25% of the women in the class, and 25% of the Saudis.

Improvement of Participants' English (Questions 5, 6, and 7)

Question 5 asked, "How much does your teacher help you improve your English?" In the experimental group, 72.7% responded positively, saying that their teacher helped them or helped them very much to improve their English. 9.1% responded negatively, and 18.2% were indifferent. The student who responded negatively was a Korean man, and the indifferent students were men from Saudi Arabia and Latin America. The negative student represented 20% of the men in the class, as well as 20% of the Koreans. The indifferent students represented 40% of the men, 33.3% of the Saudis, and 33.3% of the Latin-Americans. In the control group, 100% of the participant responded positively.

Question 6 asked, "How much do your classmates help you improve your English?" This question addresses the positive interdependence that is so important in cooperative learning. In the experimental group, 36.4% responded positively, indicating that their classmates helped them or helped them very much to improve their English. 9.1% responded negatively, and 54.5% were indifferent. The student who responded negatively was a Saudi man, who represented 20% of the men in the class and 33.3% of the Saudis. The indifferent students were five women and one man, two each from South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Latin America. These students comprised 83.3% of the women in the class, 20% of the men, 40% of the Koreans, 66.7% of the Saudis, and 66.7% of the Latin-Americans. In the control group, 77.8% responded positively and 22.2% were indifferent. The indifferent students were one man and one woman, one from Saudi Arabia and one from South Korea, who represented 20% of the men, 25% of the women, 50% of the Koreans, and 25% of the Saudis.

Question 7 asked, "How much has your English improved in this class?" In the experimental group, 27.3% responded positively, saying that their English had improved or improved very much. 18.2% responded negatively, and 54.5% were indifferent. The students

who responded negatively were Korean and Saudi men, representing 40% of the men in the class, 20% of the Koreans, and 33.3% of the Saudis. The indifferent students three men and three women, four from South Korea, one from Saudi Arabia, and one from Latin America. These students comprised 60% of the men in the class, and 50% of the women. They also comprised 80% of the Koreans, 33.3% of the Saudis, and 33.3% of the Latin-Americans. In the control group, 88.9% responded positively and 11.1% were indifferent. The indifferent student was a Saudi woman, who represented 25% of the women in the class, and 25% of the Saudis.

Affective Factors (Questions 8 and 9)

Question 8 asked, "When you are in this class, how happy do you feel?" In the experimental group, 54.5% responded positively, indicating that they felt happy or very happy. 27.3% responded negatively, and 18.2% were indifferent. The students who responded negatively were all men, from South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Latin America. They represented 60% of the men in the class, as well as 20% of the Koreans, 33.3% of the Saudis, and 33.3% of the Latin-Americans. The indifferent students were one man and one woman, one from South Korea and one from Saudi Arabia, representing 20% of the men and 16.7% of the women, as well as 20% of the Koreans and 33.3% of the Saudis. In the control group, 100% responded positively.

Question 9 asked, "When you are in this class, how bored do you feel?" In the experimental group, 54.5% responded positively, indicating that they were never or rarely bored. 27.3% responded negatively, and 18.2% were indifferent. The students who responded negatively were all men, from South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Latin America. They represented 60% of the men in the class, 20% of the Koreans, 33.3% of the Saudis, and 33.3% of the Latin-Americans. The indifferent students were also men, from South Korea and Saudi Arabia, representing 40% of the men, 20% of the Koreans, and 33.3% of the Saudis. In the control group,

88.9% responded positively, and 11.1% were indifferent. The indifferent student was a Korean woman, representing 25% of the women in the class and 50% of the Koreans.

Open-Ended Suggestions for Improvement (Question 10)

Question 10 asked, "Is there anything your teacher could do to improve this class? If so, please explain here." Not all students chose to respond to this question, but all of the responses that were given are listed here, some positive and some negative. For the experimental group, the positive responses were as follows (spelling and grammar left as the students wrote):

> "She explains good the topics and she is good teacher."
>
> "My teacher is so nice. She gives us a lot of vocabulary and this help to enlarge our vocabe. More over, she is doing pop quizes and a quiez evry week which helps to keep us studying and practicing choosing the correct answer in different contexts. Also, she teaches us how to do researches on the internet and reading good puplications. Finally, she corrects and comments on our work positevely. I am enjoying this class."
>
> "It's ok!"

These responses were all given by women from Latin America and Saudi Arabia. The negative responses for the experimental group were as follows:

> "Less homework. I feel like I am back in a elementary school, which is not helping at all. People who are here are prepared to learn English and little bits of lots of homeworks made me not useful as well as bother by it and feel bad about the class."
>
> "Ok, there is somthing really good with [teacher's name]. She gives us a good vocab, but the problem she gives us a lot of words. We canot focus on them like if she gave us fewer."

These responses were both given by men, one from South Korea and one from Saudi Arabia.

For the control group, the following positive responses were given (again, spelling and grammar have been left as the students wrote):

> "Teacher is excellent!"
>
> "I think she is an excelent teacher. She has explaines very good, and also makes the class really fun."

"The class is totaly to improve my English. I am really happy with the activities and with the teacher."

These responses were all given by Latin-Americans, two women and one man. The following responses from the control group suggest some improvements for the class:

"I want to use more video & audio text for English study."

"I think the teacher almost do everything fine for improving our skills but I hope in her class she focuses for Essay because we will need it in our University."

"I think if she concenterate to give us a new words and make quizes in these new words. If the classroom has a meet table and we meet in this table and talk to each other."

The last three responses, all of which suggest some improvements, were given by men from South Korea and Saudi Arabia.

Table 3-1. Question 1 responses by percentage

	Experimental group			Total	Control group			Total
	Positive	Negative	Indifferent		Positive	Negative	Indifferent	
Group	9.1 (1)	54.5 (6)	36.4 (4)	100 (11)	11.1 (1)	88.9 (8)	0 (0)	100 (9)
Men	0 (0)	80 (4)	20 (1)	100 (5)	0 (0)	100 (5)	0 (0)	100 (5)
Women	16.7 (1)	33.3 (2)	50 (3)	100 (6)	25 (1)	75 (3)	0 (0)	100 (4)
Korean	0 (0)	60 (3)	40 (2)	100 (5)	0 (0)	100 (2)	0 (0)	100 (2)
Saudi	0 (0)	66.7 (2)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	0 (0)	100 (4)	0 (0)	100 (4)
Lat-Am	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	33.3. (1)	100 (3)

Table 3-2. Question 2 responses by percentage

	Experimental group			Total	Control group			Total
	Positive	Negative	Indifferent		Positive	Negative	Indifferent	
Group	100 (11)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (11)	77.8 (7)	0 (0)	22.2 (2)	100 (9)
Men	100 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (5)	80 (4)	0 (0)	20 (1)	100 (5)
Women	100 (6)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (6)	75 (3)	0 (0)	25 (1)	100 (4)
Korean	100 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (2)	100 (2)
Saudi	100 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)	100 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (4)
Lat-Am	100 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)	100 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)

Table 3-3. Question 3 responses by percentage

	Experimental group			Total	Control group			Total
	Positive	Negative	Indifferent		Positive	Negative	Indifferent	
Group	45.5 (5)	9.1 (1)	45.5 (5)	100 (11)	88.9 (8)	0 (0)	11.1 (1)	100 (9)
Men	40 (2)	20 (1)	40 (2)	100 (5)	80 (4)	0 (0)	20 (1)	100 (5)
Women	50 (3)	0 (0)	50 (3)	100 (6)	100 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (4)
Korean	80 (4)	0 (0)	20 (1)	100 (5)	50 (1)	0 (0)	50 (1)	100 (2)
Saudi	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)	100 (3)	100 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (4)
Lat-Am	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	100 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)

Table 3-4. Question 4 responses by percentage

	Experimental group			Total	Control group			Total
	Positive	Negative	Indifferent		Positive	Negative	Indifferent	
Group	72.7 (8)	9.1 (1)	18.2 (2)	100 (11)	88.9 (8)	0 (0)	11.1 (1)	100 (9)
Men	40 (2)	20 (1)	40 (2)	100 (5)	100 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (5)
Women	100 (6)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (6)	75 (3)	0 (0)	25 (1)	100 (4)
Korean	80 (4)	20 (1)	0 (0)	100 (5)	100 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (2)
Saudi	66.7 (2)	0 (0)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	75 (3)	0 (0)	25 (1)	100 (4)
Lat-Am	66.7 (2)	0 (0)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	100 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)

Table 3-5. Question 5 responses by percentage

	Experimental group			Total	Control group			Total
	Positive	Negative	Indifferent		Positive	Negative	Indifferent	
Group	72.7 (8)	9.1 (1)	18.2 (2)	100 (11)	100 (9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (9)
Men	40 (2)	20 (1)	40 (2)	100 (5)	100 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (5)
Women	100 (6)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (6)	100 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (4)
Korean	80 (4)	20 (1)	0 (0)	100 (5)	100 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (2)
Saudi	66.7 (2)	0 (0)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	100 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (4)
Lat-Am	66.7 (2)	0 (0)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	100 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)

Table 3-6. Question 6 responses by percentage

	Experimental group			Total	Control group			Total
	Positive	Negative	Indifferent		Positive	Negative	Indifferent	
Group	36.4 (4)	9.1 (1)	54.5 (6)	100 (11)	77.8 (7)	0 (0)	22.2 (2)	100 (9)
Men	60 (3)	20 (1)	20 (1)	100 (5)	80 (4)	0 (0)	20 (1)	100 (5)
Women	16.7 (1)	0 (0)	83.3 (5)	100 (6)	75 (3)	0 (0)	25 (1)	100 (4)
Korean	60 (3)	0 (0)	40 (2)	100 (5)	50 (1)	0 (0)	50 (1)	100 (2)
Saudi	0 (0)	33.3 (1)	66.7 (2)	100 (3)	75 (3)	0 (0)	25 (1)	100 (4)
Lat-Am	33.3 (1)	0 (0)	66.7 (2)	100 (3)	100 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)

Table 3-7. Question 7 responses by percentage

	Experimental group			Total	Control group			Total
	Positive	Negative	Indifferent		Positive	Negative	Indifferent	
Group	27.3 (3)	18.2 (2)	54.5 (6)	100 (11)	88.9 (8)	0 (0)	11.1 (1)	100 (9)
Men	0 (0)	40 (2)	60 (3)	100 (5)	100 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (5)
Women	50 (3)	0 (0)	50 (3)	100 (6)	75 (3)	0 (0)	25 (1)	100 (4)
Korean	0 (0)	20 (1)	80 (4)	100 (5)	100 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (2)
Saudi	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	75 (3)	0 (0)	25 (1)	100 (4)
Lat-Am	66.7 (2)	0 (0)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	100 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)

Table 3-8. Question 8 responses by percentage

	Experimental group			Total	Control group			Total
	Positive	Negative	Indifferent		Positive	Negative	Indifferent	
Group	54.5 (6)	27.3 (3)	18.2 (2)	100 (11)	100 (9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (9)
Men	20 (1)	60 (3)	20 (1)	100 (5)	100 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (5)
Women	83.3 (5)	0 (0)	16.7 (1)	100 (6)	100 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (4)
Korean	60 (3)	20 (1)	20 (1)	100 (5)	100 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (2)
Saudi	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	100 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (4)
Lat-Am	66.7 (2)	33.3 (1)	0 (0)	100 (3)	100 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)

Table 3-9. Question 9 responses by percentage

	Experimental group			Total	Control group			Total
	Positive	Negative	Indifferent		Positive	Negative	Indifferent	
Group	54.5 (6)	27.3 (3)	18.2 (2)	100 (11)	88.9 (8)	0 (0)	11.1 (1)	100 (9)
Men	0 (0)	60 (3)	40 (2)	100 (5)	100 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (5)
Women	100 (6)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (6)	75 (3)	0 (0)	25 (1)	100 (4)
Korean	60 (3)	20 (1)	20 (1)	100 (5)	50 (1)	0 (0)	50 (1)	100 (2)
Saudi	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	100 (3)	100 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (4)
Lat-Am	66.7 (2)	33.3 (1)	0 (0)	100 (3)	100 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (3)

CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

Answers to Research Questions

The first research question of this study asked, “Do college-level ESL students in a cooperative-learning based classroom feel that they are acquiring more English than their counterparts in a classroom that does not use cooperative learning techniques exclusively?” The answer to this question, given the results of the survey, is no. In response to Questions 5, 6, and 7 of the survey, all of which asked about improvement of the participants’ English, the students in the control group answered more positively than the experimental group, indicating that they noticed more improvement.

The second research question asked, “Do college-level ESL students in a cooperative learning-based classroom feel, more than their peers in a ‘non-cooperative’ classroom, that the activities implemented by their instructors are useful?” The answer to this question is also no. In response to Questions 3 and 4, which dealt with usefulness of in-class activities, the students in the control group again responded more positively than the students in the experimental group, indicating that they more strongly felt their in-class activities to be useful.

The third research question asked, “Does cooperative learning positively affect affective factors such as overall happiness, interest in the class, motivation, and self-esteem more in college-level ESL students who are in a cooperative learning classroom than in students in a ‘non-cooperative’ classroom?” Again, the answer to this question is no. In response to Questions 8 and 9, which addressed affective factors, the control group again responded more positively than the experimental group, indicating that they generally felt happier and less bored in class.

The fourth research question asked, “What other factors influence the acquisition perceptions of college-level ESL students?” As will be discussed shortly, gender seemed to

influence the participants' perceptions more than any other independent variable, although nationality was also examined for possible influences.

As is now obvious, the results of this study do not support the hypotheses that were made earlier. In fact, these results are exactly the opposite of what I expected. In describing the complex nature of second language acquisition and the number of variables that can factor into a human participant's performance, Larsen-Freeman (1997, p. 151) says that "perhaps no one of these [variables] by itself is a determining factor; the interaction of them, however, has a very profound effect." It is highly possible that in examining the unexpected results of this study, I may be dealing with the interaction of several variables. To try to account for these results, I will first examine some patterns in the data, and then offer possible explanations.

Patterns in the Data

It is clear from examining the data that the students in the experimental group seemed to respond negatively or indifferently in greater numbers and more frequently than the students in the control group. As I expected that the experimental students, who were exposed to cooperative learning on a regular basis, would have a more positive attitude about their classroom experience than the control students (who were not exposed to cooperative learning), it makes sense to look at the data more carefully in an attempt to isolate any particular factors that may have contributed to these results. The data were analyzed in terms of gender and nationality, so in this section, I will describe any patterns highlighted by analysis of these variables.

Gender

Of the four gender groups that were examined (experimental men, experimental women, control men, and control women), one group seemed to consistently provide more negative and indifferent answers than the others – experimental men. Not including Questions 1 and 2 (which concerned perceived group work frequency), the experimental men always provided at least one

negative response, even when no one else – experimental women or anyone in the control group – answered negatively. The experimental men also always provided at least one, and often more than one, indifferent answer. For Questions 7 ("How much has your English improved in this class?") and 9 ("How bored do you feel in this class?"), no experimental men answered positively, and for Question 8 ("How happy do you feel in this class?"), only 20% of experimental men (one man) answered positively. One man in particular, from South Korea, seemed to feel more negatively about the class than any other student, as his answers were consistently negative, and often were the only negative responses for any one question.

The experimental men seemed to be most negative when answering the questions about affective factors – Questions 8 and 9. As stated above, 80-100% of the men were negative or indifferent about these questions, making it evident that the men in this class are unhappy and/or bored. They also felt strongly non-positive about the amount of improvement their English has shown, which may possibly be linked to their affective factor responses (to Questions 8 and 9) – if they felt unhappy, it is no great stretch to imagine that they might also have not perceived any linguistic development, especially given Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (1983). As not all of the men answered the open-ended Question 10, it is unclear what was causing them to feel this way, but a few speculations can be made based on the answers that were given, and these speculations will be discussed shortly.

Admittedly, with only five men in the experimental group, the responses of one or two can appreciably alter the data. However, the experimental men showed a tendency towards non-positive responses not exhibited by any other group. The experimental women were consistently more positive than the experimental men, as were the control men. Clearly, some aspect of the

experimental class, whether cooperative learning or something else, negatively impacted the experimental men.

The experimental women were much more positive on the whole than the experimental men, and were generally positive all the way through the survey, but they tended on some questions to answer indifferently more than the control women did. It is unknown whether these women genuinely felt less negatively toward the class than the experimental men, or whether they were hesitant to be as bluntly negative as the men were, but either way, their tendency to answer indifferently on some questions contributed to the overall less positive nature of the experimental group's responses.

The responses of the control men and women did not differ profoundly from each other. In general, when there was an indifferent response, it tended to be given by a woman, but otherwise, both groups answered very positively. Other than Question 1, there were no negative responses at all for the whole group.

Nationality

The very small numbers in each nationality group made it difficult to come to any conclusions, but in general, there did not seem to be any patterns related to nationality in the data. There were negative and indifferent answers from all three groups. As stated above, the experimental group had some consistently non-positive responses, but those seemed to be more related to gender, and less related to nationality. For example, Question 8 and 9 had negative responses from all three experimental nationality groups, but those answers all came from men, whom we have already established to have felt more negatively than the other gender groups. Overall, there did not seem to be a predictable pattern of responses related to nationality; any predictability seemed rather to be related to gender.

Possible Explanations

While no explanation can be conclusive without retrospective interviews with the participants, some speculations can be made as to what might have led to these results. Naturally, all of these speculations would need to be investigated further to have any real validity, but I do not want to leave this study without hazarding a few guesses at which factors were most influential on the participants' responses, keeping in mind Larsen-Freeman's description of many variables interacting to create one result (1997).

Teacher and Student Factors

It is highly possible that these results were partially caused by personality or style differences between the two teachers, or the way each teacher's personality and style interacted with the personalities of the students. Two of the five experimental group participants who answered the open-ended question remarked in their responses that their teacher assigned too much homework or gave too many vocabulary words, which for many students is enough to turn them off to a class altogether. As with many of the negative responses given in the experimental group, these statements were made by men, who may have been uncomfortable being assigned a lot of work by a young woman, especially considering that many of them came from male-dominated cultures (such as Saudi Arabia). The control group teacher was a young woman as well, but she was a little older than the experimental group teacher and none of her students mentioned feeling like they had too much homework in their open-ended question responses.

Another possibility is that the relative newness of cooperative learning to the experimental group teacher had an effect on the experimental group responses. Although she was instructed in Kagan's Structural Approach by a certified trainer, and regularly observed to ensure that she was applying the approach in her class, she was still learning and experimenting with what worked best for her class during the period of this study. If she had been observed during a later

semester, after she had become more comfortable with the approach, her students' perceptions of the class might have been different.

The control teacher might also have influenced the results. She had a few more years of teaching experience than the experimental teacher, and although she described her classroom as "non-cooperative" before the start of the study, saying that they worked in groups but not in a structured manner, she may have been a more cooperative-style teacher than she felt she was. She was not observed as the experimental group teacher was, and as careful observation might have found her teaching style to be too similar to Kagan's Structural Approach, any future development of this study will include observation of both groups.

The use of two different teachers, while eliminating the mixing-up of teaching styles that might occur with a single teacher, may have negatively impacted the results of this study as well. Using two teachers leaves room for students' attitudes about each teacher to affect the data. It could be that the control teacher's personality interacted better with the personalities of her students than did the personality of the experimental teacher, or that the control teacher's style better suited the cultural sensitivities of her students, or any number of things. It would be worthwhile in future developments of this study to work with one teacher for both groups, in order to compare the results with those presented here.

The personalities of the students themselves may have had an impact on the results. In my observations of the experimental group, I noticed that they seemed to complain fairly frequently, whether about the number of vocabulary words, the amount of homework, or the activities they were asked to do in class. The control group, on the other hand, was very friendly and positive when I visited their class with the consent forms and surveys. They were excited about taking the survey, and interested in the process of conducting such a study. We cannot know whether the

overall attitude of each class was the result of the students' own personalities or of how they felt about the class, but the control group seemed to be a more positive group on the whole.

Cooperative Learning and Men

Given the results, it is also possible that there is a negative correlation between men and cooperative learning. Only the men in the experimental group seemed to have a truly negative reaction to their class, whereas the experimental women were on the whole positive or indifferent, and both the control men and women were positive. It seems possible that there may be some factor of cooperative learning that affects men negatively. There is currently not any research to support this idea, so obviously more research would need to be conducted to give it validity. However, Nyikos (1990) posits in a review of language-learning and gender-related literature that a generally acknowledged verbal advantage of women over men may contribute to a lack of confidence or negative feelings among men in language classrooms. As students in cooperative learning classrooms are asked to talk frequently, Nyikos' suggestion may be true for men in those classrooms. Men are stereotypically seen as more competitive than cooperative, so this competitiveness may also have influenced their responses. Again, more research is needed to be conducted to know anything for sure.

It seems most probable to me that the more negative responses of the experimental group are due to a combination of factors, rather than just one. Larsen-Freeman calls the process of SLA "complex," with "many interacting factors at play" (1997, p. 151), and I believe that the same is likely true of the reactions of the experimental participants. While there may be some negative correlation between men and cooperative learning, that possible correlation could well have been affected by teacher and student personality factors, students' feelings about homework, whether any students were simply having a bad day, etc. As this study is very small-scale, further research would need to be conducted, on larger groups of students for longer

periods of time, to determine which factors were most influential on students' perceptions of their classes.

Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of cooperative learning on college-level ESL students' perceptions of their own language acquisition and educational experience as a whole. It was hypothesized that students in a classroom that used Kagan's Structural Approach to cooperative learning would perceive greater language acquisition and greater usefulness of in-class activities, as well as respond more positively when asked about affective factors in the class (happiness and boredom). However, the results showed the opposite to be true – the students in the control group, who were not exposed to cooperative learning, reported more positive perceptions and feelings about their class across the board than the experimental group.

These results seemed to be influenced by gender, but not by nationality. The men in the experimental group consistently responded more negatively than any other gender group (experimental women, control men, and control women). The experimental women were much more positive than the experimental men, although they answered indifferently more frequently than the control women. The cause of these results is unclear in the data, but some speculations can be made: that the teachers' personalities and teaching styles influenced student responses, that the students' own personalities and their interactions with their teachers influenced their responses, or that cooperative learning has some negative effect on men in particular.

Future studies could expand on this study in a number of ways. It would likely be worthwhile to replicate this study with a greater number of students, over a longer period of time, and with a teacher who had more experience with cooperative learning. Taking these measures would probably yield more generalizable results. It would also be interesting to investigate not only students' perceptions of acquisition and learning in cooperative and "non-cooperative"

classrooms, but also which factors contribute the most to those perceptions. This could be accomplished by adding a “why” question after each Likert scale response on the survey, asking participants to explain why they responded the way they did. Individual learning styles might be looked at as well, to determine if learning style has an effect on students’ like or dislike of a cooperative learning-style classroom. Finally, it might prove fruitful to conduct a study comparing actual language acquisition with perceived acquisition in cooperative learning classrooms, as research has shown that cooperative learning has many benefits for second language learners.

APPENDIX A
SURVEY

Class _____ Number of years of English study _____ Gender _____ Age _____
Home country _____

Students, thank you for participating in this survey. The survey is being conducted to determine your feelings about this class. Please circle the number that best describes your feelings for each question.

1. When you studied English in your home country, how often did your English teachers ask you to work in groups?

Never				Always
1	2	3	4	5

2. In this class, how often does your teacher ask you to work in groups?

Never				Always
1	2	3	4	5

3. How useful is talking or working with your classmates for improving your English?

Not useful				Very useful
1	2	3	4	5

4. How useful are the activities you do in this class for improving your English?

Not useful				Very useful
1	2	3	4	5

5. How much does your teacher help you improve your English?

Not at all				Very much
1	2	3	4	5

6. How much do your classmates help you improve your English?

Not at all				Very much
1	2	3	4	5

7. How much has your English improved in this class?

None				A lot
1	2	3	4	5

8. When you are in this class, how happy do you feel?

Unhappy				Very happy
1	2	3	4	5

9. When you are in this class, how bored do you feel?

Not bored				Very bored
1	2	3	4	5

10. Is there anything your teacher could do to improve this class? If so, please explain here.

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title: Cooperative Learning and Learner Perceptions of Language Acquisition in College-Level ESL Classrooms

Please read this form carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how English learners feel about their language development in classrooms that use cooperative learning and classrooms that do *not* use cooperative learning.

What you will be asked to do in this study:

After three weeks of instruction in this teacher's classroom, you will be asked to complete a survey on your feelings about this class and how much you feel your English has improved.

If you choose not to participate in the study, you may work on homework or classwork, read, or do any other quiet activity while your participating classmates complete the survey.

Time required:

10-15 minutes, during class time

Risks and benefits:

There are no risks or dangers associated with this study. One possible benefit is the opportunity to reflect on your progress in English, which may help you set goals for your continued education.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

The survey will be completely anonymous. You will not write your name on your survey, and no one will know what answers you wrote. Your teacher and your classmates will not see your survey at any time. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty or consequence for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study:

You have the right to withdraw from, or quit, the study at any time with no consequences.

Freedom to not answer questions:

While completing the survey, you may choose to not answer any question you wish.

Whom to contact if you have questions about this study:

Emily Kirby, Graduate Student, Program in Linguistics, 4131 Turlington Hall
[e-mail address deleted] [phone number deleted]

Dr. Virginia LoCastro, PhD, Program in Linguistics, 4131F Turlington Hall
[e-mail address deleted] [phone number deleted]

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 392-0433.

Agreement:

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the study and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Emily Bourne Kirby was born in 1984 in Melbourne, Florida, and grew up in nearby Palm Bay. She graduated from Palm Bay High School in 2002 and obtained a B.A. in English from the University of Florida in 2006, with minors in Spanish and teaching English as a second language. She was a language assistant in UF's Academic Spoken English program for four semesters and an instructor at the University of Florida English Language Institute for another four. After completing her M.A., Ms. Kirby will continue to teach and live in Gainesville, Florida, with her husband, Cary.