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Taking a more active role in the classroom through oral presentations

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Abstract. This paper illustrates the results of a study aimed at investigating EFL students' attitudes towards group work. The data were collected through the administration of a questionnaire to 125 participants attending a Business English for Academic Purposes course at the University of Calabria, Italy. In particular, the survey aimed at verifying the usefulness of group work and task-based activities (oral presentations) in large mixed ability groups, the reasons for possible reticence towards working in groups, and the extent to which participants found preparing and delivering oral presentations effective in improving their language skills. Results indicate that LSP oral presentations are beneficial to students for both their study and work needs since they replicate real-life tasks. Moreover, working in groups can help students improve their language competence, overcome their reluctance to actively participate in class and enhance their study as well as social skills.

Keywords. Collaborative learning, ESP, group work, oral presentations, task-based learning.

1. Theoretical framework

The diversity of needs of English language learners has long been acknowledged (Tarone & Yule 1989) and the focus on such diversity has led to the encouragement of the adoption of a learner-centered or communicative approach in EFL classrooms in order to meet these needs. One way to achieve these goals is to focus on students' potential for interdependent study through group work, creating thus a suitable environment for students with different proficiencies and learning styles. Indeed, various scholars (Long & Porter 1985, Johnson & Johnson 1991, Nunan 1992, Davis 1997) have emphasized the value and efficacy of group work and cooperative learning. Although there are different definitions of cooperative learning, the basic elements are the same for all. Cooperative learning is a system of learning and teaching techniques in which students are able to interact with and learn from each other as well as from the teacher (Olsen & Kagan 1992). Moreover, as suggested by Vygotsky (1986) working in groups may help students fill the gap between what they could do on their own and what they could accomplish working with others, a process which is known as 'scaffolding'.

Group work has become an increasingly popular classroom technique used to facilitate second language (L2) acquisition (Long & Porter 1985, Pica & Doughty 1985, Davis 1997). As with any teaching technique and strategy there are various advantages and disadvantages of working in groups. Cooperative, small group learning is a pedagogical practice that provides positive benefits to students' learning, motivation and relationships with others in all curriculum areas (Gillies 2003). Moreover, in cooperative learning situations each learner is fundamental to the group, since everyone is responsible for achieving the group's goals as well as offering peer support (Donato 1994, Jimenez & Ruffolo 2010). However, while there is a great deal of existing research on both the benefits and the types of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson 1988, Slavin 1995, Gillies 2003), studies on the disadvantages of and students' reticence to working in groups are less extensive.

According to a study conducted by Martine (2006), both teachers and students are concerned about the drawbacks of group work. In fact, the study revealed that although teachers recognize the validity of cooperative learning, they also worry about the limitations. These include the fact that in single language classrooms group work may encourage students to speak in their L1,

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which may lead to defeating the whole purpose of improving the foreign language; or the risk that students may learn incorrect English from the other students. Moreover, studies have shown that students are not always willing to work in groups for several reasons (see Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Cheng, 2000; Martine, 2006). For example, some students believe that this type of work will not provide any help for exam preparation, or that the workload will not be carried out equally among the members of the group. Furthermore, students' reluctance to participate in group work may depend on cultural or psychological traits, but it may also regard other factors, such as teaching methodology, the way tasks are formulated, the topics chosen and the students' own perceptions of being active in class (Cheng, 2000). Moreover, other factors that may cause students' reticence to speak in class or may lead to foreign language anxiety are communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Furthermore, some studies reveal that most students tend to focus more on accuracy than on fluency as this would help them avoid making mistakes or experiencing loss of face (Bond, 1991; Mao, 1994), leading thus to an increase in the reluctance to actively participate in class.

Much has been written on Asian EFL learners' passivity and reticence to speak in class (Xiao 2006), claiming that this behavior "results from cultural attributes of Asian societies" (Cheng 2000:1). However, foreign language learning is a complex process, which strongly depends on learners' individual characteristics, whether Eastern or Western, and their different social, cultural and educational background. A decisive cause of students' reticence to work in groups and actively participate in classroom activities is low language proficiency. "Language difficulty is a significant factor in inhibiting effective communication between NNS [non-native speaker] students and their NS [native speaker] teachers and counterpart" (Jones 1999:257), as well as between low proficiency NNS students and advanced NNS learners. Moreover, students are reluctant to speak in class or in group because of their fear of making mistakes in front of the class, which may depend on, among other factors, the fact that students have focused more on developing receptive skills rather than the productive ones (Tsui 1996).

One way to overcome students' reticence is to engage them in task-based communicative activities which allow them to rehearse speaking in public while at the same time supporting identity development through familiarization with the routines of the academic community or work field (Morita 2000). Among the various task-based communicative activities that can be used in class, oral presentations may be a solution to this specific problem since the work carried out by students leads to purposeful language use (Sheppard & Stoller 1995, Jimenez & Ruffolo 2010). Oral presentations specifically in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) settings can be an effective tool as they provide authentic language use, authentic tasks, focus on language at the discourse level and learner centeredness (Sheppard & Stoller 1995), which are at the basis of the agenda for Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) analysis and instruction outlined by Swales (2000). Moreover, this task can lead to the actual development of the skills required for participation in the academic and work community (Beaufort 2000, Morita, 2000). Furthermore, ESP oral presentations "give learners the chance to be creative and innovative as well as to personalize topics that regard their studies or interests" (Jimenez & Ruffolo 2010:11)

In light of this, the following sections will report on a study carried out in a Business English for Academic Purposes (BEAP) course, providing an overview of how the course was structured and illustrating the findings of a questionnaire administered to the students. The final section considers the pedagogical implications and suggests further lines of research.

2. The study

2.1. Research aims

The main aim of the study was to investigate students' attitudes towards group work, with particular focus on possible reticence towards working in groups on the part of lower proficiency students. Specifically, the study explored the advantages and/or disadvantages of group work

and task-based activities in large mixed groups as well as the effects of oral presentations on foreign language development.

In particular, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons for choosing to work individually or in groups? Are there different reasons depending on students' proficiency level?
2. Do students working on oral presentations find group work useful?
3. Are oral presentations useful for the learning of a foreign language?

2.2. The teaching experience: the participants and the context

The study was carried out within a BEAP course in which approximately 200 first year students majoring in Economics were enrolled (Department of Economics, Statistics and Finance). The students, all native speakers of Italian, attended an English course in the first semester of the academic year. The course was divided into two modules. The first module was structured around an EFL integrated syllabus which emphasizes the importance of structures and how they are related to their communicative function. Particular attention was paid to speaking and reading skills as well as to the acquisition of specialized vocabulary in the field of business. The module was held over a 6-week-term for a total of 36 hours and was organized as tutorials to allow the students to work in relatively small groups (about 35 students). The aim of this first module was to prepare students for the second module, which is an integration of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), with emphasis on language used in business, commercial and marketing sectors, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) with a focus on academic discourse and study skills.

After completing the first module, students took a mid-term test, the results of which were used to divide them into two larger groups (about 100 students) based on their language competence. Students whose average proficiency in English was B1 following the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe 2001) were placed into Group 1, while the students with an A2 level of competence were placed into Group 2. The students then attended the second module, which consisted of 15 two-hour lessons taught by the authors over a 6-week-term. The aim of this second module was to introduce students to the main features of academic discourse and develop study skills (e.g., identifying and understanding main concepts and key words, summarizing main points, taking notes) that are useful for students when attending seminars or consulting sources in English. Moreover, since most of these students will need to give and/or attend an oral presentation in English sometime during their academic or professional careers, part of the course focused on the structure and language of oral presentations as well as strategies necessary for preparing and delivering an effective talk. All students were required to prepare an oral presentation on a business, economic or socio-economic issue which they would present as part of their oral exam. They were given the choice of working on their presentation alone or in groups of up to 4 people.

2.3. Data collection

The data were collected through a questionnaire purposely designed for the present study to investigate students' attitudes towards group work, the reasons for choosing to work alone, and their views on oral presentations in a foreign language (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire was compiled in Italian to ensure that students could understand the questions and fully express their opinions. It was administered to the 125 students who took the exam in the winter and summer sessions, individually and immediately following each oral exam.

The questionnaire consisted of thirteen items which included questions on the modality of the work done as well as specific questions that regarded their presentation, e.g., how they organized their work, how much time they spent preparing the presentation, which skills they had improved. For the purposes of this paper, only the questions directly related to the research

aims will be addressed, namely why students chose to work alone or in groups, the advantages and disadvantages they found, and the extent to which oral presentations are useful for improving language skills.²

2.4. Data analysis and discussion

Of the 125 students who answered the questionnaire, 78 were in the intermediate group (Group 1) and 47 were in the pre-intermediate group (Group 2).³ Overall, most students chose to work on their own (Figure 1), with 75 students working alone compared to 50 students working in groups (cfr. Questionnaire item 1). However, it is interesting to see that there is a substantial difference between the two groups (Figures 2 and 3), in fact whereas only 19% of the students in Group 2 (9 students) decided to work with other students, this percentage was much higher (53%) for students in Group 1, with 41 students working in groups.

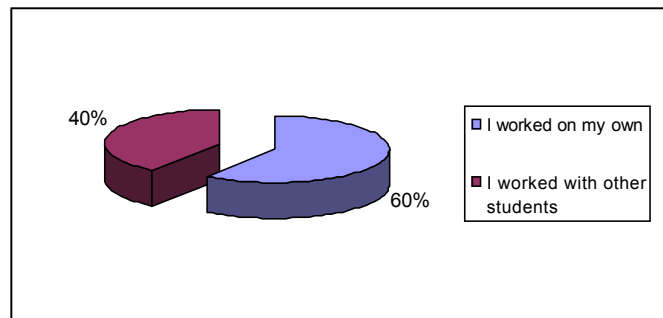


Figure 1: Did you prepare your presentation on your own or did you work in a group?

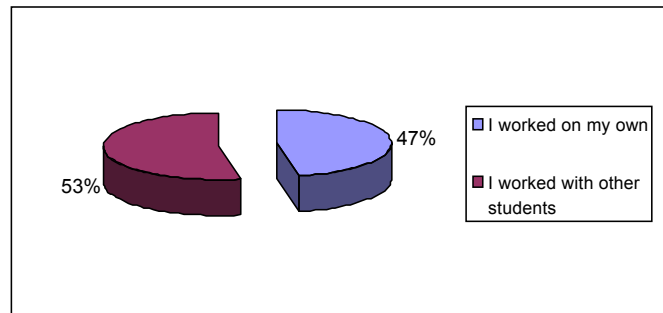


Figure 2: Group 1

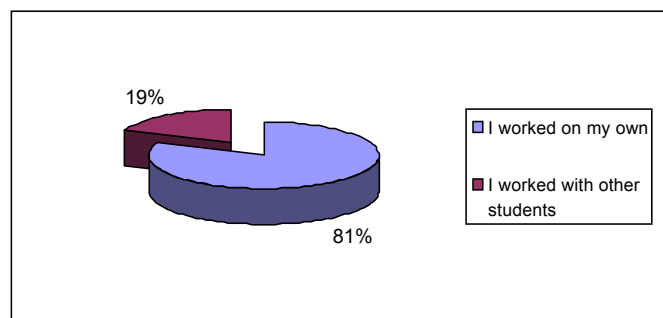


Figure 3: Group 2

The reasons why students chose to work in groups are summarized in Tab. 1, while those given by students who worked alone are in Tab. 2 (cfr. Questionnaire items 2 and 6).⁴ As regards students who worked on their presentation with other students, their answers can be grouped into three macro areas. ‘Socializing’ was the reason given by 38% of the students (answers *a* and *b*), in addition to being a good way to learn about a topic. 32% referred to the idea of ‘helping each other’, which can make studying easier (answers *c* and *e*). 26% stressed that collaborating with

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other students can ‘lead to better results’.

| Why did you decide to work with other students? | | Group 1 (total=41) | Group 2 (total=9) | Total (N=50) |
|---|--|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| a. | Because it's a good way to get to know each other while also learning more about the topic | 9 | 1 | 10 (20%) |
| b. | Because it's more fun and a good way to socialize | 9 | 0 | 9 (18%) |
| c. | To help each other gather more information about our topic and make studying easier | 5 | 0 | 5 (10%) |
| d. | To help each other get ready for the exam by speaking in English | 3 | 1 | 4 (8%) |
| e. | To simplify and reduce the work | 5 | 3 | 8 (16%) |
| f. | Because collaboration means sharing ideas and coming up with new ideas together and this leads to better results | 7 | 0 | 7 (14%) |
| g. | Because group work leads to better results since we can deliver a more complete presentation and compare ourselves to others | 3 | 3 | 6 (12%) |
| h. | No answer | 0 | 1 | 1 (2%) |

Table 1: Reasons for choosing group work

On the other hand, students who chose to work alone gave a wider range of reasons for doing so. 23 students (30.7%) said that they achieve better results when they work alone (answers *a* and *b*), while 9 students (11.6%) said they prefer being autonomous and making decisions on their own (answers *c*, *d* and *e*). 15 students (20.0%) said they do not feel comfortable working with others (answer *f*), underlining in some cases that group work can be intimidating (answers *g* and *h*). Having different proficiency levels was the reason 9 students (11.9%) gave for not working with other students (answers *i*, *j*, *k* and *l*). 3 people (4.0%) also mentioned the unfairness of group work since sometimes one person does most of the work. 5 students (6.7%) said they had already chosen a topic and therefore wanted to work alone, while 1 student could not find anyone else who was interested in her idea for the presentation. Finally, 8 students (10.7%) gave practical reasons for working on their own, such as distance or time.

| Why did you decide to work alone? | | Group 1 (N=37) | Group 2 (N=38) | Total (N=75) |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| a. | <i>I do a better job when I work alone</i> | 7 | 11 | 18 (24.0%) |
| b. | <i>To organize my work better and take full advantage of my potential</i> | 2 | 3 | 5 (6.7%) |
| c. | <i>To be more autonomous, I don't like to depend on others</i> | 5 | 2 | 7 (9.0%) |
| d. | <i>I wanted to be able to make changes without having to ask others</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| e. | <i>I don't like group work because I don't like my ideas to be influenced</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.3%) |
| f. | <i>I prefer to work alone, it's hard to work with/talk to others</i> | 5 | 7 | 12 (16%) |
| g. | <i>So I wouldn't be so nervous at the exam since I'm intimidated by other students</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.3%) |
| h. | <i>To be able to fully express my ideas without feeling intimidated</i> | 1 | 1 | 2 (2.7%) |
| i. | <i>I didn't want to be a burden for the others because my English isn't very good</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 (4%) |
| j. | <i>Because I didn't want the others to have to present my part if I didn't pass the written exam</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.3%) |
| k. | <i>It was easier because my level of English is low so I needed to work at my own pace</i> | 0 | 4 | 4 (5.3%) |

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|----|--|---|---|----------|
| l. | <i>I don't think people with different language competences can work well together</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.3%) |
| m. | <i>To avoid people taking advantage of just one person by making them do all the work</i> | 3 | 0 | 3 (4.0%) |
| n. | <i>I don't think I would have been able to collaborate with others since I already had a topic in mind</i> | 4 | 1 | 5 (6.7%) |
| o. | <i>I couldn't find anybody who was interested in my idea</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.3%) |
| p. | <i>I had very little time because I work</i> | 1 | 1 | 2 (2.7%) |
| q. | <i>It would have been difficult for me to meet the others because I live far away</i> | 4 | 0 | 4 (5.3%) |
| r. | <i>I wasn't sure when I wanted to take the exam</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| s. | <i>It allowed me to have more time to get ready</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| t. | <i>No answer</i> | 1 | 1 | 2 (2.7%) |

Table 2: Reasons for choosing to work alone

The results would seem to indicate that lower proficiency students may prefer to work individually rather than with other students. In fact 81% of the students in Group 2 chose to prepare and deliver their presentation on their own compared to 47% in Group 1. This might be due in part to the fact that students with a lower level of language competence may experience a feeling of uneasiness and apprehension when working with students that they consider more proficient in the language. However, there were other reasons for choosing to work alone, including wanting to be more autonomous, which was mentioned by students in both groups. Turning to the answers given by students to motivate their choice of working with others, students stressed the idea that group work can lead to better results while also simplifying and reducing the workload. The large difference in the number of replies from students in the intermediate group (41) and the pre-intermediate group (9) makes it difficult to state whether the reasons given depend on proficiency level.

Question 4 aimed at understanding how students who worked in groups organized their work (see Tab. 3). 34.0% of the students said they had divided the work up equally but did not specify how (answer *a*). Other students gave more detailed explanations as to how the work was divided (answers *b*, *c*, *e*, *f*, *g* and *h*). As can be seen, 20.0% of the students divided the tasks based on what they had more knowledge about (answer *c*) or on their abilities (answer *e*), while 40% did not say what the division was based on (answers *b*, *g* and *h*). 8.0% said they worked on everything together.

| How was the work divided among the group? | | Group 1 (N=41) | Group 2 (N=9) | Total (N=50) |
|---|--|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| a. | <i>We divided up the work into equal parts</i> | 13 | 4 | 17 (34%) |
| b. | <i>Each member of the group conducted research on one of the subtopics we had decided on and then the material was organized and put together as a group</i> | 11 | 3 | 14 (28%) |
| c. | <i>We divided the topic into subtopics and each person focused on the subtopic they knew more about</i> | 7 | 0 | 7 (14%) |
| d. | <i>We worked on everything together</i> | 3 | 1 | 4 (8%) |
| e. | <i>We divided up the work based on our abilities</i> | 3 | 0 | 3 (6%) |
| f. | <i>One person was responsible for the introduction, another for the body, and another for the conclusion</i> | 3 | 0 | 3 (6%) |
| g. | <i>We worked on the whole presentation together and then each member rehearsed their own part</i> | 0 | 1 | 2 (4%) |
| h. | <i>One person concentrated on the content and one on the power point slides</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (2%) |

Table 3: How group work was organized

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The answers given to question 5 are essential to understanding the extent to which students found group work useful. All 50 students said that working with other students was indeed beneficial. Their answers, which can be grouped into 4 macro areas, are illustrated in Tab. 4. 28 students (56.0%) highlighted that group work allowed them to exchange ideas, which helped them improve their language skills (answers *b*, *c* and *e*) and do a better job (answer *d*). Having a ‘lighter work load’ was an advantage which 6 students (12.0%) referred to, of which 2 also said led to a better presentation (answer *g*). Other reasons included that it was a good way to socialize and have fun (answers *h* and *i*) and that it was interesting and motivating (answer *j*). 11 students (18.0%) did not specify why it was useful. From these responses we can affirm that collaboration helped students improve their language skills as well as giving them the chance to exchange ideas and socialize with their peers, which confirmed some of the reasons given above for choosing to work with others.

| How was group work useful? | | Group 1 (N=41) | Group 2 (N=9) | Total (N=50) |
|----------------------------|--|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| a. | <i>It gave us the opportunity to exchange more ideas</i> | 13 | 0 | 13 (26%) |
| b. | <i>It gave us the chance to work together and help each other improve our skills</i> | 5 | 1 | 6 (12%) |
| c. | <i>By collaborating we learned from each other</i> | 3 | 1 | 4 (8%) |
| d. | <i>We were able to do a better job (e.g. well-organized, interesting, in-depth study) by sharing ideas</i> | 1 | 3 | 4 (8%) |
| e. | <i>It gave us the chance to compare different study strategies and learn more</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (2%) |
| f. | <i>We didn't have to do as much work as the people who worked on their own</i> | 3 | 1 | 4 (8%) |
| g. | <i>We were able to share the workload and as a consequence do a better job</i> | 2 | 0 | 2 (4%) |
| h. | <i>It was a good way of socializing</i> | 2 | 0 | 2 (4%) |
| i. | <i>We had fun together</i> | 2 | 0 | 2 (4%) |
| j. | <i>It was interesting and motivating</i> | 3 | 0 | 3 (6%) |
| k. | <i>No answer</i> | 7 | 2 | 9 (18%) |

Table 4: How group work was useful

Students who worked on their own were also asked to explain how they organized their work (cfr. Questionnaire item 8). Unlike students who worked in groups, these students gave more details about their organization (see Tab. 5), perhaps also because this question was interpreted in different ways.⁵ 27 students (36%) referred to how they organized the presentation itself (answers *a* to *c*) whereas 21 (28.0%) described some of the steps taken to prepare their presentations (answers *d* to *n*). 1 student said that she focused on the most difficult parts first, while 2 students explained what linguistic aspects they had focused on (answers *o*, *p* and *q*). Answers *r* to *u* refer to when or how much students studied, while answers *v* and *x* refer to the final product. 10 (13.3%) students did not provide an answer.

| How did you organize your work? | | Group A (N=37) | Group B (N=38) | Total (N=75) |
|---------------------------------|---|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| a. | <i>I developed the different sections I wanted to present, mainly following the outline given by the teacher (introduction, body, and conclusion)</i> | 12 | 8 | 20 (26.7%) |
| b. | <i>In three parts, focusing equally on all of them</i> | 2 | 2 | 4 (5.3%) |
| c. | <i>First I introduced myself then I presented the topic</i> | 0 | 3 | 3 (4%) |
| d. | <i>I did some research online and then prepared the PPT presentation</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 (4%) |

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| e. | <i>I found the information online and then I summarized it</i> | 2 | 3 | 5 (6.7%) |
| f. | <i>I found biographical information as well as economic information and put it together</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| g. | <i>I rewrote the information I had found into a spoken form</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| h. | <i>First I rewrote the information I had found and then I rehearsed it</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| i. | <i>I chose a topic and started looking for information</i> | 1 | 1 | 2 (2.7%) |
| j. | <i>I got information about the company by talking to one of the managers, I put everything together using this information and my personal knowledge, and then summarized everything</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| k. | <i>First I found the information, then I created an outline which included the most important points</i> | 1 | 1 | 2 (2.7%) |
| l. | <i>I found some information on the Internet and some other news in magazines</i> | 1 | 1 | 2 (2.7%) |
| m. | <i>I used the information in the hand-out as a starting point and then looked for more information online</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| n. | <i>I found the information in Italian, translated it and learned it</i> | 1 | 1 | 2 (2.7%) |
| o. | <i>I focused on the most difficult parts first</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.3%) |
| p. | <i>First I learned the key words, then I worked on my grammar</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.3%) |
| q. | <i>First I focused on the vocabulary then on my pronunciation</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.3%) |
| r. | <i>Learning and revising day after day</i> | 1 | 1 | 2 (2.7%) |
| s. | <i>Studying 3 or 4 hours every two days</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| t. | <i>I studied when I had time and tried to be very organized</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.3%) |
| u. | <i>I didn't have much time so I prepared everything in one day</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| v. | <i>A prepared a brief PPT presentation</i> | 4 | 4 | 8 (10.7%) |
| w. | <i>I created a brochure</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) |
| x. | <i>No answer</i> | 3 | 7 | 10 (13.3%) |

Table 5: How students who worked on their own organized their work

To address the other aim of this study, which was to investigate the effects that preparing and delivering an oral presentation can have on foreign language development, the students were asked to self-assess their improvement (cfr. Questionnaire item 11). Tab. 6 illustrates the answers given by students who worked in groups as well as by those who worked alone.⁶ Not surprisingly, oral production was the skill which most students felt they had improved (59.2%), followed by oral interaction (40.0%). Students also said they had improved their reading (38.4%), writing (36.8%) and listening skills (28.8%). Only 2 (1.6%) students said they had not improved any skills, in addition to 5 students (4%) who did not choose any skill.

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| Skill | Worked in groups (N=50) | | Worked alone (N=75) | | Total (N=125) |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|---------------|
| | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 1 | Group 2 | |
| <i>Reading</i> | 17 | 5 | 12 | 14 | 48 (38.4%) |
| <i>Writing</i> | 17 | 3 | 9 | 17 | 46 (36.8%) |
| <i>Oral interaction</i> | 16 | 3 | 15 | 16 | 50 (40.0%) |
| <i>Oral production</i> | 21 | 5 | 24 | 24 | 74 (59.2%) |
| <i>Listening</i> | 11 | 4 | 7 | 14 | 36 (28.8%) |
| <i>None</i> | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 (1.6%) |
| <i>No answer</i> | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 (4%) |

Table 6: Language skills students have improved

The students were also asked if they had encountered any difficulties. As illustrated in Tab. 7, of the 125 respondents, 67 (53.6%) stated that they had not had any problems, while 31 (24.8%) said that they had. 27 students (21.6%) did not answer this question. This high number of students who did not give an answer makes it difficult to draw any conclusions about whether there are differences between students who worked in groups or those who worked alone or between Group 1 and Group 2. However, if we look at the valid percent, which does not take into account answers left blank (Tab. 8, 9 and 10), it would appear that overall students in Group 2 had more difficulties (36.6%) than those in Group 1 (28.1%), and those students from Group 2 who worked alone had the most difficulties (37.5%).

| Did you have any difficulties? | Worked in groups | | Worked alone | | Total number of students (125) |
|--------------------------------|------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| | Group 1 (N=41) | Group 2 (N=9) | Group 1 (N=37) | Group 2 (N=38) | |
| Yes | 10 (24.4%) | 3 (33.3%) | 6 (16.2%) | 12 (31.6%) | 31 (24.8%) |
| No | 19 (46.3%) | 6 (66.6%) | 22 (59.5%) | 20 (52.6%) | 67 (53.6%) |
| No answer | 12 (29.3%) | 0 | 9 (24.3%) | 6 (15.8%) | 27 (21.6%) |

Table 7: Whether or not learners had difficulties- Raw percent

| Did you have any difficulties? | Worked in groups | | Total number of replies (N=38) |
|--------------------------------|------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| | Group 1 (N=29) | Group 2 (N=9) | |
| Yes | 10 (34.5%) | 3 (33.3%) | 13 (34.2%) |
| No | 19 (65.5%) | 6 (66.6%) | 25 (65.8%) |

Table 8: Whether or not learners had difficulties- Valid percent group work

| Did you have any difficulties? | Worked alone | | Total number of replies (60) |
|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|------------------------------|
| | Group 1 (N=28) | Group 2 (N=32) | |
| Yes | 6 (21.4%) | 12 (37.5%) | 18 (30.0%) |
| No | 22 (78.6%) | 20 (62.5%) | 42 (70.0%) |

Table 9: Whether or not learners had difficulties- Valid percent individual work

| Did you have any difficulties? | Group 1 (N=57) | Group 2 (N=41) | Total number of replies (N=98) |
|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| | Yes | 16 (28.1%) | |
| No | 41 (71.9%) | 26 (63.4%) | 67 (68.4%) |

Table 10: Whether or not learners had difficulties- Valid percent per group

Examining the answers given by the 31 students who said they had encountered difficulties (see Tab. 11), we can see that 16 students referred to problems with using English (answers *a*, *b*, *c*, *d* and *e*). In particular, students had problems presenting the topic in English, writing the slides and understanding sources, while 1 student mentioned that her low proficiency made it difficult to prepare the presentation. 7 students referred specifically to problems learning specialized or

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technical vocabulary related to their field of study. Other students had problems summarizing the topic and rehearsing the presentation. 1 student stated that she felt isolated because she had worked alone.

| What difficulties did you have? | | Worked in groups | | Worked alone | | Total N= 31 |
|---------------------------------|---|------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| | | Group A N=10 | Group B N=3 | Group A N=6 | Group B N=12 | |
| a. | Speaking/presenting a topic in L2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 10 |
| b. | Writing the slides in L2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| c. | Understanding sources in English | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| d. | I have a very basic knowledge of English | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| e. | Learning specific/technical vocabulary so that I could use appropriate language in the field of economics | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| f. | Summarizing the topic | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| g. | Rehearsing the presentation | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| h. | Felt isolated | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| i. | No answer | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |

Table 11: Difficulties encountered

Overall, the large majority of students (80.0%) said that delivering an oral presentation was a positive experience. This percentage was the same for both students who worked in groups and those who worked alone. If we consider only the valid data, the percentages are even higher: 97.6% for group work and 98.4% for individual work; 98.4% for Group 1 as a whole and 97.6% for Group 2 (see Tab. 12, 13 and 14).

| Has delivering an oral presentation been a positive experience? | Worked in groups | | Total number of students (N=50) | Total number of replies (N=41) |
|---|------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Group 1 (N=41) | Group 2 (N=9) | | |
| Yes | 32 | 8 | 40 (80.0%) | 97.6% |
| No | 0 | 1 | 1 (2.0%) | 2.4% |
| No answer | 9 | 0 | 9 (18.0%) | -- |

Table 12: Positive experience (group work)

| Has delivering an oral presentation been a positive experience? | Worked in groups | | Total number of students (N=75) | Total number of replies (N=61) |
|---|------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Group 1 (N=37) | Group 2 (N=38) | | |
| Yes | 28 | 32 | 60 (80.0%) | 98.4% |
| No | 1 | 0 | 1 (1.3%) | 1.6% |
| No answer | 8 | 6 | 14 (18.7%) | -- |

Table 13: Positive experience (individual work)

| Has delivering an oral presentation been a positive experience? | Group 1 (N=61) | Group 2 (N=41) | Total number of replies (N=102) |
|---|----------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Yes | 60 (98.4%) | 40 (97.6%) | 98.0% |
| No | 1 (1.6%) | 1 (2.4%) | 2.0% |

Table 14: Positive experience- valid percent per group

In order to investigate why the experience had or had not been positive, the respondents were asked to provide details for their answers, which are illustrated in Tab. 15 and 16. A wide range of answers were given by both students who worked in groups and those who worked on their own. Among the answers provided, we can see that oral presentations were useful for improving language skills and the English language in general, developing study skills, developing group

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skills, and socializing. There is also an emphasis on the importance of learning specialized vocabulary and improving their knowledge of their subject area. Finally, oral presentations were useful because they were given the chance to engage in a real-life situation which will be useful for their future.

| Why or why not? (in groups) | | Group A (total=41) | Group B (total=9) | Total (50) |
|-----------------------------|---|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| a. | <i>It helped me overcome my shyness</i> | 6 | 0 | 6 (12%) |
| b. | <i>I now understand the importance of group work</i> | 5 | 0 | 5 (10%) |
| c. | <i>We became better friends</i> | 2 | 0 | 2 (4%) |
| d. | <i>It gave me the chance to exchange ideas and learn words that can help me understand texts in my area</i> | 3 | 1 | 4 (8%) |
| e. | <i>I learned more about the topic</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (2%) |
| f. | <i>I learned specialized vocabulary which is very useful for my studies</i> | 3 | 1 | 4 (8%) |
| g. | <i>I improved different language skills and I learned more about the topic</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (2%) |
| h. | <i>I improved my oral production and interaction skills</i> | 2 | 1 | 3 (6%) |
| i. | <i>I had the opportunity to present a topic in English, which I think will be useful in the future</i> | 3 | 1 | 4 (8%) |
| j. | <i>It helped me understand how to do an oral presentation</i> | 2 | 0 | 2 (4%) |
| k. | <i>It made it easier for me to present my ideas</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (2%) |
| l. | <i>We had the possibility to present/talk about our region.</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (2%) |
| m. | <i>I learned to organize my work notwithstanding my basic knowledge of English</i> | 1 | 0 | 1 (2%) |
| n. | <i>It encouraged me to study more in English and in a different way</i> | 2 | 0 | 2 (4%) |
| o. | <i>It was useful and above all interesting</i> | 0 | 1 | 1 (2%) |
| p. | <i>No answer</i> | 10 | 2 | 12 (24%) |

Table 15: Why oral presentations were or were not a positive experience- group work

| Why or why not? (alone) | Group A (37) | Group B (38) | Total (75) |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|
| It increased my motivation to study | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| It will help me interact with teachers of other subjects | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| It helped me overcome my shyness | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| It helped me overcome my shyness and expand my knowledge | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| It helped me improve my English in general | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| It helped me overcome many difficulties in English | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| It is useful to express yourself in a foreign language and improve your language competence in general | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| I expanded my knowledge. | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| I learned more about the topic | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| I improved my English competence and learned more about the topic | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| I improved my oral production and interaction skills | 4 | 8 | 12 |
| I think I have improved my oral interaction skills as well as my reading skills very much. | 1 | 0 | 1 |

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|----|
| I improved my summarizing and oral production skills | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| I improved my vocabulary and my oral production skills | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| I learned new vocabulary | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| It was a new experience thanks to which I learned new vocabulary and hopefully it will be useful for my future job. | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| It encouraged me to study more in English and in a different way | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| It was my first experience in presenting an economic topic in English. | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| It is useful for the English exam and for the world of work. | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| It is useful for my future studies and job | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| It gave me the opportunity to present a current topic which I think is very important and interesting | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| I learned more about local companies | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| No, because I had already done a presentation. | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| No answer | 7 | 7 | 14 |

Table 16: Why oral presentations were or were not a positive experience- individual work

Thus we can see that as regards the effects of preparing and delivering an oral presentation on foreign language development, the vast majority of students said they had improved at least one skill. This is very important because oral presentations not only helped students reflect on language form and specialized vocabulary, but presenting a topic in English also gave learners the chance to engage in a real life task which they felt would be useful in the future. At the same time, this activity was useful in developing and enhancing study skills.

3. Conclusion

Various scholars have highlighted the beneficial effects of employing oral presentations and group work in LSP classrooms. In particular, this study aimed at investigating students' attitudes towards group work as well as exploring the possible advantages of group work and oral presentations in a LSP class. The results of the study showed that preparing ESP oral presentations can have positive effects for students. As highlighted in other studies (Gillies 2003, Donato 1994, Jimenez & Ruffolo 2010), this specific task encourages students to reflect on language form, language use and communicative effectiveness issues. The findings also showed that when preparing ESP oral presentations, students focus on specialized vocabulary which can be useful in their future studies and careers, thus providing them with strategies and competences that can be employed in their area of interest. Moreover, working in groups on oral presentations may facilitate language learning, and, if we consider the project from a more humanistic point of view, it encourages students to overcome their reluctance to speak in class and improve their social skills.

Future research will involve investigating the extent to which students who worked on their own found individual work beneficial. In fact, students who worked in groups were explicitly asked the extent to which they found group work useful, while this type of information could only be inferred for those who worked on their own. Finally, a last question regarding students' willingness to repeat the experience could have been included in the questionnaire.

In a teaching reality in which university language teachers are often faced with large numbers of students, it is important to find techniques that are effective on a variety of levels and which may be of interest to students outside of the classroom. Therefore, LSP oral presentations may be a valid tool to implement in courses which involve very high numbers of students and a limited amount of hours in the classroom.

4. Appendix

Oral Presentations

This questionnaire is aimed at collecting your opinion about oral presentations. In particular, your answers will help us understand students' attitudes on preparing and delivering an oral presentation in class. Please take some time to answer the following questions, which refer to the presentation you have just completed. The questionnaire is anonymous and the findings will be used for research purposes only. Thank you for your collaboration! ☺

1. Did you prepare your presentation on your own or did you work in a group?
 alone **[go to question N°6]**
 with other students **[go to question N°2]**
2. Why did you decide to work with other students?
3. Why did you choose the topic of your presentation?
4. How was the work divided among the group?
5. Was working with other students useful?
 Yes No
Please provide details.
[go to question N°9]
6. Why did you decide to work alone?
7. Why did you choose the topic of your presentation?
8. How did you organize your work?
9. Which of the following sources did you use to prepare the presentation? If you used more than one source, number them starting with the source you used the most (i.e. 1: main source).
 Books Our English course handout Newspapers/magazines
 Internet Background knowledge Other _____
10. How long did you spend on your presentation?
 Less than a week 1 week 2 weeks
 3 weeks 1 month Other _____

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11. Which language skills do you think you have improved? If you choose more than one, number them starting with the skill you have improved the most.
- Reading Writing Oral interaction
- Oral production Listening None
12. Did you have any difficulties? If so, please provide details.
13. Has delivering an oral presentation been a positive experience? Please provide details.

Thanks for your collaboration!

5. Notes

¹ Although the authors have co-operated in the research work and in writing the paper, they have individually devoted specific attention to the following sections: Jimenez: 2.4; Ruffolo: 1, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.5.

² cfr. items 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 12, and 13.

³ The difference in numbers between the two groups is due to the fact that students had to pass the written exam, which was the same for both groups, before they could sit the oral exam. Not surprisingly, the pass rate for Group 1 was higher.

⁴ The students' answers, which were all in Italian, have been translated by the authors. This regards all the questionnaire items that are open-ended. Since the questionnaires were anonymous, we have used 'she' to refer to both males and females.

⁵ This question was designed to collect information on how the students had prepared for the presentation, but when analyzing the responses we realized it was not clear as some students referred to the structure of the presentation per se.

⁶ Students could choose more than one skill, which is why the percentages do not add up to 100.

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