

Investigating the Role of Cooperative Learning in Fostering Moroccan ESP Students' Learning Attitudes

Hanae Ait Hattani

Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, ENCG Fes

e-mail: hanae.aithattani@usmba.ac.ma

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Abstract

Cooperative learning (CL) is a teaching and learning approach that has been sufficiently studied to be accepted as an effective method of language education, English language in particular. In all levels of education, students in cooperative situations achieved greater academic, social, and psychological benefits. Nowadays, learners are expected to be more actively involved in the teaching and learning process, especially when they work together to achieve a specific target or objective. This study investigates teaching English for Specific Purposes within the paradigm of a cooperative learning approach. It comes as an attempt to investigate the impact of cooperative learning on improving students' learning skills and attitudes in the ESP instructional context. Through a survey questionnaire, this inquiry aimed at shedding light on learners' perceptions towards their cooperative learning experience. Based on attitudinal results, the majority of respondents positively perceived the use of cooperative learning as an approach that provides them with a learning environment conducive to social interaction, peer tutoring, skills' development, and knowledge retention. Eventually, according to the study results, cooperative learning has benefits that go outside of the classroom and learning environment. Long-term benefits of cooperative learning include the opportunity for students to practice skills that may have a progressive impact on their lives in addition to helping them acquire new knowledge.

Keywords: attitudes, cooperative learning (CL), ESP, English skills, knowledge

1. Introduction

The main objective of any teaching method is to increase learning effectiveness. Making learning productive, fun, and inspiring for students is currently one of the most challenging issues facing educators and other industry experts. Over the past ten years, research has focused more on methods and strategies that let teachers and students participate more actively in the language teaching and learning process in an effort to address the aforementioned question.

Language education, English in particular, has been one of the main concerns in the field of education in the 21st century. With English becoming the global and most dominant language worldwide, in addition to the political, economic, and cultural developments and changes, English language teaching and learning needed to be reconsidered and reevaluated. English language education has been gradually replaced by new paradigms, shifting from its classical applications such as EFL (English as a foreign language) or ESL (English as a second language) toward new paradigms like English for science and technology (EST), English for business and economics (EBE), and English for academic purposes (EAP).

The previous few decades have seen significant developments in the field of ESP due to the economic and technical revolutions, as well as the new pedagogical trends that have had an impact on English language instruction. Hewings (2002), co-editor of the journal *English for Specific Purposes*, said in one of his works that ESP is becoming more and more recognized globally and that several studies have been carried out to examine the various aspects of ESP as one of the most prominent and dynamic research disciplines.

The ESP instruction is differentiated from any other English language education as it focuses on creating and developing a content that aims to provide learners with specific skills to seek knowledge, conduct research, enhance communicative needs, and exploit their professional proficiencies (Qi Dou, Chan & Win, 2023). Thus, ESP instruction requires rigorous research at the level of curriculum design, instructional strategies, and material selection. In this regard and to improve ESP instruction in specialized institutions and prepare competent and well-equipped professionals to operate successfully in the target work fields using high language proficiency, a number of teaching approaches and methods have emerged, each offering a unique vision of the learning process.

For this reason, educators, nowadays, believe in the need to make ESP learners shareholders in their learning journey, instead of being passive receivers of knowledge and information. Therefore, cooperative learning, one kind of student-centered approach, has emerged as a globally significant topic of investigation among researchers.

This teaching and learning approach has been sufficiently studied to be accepted as an effective method of language education, English language in particular. In all levels of education, students in cooperative situations achieved greater academic, social, and psychological benefits (Mendo-Lázaro et al., 2022). As Johnson and Johnson (2002) asserted, cooperative learning consists of five main elements: positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, teaching of interpersonal and social skills, and quality of group processing.

Eventually, this study attempts to contribute to the research conducted for assessing and measuring the effectiveness of the cooperative learning approach in language education, ESP in particular. The aim of this research is to examine students' attitudes towards using cooperative language learning techniques in ESP classroom. In fact, learners' perceptions, attitudes, and opinions are key determinants of the success of any instructional program. For this objective, a survey questionnaire was designed. The latter includes 32 Likert-Scale questions. This survey was administered with 216 university students.

Specifically, this work seeks answers to the following research questions:

- 1- What are ESP students' opinions and attitudes towards the incorporation of cooperative learning?
- 2- Does the incorporation of CL help ESP students develop their learning attitudes and skills?

2. Literature Review

2.1 ESP Education

ESP (English language teaching) is a subset of ELE (English language education) and a field of research within theoretical and applied linguistics. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), it is "a phenomenon that grew out of a number of converging trends." The subject of ESP began to take shape in the mid-1960s after the Second World War and a number of significant changes that impacted the scientific, technological, and economic domains (Garcia Mayo, 2000). Knapp and Seidlhofer (2009) claimed that while discussing Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), in the majority of cases we refer to English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It is "the area of inquiry and practice in the development of language programs for people who need a language to meet a predictable range of communicative needs" (Swales, 1992). This branch of linguistics seeks to increase students' knowledge needed in a certain professional or academic setting while also to address their individual language demands. Arnó-Macià, Aguilar-Pérez, and Tatzl (2020) and Basturkmen (2003) also explained that ESP is pertinent to the language use requirements that students face in their particular work or study-related scenario.

When English language instruction first started, it primarily focused on students' communication needs in the fields of technology and business (Benesch, 2001). Later, other fields have emerged, such as English for academic purposes (EAP), English for business purposes (EBP), English for occupational purposes (EOP), English for vocational purposes (EVP), English for medical purposes (EMP), English for legal purposes (ELP), and English for sociocultural purposes (ESCP) (Belcher, 2009). Therefore, the creation of specialized content for ESP instruction centers on giving students the tools they need to seek knowledge, conduct research, meet their communication needs, and utilize their professional proficiencies. Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) said that "a critical step in designing the ESP curriculum is accepting that the methodologies and approaches valid in any other area of ESL are not necessarily the most appropriate for ESP" (177). In other words, the foundation of ESP teaching is a flexible and innovative framework that recognizes the application of particular pedagogies and tools along with their customization to every learning context.

2.2 Cooperative Learning Approach

Cooperative learning is defined as the instructional use of small groups of students of diverse abilities, talents, and backgrounds, working together on an academic task to attain a common goal (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). It is referred to by a variety of names including collaborative learning (Giwa, 2008), team learning (Kapp, 2009), workgroup learning (King, Hebl, & Beal, 2009), group work or group learning (Gatfield, 1999; Ledwith & Seymour, 2001), and learning groups (Gabriel & Griffiths, 2008).

Much of the current research investigates the positive effects of cooperative learning on various outcomes (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). The cooperative learning approach is acknowledged to be absorbed in the mainstream of educational practice as it has been proved to be highly effective in enhancing academic performance and improving socialization skills (Johnson, Johnson, and Stanne (2000). It is a key competence in establishing a knowledge-based society (Rychen & Salganik, 2001). Cooperative learning approach claims to foster the level of understanding and reasoning, develop higher level thinking, and increase the accuracy of long-term retention compared to the other non-cooperative and lecture-based approaches (Koppenhaver & Shrader, 2003). Following the premises of Johnson and Johnson (2014), cooperative learning is essential if we are to meet the challenges and expectations of the 21st century

Additionally, the teaching and learning process using cooperative learning techniques is a learner-centered paradigm where the student is the protagonist and actively participates in his own learning process (Barr & Tagg, 1995). More transformative models, in which students can learn from each other under teacher organization and supervision, have replaced the transmissive paradigm, which held that students could only learn what teachers taught them (Sharan, 2010). As a result, in order to support cooperative learning, teachers must change from being knowledge transmitters to learning mediators and facilitators (Nasri & Biria, 2017). In this capacity, coaching, modeling, and facilitation are all involved. Educators assuming this novel position ought to uphold a secure, productive, and student-focused milieu where pupils can make meaningful contributions to the cooperative tasks allocated to their teams (Ning, 2011, Cecchini et al., 2021). On the same line of thought, research confirmed that due to the lack of teacher preparation and organization, putting cooperative learning into practice in the classroom has proved difficult (Kyndt, Raes, Lismont, Timmers, Cascallar & Dochy, 2013). Grisham and Molinelli (2001) identified the main and most frequent mistakes made by teachers when adopting cooperative learning in their classrooms. These include oversized and over-homogeneous groups, lack of explicit and clear instructions, lack of time devoted for interaction, too much physical distance between team members, incorporation of activities lacking structure, poor or lack of team self-assessment, among other barriers. Hence, teachers should be trained in the conceptual bases of cooperative learning by adopting different methods and techniques. That is to say, instructors who are willing to implement this instructional approach in their classrooms should be offered initial training to ensure effectiveness and success in their new role; training which will be looking at the continuity between theory and practice (Abrami, Poulsen & Chambers, 2004).

2.3. Cooperative Learning Principles

According to the literature, there were five key factors that define effective cooperative learning: (1) positive interdependence, (2) individual accountability, (3) quality of group processing, (4) teaching of cooperative skills, and (5) teaching of social skills.

- **Positive Interdependence:** According to Yager (2000), cooperative learning environments necessitate that students collaborate as a coherent unit in order to accomplish shared learning goals. In this situation, students have to take accountability for both their own education and the education of other group members (Slavin, 2011). Without the assistance, support, explanation, and guidance of the all the members, the group will not be able to achieve the ideal outcome.
- **Individual Accountability:** each learner is responsible for their role in the group; they are responsible for completing their task seriously and effectively and for helping the group members operate well (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).
- **Quality of Group Processing:** this principle is based on allowing learning determine their own progress by reflecting on the way each group member functioned during learning activities to decide what actions were effective and helpful, what needs to be fixed, and what needs to be changed (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).
- **Interpersonal and Social Skills:** they refer to skills such as communicating clearly and accurately, listening attentively, providing constructive feedback, reaching consensus, effectively interacting, involving all members in the learning process, solving problems, among others (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). According to Slavin (1996), if these skills are not taught, cooperative learning activities are rarely successful.
- **Positive interaction:** learners should be empowered to use verbal and nonverbal communication to discuss the assignment, develop ideas, explain learning materials, give support to each other, and/or deal with problems encountered.

Overall, when these basic elements are implemented in cooperative learning groups, learners achieve better, demonstrate better learning skills, show more positive attitudes, and experience more

positive relationships among group members and with their teacher (Johnson & Johnson, 2008; Slavin, 2011).

3. Research Methodology

Learners' perceptions, views, and behaviors are key determinants of the success of any instructional program. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effective role of cooperative learning on improving university students' learning achievement and skills' acquisition by shedding light on their attitudes and perceptions.

To address this issue, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1- What are ESP students' opinions and attitudes towards the incorporation of cooperative learning?
- 2- Does the incorporation of CL help ESP students develop their learning attitudes and skills?

3.1 Participants and Setting

This study was conducted with first- and third-year students from the National School of Commerce and Management of Fes (Morocco) after finishing their ESP (Business English) course of the Academic year 2022-2023. The total sample of participants consisted of 216 students. As presented in table 1, this sample counted 66 (30,6%) males and 150 females (69,4%).

Table 1. Respondents' Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	66	30,6%
Female	150	69,4%

3.2 Research Design

In this study a descriptive, survey-based design was employed. To garner information about students' opinions and attitudes towards cooperative learning strategies, an online survey questionnaire was conducted.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

As mentioned earlier, to gain numerical data indicating ESP students' views on their cooperative learning experience, more specifically on its effectiveness on their classroom achievement and skills' development, an online survey questionnaire was sent to the participants. The questionnaire survey, as a data collection instrument, is a very effective tool as it is, first, easily administered, and, second, it enables large scale numerical data to be obtained over a short period of time.

At the end of the second and last semester, and after being exposed to different cooperative learning contexts, namely classroom debate, group presentations, role play, and workshops, almost 250 students received an online questionnaire to complete. The survey questionnaire included 32 items and was designed in the form of a 5-point Likert scale. The respondents were allowed to rate each item on a scale of options, which were numerically coded as 1 (strongly disagree); 2 (disagree); 3 (neutral); 4 (agree); 5 (strongly agree). The reliability and validity of the questionnaire were determined by the researcher before conducting the research using a pilot test.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the survey conducted with first- and third-year students from the National School of Commerce and Management. At the end of the second and last semester, respondents were asked to complete a survey, which aimed at garnering information about their attitudes and perceptions on the use of cooperative learning approach and its impact on their skills'

development and classroom achievement in the ESP context. A sample of 216 students responded to the survey.

4.1 Students' attitudes about the effectiveness of cooperative learning on their classroom achievement

To start with, the survey sought to investigate the extent to which students, generally, perceive the cooperative learning experience in terms of their classroom achievement in the ESP context. As mentioned earlier, the survey was designed in the form of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" with values 1-5 assigned to each alternative.

As demonstrated in table 2, in the first statement, the majority of students (28.7%: strongly agree; 28.7%: agree) expressed their enjoyment of their cooperative learning and group work activities and assignments. Besides, respondents confirmed that the material is more interesting (18,5%: strongly agree; 29,6%: agree) and easier (25%: strongly agree; 26,9%: agree) to them when they work in group.

Additionally, students expressed their positive attitudes towards their cooperative learning experience as, according to them, it improves their work habits (33.3%: strongly agree; 25%: agree), it improves their learning (38%: strongly agree; 19,9%: agree), and it enhances their classroom participation (29.6%: strongly agree; 25,9%: agree). More than that, students asserted that when cooperative learning is adopted, the work load and pressure is less (26.9%: strongly agree; 21,3%: agree) and the task completion is less time consuming (23.1%: strongly agree; 29.6%: agree). Finally, the majority of participants affirmed that when they collaboratively work, their grades improve (32.4%: strongly agree; 21,3%: agree) and each member's grade depends on how much they learn and what they achieve (28.7%: strongly agree; 25%: agree).

Table 2: Respondents' assessment of their cooperative learning experience in terms of classroom achievement in the ESP context.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy participating in group work activities/assignments	28.7%	28.7%	25%	9.3%	8.3%
The material is more interesting to me when I work with other students	18.5%	29.6%	21.3%	21.3%	9.3%
The material is easier to understand when I work with other students	25%	26.9%	28.7%	12%	7.4%
When I work in group, my work habits improve	33.3%	25%	19.4%	13.9%	8.3%
When I work in group, I learn better.	38%	19.4%	19.4%	13%	10.2%
When I work in group, I do better quality work	29.6%	26.9%	23.1%	10.2%	10.2%
Working in group enhances my class participation	29.6%	25.9%	28.6%	7.4%	8.3%
The work load and pressure is usually less when I work with other students	26.9%	21.3%	19.4%	15.7%	16.7%
The work takes less time to complete when I work with other students	23.1%	29.6%	17.6%	11.1%	18.5%
My grades improve when I work with other students.	32.4%	21.3%	18.5%	17.6%	10.2%
When I work in group everyone gets the grade they deserve	21.3%	13.9%	30.6%	19.4%	14.8%
The grade depends on how much every group member learns and what he/she achieves	28.7%	25%	22.2%	12%	12%
It is difficult to get together with the other group members outside the classroom to complete an assignment/project	18.5%	16.7%	26.9%	22.2%	15.7%

4.2 Students' attitudes about the effectiveness of cooperative learning on their skills' development in the ESP context

The second section of the survey attempted to examine students' attitudes and perceptions about the use of collaborative learning and its influence on their skills' development in the ESP classroom. That is to say, respondents were asked to give their opinions on the extent to which collaborative learning help them improve the following learning skills (see Table 3):

- **Organization:** Most students (17.6%: strongly agree; 25.9%: agree) confirmed that when they work in group, their work seems to be better organized.
- **Communication and free expression:** Most students (38.9%: strongly agree; 31,5%: agree) confirmed that cooperative learning gives them a better chance to communicate and express themselves.
- **Motivation:** Most students (42.6%: strongly agree; 21,1%: agree) confirmed that cooperative learning makes them feel more motivated in the classroom.
- **Autonomy:** In one of the survey's statements, students were asked about whether working in group makes them feel more autonomous, particularly in their learning; the majority (34.4%) were reluctant in their answers while 24.1% said that they "agree".
- **Creativity:** Most students (33%: strongly agree; 28.7%: agree) confirmed that cooperative learning makes them feel more creative.
- **Active attitude:** Most students (36.1%: strongly agree; 36.1%: agree) confirmed that cooperative learning makes them feel more active.
- **Problem-solving:** Most students (40.7%: strongly agree; 30.6%: agree) confirmed that cooperative learning participates in improving their problem-solving skill.
- **Decision-making:** Most students (33.3%: strongly agree; 29.6%: agree) confirmed that cooperative learning participates in improving their decision-making skill.
- **Leadership:** Most students (44.4%: strongly agree; 27.8%: agree) confirmed that cooperative learning participates in improving their leadership skills.
- **Accountability:** To measure students' sense of accountability and responsibility in cooperative learning, students received a number of statements to answer using the Likert scale. For instance, respondents asserted that while working in group, every member contributes to complete the task (35.2%: strongly agree; 24.1%: agree). Also, they stated that all members respect the deadline and get the work done on time (72.2%: strongly agree; 24.1%: agree).
- **Competition:** As for the competition variable, the majority of students said that while working in group, they do not seem to compete between each other to complete the task (25.9%: disagree; 22.5%: strongly disagree), as they all strive to achieve a common successful result.
- **Positive interdependence:** Additionally, students confirmed that working in group makes them cooperate to complete the assigned task; they help each other (75%: strongly agree; 10.2%: agree) and share opinions and ideas to achieve a good outcome (72.2%: strongly agree; 10.2%: agree).
- **Socialization:** Finally, most students reported that cooperative learning helps them socialize with each other (62%: strongly agree; 19.4%: agree) as they usually tend to work with different students not only with their friends (22.2%: disagree; 23.1%: strongly disagree).

Table 3: Respondents' assessment of their cooperative learning experience in terms of skills' development in the ESP context.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
My work is better organized when I work in group	17.6%	25.9%	12%	7.4%	10.2%
When I work in group, there are opportunities to express my ideas and opinions	38.9%	31.5%	29.6%	21.3%	9.3%
When I work in group I feel more motivated	42.6%	21.1%	19.4%	7.4%	7.4%
When I work in group I feel more autonomous	15.7%	24.1%	34.3%	14.8%	11.1%
When I work in group I feel more creative	33%	28.7%	18.5%	10.2%	12%
When I work in group I feel more active	36.1%	36.1%	13.9%	4.6%	9.3%
When I work in group I feel capable of solving problems	40.7%	30.6%	13.9%	5.6%	9.3%
When I work in group I feel capable of taking decisions	33.3%	29.6%	21.3%	7.4%	8.3%
Working in group enhances my leadership skill	44.4%	27.8%	14.8%	6.5%	6.5%
We cannot complete the assignment unless everyone contributes	35.2%	24.1%	17.6%	12%	11.1%
When I work in group, the work is divided equally between all members	41.7%	24.1%	12%	11.1%	11.1%
It is important to me that my group respects the deadline and gets the work done on time	72.2%	12%	6.5%	2.8%	6.5%
My group members compete to see who does better work	10.8%	18.5%	22.2%	25.9%	22.5%
I help my group members with what I am good at	75%	10.2%	4.6%	4.6%	5.6%
Everyone's ideas are needed in the group to achieve a good result	72.2%	10.2%	4.6%	8.3%	4.6%
Working in group helps me socialize with the other members	62%	19.4%	10.2%	2.8%	5.6%
I always choose to work with my friends only	15.7%	19.4%	19.4%	22.2%	23.1%

5. Discussion

Based on the results of the questionnaire administered with students, it was revealed that the latter have a positive perception of the use of collaborative approach in their ESP learning context. The activities conducted in class, such as classroom debate, group presentations, role play, and workshops provided these students with numerous learning opportunities. Participants explained that, in groups, they are able to identify their learning objectives, preferences, and styles and improve their learning habits. Therefore, the incorporation of CL helps learners improve their acquisition of the target language and boost their classroom performance. Such findings support previous research on the role of cooperative learning in language acquisition (Brown, 2014), whereby students implement certain strategies that provide them with multiple sources of knowledge of the intended content, namely asking questions, asking for feedback, paraphrasing, and peer reviewing.

Additionally, students asserted that this connection made learning more interesting, enjoyable, and engaging, which motivated them to participate more in the different learning contents and classroom activities. These results are consistent with former studies, as noted by Greenop (2007) and Liu and Amin (2020), and Lipowski (2021), who advocated that students in language learning contexts feel extremely delighted to cooperate, discuss ideas, and listen to the viewpoints of their peers, which creates a positive learning environment that, consequently, ensures a better learning outcome. In the same line of thought, research on the implementation of group work and cooperation in language learning contexts, shed light on the effectiveness of such approaches in decreasing comprehensibility issues and avoiding pedagogical and linguistic barriers (Habbash & Troudi, 2015). That is to say, engaging language

learners in cooperative learning activities and experiences motivates them and help them to become active and productive. It also enables them to get over their shyness, which is a major barrier that keeps pupils from using the language to its full potential in the classroom (Andreev et al., 2020).

Besides, as presented in the previous section, in addition to changing students' attitudes towards language learning to become positive, by applying cooperative learning, students can develop and acquire a number of interpersonal and social skills deemed necessary, first, in their academic journey and, second, in their future professional life (León del Barco et al., 2018). In fact, from a non-academic standpoint, the findings demonstrate how cooperative learning equips students with a certain set of social and professional development skills. As aforementioned, the main objective of this study is to understand the effectiveness of using CL in the ESP instructional context in terms of students' learning attitudes and skills. Besides, our research participants are Business students who are preparing themselves to meet the challenges and expectations of the job market and professional world; they are future careers builders, leaders, managers, and change agents in different fields and sectors. These students confirmed that working cooperatively in their ESP class allows them to develop various skills and competencies such as communication, creativity, critical thinking, leadership, accountability, problem-solving, decision making, to mention but a few. As a matter of fact, these skills and abilities will aid learners in their development in non-academic domains (Kasim, 2015). Moreover, they might possess enhanced managerial competencies to collaborate with teams, allocate tasks, assign duties, and effectively function in any group setting. In similar research by Frykedal and Chiriac (2012), Taqi & Al-Nouh (2014), and Mendo et al. (2018), students expressed how they felt that they were gaining more than learning the intended content; cooperative learning enabled them to socialize and interact at the social and personal levels. Students who work as a team usually have better opportunities to build up friendships and to engage in fruitful conversations with their peers.

Eventually, the results of this study and other studies indicate that cooperative learning offers advantages that go beyond the classroom or the learning environment. The positive aspects of cooperative learning help students in the long run; in addition to knowledge acquisition, it gives them the chance to practice skills that may have a progressive effect later in life.

6. Conclusion

This study is an attempt to investigate the impact of using the cooperative learning approach in the ESP classroom on enhancing students' learning achievement and skills' acquisition. According to the study findings, learners hold, generally, positive attitudes on the implementation of cooperative strategies in their language learning context, ESP in particular. Students confirmed that the use of cooperative learning is significantly boosting their learning attitudes, behaviors, and skills. Students who work cooperatively perform better in the classroom, make better learning achievements, are more engaged and motivated, and are more likely to develop and acquire new skills, such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, and leadership, among others.

Eventually, both ESP instructors and learners need to be aware of the benefits and importance of cooperative learning. First, teachers should act towards changing their teaching methods into a more student-centered approach where students can be responsible for their own learning, their knowledge achievement, and their skills' acquisition. Also, English language teachers need to think of a successful implementation of cooperative learning models by adopting structurally planned teaching and learning techniques and activities to be employed for different skills, like reading comprehension, listening, speaking, and writing. As for students, they ought to believe in the effectiveness of cooperative learning in improving their English language ability as well as their skills and competencies both inside and outside the classroom, such as critical thinking, leadership, communication, problem-solving, among others.

Despite the interesting findings and conclusions resulted in this research, it has some shortcomings. The first limitation consists of the data collection instrument. As stated before, this study was

quantitative using questionnaire only. Future research should build on qualitative studies such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnography. Besides, the sample size was limited (216 citizens), which might raise the issue about representativeness and generalizability of findings. Moreover, this inquiry focused mainly on investigating cooperative learning within ESP context using learners' attitudes only; other projects should approach other stakeholders' perceptions, namely educators.

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