

Active learning: let's make them a song

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Suggested Citation:

Demirci, C. & Yavaslar, E. (2018). Active learning: let's make them a song. *Cypriot Journal of Educational Science*. 13(3), 288-298.

Received from January 02, 2018; revised from June 22, 2018; accepted from September 27, 2018.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof Dr. Huseyin Uzunboyly, Near East University, Cyprus.

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Abstract

Active learning strategy has an important role in helping students gain twenty-first-century skills such as creativity, collaboration, responsibility and effective communication. By being more active and free in classrooms, students take their own learning responsibility. In this study, we wanted to see the active learning strategy through students' eyes. Thus, we asked for their views after the completion of the activity. Consequently, students stated they had a lot of fun, felt happy and proud. They also indicated that they developed their imagination and creativity. They also found the opportunity to practice speaking English and discovered how to reach a consensus as a group. In sum, the activity we adopted active learning strategy provided them a better learning environment.

Keywords: Active learning, group work, creative thinking.

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1. Introduction

The changing world and globalising economy have created a new set of expectations for rising generation in the twenty-first century. Therefore, the present generations of students need to develop different skills than the past generations who met the expectations of the old economy of the industrial revolution and the information age. Creativity, making decisions and collaborating with others are among the skills today's generation requires (P21 Partnership For 21st Century Learning, 2015).

Pink (as cited in Kelly, 2012, p. 2) notes that we are in the period of transition from the information age to the conceptual age. The age of information emphasised an education focused on analytical thinking; however, creativity is more relevant to the emerging conceptual age (Kelly, 2012, p. 3). Charles Leadbeater (as cited in Kelly, 2012, p. 3) also states that we have entered an era in which creativity is very important. He also points out that collaborative creativity emerges as the most important skill set the new generation needs in order to face and overcome the difficulties of their time. That is, the trend nowadays is to emphasise organising facts by communicating and cooperating with other professionals, and discovering new information to create novel ideas (Park & Choi, 2014).

Ozsoy (2004, p. 132) states that creating a society that asks questions, investigates and debates is one of the most important goals of education. Today, the necessity of educating people who are creative and open minded, who are willing to work with others and also who bring forward new ideas has focused everyone's attention on schools. The fact that classical education focuses on events, memorisation, basic skills and exams is not suitable for the development of creativity (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 57). Therefore, active learning can be used in order to help students improve their creativity.

Creativity helps us to produce ideas (Drapeau, 2014, p. 95). Creativity is the expression of all ideas, emotions and desires. Thinking creatively allows children to open their minds to further learning. When children are supported in their creativity, they are able to actively engage in the learning process (Dischler, 2010, pp. 5, 6). Creative strategies and techniques help all students think deeply and improve achievement. In addition, creativity is motivating for all learners (Drapeau, 2014, p. 3). Drapeau (2014, p. 6) notes that students who think creatively prefer to discuss ideas rather than facts, express ideas other students do not think of, enjoy open-ended assignments and ask questions that may seem silly or off-topic. Also, creativity is central to language learning. When learning a new language or trying to communicate in a foreign language, the creative strategies are needed (Mologu, 2013, p. 11).

Bonwell and Eison (1991, p. 2) define active learning as anything 'involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing'. Weikart (as cited in Sahinel, 2003, p. 8) states that active learning means students are not satisfied with just watching and listening to the teacher in the classroom. They actively participate in learning process and act independently and research. Students take over the responsibility of self-learning under the guidance of teacher. That is, learning becomes literally a life experience. Thus, learning becomes permanent.

Bonwell and Eison (1991) assert that students are not passive listeners in active learning environment. They are engaged in activities. Also, active learning put emphasise on improving students' skills rather than information transition. Moreover, active learning helps students increase their motivation. In their study, Park and Choi (2014) indicated that students maintained stronger motivation for learning in the active learning classrooms.

Active learners are those who want to learn the life skills, not the ones who just want to pass an exam (Browne & Keeley, 2001, p. 76). Nist and Holschuh (2000, pp. 28–31) have argued that active learners think deeply and critically, listen actively by taking notes, know that learning involves more rather than spending a certain amount of time in the classroom, receives help when there is a problem and also take over the responsibility for their own learning.

Active learning has numerous benefits in terms of academic achievements and psychological outcomes. In terms of academic achievements, active learning leads students to take higher grades, spend more time to pursue extracurricular activities and social activities and gain knowledge. Active learners enjoy learning new things. In terms of psychological outcomes, it can be said that once active

learners have enjoyed academic success, they want to maintain that success. Also, being successful makes them feel good and raises their expectations for the future (Nist & Holschuh, 2000, p. 33).

It is not easy to be an active learner. It takes a lot of time to learn how to think critically and how to ask good questions to others. Sometimes, the most difficult thing active learners face with is that they cannot find someone who is actively learning as they do (Browne & Keeley, 2001, p. 104). For this reason, it is important to make all the students in our class active learners. Teachers can achieve this by using various active learning techniques such as 'make it a story', 'pass the problem', 'pick the winner', etc.

Cooperative learning has also an important role in active learning. Cooperative learning is an approach to education based on the philosophy that education should be learner centred and learner directed, that learners can be teachers and the teachers are guides and facilitators rather than the source of all knowledge and direction (Coelho, 1992a, pp. 129, 130). It is based on interactions among group members and the teacher approaches the group when necessary (Harel, 1992, p. 156). Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximise their own and each other's learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1987, p. 5). The goals of cooperative learning are to enhance students' learning and to develop students' social skills like decision making and communication (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 43).

Fern, Anstrom and Silcox (1995) recommend using a variety of grouping strategies such as small groups and pairs for active learning in the classroom. That is, working in groups provides several advantages to students such as promoting creativity. Davis and Davis & Rimm (as cited in Fasko, 2001) state that creativity can be stimulated by providing situations for students to participate in group activities. Also, Johnson, Johnson and Smith (as cited in Petersen & Gorman, 2014) indicated that students working in groups experienced social support, reported higher satisfaction with their learning and learnt better than students working as individuals.

Harmin (1994, p. 95) argues that collaborative group work facilitates the work of teachers in classroom in terms of teaching time and energy. Thus, teachers find the opportunity of working with their students more individually. Also, group work gives students the opportunity of speaking more, taking initiative, making choices in class and developing lifelong learning habits.

By seeing that active learning contributes a lot to students' learning and creativity, we, as researchers, wonder about our students' view after they experienced an active learning activity in their English class. Thus, in this study, we aim at determining students' views about an English class in which active learning is adopted.

2. Method

Qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. Qualitative research is defined as a research method in which qualitative data collecting techniques such as observation, interview and document analysis are used. Also, a qualitative process is carried out in order to reveal perceptions and events realistically and holistically in the natural environment (Yildirim & Simsek, 2000, p. 19). In qualitative research, a goal such as verification or falsification is not on the front burner. The data which are rich and deep in nature cannot be generalised (Sonmez & Alacapinar, 2016, p. 72).

This study was carried out with the participation of senior students of Music and Performing Arts High School in Eskisehir, Turkey. It took 3 hour-class periods. There were ten students in the class. However, eight students participated in the study. The data obtained from these eight students who participated in the study were assessed.

The data were collected through an opinion form consisting of five open-ended questions prepared by the researchers. In order to ensure the validity of questions, expert opinion obtained from a field expert (holding a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction) and two instructors teaching English. Lastly, the final status was given to the questions by considering the comments of experts and they were made ready for implementation.

The data obtained from the students during the study were analysed using the content analysis technique. In content analysis, similar data are grouped together on specific concepts and themes, which are interpreted in such a way that the reader understands (Sahin, 2010, p. 189).

2.1. Study group

Eight students attended the classes during the activity. Fern, Anstrom and Silcox (1995) recommend providing small class sizes for active learning in classrooms. Therefore, the number of students in the classroom was convenient enough to carry out the activity based on active learning approach.

All the students participating in the research are 17 years old. They all say that they like English classes. However, students named A, B, D and F seemed more interested in the classes since the beginning of the 2016–2017 academic year. On the other hand, all the students showed great interest in the activity and performed very well. This is because active learning is not an inert type of learning. In contrast, it is a dynamic type of learning students interact with each other (Demirci, 2017).

The participants of the study are the senior students of Music and Performing Arts High School in the city centre of Eskisehir, Turkey. The school is a public music school serving 45 high school students in grades 9–12. All the students have the same socio-economic status, middle class. They have been educated together for 4 years in the music school. They know each other very well. Also, this is the second year they have been taught English by the teacher, who is the co-author of this study.

The activity was conducted by the co-author in the guidance of the lead author. Therefore, the implementation part is narrated by the co-author's first-hand experience.

2.2. Implementation

Before starting the lesson, I wanted to arrange my classroom layout. Arranging the physical environment is an important ingredient in the successful use of cooperative learning (Baloche, 1998, p. 208). The classroom was in the style of traditional classroom. Park and Choi (2014) argues that the traditional classroom setting is not based on educational effectiveness in terms of student-oriented learning. Therefore, in order to enable active communication and interaction among students in the classroom, I preferred the cluster arrangement. I think the cluster arrangement is one of the best arrangements for cooperative works in the classroom since it easily provides face to face interaction. Park and Choi (2014) concluded from their study that classroom arrangement suitable for active learning provided an educational environment that increased student interaction and communication with instructors.

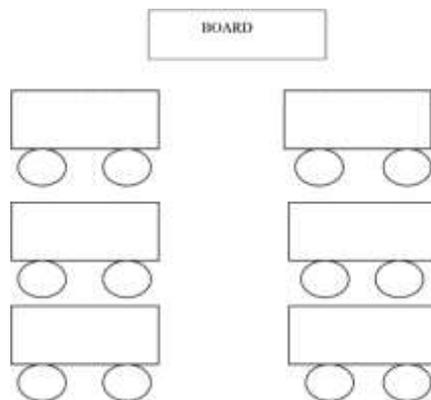


Figure 1. The classroom seating arrangement before starting the activity (Traditional Rows)

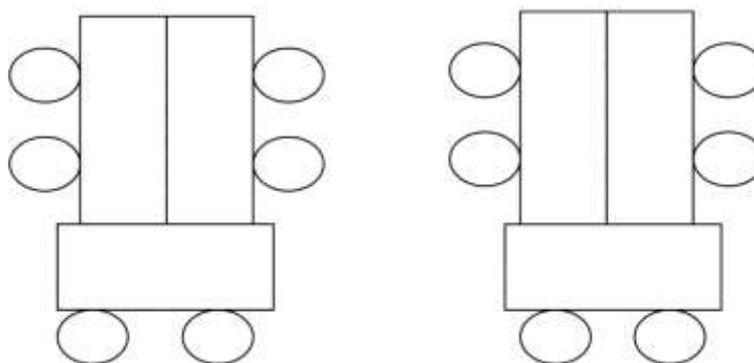


Figure 2. The classroom seating arrangement during the activity (Cluster arrangement)

In the lesson, I taught vocabulary on *'vigorous activities'* and *'geographical features'* given in the course book. Students tried to guess the meaning of the words by talking about pictures in their course book. These words were: *'cycling, hiking, sailing, desert, rainforest, bridge, connect, vacation'*. After doing the activities related to these words, I applied the activity *'Make Them a Song'* to ensure the permanence of these words. This activity required my students to write new song lyrics. When they finish writing lyrics, they adapted them to the rhythm of an existing song or make a new song rhythm. Then I asked students to record their song. They used their piano-class rooms in the school to record their songs. The groups who completed recording submitted the recordings to me. Finally, we all listened to recorded songs students made with their groups.

I started the first lesson with a warm-up activity which students used brainstorming technique. Bonwell and Eison (1991, p. 34) suggest to begin with students brainstorming for an interactive lecture. In brainstorming, teacher presents a topic; students give as many ideas as possible either individually or as a group (Olsen & Kagan, 1992, p. 22). I wrote the word *'geography'* on the board and I wanted them to say the words that came first to their minds. As they say the words *'mount, river, sea'* and so on, I quickly wrote them on the board. Then I continued by asking questions using the words we wrote on the board. *'What kinds of activities can we do on the mountains? What kind of activities can we do on the sea?'* After these questions, I directed their attention to the course book and wanted them to talk about the pictures given in the course book to help them learn new words. After all the words became clear, I asked the students to write songs from these words. At first, they were unwilling to write lyrics. A student said that these words could not be lyricised but stories could be made. A few students supported this idea. When I asked why the lyrics could not be written, they said: *'Sir, these words are not romantic at all. How do we make a song from this?'* As the age of the students was between 16 and 17, I thought that romantic song expectation was quite normal. Then, I said that: *'Using these words, your lyrics can also be romantic. Your lyrics will not only consist of these words.'* After a while, I convinced my students to do this activity.

After telling my students how to carry out the activity, I told them that we needed to make groups because collaboration is an essential component of learning activities in Active Learning approaches (Simpson, 2017). Also group size is critical to the success of learning groups. The group size varies; however, it is best to keep group size small (Baloche, 1998, p. 212). There were eight students in the classroom when we started the activity. My students preferred to make two groups. I respected their preference. However, I wanted them to have at least one piano student in their groups so that the recording of their songs would be done in the piano lesson rooms. There were two piano students in the classroom. I wanted these students to be group leaders and form their own groups. They decided on their own how to form the groups. These two group leaders stood at the opposite corners of the classroom and then began to pace one by one towards each other. While they were pacing, they say some tongue-twisters which are widely known in Turkey and frequently used by children to form their own groups before they start playing a game. They approached each other step by step saying the tongue twister and the one who was able to hit his/her opponent's foot first got a chance to start

choosing his/her group members. When the group members were selected, two students who were not in the class that day were included in the groups as well. However, they did not attend the class during the implementation. Finally, we had two groups of four students in the class. Mandel (2003, p. 9) asserts that four to six—member groups are manageable and allow for the diversity.

After the groups were formed, the students began to write their lyrics. I thought 20 minutes would be enough for this activity. However, both groups began to create their stories, saying that each song had to have a story. The stories each group tried to create was a love story. They were talking to each other and suggesting ideas. Sometimes they agreed, sometimes they disagreed. Each one tried to persuade each other to their own ideas. They discussed and found the common ground. Both groups first made up their stories and then began to write the lyrics of their song. There was even a sweet competition between two groups. They challenged each other by saying that they would make the best song. Students, who were not very willing to do the activity when I first told them about it, showed an increasing motivation as they were doing the activity. This made me very happy as a teacher. Students were so concentrated on the activity that they wanted to continue working although it was time for a break. I said that they could continue if they wanted and then I got out of the classroom. When I returned to the classroom at the end of the break, I saw everyone working in the same place and working in the same way.

I planned an activity that would take 2 hour class periods. One lesson for teaching the new words and writing lyrics, one lesson for recording the song they made, listening to their songs and asking for students view about the activity. However, since the students created a story before writing lyrics, I had to spend one more lesson to complete the activity.

In the following lesson, after students wrote their lyrics, they made a record of their songs. While making these records, they used two of the individual piano practice rooms in the school. At the same time, while they were recording their song, I took them to the camera for about 20 minutes in order to better understand their reactions and to see how they worked. Students recorded their song on their smartphones. Then, I transferred these records to my computer. Later, I and my students went to the classroom together to listen to their songs. The lyrics of the songs made by the students are as follows:

Table 1. Students' songs lyrics

| Lyrics of 1st Group | Lyrics of 2nd Group |
|--|---|
| When I fell in love, I was in space, I was a <i>desert</i> , I became a <i>rainforest</i> with you, When I was <i>hiking</i> step by step, you were always with me. We had a <i>bridge connecting</i> us, You made my heart <i>sailing</i> in the ocean, Join me for the rest of my life, Will you marry me? You're making my head <i>cycling</i> . <i>Chorus</i> Join me for the rest of my life, Will you marry me? <i>Let's go on a vacation</i> with our emotion | It felt like falling down the <i>bridge</i> , When our hearts <i>connected</i> for the first time, I feel like exploring a <i>rainforest</i> when I try to know her, She was everywhere, in my heart, my mind and my dreams, I feel like I'm in a dry <i>desert</i> when I don't see you, She has a lot of dreams that I want to join, Dreams like <i>cycling</i> and <i>hiking</i> on the mountains, <i>Chorus</i> I'm <i>sailing</i> on the ocean Wishing to be with you on <i>vacation</i> |

The underlined words are the new words given to the students to make songs.

After listening to the recordings, I asked the students to write their views about the activity. Therefore, I gave the students a form including five questions. The questions on this form are:

Table 2. The feedback form

Dear Student,
This form is prepared to determine your views about the activity, 'Make Them A Song'. Please

answer the following questions considering your experience with the activity.

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1. How does this activity affect your vocabulary learning? | Answer: |
| 2. Does the activity ease your vocabulary learning? If yes, how? | Answer: |
| 3. What are the positive or negative effects of working with a group during the activity? | Answer: |
| 4. What did you feel during this group work? | Answer: |
| 5. What do you think about the song the other group made? | Answer: |
-

3. Results

The data obtained from the students were analysed and the following themes shown in Table 3 were found:

Table 3. Themes emerged in the study

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>f</i> |
|--|----------|
| 1. I could easily keep in mind the meaning and the pronunciation of the new words | 3 |
| 2. I learned by having fun | 8 |
| 3. I felt my creativity/imagination developed | 2 |
| 4. We were finally able to reach an agreement as a group after we discussed divergent points of view | 5 |
| 5. I was proud of my work | 3 |
| 6. I felt successful and happy | 4 |
| 7. I found the opportunity to practice speaking | 3 |

Total Number of Students: 8

1. *I could easily keep in mind the meaning and the pronunciation of the new words:* Students who stated that this activity influenced their learning positively expressed that working in this way made the newly learned words more permanent in terms of meaning and pronunciation, because it was possible to repeat the words many times while trying to write the lyrics. For example, Student **A** said: *'The effect of the song was nice for me. Writing lyrics and composing helped me keep the meanings of the words in my mind.'* Student **B** said: *'Sir, it was so hard to put the word sailing into the lyrics that I am sure I will not forget that word for my entire life'*.
2. *I learned by having fun:* Students expressed that they enjoyed working with their friends and had a lot of fun. Student **B** said *'I had fun while working with my group. It was nice to do something related to music in a lesson although it is not a music lesson'*. Student **D** said *'We had a lot of fun as a group. It was a good activity. It was an event we had good time and laughed a lot'*. Since I saw my students keep working during the break time, I can say that they really had a lot of fun during the activity.
3. *I felt my creativity/imagination developed:* Students expressed that they pushed their imagination very much; thus, they had the opportunity to improve their imagination and creativity. For example, Student **C** said *'I felt that trying to associate the new words with an imaginary story helped me improve my imagination, and using the new words in the lyrics contributed to my vocabulary knowledge'*. Student **E** said *'Creating our own song, I mean using certain words to write the lyrics was very useful to develop my creativity'*.
4. *We were finally able to reach an agreement as a group after we discussed different points of view:* Students expressed they brought different ideas and tried to reach a common ground, and they also mentioned that they discovered how to dispel disagreements. Johnson and Johnson (1987, p. 5) assert that group members gain from each other's efforts and empower each other. For example, Student **G** said *'I and my friends tried to make joint decision as a group and we were able to do that'*. Student **H** said *'Everybody brought different ideas. I felt this broadened my perspective of thought. What we did best was that: Despite the fact that we all had different opinions, we were able to reach an agreement'*. Student **C** said: *'I figured out what to do in order to reach an agreement'*.
5. *I was proud of my work:* They expressed that they were proud of themselves and their friends. Student **A** said *'I am so proud of making contribution to the work that emerged with the group. This made me feel good'*.
6. *I felt successful and happy:* They mentioned that when they listened to the songs they created, they felt how successful they were and this made them happy. Also, they told that they enjoyed every moment of the lesson and sharing the joy with the others. For example, Student **H** said *'I felt happy. It was nice to share something. When I saw the result, I really felt that I was successful'*.
7. *I found the opportunity to practice speaking English:* Since the students exchanged ideas during the activity and tried to persuade each other to their own ideas, they had the opportunity to practice speaking English a lot. For example, Student **F** said *'I had the opportunity to practice speaking English thanks to this activity. It was nice'*.

3.1. Notes from the teacher's (co-author) observation

Some authors describe teachers as guide or facilitator (Celik, Senocak, Bayrakceken, Taskesenligil & Doymus, 2005; Grabinger, Dunlap & Duffield, 1997; Niemi & Nevgi, 2014). As the students creating their lyrics, I tried to guide both groups as their teacher. I answered their questions about the activity and the words they wrote. I also observed them carefully. I saw that they had a lot of fun while writing lyrics. I heard some of their arguments as well. What I liked most about my observations was that they were both doing their jobs seriously and bringing forward new ideas. They were not only discussing these ideas together but also having a lot of fun while trying to persuade the others. Also, their discussion on the ideas as a group was making great contribution to their speaking skills.

All of the participant students actively took part in group work and expressed a positive opinion on the activity. Students had fun, exchanged ideas and persuaded each other to their own ideas during the activity. Also they were proud of themselves when they listened to the songs they came up with at

the end of the activity. As they listened to their own songs, I saw some students closing their eyes with their hands. After we listened to the songs, I asked them why they did this. Student **B** said: *'I feel so shy, but it is not something bad. I mean, I have the same feeling when I go on the stage at a concert. That's a good thing'*. Student **A** added: *'I felt shy, too when I first heard our song. But then I said wouvv! What a good job we did!'* Other students also stated that they agreed with students **B** and **A**.

4. Conclusion

When the findings of this study, which we determined students' view by preparing a lesson based on active learning strategy, were examined, the following conclusions were reached.

Students were able to recall the meaning and pronunciation of new words with the activity. The students mentioned that they could easily remember the meaning of the words and how to pronounce them in the following lessons. Student **B** said that she would not forget the word 'sailing' throughout his life. Ersoy (2015) reached the conclusion that the active learning approach positively influenced retention in her doctoral dissertation study with the high school students on active learning applications. Similarly, Demirci (2003) concluded that the active learning approach is effective on retention in her doctoral dissertation, titled [removed for peer review]. Aksu and Kesan (2011) determined a significant increase in retention of learning in the experimental study they conducted using active learning strategy. In addition, Yazedjian & Kolkhorst (as cited in Lumpkin, Achen & Dodd, 2015) suggested active learning activities positively affected the degree of students' retention. Thus, by considering data obtained from students' view, it can be said that active learning is an important factor to increase vocabulary retention since the students are active, feel freer and find more time to talk and practise during a teacher-guided activity. The retention of new information and ideas will be better when students have more opportunities for talk, practice or experience in the classroom (Coelho, 1992b, p. 38).

The students had fun during the lesson. It can be said that students' having fun in the classroom environment reflects positively on their learning. Kalem and Fer (2003) reached the conclusion that their students enjoyed learning with active learning in their work titled 'The Effects of Active Learning Model on the Learning, Teaching and Communication Process of Students'. Demirci (2003) also revealed that the students were happy during the activities in her doctoral study. The Study of Lumpkin & Achen (2015) indicated that students enjoyed participating in active learning activities and these activities were positively impactful on students' learning. In addition, Grossman and Richards (2016) argued that karaoke videos influenced the learning of B.A. and M.A. students in a positive way and they learned by having fun. Park and Choi (2014) found out that students regarded the class as more fun in active learning classrooms and displayed positive learning attitudes. In the class, the students developed a positive attitude towards the English course and the technique of making a song. In fact, the students were so focused on making song that they did not even take a break. They continued the activity without stopping. Thus, it can be said that the students who learnt by having fun show great interest to the course.

Students felt that their creativity and imagination developed. Park and Choi (2014) asserted that students receiving active learning instruction were more likely to develop creative ideas and create new perspectives with their peers. Chiu and Cheng (2017) revealed that active learning pedagogies enhanced student creativity. Marlowe and Page (1998) point out that active learning was reported to give students more opportunities to express themselves in the 33rd Year Book of the National Society for the Study of Education. The students who created a song from the words they just learned also introduced a new and unique product belonging to themselves and their groups. The songs (also the stories they made before writing their lyrics) created by the students themselves were a proof that they used their imagination and creativity.

The students were able to reach an agreement after they discussed their ideas. It was very good for the students who worked as a group to come up with different ideas during the activity. In addition,

the best of all was that they could reach a consensus. It can be said that students' discussions on their ideas, their try to persuade each other, their defending or rejecting the views emerged and finally their agreement on the subject had a positive effect on developing group discussion skills. The group discussion has an important role in the development of a civilised human society. The group discussion teaches us to accept the opinions of others on the basis of reason. Most importantly, it increases the knowledge of all group members by transferring their knowledge to each other (Livingston, 2016). Ozsoy (2004) also stated that increasing classroom discussions would allow students to respect the ideas of others and be patient and also listen to others.

The students felt successful and were proud of themselves during and at the end of the activity. Slavin (1995, p. 60) states that working cooperatively makes students feel more successful in their academic work. It is enormously valuable that the students felt successful both individually and as a group without being graded by the teacher. It can be said that the proud and success the students felt because of their own products made them developed positive attitude to the lesson. Active learning strategies positively influence the course attitude and success. Demirci (2017) revealed that active learning approach had a positive effect on secondary school students in terms of attitude in her study titled [removed for peer review]. Also, Aksu and Kesan (2011) concluded that active learning approach is more effective than traditional approach in terms of academic success.

The students had the opportunity to practice more speaking English with this activity. Cooperative techniques dramatically increase the amount of time for oral interaction available to each student (Coelho, 1992b, p. 38). The constant exchange of ideas among the students in groups means that they were always in contact with each other. This gave them the opportunity to practice speaking English. For those students who did not have the opportunity to practice speaking English outside the classroom, this activity offered them the opportunity to improve their speaking skills.

It is important to create an environment in which students can talk and discuss within the classroom, especially for the development of speaking skills in a foreign language. In the courses where active learning strategy is adopted, students can easily find such an environment. Students' feedback about an active learning adopted activity in the study of Barnum, Simmons and Distasi (2008) indicated that the class was fun and it was enjoyable to work with other students. Students who are having fun while talking, discussing and finally reaching a conclusion as a group and introducing a new product, have the opportunity of practicing the language they are learning. As a result, it can be said that in this English course where the active learning strategy is adopted, learning is made more enjoyable and more permanent by offering an environment where students can enjoy themselves, express themselves freely and be freer.

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