

Project Work: An Experiential Journey towards the Conquer of Self-confidence

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Abstract

This paper presents an Action Research study on the impact of the implementation of a project work in students' self-confidence while developing public speaking performances. The study was conducted in a public institution in Itagüí with 35 eighth graders. Data was collected through research journals, focus groups interviews to students, and a semi-structured interview to the Cooperating Teacher. Data analysis showed that while students were developing each of the four project work didactic units, they were able to improve some aspects related with self-confidence in public speaking activities such as power relations, language anxiety, presentation skills, and social construction. Furthermore, students' work in their own themes for their projects allowed them to support each other, and to share more experiences.

Key words: Self-Confidence, Project work, Oral Presentation

Requirements

This action research study was carried out at a public Institution of Itaguí from February to November 2016 as part of the requirements that the School of Languages establishes for the students of practicum to achieve their degree of Bachelor in Foreign Languages Teaching.

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Preface

This thesis work was the result of a whole process of observation, analysis, and implementation of actions that took place from February to November of 2016. At the beginning of this time, it was noticeable in the student teacher's journals that the group in study presented some difficulties at the moment to speak in public, in this case, in front of their classmates. Students lack of confidence to share their ideas in English due to multiple factors that surrounded them and affected them in negative ways. This factors ranged from the negative behaviors of classmates until their negative perceptions towards their English teacher. All of this disrupted not only the students' process of learning an L2 but also their personal relations inside the classroom.

Therefore, it was decided to implement a project work with the class to make students involve in their learning of an L2 in a more comfortable way, and where they could develop a certain degree of confidence with themselves in public speaking activities. Besides, project work allowed students to choose many aspects of their work making it more enjoyable and letting student to be more engaged with their works. Also, project work was a good way to enhance in students the team work and the independence in their projects since they had to make decisions as a group and to be responsible with their own learning. What is better, since the project work was focus on only one topic, students could develop more easily the enough confidence to speak in the foreign language after being working on it for a period of time.

This paper shows all things described above and a complete analysis of each of the steps developed for this action research study.

Description of the Context

Teaching in a school or institution means more than only training students. You have to take into account all the factors that influence both the institution and the students. In my case, it is high important to get familiar with the school, its philosophy, the English program, my Cooperating teacher, and some discipline issues of my group to understand a bit more the context in which I am going to develop my practicum.

Concerning the “Institución Educativa San Jose”, it is located in the municipality of Itaguí. It is divided into two locations: one for elementary school, and another for middle and high school. The later location has three floors with 18 classrooms, two rooms of computer science, a teachers' room, two laboratories, and a covered court, Also, it has two coordination offices, a library, a secretary office, rectory, and some others classrooms for students. In organizational terms, it is an official institution with two educational shifts: in the morning and in the afternoon. In addition, it is a women’s institution that has around 1929 students and 66 teachers.

In terms of philosophy, the institution works towards the Educational Excellence. There, it is essential to educate people with democratic principles to strengthen ethical values such as responsibility, respect, autonomy, love, and abundance. Also, it is expected from students the ability to communicate the acquired knowledge with other, the development of each skill, and the competences required for the all areas to improve its quality of life and community participation. This philosophy has done of the Institution the best public institution in Itaguí.

Concerning the English program, it is based in the development of the communicative competences in which students can make use of them inside the culture where the foreign language is spoken. This way, students could be capable of

dealing and producing oral and written texts in the foreign language. To achieve this English program goal, the institution works with some books sent by the Ministry of Education through the program “Colombia Bilingue”. Besides, it has a bilingualism classroom where students have computers, a video beam, and a TV to facilitate their learning in the world of tics.

Dealing with my immediate context, I am working with the English teacher of 8th grade, Sandra Córdoba. She is my Cooperating teacher (CT), a teacher who has a major in languages from the Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó. She has worked in some institutions in the Itagüí's municipality such as I.E.

Diego Echavarría Misas and Isolda Echavarría. Among her principles, responsibility, equity, effort, and participation are the most important values she wants to promote in students to facilitate their learning. She is always looking for new ideas, suggestions, and opinions to do a more creative and pleasant course. Dealing with English, her concept of this language is a synonym of opportunity to growth between cultures, and it is a way to expand students' view of the world. Also, she considers that language is learned by listening, practicing, and having the habit. But the most important thing, she expresses is having the desire to learn the language.

Finally, discipline is another issue within my group of practicum where it is believed that if students know the rules, especially those of punctuality and respect, it is not necessary to punish them. Some teachers, including the English teacher, acknowledge that some students' lack of rules affect discipline, but they do not like to threaten students all the time sending them to the coordination office because as teachers we first have to make use of the dialogue with students.

Statement of the Problem

The Colombian Government is constantly concerned about how to help students improve their English level; for instance, the “Colombia Bilingüe 2014-2018” program which aims to provide students with abilities to communicate better in English.

However, there are some factors that affect students’ performances like the lack of students’ self-confidence which make them feel reluctant to speak in a foreign language or perform an oral activity in L2.

This is the case at Institución Educativa San José where in the observed group, 8^o4, I found that students were good translating short texts into Spanish, but when they had to use the foreign language to express their ideas they were unable to do it. During my observation process, I could see that students were scared, anxious, and shy when they had to stand in front of their classmates to make a presentation or just to say a sentence in English; some of them told the teacher they did not do the work to avoid having to go in front of the group and speak. I also noticed how students’ behavior changed when they had to stand in front of the class, not matter if from their own places the students were talkative or extroverted, their body language and gestures changed showing insecurity and lack of self-confidence. These behaviors observed in students were supported by some of their comments and those of the CT; for instance, students express their afraid and dislike when the teacher propose and oral activity, and the CT expresses students lack of preparation to perform this kind of activities.

Bearing in mind these reasons, my experience as student, and my reflection as pre-service teacher, I decided to implement a series of project work didactic units to impact students’ self-confidence in English public speaking. According to my literature review, the process of project work provides opportunities for students to develop their

confidence and independence (Fried-Booth, 2002); also, students demonstrate increased self-esteem, and positive attitudes toward learning (Stoller, 2006). In addition, it provides students with contact with the real world subject matter which require students to apply and adapt what they already know. Another positive aspect of project work is that it demands the presentation of a final product where students have to show their work to the rest of the group in the foreign language. Finally the use of this method allows students to lose their fear to speak in English and learn from their own and peers' errors throughout the process. To sum up, in this research project I intended to evaluate how does the implementation of project work impact 8th grade students' self-confidence in English public speaking.

Theoretical Background

Within the current AR study, it was necessary to establish the implications of the concepts that were the basis for the inquiry process such as self-confidence, oral presentation, and project work.

Concerning self-confidence, Palmer (2011) describes the term as:

The self-reliance that people have in their own abilities and values. It does not mean thinking that people are the best at everything; but feeling comfortable about themselves in something that they have to do. (Pag.1)

Similarly to this, some researchers like Clément, Dornyei & Noels (1994), Pae (2008), and AL-Hebaish (2012) agreed in the fact that it is one of the principal factors that have strong influence in L2 achievements, and that self-confidence as a psychological and social phenomenon affects students' development in their learning processes in a positive or negative way depending on different emotional states and

external conditions such as personal experiences, community, home and school. This external factors and conditions are related to the construction of cultural and linguistic background in which interaction among individuals is essential. For instance, Norton's (2000) explains that “the learner’s senses of confidence are shown to be strongly influenced by external factors such as power relations in specific contexts of interaction” (as cited in Xu, 2011, p. 246) where interactions arise between socially constituted individuals engaged in activities which are co-constructed with other individuals. That is why, Dr. Xu (2011) establishes that "self-confidence is socially constructed through the analyses of lived experiences"(p. 246), and that confidence or anxiety could not be inherent to the learners' learning process, especially those of language learners. This concept of anxiety is a highly important affective factor in the broad context of research on attitudes and motivation for L2. It is a "subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry" (Horwitz, 1986, as cited in Alahem, 2013, p. 35) that has both physical and mental elements to it such as "feeling stressed, with negative emotions, sweaty palms, self-doubts and constant worry about things" (Alahem, 2013, p. 35). The low level of anxiety linked to a good classroom atmosphere helps students believe that they are able to use and understand English inside and outside the classroom. So, it is important to say that self-confidence in classrooms not only affects attitudes and determine the level of effort in students toward L2 learning, but also it helps students to increase the abilities to use the four language skills especially that of oral production or oral performance; like Brown (1994) expresses: “Among the four language skills, the achievement of oral performance is thought to be highly correlated with self-confidence. FL learners can’t speak the language or express themselves freely and fluently without a degree of it” (as cited in Al-Hebaish, 2012, p. 61)

Talking about oral performance, it is said that oral presentations require courage and confidence from the speakers who are in front of their classmates. Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan (2010) and King (2002) state that oral presentations are effectively communicative tools in which the focus remains in students, so the student centered approach plays the most important part. Besides, they help students and teachers integrate also the language skills, as Al-Issa (2006) states "Oral presentations help integrate the language skills, which are all equally essential and important in the global village" (as cited in Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan, 2010, p. 228). Although the idea of oral presentations could be intimidating and students could tend to refuse it, this procedure has many benefits for students' learning; for example, they foster learning through discovery and research, and they facilitate cooperative and independent learning in students; or as King (2002) expresses, oral presentations "bridge the gap between language study and language use; help students to collect, inquire, organize and construct information; enhance team work; and help students become active and autonomous learners." (p. 402) Finally, Nunan (1999) emphasizes that "in EFL classrooms, learners should be given the maximum numbers of opportunities to practice the target language in meaningful contexts and situations." (as cited in Alahem, 2013, p. 49)

Regarding the mentioned notions of self-confidence and oral presentations, project work is presented as an instructional approach situated also in the epistemological paradigm of social constructivism in which learners have the opportunities to interact with peers for the purpose of discussing, generating, and sharing knowledge (Roessingh & Chambers, 2011, p. 62). Besides, it is considered as a "comprehensive teaching approach that holds potential to motivate and engage learners in tasks that support deep learning and allow them to exercise choice and control regarding what to work on, how to work, and what products

to generate” (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palincsar , 1991, p. 376). Furthermore, project work, as oral presentations, is also learner centered and flexible, that is, learners have the possibility and the motive "to work their way to the solution in their own idiosyncratic way" that allow them to develop autonomy, to learn how to work in groups, and to construct their knowledge integrating the skills in their immediate context. Lastly, an important aspect of project work is that it provides students opportunities to develop confidence and independence (Fried-Booth, 2002, p. 6) which becomes in more positives attitudes towards learning reducing anxiety and increasing motivation.

To conclude, project work reduce anxiety improving students' oral performances as Iakovos Tsiplakides (2006) suggests:

Students are more personally involved, so they usually have increased motivation. They do not feel that they are constantly assessed. It is easier for them to focus on communication, rather than on accuracy, and is less concerned with language errors and the consequences of "imagined failure". An additional advantage of project work is that students have an active role and responsibilities in the implementation of project work, which can boost their confidence and reduce the effect of perceptions of low ability in the target language. (As cited in Alahem, 2013, p. 42)

Research Questions

How does the implementation of Project Work impact 8th grade students' self-confidence in English Public Speaking?

General Objective

To evaluate the impact of 4 project work didactic units in students' self-confidence while developing public speaking performances.

Specific Objectives

- Describe students' confidence in oral performances.
- Propose a project work plan for helping students fostering their self-confidence in public speaking performances.
- Analyze the results of the implementation of each project work unit in terms of students' self-confidence.

Action Plan

The present investigation was developed under the qualitative research paradigm where there is an interest to understand the contexts of individuals. Cresswell (1994, n.p) defines this paradigm as "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting."

Within this paradigm, the type of study selected was action research. In education, Hensen (1996); Johnson (2012); and McTaggart (1997) defined AR as the process of studying a school situation to understand and improve the quality of the educative process (as cited in Hines, 2013, p. 152). Besides, it is widely used by practitioners in order to improve their practices and contribute with problems solving. Lewin (1946) proposes four stages to develop AR: the initial reflection stage, the planning stage, the action and observation stage, and the reflection stage. Those stages respond to the practical view of action research that McNiff (2010) describes as: review our

current practice, identify an aspect we want to improve, imagine a way forward, try it out, take stock of what happens, modify our plan in the light of what we have found, and continue with the 'action'.

In the first stage, the student teacher worked on a series of preliminary observations to identify a more concrete concern to take action. These observations were made through the writing of journals that according to Burns (2010) are:

A way of capturing the events that occur in AR. It allows you to record the events happenings in your location, your reflections, beliefs and teaching philosophies, your ideas and insights about your practice, and your personal histories as a teacher researcher. (p. 89)

In the second stage, the practitioner made a detailed plan of the actions to take in order to collect the initial data within this AR. So, three instruments were applied with the students and the Cooperative Teacher (CT). The first instrument was a journal about an oral presentation made by the students where they had to consult about "The Colombian Celebrations" and prepare a short presentation with two of them. As the group was numerous, the CT and the student teacher made use of "parallel co-teaching" in which "teachers teach the same or similar content in different classrooms groupings" (Scruggs, Mastropieri & Mcduffie 2007, p. 393). The intention was to see the students' behaviors and attitudes concerning self-confidence in an oral presentation to start thinking in possible actions.

The second instrument was a semi-structured interview with the CT. This interview included questions related to the teacher's perceptions about students' confidence in oral activities, in particular, her thinking about students' behaviors, attitudes, and preparation to oral performances in order to give to the interview a focus but letting the CT talk freely

about that. These aspects were important since they permit complement and compare the student teacher's perceptions to construct a more complete analysis for this AR study. Also, as Harrel & Bradley (2009) explains, they permit collect detailed information in a conversational way, and they are often used when the researcher wants to inquire deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers provided. The interview was audio taped and transcribed. (p. 27)

The third instrument used was a focus group with 10 students where they could express their feelings and opinions about some topics related with their class environment. The focus group had two parts: the first part was the writing of anecdotes or lived experiences students had in an English class, more specifically in the last oral presentations they had done in class. In this case, the use of anecdotes allow students express in a more comfortable way their feelings, experiences, and opinions. For this concern, Van Manen (1989) says that it is “a concrete way on experience”, for him anecdotes imply to reflect, to think, and to recreate but in a transcended (focused, condensed, intensified, oriented, and narrative) form. (p. 232)

The second part was the oral part in which trough a game students spoke about topics like: the teacher, the English class, the oral presentations, and the classmates. This game was audio and video recorded in order to validate the information gather from students.

The information gathered was triangulated and analyzed in order to find common information among them. Also, it was organized into big categories that could provide a better idea for the stage of interpretation of the data.

Development of Actions

Through the development of this AR study, some actions were taken in order to achieve the main goal. Four didactic units were designed following the 9 steps of Project-Based learning that Stix and Hrbek (2006) identified. The steps went from the setting the stage for students, and discuss and accumulate the background information until the creation, preparation and presentation of the projects. the topic for the project proposed by the teacher was 'Healthy Lifestyles', one of the topics assigned by the Institution for the last period of the year, and the units for it were divided as follow:

The unit one included the introduction or presentation of the topic, and this was done mostly by the student-teacher. At this unit, the objectives were to identify the activities and explain the reasons for a person to become healthy or unhealthy. To achieve those objectives, videos and pictures about good and bad habits were used to explain students how those habits influence in the development of a healthy or unhealthy lifestyle. From the students' part, they had to use the pictures shown by the student-teacher to make descriptions and write predictions for people in the future. Also, this unit included the writing of a short paper in which students had to describe their family's lifestyle and made the oral presentation of it in front of the whole class in order to finish the unit.

The unit two was designed to students take the roles of project designers and gather information to develop their projects. The main objective was that students understand what the creation of a project implied, that is why the student-teacher began explaining the most important features of a project work. Then, students were organized in groups where they had to choose a subtopic of Healthy Lifestyle; for instance, music, sports, free time activities among others before to start looking for information such as history, kinds of, benefits, problems, and suggestions about their own subtopics. The actions taken by the

student-teacher were focused mainly in scaffolding students while they were working in their projects about the performance of a talk show or a radio station. The student-teacher was a coach and a guide for students in terms of the summary of information, the pronunciation of English words, and the feedback of their oral reports. All this process of scaffolding was also a strategy to help students get confidence in their oral reports and presentations.

The unit three was planned for helping students to improve their communicative skills. To achieve this, it was some tips proposed by Woodcock (n.d) such as structure, practice, body language, notes, speech, nervousness, power point, and interaction. Regarding this, the main actions taken by the student-teacher were the modeling of a short presentation of a story to students in order to show how a presentation could be made only with images. So, they could made their own presentations. Also, she sought to develop in students some degree of self-confidence with the practice of a series of oral activities such as oral games, debates, and storytelling where they had to put into action the tips that were studied in this unit.

The unit four comprised the preparation and presentation of their projects. The main objective was that students recycle the information gathered for their topics to design and present their projects. The whole class defined the criteria for evaluating the projects, and watched a video about a talk show and a radio program as examples for students. Then, with the teacher's help each group selected the relevant information to construct their outlines, and finally they prepared their materials to the final presentations.

Findings and Interpretations

After a process of categorization, comparison, and validation of the information gathered to collect data, four main categories were found in this AR study; these categories were: Power Relations, Language Anxiety, Lack of Presentation skills, and Social Construction. Each category included a series of aspects that provided a better interpretation and understanding of the general findings.

Power Relation

First, Cartwright & Zander (1968); Goldner (1970); McClelland (1975); Zaleznik & Kets de Vries (1975) defined power relation as “an individual’s potential to have an effect on another person’s or group of person’s behavior” (As cited in McCroskey and Richmond, 1983, p. 176) was one of the main problems that students expressed at the beginning of the study . This was highly determined by the interaction among teachers, students, and parents who were involved in the students' learning process. According to that, the students under investigation had, initially, some negative perspectives about how they saw others and that impacted their self-confidence by lowering it. In order to provide a more clear interpretation of that, three aspects were found.

First, some students saw their classmates like people who inspires insecurity; for some of them, at the beginning their classmates were not friends that provided support in English oral activities; instead, they found mockery and bad comments from their part. These behaviors increased students’ fears, insecurities, and dislikes for these activities as they expressed:

E6: Sometimes our fear is not because of the presentations. Sometimes we forget the things we are thinking about because of the mockery.

ST: mockery of whom?

E4: of our classmates

E6: and many of the girls are very insecure, and the mockery make them feel more insecure. (Focus group, part II, August 11th, 2016)

In order to address this problem, some actions were taken for helping students improve their coexistence inside the classroom like have discussions with the group about the importance of show respect to others, and where they could express their feelings. After this process, it was found that at the end of the study the students showed a positive advance in this aspect.

At the beginning of the year, I felt afraid because in the presentations anybody listened, or when someone made a mistake they mocked. But in the last months everything had improved, they was listening others and showing respect for whom was presenting; and the communication had improve a lot. (Focus group, November 2nd, 2016)

Second, students felt pressure to fulfill the expectations that teachers had about their works and behaviors at the beginning of this project. They often felt fear for being not only evaluated with a grade but also judged with a comment or with a look.

When the class was over and the teacher was not there, I asked to some students how they felt in the class. They said that they felt well, but they expressed that they had fear of the teacher, and they felt intimidated when she looks at them in an oral activity or presentation. For that reason, they forget the things they had to say. One of them said she felt panic to the teacher. (Journal May 18th, 2016)

This kind of teacher's pressure was not only a perception of the students. Throughout the observations made by the student-teacher, it was also possible to see how teacher pushed students with the use of memory in their studies:

At the end of the class, teacher said that the girl who learn from memory 50 verbs could change some bad grades. Teacher said also that she chose this strategy because she was tired of planning activities on the weekend for students that did not do anything or didn't want to do anything. (Journal February 29th, 2016)

Consequently, students felt afraid because they saw memory as a way of punishment, and as something that does not allow them to express themselves in their own words. For instance, a student expressed:

When I have to go out in front of the class, I feel very bad because I have too bad memory and worst for English. I do not remember what I have to say in the presentations, what I have in my mind is lost not matter how many hour I study. (Focus group part II August 11th, 2016)

So, the pressure to learn by heart is another aspect that affected students' confidence in oral activities before this project started. As a way to reduce this pressure and the afraid for being evaluated, teachers and students developed some activities where they had to speak using their own simple words. Besides, the CT and the student-teacher tried to avoid the negative comments and the intimidated looks. In this aspect the improvement was not too notorious because some students kept feeling afraid for being evaluated, and they still feel the pressure for forgetting their presentations, mostly when they have to present individually.

Finally, in this category students expressed in the initial part of the project that they felt the CT had a bad attitude and lack of support while interacted with them affecting

their performance in class. They said the teacher did not motivate them, she did not help them to reduce nervousness, and sometimes her comments affected the class environment negatively. To this concern, students expressed:

E3: I get anger with the English teacher because she asks us: what grade do you think you deserve? And in front of the class she says: No, you do not deserve that grade, you did not do anything in the course.

E10: in my opinion teacher does not make me feel fear, but she does not give me that security neither. She does not encourage me, so... do you understand. I think teacher does not support us. (Focus group part II. August 11th, 2016)

Considering this situation, one important action was taken by the student teacher as a way to help the CT to show to students her support, and to aid students see the CT as someone who could encourage them to be better in class. It was proposed to the CT to be attentive to the students' presentations in order to give them some feedback at the end of the class about their performance. For instance, the teacher said:

CT: Where student A is? Please let's give an applause to her because she had improved a lot. She has more self-confidence because before she did not go out in front of the class, or she spoke little, but now, she had shown good advances. And her pronunciation improve too... In general, everybody had improved, and you all are very motivated. (Journal September 29th, 2016)

The result of this action was too beneficial for students because they found a good stimulus for being better and work harder. As they expressed in the following excerpt: "I liked very much when the teacher congratulated us after the presentation we did because I felt that all the effort we put in the presentation was worthy". (Focus group, November 2nd, 2016)

Language Anxiety

A second category related with self-confidence was Language anxiety. In this aspect, people were worried about what their peers thought, and they were concerned with pleasing others. Here, two factors were found at the beginning of the study: Students felt fear to make mistakes, and they felt fear of the others' mockery in the English oral activities. Concerning the fear to make mistakes, students expressed their distress because of their lack of security to speak in English and their ignorance to pronounce English words.

When I have to go out to the front I am frightened to be wrong, I do not know how to speak in English, I do not like English; when I go out to the front I am not able to do it no matter how many times I try to speak. (Focus group Part II, August 11th, 2016)

For this aspect, the main strategy or action taken was the use of scaffolding with the students where the student teacher became a guide and a support for students in terms of preparation for the presentations, improvement of vocabulary and pronunciation. Besides, working in small groups was an idea that helped students reduce this fear for making mistakes. The result was positive in many cases, as some students evidenced: "I felt good in the presentations because my classmates are already listening to me, and when I make a mistake, they help me to pronounce well sometimes or other times they correct me at the end." (Focus group, November 2nd, 2016)

The students' anxiety was also caused by the other's mockery in which students got worried initially by their classmates and their teacher. It made students get distracted and confused, as well as made them lose confidence in themselves. This was evidenced in the next lines: "E1: Or when someone says something wrong the others start laughing, so you

get distracted or get lost or because of the embarrassment you do not say anything more.”

(Focus group Part II, August 11th, 2016)

In this case, working in small groups for the same goal, and the teacher's words about the respect they had to show to other was a good strategy to reduce mockery. As some students expressed: “I felt great with my classmates because I did not feel anymore that they were going to mock me. Now, they are a public support.” (Focus group, November 2nd, 2016)

Finally, it is quite important to cite Alahem (2013) who argues that “anxiety is a very complex human reaction that has both physical and mental elements to it” (p.35). Thus, it was necessary to mention how students behave, or what were their physical reactions face to an oral presentation in English.

In front of the class, students stood giving the back to the other students, they spoke in a low voice, they laughed shyly, they crossed their arms, and some of them took her finger towards their mouth. Besides, they showed a bad physical position like having their back bent, or they danced in their place. (Journal April 27th, 2016)

This aspect was not only observed at the beginning in the student-teacher practice but also perceived by the same students who expressed: “Sometimes I feel that my legs tremble, I start sweating cold and my voice trembles very much, in some occasions I lack the air.” (Focus group Part I, August 8th, 2016)

After the project was finished, the student-teacher could perceive in her journals a little change in students’ reaction when they were presenting. Although the changes were not too remarkable, students tried to make an effort to improve or control their reactions. An excerpt of a journal was the following: “They started to show a little improvement when they reduce their movements of nervousness and anxiety; in this case,

just one girl dance in her place and another one look at the ceiling a few moments.”

(Journal. September 22nd, 2016)

Lack of Presentation Skills

The third category in this AR study was the lack of presentation skills of not only the students but also the teachers which was also related with the lack of experience in this field. As King (2002) explained “it is usually the main producer of students stress and nervousness. Experience builds confidence, which is vital to effective oral presentations” (p. 406). When this study started, this aspect was very noticeable in students’ oral performance with their lack of vocabulary, lack of oral skills to pronounce words, and lack of preparation to oral activities. The following excerpt supports this idea:

The lack of vocabulary is a constant in every activity. For me, it affects also the confidence in students because if they do not have the tools or the knowledge to speak or to answer some simple questions, they will have fear to do oral exercises. (Journal March 2nd, 2016)

However, some aspects of this category were improving while the project was developed. Students started to show more interest for improve their performances and their pronunciation while they were working in groups in the same topic and with the teacher’s help. This was evidenced in the student-teacher’s journal: "When I entered to the classroom, some students came to me to ask me about the pronunciation of some words that they had in their part of the presentation, so I took a minute for helping them with that." (Journal September 22nd, 2016)

Also when this study started, it was found that the lack of presentation skills were not only caused by the students’ lack of responsibility or self-confidence but also caused

by the lack of teachers' oral work with students. This situation with teachers became worse because they proposed oral performances to students, but they did not help students to develop appropriate oral skills to perform them. An excerpt of the testimony of the teacher is provided in this study:

Teacher: Here the oral part is not worked a lot. I asked to some teachers how did they work the oral part, and they told me that they did not work that part...Honestly, I tell you that they only say to students "repeat after me" and not more. That means we do not work the oral part. (Teacher's Interview. July 21st, 2016)

Regarding that, one of the main actions of this AR study was not only to implement many oral activities with students but also to work with them about how to do oral presentations and to give them the space to expose their doubts for the presentations. Everything as tools to support their presentations. The results of these actions were positives for students who gave their opinions about it: "I liked that the teacher gave us time in class to prepare, improve, and review our project. Thus, we could understand and learn English better." (Focus group. November 2nd, 2016)

Social Construction

Finally, it was found that all the aspects treated in this AR study were part of a social construction, the last category in this AR study, since knowledge was constructed by the interactions of individuals within society. There, the students lived experiences and anecdotes from their past transformed their presents and futures. This is an experience written by a student in the initial part of this study:

When I was in fourth grade, I was a very participative girl, I liked to go out to the board, and I liked English. However, when I moved into the fifth grade my parents

changed me to another school. I was still the same participative girl, but when I went out to the board and made a mistake, everybody mocked of me or they told me harsh comments...[so] my mom went to talk to the teachers, but nothing changed after that. Everything was worse, so my mother decided to move me to another school. After that, I felt better, but I could no longer recover the confidence in myself to go out to the front of the class. (Focus group part I, August 8th, 2016)

As this girl, some other students had lost their confidence due to bad experiences that they did not want to share but that had affected their lives. That is why, one of the intentions of this project was to provide to these students the opportunity to construct a better thought about their classmates and oral presentations. For some students, it affected them positively their minds although it is known that achieve a real change in so little time is nearly impossible. Anyways, with more time and work this project would be a good tool to help students construct knowledge as well as good lived experiences. One example of the students' improvement in this category was the follow: "What I liked the most was that we integrated ourselves in the group, everybody had things to contribute to the group, and we get along." (Focus group. November 2nd, 2016)

Conclusions and Suggestions

After all the analysis made in every step of this action research study, it may be conclude that there were many positive aspects to highlight throughout the development of this project work, but also there were also some negative issues that caused difficulties at some stages of it.

In the positive aspects, it was seen that project work is a great tool to make students be more engage with the class and with their learning. Also, it was a time where students can share their feelings and opinions among them in a comfortable environment about not only their projects but also about how they perceived their groups' success and failures. It is essential stands out that when a group have the opportunity to express what they feel and what make them feel uncomfortable in class, there are more possibilities to make changes and achieve good improvements in favor of the same students.

Likewise, it was noticeable that the fact of working in groups and performing the presentations in groups made students feel more confident because they all support each other and share their nervousness in each presentation making it reduce in a certain level.

Also, it is quiet important to highlight the process of scaffolding, carried out by the teacher, as a key aspect for helping students be more confident in both situations their work in small groups and their presentations in public. For this aspect, it is necessary to value the teacher's work as a guide who can contribute to students' formative process, and not as a person who is there only for grade students. Also, it is necessary to have in mind the positive impact of students' pedagogical recognition on the teacher's side because it is a way to encourage students and to show them that their work has value, and that they are significant as students.

This project work represented many advantages for these students; however, throughout the process of fulfilment, some negative aspects were identified. Such aspects were not specifically tied to the project, but they affected the students' work. For instance, one aspect was the lack of responsibility in students; this was a constant problem all the way through the implementation of the project. Of course, this lack of responsibility linked to the lack of preparation made students feel more nervous at the moment to present lowering their self-confidence. This aspects founded in the current investigation could be issues for a future research study.

Another negative aspect was the role of the grade which has a big influence in students' feelings. In this case, the students' fear for getting a low or bad grade was something that did not help them feel enough confident in their English presentations no matter how much the teacher had made emphasis in that the most important aspect was the preparation for the projects.

In sum, through project work, both students and teachers create not only good performances but also good classrooms environments that facilitate their process of learning and teaching. And, although implementing project work appropriately demands more autonomy on students side, it is and excellent approach to integrate topics, and linguistics and non-linguistics objectives in any context and with any public.

Reflections

Regarding my personal experience within this action research study, I would say that the process of teaching is a work of constant inquiry, investigation, and analysis of the theory implied in the teaching process; the human being in terms of behavior, reasons for such behavior; and the teacher's role in terms of personal practice, and self-reflection. For the mentioned above, research in education is not a work that a teacher do only once but it is an everyday process that let teachers discovers the small or big personal worlds of students, and how those worlds influence each aspect of students' behaviors and perceptions in front of others.

One aspect that makes me reflect, is how easy, as human beings, we tend to judge a teacher, a student or a whole group based only in perceptions or assumptions. What is worse, sometimes as teachers, we fall into the wrong habit of judging or comparing our students without giving us the opportunity to know them better, to understand a bit their difficulties, and to let us experience the inspiring and satisfactory moment in which we can do something good for students.

As a final point, I say that if we can see teaching not just as a work but as a way of impact students' lives positively, we can get that students see the learning of a foreign language, in this particular case, not as an obligation or simple requirement but as a way of discover new worlds, different ways of thinking, and why not develop new ways of use their communicative abilities.

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Appendix A

Focus Group

With 10 girls, teacher propose a game in which students could express their feelings, emotions and opinions about some aspects or topics related to the students performances in English. For instance, how they feel about their teacher, their English class, their partners, their feelings at the moment of doing oral presentations in English, their parents, and the influence that preparation has in their performances.

The game is called “the battle game”. Students are sitting in a circle and in the middle there is a bottle of plastic. There are also some cards with numbers, and each number has one of the aspects mentioned above with a question to discuss inside the group.

One student has to catch the bottle and make it turn. When the lid of the bottle point out a student, this girl has to choose a card, read the question and answer it. Then, the other students can express what they think or feel about the same topic or question. The idea is that every student says something about the topic and tell what they really feel.

The game is develop in Spanish, their mother tongue. This because it allows students to feel more comfortable talking about their feelings, and the conversation could be more fluently and spontaneous.

The topics and questions for the game are

1. Profesora: Elige el personaje que de acuerdo a tus sentimientos representa mejor a tu profesora de inglés. Explica porqué
2. Clase de Inglés: Escoge el color que mejor represente tus sentimientos en la clase de inglés y explica por qué.
3. Compañeras: En una palabra describe cómo te sientes cuando estás hablando en frente de tus compañeras. Explica por qué.
4. Presentaciones en Inglés: De los siguientes emoticones, elige con cuál te sientes identificada al momento de hacer una presentación oral en inglés. Explica por qué.
5. Preparación: Cómo crees que te afecta la buena o mala preparación de tus actividades escolares? Cómo te sientes cuando estás bien o mal preparada para una actividad?
6. Papás: Cuando tienes algún problema en el colegio y debes hablar de eso con tus padres, cómo te sientes?
7. Reflexión: Cómo crees que puedes ayudar a tus compañeras a que se sientan bien cuando deben hablar en inglés en público? Qué piensas de lo que han dicho tus compañeras?

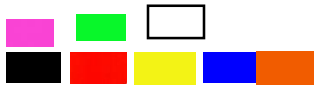
Personajes



Emoticones



Colores



Appendix B

Sample of students' presentations

