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Using Collaborative Learning strategies to enhance students' English performance in a

multi-level content class.

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Preface

The idea of teaching adolescents has always troubled the brains and metaphorical hearts of teachers around the world. I was not the exception, especially in the case in which students are learning something as important as History in their L2. Therefore, the different levels of English performance make the job a little bit harder. If you are a teacher like me, that always strives for finding new and better ways of teaching and making your students comfortable in the class, this idea of collaborative learning in the class makes perfect sense.

I have taught History in English for around 6 years already and I always find these kinds of interactions in class, students that struggle at the moment of performing in English in contact with students with a very high level; it was indeed an interesting opportunity to look for ways of improving this situation with the help of my research project.

In the end, this journey was very exciting and hugely revealing for my personal development as a teacher. My deeds in the classroom will never be the same after this project and I hope I never forget the ideals I sought and found in this research. To this, I finally have to thank professor Marlon Vanegas and Professor Mary Isabel Arredondo that gave their best at the moments of advising me and correcting me in this process; the department of "practicas" in the University and the school that allowed me to conduct this research. Finally, I want to thank my students who willingly helped me with surveys, interviews, and giving their best in the classes.

Context

Sagrado Corazón Montemayor School is an educational community made by Students, teachers, and parents. They have as their main objective the development of persons capable of facing the world's challenges by being leaders committed to developing the country from a comprehensive anthropological conception. It has its core in the faith and vast pedagogical experience of the Catholic Church. Finally, it lies in the countryside, 15 km from Medellin's Downtown. It has two classrooms per grade, and it goes from pre-kinder to 11th grade (k-11).

The school is still in the growing phase at this very moment; it is building an extensive preschool to have four groups per year. Nevertheless, in general, there are no buildings taller than two stories. It has a preschool, an elementary, and a middle and high school. It has a schedule of 7 hours and 15 minutes, from 8 am to 3:15 pm, and each study period lasts for 45 minutes.

The mission and the vision of the school say this, respectively. In the framework of the Sodalite family (a catholic society), we are an educational community that grants to its members a solid personalized and complete development; this is based on the values of the catholic faith. In addition, by the year 2020, we will continue being an institution recognized for its quality human resource and commitment to the transformation of society from a broader, deeper, and more critical perspective of reality.

I conducted the practicum in the course of History (entirely in English). The class takes place two class hours a week. Even though it is a content-focused class, the English language makes an essential part of it and has value in developing the course and final grades. The class prioritizes the use of authentic material and a communicative approach. The classroom, like any other one in the school, has a big TV. (40') and has good internet access.

Specifically, I conducted this practicum in 8th Grade. It has nineteen students, ten boys, and nine girls. The students' proficiency level oscillates between B1 and B2, and there are two native students from the United States and Canada. In general, the class is very active; almost all of the students participate in the class and have some sense of commitment to the course.

I conducted the research, and I am the regular teacher of this classroom's History course. The school has an agreement with the university; therefore, the study is accepted and valid. I am a student from the last semester of a bachelor's degree in teaching and learning in foreign languages. I have been teaching History for five years and instruct it from fourth to ninth grade. I commonly used two main approaches when teaching. CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) to engage students in the dynamics of the class. In addition, I use a Task-Based Approach to make more formal assessments and projects. This class's contents are mainly the crisis of the 17th Century, the French Revolution and Napoleon, and the Industrial Revolution.

Statement of the Problem

As I was observing the classes during different moments, including English classes and my History classes, I could find some distinctive characteristics of the course regarding English as a foreign language and its use by the students. In the first place, I found a sort of resistance towards English, and they use very often Spanish in their conversations. Also, and more importantly, I notice the unbalance of the English proficiency level that students showed. I undoubtedly wanted to go in-depth into this topic and figure out how to help some students with this difficulty. In this way, they should not have to feel behind or make the pace of the classroom slower; therefore, benefiting students and teachers at the same time.

In this context, I found that the previously mentioned and often seen situation has a connection with the issue of a multi-level class. This multi-level refers to the circumstance in which you have many different and distant language levels in a class.

Adding to what I previously said, I have taught these same students for three years, and I have observed them willingly. Two students are native from Canada and the US, which makes them very proficient in the language; they have an understanding of ideas in context and have use of them in that same context. There are around four or five students that are proficient, although they do not have the pragmatic abilities of the native ones.

Moreover, some other four or five students go along at a moderate level; they can understand the whole class in English but produce content at a shallow level. Moreover, the other five or six students struggle to understand general ideas and concepts. In the end, this creates some dynamics that make the pace of the class uneven, boring, and, sometimes, difficult to follow, this for students as much as for the teacher.

This issue creates significant discomfort in the class because the class is mainly content-oriented. When you have a content-oriented language in an L2, it is essential to be at the minimum level required of such language. When you are not, two main inconveniences can appear. Firstly, the pace of the class can get slow and, most of the time, boring for the advanced students, thus creating a vicious circle of distraction. Secondly, some students rally behind others when the class has a good pace, and there are active conversations about the topics explained in class. In the end, the course can undoubtedly malfunction, hence creating stagnation in the topics, so it is imperative to recognize and demonstrate ways of making the gap closer between those levels.

Theoretical Framework

Considering the context, the observations, and the statement of the problem, the research needs to focus on three significant scopes of action. Firstly, I addressed the issue of English language Performance. Secondly, I conducted my attention on the subject of multi-level classrooms and their dynamics. Finally, I needed to explore Collaborative Learning Strategies and their benefits in class.

English Language Performance

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, performance is about the execution and accomplishment of a task. As Nordquist (2020), states based on Chomsky's studies, "The former (linguistic competence) concerns the tacit knowledge of grammar, the latter (linguistic Performance) the realization of this knowledge in actual performance." In simple, we can say that the production of the language is the performance and that output lies in our inner capacities. Chomsky adds that this performance relies on the concrete use of the language in specific situations, and flawed in many ways. In which we could assume that errors are inherent to language performance.

Nordquist (2020) also tells us that linguistic competence turns around the idea of the implicit structure of a language user, and linguistic performance turns around the use of this competence, which means the competence in action. I can confidently say that the focus of this research will be the performance or the practical use of language, considering that the entire interest of the course is the content and not the complete development of the competencies that they target in the English class.

Multi-level Classrooms

One challenge that humans face in almost every scope of their interactions is inequality or level disadvantage. One essential point of view in this people's interaction is education, and that interaction does not escape this drawback. In effect, some educational experts have named this issue multi-level classroom or mixed-level classroom (MLC). As Barrantes (2019) puts it, in the mixed-level classroom (MLC), teachers need to think about some techniques to give every student an equal amount of learning opportunities.

Even Though this concept of MLC can have many definitions and meanings, for the sake of this research, I will use Barrantes's (2019) definition. She explains it as being in a single class full of students with varying language proficiency levels. MLC is a situation that occurs not only in the setting of this study but also in many places in which they teach

English as a Second Language. However, more clearly, you can see this accentuation in a class in which the primary target is a specific content; it means a course conducted in a second language, in this case, English, but it focuses on content, in this case, History.

Having an MLC brings many difficulties to the duty of a teacher; planning the class takes more time, dynamics are less successful sometimes, and there is a high risk of increasing that level gap of students. In addition, as Manitoba Education and Youth (2003) declares, it is an arduous task to address every student's needs in this wide range of levels and different kinds of topics, especially if the class has performance level gaps. It is clearly seen when native students are performing aside English as a second language students. As the second group does not use English very often, they are not as proficient as the first group.

Collaborative Learning Strategies

Some references suggest different ways of addressing the situation, from the planning stage to the assessment moments. Nevertheless, many of those references propose the use of effective collaboration and group working. As it happens, the system that teachers establish for dividing and managing the MLC in groupings can ensure a good flow of knowledge for learners. (Manitoba Education and Youth, 2003)

These groupings and collaborations are often encompassed in the theory named Collaborative learning. Koç (2018) describes Collaborative Learning (CL) as a method in which learning occurs because of social acts; this social act refers to the talk of the participants among themselves to perform learning activities. It means fostering interaction to achieve the famous process of scaffolding that Vygotsky famously mentioned. In the same paper, Koç (2018) states that CL is "an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product." (pg. 584) which means there are actions taken in groups to achieve a common goal.

From the previous statement, we can recognize the importance of a collaborative approach to deal with the English proficiency level in a class. Ibrahim, Shak, Mohd, Zaidi, & Yasin (2015) made a sequence of asseverations that allow us to see the relevance of this method in MLC. First, collaboration in groups will improve and enhance learning affairs; second, students will help each other by the idea of making part of a community; finally, at the moment of using Collaborative Learning, students will hugely benefit from the guidance of another more knowledgeable other and improve their language skills.

From this previous description, one could easily connect the direct influence that CL can have on MLC. A class can have students native from the language and students with difficulties in the language. One may say that students with high proficiency level will aid less proficient students; the latter will hear and interact closely with those classmates and from their assistance, encouragement, and stimulation enhance their English level, hence helping closing that previously mentioned gap (Barrantes, 2019). Thus, creating a better learning environment and a more agile classroom pace.

After this referencing process, the Manitoba Education and Youth (2003) proposes this way of organizing the groups so teachers could make the most out of the collaborative learning in an MLC. They mention the following five stages:

> • *Stage 1: Whole-class setting for reflection, planning, and initial instruction*
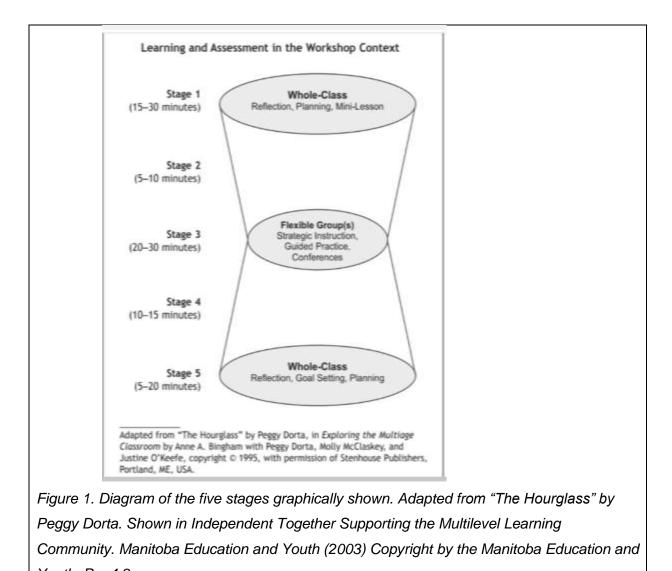>
> • *Stage 2: Cooperative and flexible groups to prepare for learning*
>
> • *Stage 3: Flexible group(s) for strategic instruction, guided practice, and/or conferences*
>
> • *Stage 4: Cooperative and flexible groups to practice and apply learning*
>
> • *Stage 5: Whole-class setting for sharing, reflection, goal setting, and further planning (pg. 4.8)*

Learning and Assessment in the Workshop Context

Stage 1
(15–30 minutes)

Whole-Class
Reflection, Planning, Mini-Lesson

Stage 2
(5–10 minutes)

Stage 3
(20–30 minutes)

Flexible Group(s)
Strategic Instruction,
Guided Practice,
Conferences

Stage 4
(10–15 minutes)

Stage 5
(5–20 minutes)

Whole-Class
Reflection, Goal Setting, Planning

Adapted from "The Hourglass" by Peggy Dorta, in *Exploring the Multiage Classroom* by Anne A. Bingham with Peggy Dorta, Molly McClaskey, and Justine O'Keefe, copyright © 1995, with permission of Stenhouse Publishers, Portland, ME, USA.

Figure 1. Diagram of the five stages graphically shown. Adapted from "The Hourglass" by Peggy Dorta. Shown in Independent Together Supporting the Multilevel Learning Community. Manitoba Education and Youth (2003) Copyright by the Manitoba Education and Youth. Pg. 4.8.

It is also crucial that the teacher provides specific jobs inside the small groups to be more successful. As Osterhold and Barrat (2012) put it, "defining specific rotating roles can provide the structure for all students in the group to be fully engaged. Each group member should be responsible for some aspect of the work". Having these dynamics inside the group working will ensure more participation of everyone in the group and increase the probability of meaningful participation and interaction of every student in the target language.

In the end, as Ibrahim et al. (2015) mention in the importance and significance of Collaborative Learning, when you found students with different performance levels and they manage to work together, they will not only give an account of their English level, but

also they become responsible for each of the classmates he/she is working with. The question then has its roots in the idea of Collaborative Learning and its impact as a tool to foster English Learning and see if the less advanced students will improve thanks to the more advanced.

Research Question

How can the use of Collaborative Learning Strategies enhance the low-level students' English Performance in a Multi-Level Content Class in 8th grade at Montemayor School?

Main Objective

To explain how collaborative learning strategies help enhance students' English performance in a multi-level content class.

Specific Objectives

To identify which Collaborative Learning Strategies work best in a content class of 8th Grade.

To interpret different kinds of outcomes after the use of collaborative learning strategies.

To compare the performance level of English students in different moments of the course after using collaborative learning strategies.

Action Plan

General description

As I previously mentioned, the context is of a History class conducted in English, which is the L2, for most students. Even though it is a content class, English plays an essential role in the conduction of the course; I do not evaluate it directly but it makes part of the assessment process.

The class follows a weekly program and each class lasts for 1 hour and 30 minutes; the school year has 2 semesters, and this action plan took place in the second semester. The semester started with a formative assessment tool. As Mertler (2016) explains, "formative classroom assessments are those assessments that are administered during instruction, to determine what sort of adjustments should be made to that instruction while it is still ongoing" (pg. 250). Therefore, these tools were perfect for beginning the semester and then, check later how much had students advanced in their proficiency level. In addition, it is essential to mention that I asked the students about their perception regarding their English level of performance at this moment, so I could have some perspectives about the focus of this Research.

Subsequently, I put into action the previously mentioned Collaborative Learning Strategies for eight weeks; I observed this process and collected its information in a journal. Mertler (2016) stated that teacher journals could give a great opportunity to researchers-practitioners to carry on narrative accounts of their specialty thoughts on practice; these Journals have the purpose of identifying which of the Collaborative Learning Strategies works best in the context. Effectively, it was the perfect tool to go for in this instance.

Before the end of the eight lessons, the students participated in a survey that looked for answers about their English level Performance, this time in a more direct way. A survey, according to Mertler, is a "data collection technique that involves the administration of a set of questions or statements to a sample of people" (pg. 240); and he complements by

saying that surveys help to acquire valuable information very quickly. The objective of this tool was to interpret different outcomes of the same process for the students. Afterward, I evaluated this procedure by reflecting, comparing data, and doing a triangulation process.

During the eight lessons, I attempted to adapt the classes to achieve proper interaction, making the most out of the Collaborative Learning. Some of the strategies that I used were: group working in which students select themselves the groups and work with roles, a group working chosen by the teacher, they also had roles and responsibilities, and a couple working chosen by the teacher. Some of these sessions were oriented towards language learning so students could interact more in the targeted language.

Development of Actions

This development of action took place on a monthly basis; I briefly described what the class focused on each month. It had an eight-week span, it included one holy week, and one week without class because it was a holiday, there are three-month descriptions.

In the first month, the assignments investigated the beginning of the French Revolutions, its causes, and its first moments. For this, there were some activities in groups focused on the topics, and the linguistic processes were not so essential. The second month made an emphasis on the reign of terror during the French Revolution; then, I chose the groups, so there was the maximum profit from those interactions. Gradually I started focusing the activities around more linguistic aims without forgetting the content. Finally, the 3rd month stressed on Napoleon; at that moment, I chose the groups again, and this time, I focused the activities more heavily on linguistic aspects.

Indeed, the parents of the students received a consent form to let them know about the research and the ethical considerations. Even though the school principal and dean already signed permission, each responsible adult of each student signed this consent form to notify them about the activities done in the class, the objective and nature of the

research, and to avoid problems while collecting any kind of data. Considering that the data collection was in the journal during the eighth week of class, the survey was two classes before the end of this period; and I conducted the focus group during the last class (session eight).

Findings and interpretations

After I administered a triangulation process and analysis, five main categories emerged among the instruments that I examined. The categories were the benefits of Collaborative Strategies, Students' Language performance enhancements, Meaningful Interactions in English, significant challenges towards enhancement, more Effective Collaborative Strategies.

Benefits of Collaborative Strategies

Regarding the benefits of Collaborative Strategies, I found that students enjoy working in groups and collaborating for non-academic purposes. Moreover, they think that this work in groups has helped them improve their English level when they did focus on using the language. These benefits were evident in the focus group as stated by some students, "... you can learn how to work with other people" (...) "you can make new friendships"... (Interview excerpt. S1. min 4:00) "because you can like for example, you don't know a word, you can ask the other, and you can complement the ideas better and have fun" (interview excerpt. S5. min 6:00). These accounts tell us that collaborative strategies do have an impact on student's performance, and it develops a sense of belonging, a way to contribute to achieving a common goal.

Students' Language Performance Enhances

Concerning Students' Language performance enhances, in a survey, students answered how much they felt they had improved their English level after working collaboratively for almost three months. I found that 100% of the students agree or strongly

agree that the dynamics had contributed to improving their linguistic level. Furthermore, 90% of the students agree or strongly agree that the activities contributed to making them feel more comfortable, secure, and confident with their English performance. As I could see in the survey, in the answers to the first question, all of the class noticed a contribution to their linguistic level (Survey question 1. Figure 1.) Moreover, Around 90% of the class found that they feel "better" (comfortable, secure, and confident) performing in English. (Survey question 3. Figure 2. It means that teachers can use collaboration effectively to enhance a student's English level. All of these interactions can even improve students' security about their language performance; this might be possible because they have to use the language in small communities, so they feel comfortable. Therefore, the benefits of collaborative work go in a double direction; the sense of belonging increases as well as students' self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Meaningful Interactions in English

After observing many of the moments and dynamics used in class, I found it imperative to make students interact meaningfully in the target language. Make them correct each other, help each other, rehearse each other. It is crucial to make them use English as much as they can. I saw this necessity more clearly in the observations that I made in the class, "...which kinds of interactions will use more interaction in English, in this case, it was not language-based". (Journal Lesson 2) "Students interacted by helping each other practice the pronunciation of the read-aloud activity." (Journal Lesson 5). I would interpret that this category explains the following idea; a vital part of enhancing someone's performance is the use of that language in small communities. In addition, it means that the acquisition or development of language is purely a social construction.

Major challenges towards enhancement

Across this journey of thinking and taking action for the class, I found several things that did the act of educating more challenging. We all know that teaching English has many inconveniences; in this case, there were two main difficult kinds of situations

from that process: the moderate use of the target language and, of course, the overuse of L1. Moreover, the use of the time, these kinds of classes need more than the usual time. This lack of time was an ongoing situation in the journals that I wrote, "... there was very little evidence of their interactions inside the groups in the target language (Journal lesson 3). The major constraint was time; we did not have time to work on the assignment properly" (journal, lesson 6). This could mean several issues. First, the biggest obstacle for students to advance in their English level is the use of L1, so more studies could take place about this, specifically. Additionally, this might be a response to compensate for their lack of proficiency in the language. Students who are possibly avoiding failure, so their copying strategy is to use Spanish, which at the same time makes them feel safe.

More Effective Collaborative Strategies

Finally, I found that some collaborative strategies work better for these kinds of scenarios. In this case, there were three beneficial strategies. First, the idea of assigning roles or responsibilities to the groups, second, activities in which they have to prepare in groups a read-aloud text, and third, an activity in which they have to write a good script and then record it similarly to a podcast. In the survey, when asked about what they found more beneficial for their English performance level, "Many students suggested the podcast activity and the read-aloud as the most useful" (Survey analysis, question 5). This idea asserts that teachers should make a small extra effort to prepare the small group's responsibilities and roles; this will end up paying off at the end of the activities. Besides, I can also interpret that teachers can find alternative and creative ways to increase students' language proficiency and respond to their cultural and socio-affective needs.

Conclusions

In the end, there are four remarkable ideas to talk about. In the first place, it is essential to address the initial key question, the one who leads the process. To begin with, the question that I asked at the beginning of this research is very complex and made out of many vantage points. To find the underlying cause of this answer, this question probably

needs a full year of work with different checkpoints and data collection methods. As of the end of this journey, I can answer that questions in two of those vantage points; on a personal level, I felt that the students connected with the class, the topics, and their English development process. Even though they showed some moments of struggle and tiredness, they could clearly show how their performance was increasing significantly during this process. Finally, on a superficial level, with the help of the data collected, especially the survey and the interview, there is a certainty that most of the students felt the way their English level advanced and enhanced to the point of comfort and security.

In the second place, considering what I previously mentioned, I can conclude that there is a suggested way of setting the collaborative strategies to work better for the class. Indeed, it is not a global condition, but any form of these three aspects will help the students realize their English performance level and enhance it. For a start, students in the small groups must have roles and specific assignments to complete the activity; if you make them responsible for something, there will be a better commitment with the group in general and better interactions. Then, I experienced the relevance of two activities that work effectively to activate many abilities in the students. First, any form of recording in which all of them participate, similar to a podcast, will make them use the language and connect inside the group. In addition, a read-aloud activity will always benefit the student's performance; even though it looks traditional, if well conducted, this can make students aware of all of the small things they have to fix in their English level, and if you ask them to rehearse before reading it to the leading group, they will tremendously help each other.

In third place, I can conclude that, even though it might seem obvious, many different kinds of collaborative strategies can target different types of objectives. I started with more content-oriented lessons in which I could see the low emphasis on the linguistic role that students opted for. Following this, I added specific responsibilities that definitely target more interaction among students. Finally, some heavy linguistic dynamics applied to the groups, which help students, gain some self-awareness towards their English performance level. To sum up, we could strive for what we want by organized the groups' roles or assignments.

        In the last place, I can certainly align my last conclusion with the fact that the students experienced an enhancement in their performance level. What was interesting was that I saw this enhancement in two ways: students believed that their linguistic performance was better, but also students felt more comfortable, secure, and free while performing. In the end, I could not make the full process of action research to the deepest due to the time, but it brought to light all of these benefits of using collaborative action effectively in the classroom, especially the enhancement of the English performance of the students

Reflections

My last personal reflections go around the importance of action research in the class and my experience as a teacher-researcher, the interesting results of the research, and the state of these topics, now and in the future. Even though I had taught these topics, this class, and at this rate for 6 years, making it as a researcher is a whole new experience; it made me value more the importance of action research in the classroom, in the planning, in the execution, in the evaluation and as I am doing here, in the reflections.

Every teacher in the world should take the risk of making action research in their classes no matter the time they have transmitted the topics before. In addition, I know it is easy to say that I did small changes and I had times of reflecting upon what I have been doing, so I fixed some things in my practice. Nonetheless, making it more formal and systematic takes you to those corners of your classes that are hidden for you and only actions research can unveil.

In other matters, I can reflect that the modern educational world should be discussing and speaking a little bit more about Collaborative Strategies in the classroom. Not only as this idea of "I make almost all my classes in small groups" or "The students sit in group tables and they discuss the ideas there" but also as the systematic process of assigning responsibilities in the groups, roles, or duties. I highly appreciate the emancipation that has been looked for in the halls of the Universidad de Antioquia and some other schools in the country, but we should not leave these topics behind during those other very valuable quests. In the end, that is one of the mystical features of education; it is a job that is constantly challenging everyone involved in the process of teaching and learning.

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