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Promoting Collaborative Learning through Student Centered Approach with Project Work

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Abstract

This study is an action research project carried out with high schoolers at Institución Educativa Josefina Muñoz González; a public institution located in Rionegro, Antioquia. The aim of this project was to promote collaborative learning through project work. The actions consisted of the creation of a project, the implementation of collaborative learning in the classroom and collaborative evaluation. Data collection instruments included a teacher journal, a questionnaire, and two focus group interviews with the learners. Findings showed opportunities and challenges in collaborative learning, effectiveness of classroom routines, and increase in student participation.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, project work, participation, teacher routines, challenges.

Degree Requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement to obtain a bachelor's degree in foreign language education (English- French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, El Carmen de Viboral, Colombia.

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Preface

This action research is conducted to fulfill the requirements of the Bachelor of Education in teaching foreign languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, El Carmen de Viboral, Antioquia. The desire for this research work has originally come from my willingness for researching and writing something on collaborative learning through project work. This research study was carried out from late January to late November in 2022. As a pre-service teacher I was assigned to observe a group of 38 eight graders from public institution in Rionegro, Antioquia. This paper is mainly addressed to educators, who play a very important role in trying to improve the teaching practices and learning experience in English classes.

Elizabeth Hurtado Ramírez

Rionegro, Antioquia. December 10th, 2022

Description of the Context

The institution where this project was carried out was a public institution in Rionegro, eastern Antioquia, Colombia. The institution offered preschool, elementary, middle school, day, and night academic and technical high school education in the specialties of commerce, health, marketing, and modern languages. It had one secondary school and two elementary schools. The English and French program were under the principles of the Colombian linguistic policies and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for teaching and learning. Its mission is to provide comprehensive education based on respect for differences to boys, girls, young people, and adults for work and higher education in accordance with current scientific and technological advances. As for the vision, the institution will be a leader in training for work, with strategic alliances that allow the continuation of higher education studies in the lines of training offered.

Concerning the class, it was an 8th grade English class taught 4 times a week in 60-minute periods. It had a large, well-lit classroom with clean walls, and a whiteboard. The class syllabus was based on the Ministry of Education's Basic Standards of Competence in Foreign Languages¹ (MEN, 2006). The contents of this class included grammatical tenses, punctuation, sentences, and texts. The methodology was Grammar Based Approach and the most frequent activities developed in class were worksheets, fill in the blank exercises and the construction of simple sentences following some grammar rules. Additionally, throughout the syllabus of each academic term, there was a grammatical approach that considers the teaching of the verb to be, the present simple, adverbs of frequency and the simple past. In relation to the evaluation, four components were taken into account:

conceptual, procedural, attitudinal and the cumulative test. Assessment was done through quizzes, dictations, and cumulative tests with multiple choice questions.

Regarding the participants of this study, it included 38 students and the cooperating teacher. Students ages range between 13 and 17 years old. At the beginning of the course there was a group of 45 students, later there were 50 students in the group. The institution made the decision to divide the eighth-grade groups and form a new class with groups of approximately 38 students each by the end of the first academic term. The cooperative teacher holds a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Spanish-English Teaching and a master's degree in Education. He has been teaching for twenty-one years, eight of which have been at IEJMG. In relation to his beliefs as a teacher, he recognizes the importance of implementing activities that allow the learning of grammar and vocabulary. He uses worksheets and games that have a cognitive approach (observation #2).

The main problem I observed in this class was the lack of implementation of collaborative work to increase students' participation and boost motivation in the English class. Activities were generally individual, where students practiced what they learnt, and this fact encouraged a lack of connection between students and a lack of voluntary participation.

Statement of the Problem

I was able to identify that the English class had a traditional perspective influence in which English classes mainly from a traditional perspective in which teacher-centered lessons were conducted. In addition, I realized that there was a lack of promotion of collaborative work to promote student participation and engagement in the English class.

I could find different situations that caught my attention, for instance, the class followed the same order in which a Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) lesson was implemented, lacking the spaces for students to produce using the target language. Classes were teacher-centered as the teacher played the role of the person who knows the subject matter via lectures or direct instruction (Journal entries: February 17, 24, 2022; March 3, 24 2022), normally, there was a general presentation of class content and students copied the information in their notebooks. The activities were usually individual where students practiced what they had learned and consisted of worksheets on the topic of the class, organizing words into sentences or questions, writing sentences with these structures, tenses, or word forms.

Moreover, I perceived the students' lack of voluntary participation in class activities, when the teacher asked questions in general so that the students could participate voluntarily but the students did not participate therefore the CT started calling specific names. (Journal entries: March 3, 8, 15, 2022). I also perceived that shyness was a frequent feature in the classroom and students recognized the vocabulary, pronounced it well but preferred not to participate. (Journal entries: February 17, 24, 2022; March 3,8, 2022). I considered essential to provide a learning process in which students feel confident to participate in class. Active participation of students with discussions in the classroom is important for the purpose of achieving effective learning and plays an important role in the success of education and personal development of students in the future (Tatar, 2005). This is because students will learn how to think critically and enhance their intellectual development if they are an active participant in the classroom (Siti Maziha, 2010).

I considered that the implementation of a well-defined Collaborative Learning strategy was missing. The lack of collaborative work was evidenced by different facts

observed in class. It caught my attention because class activities were generally developed individually and students remained in their corresponding positions (Journal entries: February 17, 24, 2022; March 8, 2022). Collaborative work can help students in different ways, as learning through interaction with other peers can result in a more interactive way of learning allowing students to feel part of the construction of a common goal. Furthermore, this environment promotes the development of fundamental abilities such as writing and oral skills, critical thinking, analyzing and teamwork by using project-based approaches (Requena-Carrión, 2010). In this sense, according to Ali and Hassan (2018), strengthening the relationship among peers contributes to the best construction of student engagement. I thought that social engagement had a strong connection with project work and collaborative learning where students can share their interest and can get to know their peers.

Another factor that affected students' performance in class was the fact that the class was always in constant change from the first day of the course because every week new students enter the group and at the beginning of the second term the institution made the decision to divide the eighth-grade groups because of the large number of students. Besides, this fact promoted the lack of connection among the students because they must regularly interact with new classmates and adapt to the new dynamics of the group (Teacher's interview, April. 8, 2022), which lead to bullying, little interaction and poor relationship amongst students.

Based on the questionnaire applied to students, most of the students expressed an interest in doing projects and working in teams. In relation to teamwork, most of the students indicated that working in a team could be very positive for them because they could share knowledge with each other, and they can practice the foreign language

(Students' survey, April 7,2022). On the contrary, some students emphasized that they were interested in teamwork, but it depends on the teammates because sometimes they do not communicate well with each other.

In conclusion, the adaptation and implementation of a well-defined collaborative learning strategy through project work could encourage the creation of groups with peers with whom students do not normally engage in classroom activities and have little interaction. Given the gaps above, this action research study intends to promote collaborative learning with project work in the English classroom.

Theoretical Background

This action research is based on the concepts of student-centered approach, project based learning, and collaborative learning. Throughout this section, definitions, features, advantages, and challenges of each concept are discussed and finally I will highlight how a student-centered approach through project work has an impact on collaborative work allowing students to be co-responsible for the creation of knowledge.

Through the years, several theorists have studied the learner-centered approach. It has its roots in constructivist theory, according to which learners learn more by doing and experiencing than by observing. In this theory, students are the initiators and architects of their own learning and knowledge making rather than passive ‘vessels’ who receive knowledge from expert teachers (Brown, 2008). Wolk (2010) also reports that in student-centered learning, students play a significant role in designing their own curriculums. In addition, education researchers McCombs and Whisler (1997) value student-centered approaches because learning is meaningful when subjects are applicable to the students’

interests, educational needs, and lives in general. Similarly, Brown (2008) claimed that the student-centered learning approach gives students ownership over their learning and helps them make necessary decisions and value judgments about the relevance of the content and the methods of teaching to their own lives and interests. The teacher plays the role of facilitator or guide who helps students achieve their goals. Moreover, student-centered instruction suggests that the planning, teaching, and assessment revolve around the needs and abilities of the students; and the teacher shares control of the classroom, and students are allowed to explore, experiment, and discover on their own.

Regarding the student-centered approach advantages. It allows students to become more open and more efficient at making decisions on their own, and it also recognizes that interactions between teacher and student are natural, thus breaking the psychological barrier whereby students see their teachers as experts (Darling, 1994). Additionally, the student-centered approach allows teachers to evaluate students according to criteria that are important for actual performance for their future instead of their memorization skills (Wiggins, 1989). According to Nagaraju (2013), student-centered activities provide spaces for students to work together in English, therefore they talk more, share their ideas, learn from each other, feel more secure and less anxious, and use English in a meaningful way.

On the contrary, there are some challenges in the student-center approach. Student-centered learning approaches have been viewed critically in recent years (O'Neill & McMahon 2005) because it seems that such approaches are not equally appropriate for all students. For example, students are very accustomed to “traditional” forms of teaching and often prefer reproductive, instruction-oriented learning (Reinmann-Rothmeier & Mandl 1997). The challenges are heightened when teachers are unable to facilitate group discussions, construct valid problems, and guide students through the problem-solving

process. Even by adapting the learning environment, it is only possible to change this orientation slightly (Baeten et al., 2013). In their study, Brahm and Gebhardt (2011) also found that students rely heavily on the guidance, control, and supervision of an instructor. Such an attitude inhibits the implementation and success of a student-centered learning culture.

In respect of Project Based Learning (PBL), it is a social practice in which students are socialized through a series of group activities involving the simultaneous learning of language, content, and skills (Slater et al., 2006). According to Markham (2012), Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a philosophy of teaching and learning that includes a framework for how we will organize education in the future. The framework involves interdisciplinary knowledge construction while completing a social activity that builds context-dependent self-awareness of learning and knowing (Tamim & Grant, 2013) And it organizes learning around projects. Projects comprise complex tasks and activities that involve students in a constructive investigation that results in knowledge building (Jeremić et al., 2009).

Regarding the advantages and challenges of PBL, an advantage of project work is that it helps students with mixed abilities and creates opportunities for individuals to contribute in ways that reflect their different creativity and strengths. In this way, students gain self-confidence by being able to decide how to work on particular tasks. Participants stressed the fact that it is an experiential and empirical procedure which helps students to better understand the information they gather. It is easier to understand something working on a specific project, rather than just be a passive receiver of messages during a lecture (Aslanides et al., 2016). However, PBL appears to have restricted the teacher's ability to manage his extra-class time. PBL is difficult to postpone tasks, such as planning and marking students' reports, and conflicts with external aspects to teaching, including

academic commitments such as participation in congresses, which could be more easily accommodated in conventional teaching models. Besides, students considered the allocation of different project topics by professors as a disadvantage (Ribeiro, 2011). To secure the transparency of the process, the professor needs to suggest a different topic per student or per team, meaning that not every student in class is learning the same thing. While this might be considered as a positive attribute when obtaining a degree, a possible downside is that future employers will not be able to distinguish the exact knowledge background of each candidate (Aslanides et al., 2016).

Stoller (2002) and Fried-Booth (1993) include several similar stages and features in their proposals for project work. The authors agree that it is necessary for teachers and students to agree on a topic and an outcome, to practice language skills required for gathering information, and to present a final product of their work. Several key features of project work identified by Stoller (2002) include: negotiation of students' interests; attention to topics and content that students are interested in as opposed to specific language targets; class instruction that is student-centered; integration of the four skills in lesson activities; preparation and presentation of a final product. Project-based learning provides a student-centered context of engagement, which places the responsibility for the learning process largely upon the student, with constant guidance from the teacher (Gubacs, 2004).

Concerning collaborative teaching and learning, it is a teaching approach that involves groups of students working to solve a problem, complete a task or create a product (MacGregor, 1990). Usually, students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. CL has as its

main feature a structure that allows for student talk, in which students are supposed to talk with each other, and it is in this talking that much of learning occurs (Golub et al., 1988).

In relation to the advantages of collaborative learning, a significant benefit of CL is that groups operate together long enough during a course. The learners in teams will get to know each other and extend their activities outside of class. Students will contact each other to get help with questions or problems they are having, and they will often continue their communications in later terms (Bean, 1996), moreover, CL helps to develop learning communities within classes and institutions (Tinto, 1997) and it leads to self-management by students (Resnick, 1987). Students are trained to be ready to complete the tasks and work together within their groups and they must understand the subject that they plan to contribute to their group. In addition, CL promotes positive societal responses to problems and fosters a supportive environment within which to manage conflict resolution. Furthermore, research shows that CL reduces violence in any setting as it permits the discussion of conflicts, sometimes instigated by individual or intergroup competition, and their resolution and/or reduction using collaborative techniques. CL promotes positive societal responses to problems and fosters a supportive environment within which to manage conflict resolution (Johnson, Messick, & Mackie, 1989). On the other hand, researchers (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018) have also highlighted several hindrances to CL which include time and work constraints, family and personal commitments, lack of learners' readiness to work in groups and time differences for members of the group from different regions.

Project-based learning and collaborative learning have several similarities. A project work leads to mirroring real-life tasks and provides opportunities for students to work cooperatively in a small group, in which they can share resources and ideas in completing a

particular project (Stoller, 2002). It is based upon the idea of creating successful collaborative teams that work on tasks that are meaningful to someone outside the classroom. Therefore, project work requires collaboration and group work on a task which they have defined for themselves, and which has not been externally imposed. An integrated student-centered collaborative learning environment aiming at enhancing communication skills. Specifically, this environment promotes the development of fundamental abilities such as writing and oral skills, critical thinking, analyzing and teamwork by using project-based approaches (Requena-Carrión, 2010). Project-based learning is described as learners working collaboratively over an extended period to solve an authentic and challenging problem that results in a product (Moursund, 1998). Law and Eckes (2000), report that students can become more responsible and autonomous while engaging in cooperative work, as opposed to working alone. As learning is usually an activity that involves the people around us, whether they be teachers, classmates, family members, or acquaintances, the social aspect is fundamental (Hein, 1991).

To conclude, project-based learning activities have explicit educational goals and are typically learner-centered, rooted in constructivism, and facilitated by a teacher who acts as a facilitator. Two student-centered teaching models that characterized and still characterize nowadays teaching programs all around the world are the task-based and the project-based models. These two models shift the emphasis from teachers teaching to students learning and doing. The tasks and the projects students get engaged in reflect the program's objectives and relate to real world problems, issues, situations and so on (Wiley, 2011, p. 91). Fung (1996) identified ideal characteristics of learners involved in project-based activities as heightened levels of self-confidence, motivation, and the ability to organize work plans. Students apply their skills and experience to solve problems and

complete a collaborative project as they are presented with real-life problems in social settings.

Research Question

How to promote collaborative learning through project work in an eighth-grade group of an urban public institution in Rionegro?

General objective

To promote collaborative learning through a student-centered approach with project work in an eighth-grade group of an urban public institution in Rionegro.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify students' feelings and perceptions when promoting collaborative learning.
2. To analyze the impact of project work when promoting collaborative learning from students' perspectives.
3. To evaluate students' production when working in groups to draw conclusions on collaborative learning.

Action plan

To answer the research question stated for this project, I developed two teaching actions. The first action was the development of a panel discussion following the

parameters of project-based learning to promote collaborative learning in students. The development of this project included the following stages: speculation, designing the project activities and conducting the project activities. The second action was the implementation of assessment tools, peer, co and self-evaluation, to evaluate students' work in the groups and draw conclusions on collaborative learning.

In addition, the particularities of the case regarding the students' responses to the collaborative project were gathered through different data sources. Students' journal, teacher's journal, students' interview, and focus groups were used to identify students' feelings and perception on collaborative learning, to analyze the impact of project work in promoting collaborative learning and to evaluate students' work in the groups to draw conclusions on collaborative learning.

Development of actions

The implementation of this action research project was divided into two sections, and the whole process lasted two terms. Its objective was to promote collaborative learning through project work in an eighth-grade group. However, it is important to mention that the teacher-researcher presented the project to the students prior to implementation, to receive their comments and involve them in the construction of the project. From the beginning the students were aware of the panel discussion project, the stages, and the evaluation process.

The first teaching action was the development of the panel discussion following the parameters of project-based learning, which was divided into three stages. The first action consisted of carrying out the first stage of the project, called "speculation" in which students decided on working on prohibitions, and then they discussed about the grammar

items they would use, these were present in the curriculum for the third period. Then, the students chose the topic of “prohibitions” in different places because the first grammatical topic was modal verbs. After that, the students chose the members of the team they wanted to work with and created 7 groups of 4 to 5 students. These groups were named as follows: hospital, museum, school, bank, airport, zoo, and library.

The second part of the project was developed in one week, students considered the research process, selection of questions for the panel discussion and development of group activities. In the research part, the teacher-researcher indicated a series of strategies to conduct collaborative research on a specific topic such as identifying a common objective, knowing the context and filtering the information. Then, the students chose the questions for the panel discussion, which should be open-ended, should generate debate and should be related to the topic of prohibitions in different places. After that, each group created 5 questions, we grouped them and selected only 5 questions as some of them were repeated, these questions were the guide for the next stage of the process.

This stage of the project took one month of the third term. Each week the students had to answer one of the leading discussion questions and complete the grammar worksheet. To answer each question the students went through a language process: explanation of the grammatical topic, practice worksheet (text, video, or podcast) related to the question of the week, brainstorming of the question on each group, research and final agreements between the members. The first part consisted of explaining and using the present simple, where students answered the question about the context of the place, they chose through descriptions to contextualize and get a general idea of the main topic of each group. In the following weeks, the grammatical theme was modal verbs (can, could and should, must, have to, may, might, ought to) and the students answered some questions

related to each type of model verb. Later, the students made the final written report of the research carried out during the period which included the answers to the questions and was the guide for the panel discussion. Finally, the students conducted the panel discussion and selected the roles they would play (moderators, panelists, and audience), and they also set the time management, space organization and support tools. After finishing the panel discussion project, we continued with different collaborative activities that included fourth period grammar topics such as comparatives, superlatives, adverbs, present and past continuous.

The second teaching action was the implementation of assessment tools, peer and self-evaluation. In the peer- evaluation part, students performed several activities in pairs in which they evaluated their performance through a rubric designed for each activity that included teamwork (See sample of [Rubrics](#)).

Similarly, at the end of the panel discussion, each group rated a different group following the rubric criteria considering the accuracy of the material, organization, content, and presentation. Finally, in each term the students performed an individual self-evaluation, and an item was added to evaluate the performance of collaborative project work.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed following Burns (1999) 5 stages: assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building interpretations, and reporting the outcomes. These methods were teacher journals, student questionnaire, and a student interview conducted in two focus groups. Teacher journals were written and codified weekly, Students' questionnaires were scanned, coded, and analyzed and the two focus groups were

transcribed, analyzed, and compared. To interpret this data, a chart in Excel was created and arranged with filters based on the target objectives of the research. After doing so, I coded data a second time.

I classified the data into categories, and finally I grouped them into final categories. Once the data was categorized, I triangulated information, and I found compelling findings concerning the development of my action plan.

Findings and Interpretations

This study was aimed at promoting collaborative learning through a student-centered approach with project work in an eighth-grade group. This section illustrates the findings namely strategies to collaborative projects, challenges and opportunities, and the impact of collaborative projects for student participation.

Strategies for Collaborative Projects

Data analysis revealed the important strategies to take into account for collaborative projects. This refers to the strategies implemented by the pre-service teacher and the students in the activities to build collaborative work.

Teacher Strategies for Collaborative Learning Through Project Work. The findings revealed two different groups of teacher strategies: For implementing the project and for assessing the project. The former is about providing clear instructions and establishing routines and the latter is about self-evaluating and co-evaluating.

Teacher strategies to implement the project.

Clear instructions for collaborative learning through project work. During the implementations, different strategies were used, these were related to providing clear instructions, as recorded in the journal “I gave them the instructions of the activity and they had many doubts, so I used other strategies to make the activity clearer. I asked some students who understood the activity to please explain it in their own words” (Journal entry excerpt, August 31st, 2022).

Routines to guide the collaborative project. At the beginning of the term, the steps and the weeks for the panel activities were indicated. Each week, students were explained about the topic, the students did a workshop, and they did a part of the final product of the project. As a result of the routine in the classroom, data revealed that this routine helped the students to recognize the stages and the corresponding evaluative activities to meet the objectives. In the following excerpt from the journal, it is evidenced:

I gave them the instructions for the activity and the students recognized what stage of the project we were at, so there was no need to re-explain the collaborative project instructions. The students already knew that they had to organize themselves in groups and recognized who their group mates were. (Journal entry excerpt, August 31st, 2022).

Thus, through the process of the collaborative project, the students get a better understanding of the expected outcome. In fact, according to Legutke and Thomas’ (1991) project learning realizes a dynamic balance between a process and a product orientation. Moreover, taking into account the teacher's strategies on routine, a student mentioned: “*Sentía que era más fácil porque la profesora nos explicó bien al inicio del periodo los pasos que debíamos seguir para el proyecto y ya sabíamos que cada clase debíamos*

formar grupos y avanzar para la presentación final”¹ (2nd focus group, November 7th, 2022).

Teacher strategies to evaluate the collaborative project. Students were assessed throughout their work on the project through self-evaluation and co-evaluation. Regarding the process of self-evaluation and co-evaluation, first, the students and the pre-service teacher reached agreements about the evaluation criteria. And then in the evaluation moment, the students reflected and explained the reason for both grades. The students liked the experience of self-assessing their work and expressed that it is good to have some participation grading their own process. For instance, a student indicated in the focus group (See transcription of focus groups [here](#)): *“La autoevaluación pienso que es muy importante porque es el 25% de la materia y me gusta tener la posibilidad de evaluar mi proceso”*² (1st focus group, September 12th, 2022.).

The students also enjoyed the experience of co-assessing their peers’ work and expressed that it is good to have others’ perception on their performance. For example, another student mentioned: *“Fue diferente calificar a otros compañeros pero creo que fue bueno porque a veces no vemos en qué nos equivocamos o nuestras fortalezas y es bueno ver otros puntos de vista”*³ (2nd focus group, November 7th, 2022). In fact, during the development of the co-evaluation, the students were very willing to give clear and precise arguments in relation to their classmates’ work (Journal entry excerpt, August 31st, 2022).

¹ “I felt it was easier because the teacher explained at the beginning of the term each of the steps to follow in the project and each class, we knew that we had to work in groups and advance on the project”

² “The self-assessment, I think it is very important because is the 25% of the grade and I like to have the opportunity to evaluate my process”

³ “It was different to assess other classmates, but I think it was Good because sometimes we don’t realize that we made a mistake or our strengths, it is good to see other points of view”

Students' strategies for collaborative learning through project work. From the beginning of the implementations, the pre-service teacher allowed the students to group themselves so they could form the group taking into account their own interests and considerations. Seven groups were created, and the students chose the topic they wanted to focus on (Journal entry excerpt, August 5th, 2022). Data analysis showed that some students' strategies for collaborative learning were effective, such as student decision making and group division. To exemplify, a student mentioned a group division strategy that they developed in their group:

Utilice la estrategia en la que nos dividimos la actividad, dos personas hicieron una parte y se concentraron solamente en esa parte y los otros nos encargamos de otras partes. Después reunimos todos los puntos y empezamos a estudiar todos juntos"⁴ (2nd focus group, November 7th, 2022).

According to Legutke and Thomas' (1991), project work allows for a wide scope of self-determined action for both the individual and the small group of learners within a general framework of a plan which defines goals and procedures. Data analysis revealed how they organized themselves to accomplish a collaborative goal.

Similarly, in relation to the decision-making strategy, a student indicated: "*Al inicio del periodo, nosotros pudimos elegir a nuestros compañeros de equipo y también pudimos elegir las preguntas que queríamos utilizar para el proyecto*"⁵ (2nd focus group, November 7th, 2022). According to Jones (2019), giving students a voice to determine what they will work on this project creates a sense of ownership, which results in their greater

⁴ Ui used the strategy in which we divided the activity, two people did one part and focused only on that and the rest took care of the other aspects. Then we put everything together and started studying all together.

⁵ "At the beginning of the term, we could choose our own partners and we could choose the questions that we wanted to use in the project"

motivation to work harder. Letting students decide aspects of what they will work on and what tools or resources they will use will help with project outcomes.

Challenges and Opportunities

Data analysis revealed the following subcategories reflect the insights of both the pre-service teacher and the students.

Challenges. Data analysis revealed difficulties in dividing the group, distractions, and lack of engagement. Regarding the first challenge: Group division, Way and Greene (2006), stress that changes in relationships with peers are not only due to changes of schools but also due to the instability of the social relationship that naturally occurred in adolescents. To illustrate this challenge: “One group decided to split up and the students indicated that they felt more comfortable working in other teams” (Journal entry excerpt, October 27th, 2022).

Related to the second challenge: Distractions in the class, it can be said that distractions such as the constant use of cell phones, doing activities of other courses and talking about topics unrelated to the English class influenced the development of the collaborative project. “In some cases, I could see that there were many distractions, some students were drawing pictures, others were playing on their mobile phones and others were simply talking about other subjects apart from the class” (Journal entry excerpt, August 10th, 2022). Consequently, it was necessary to frequently supervise the group work, to call attention and to emphasize the completion of the activities. Regarding this challenge, a student mentioned in the questionnaire (See questionnaire [here](#)) the following: “*Lo que*

menos me ha gustado durante la realización del proyecto son las distracciones ya que a veces no me permiten entender muy bien”⁶ (Students’ questionnaire, October 31, 2022).

In relation to the third challenge: The lack of engagement, it was possible to evidence that in some occasions the students were not committed to the collaborative project. Indeed, in one of my implementations, it was evidenced that in three groups the students were working individually because they did not create an order for the activity. Some started by drawing pictures and then writing sentences. Only two groups were very concentrated during the activity and managed to finish it (Journal entry excerpt, August 17th, 2022). Moreover, there were individualities and difficulties in reaching agreements in groups which affected the students’ engagement. Indeed, peers are significant individuals who play an important role in the psychosocial and educational development of an adolescent, in fact, there is a potential relationship between school engagement and peer-to-peer relationships (Poulin & Chan, 2010).

Opportunities. Considering this subcategory, data analysis showed that the collaborative project promoted confidence, collaboration, and motivation in the students. Concerning the confidence, it was crucial for the implementation of activities related to the collaborative project. In this study, most participants agreed that the collaborative activities helped them to increase their confidence. A student stated: “*Aprendo más con mis compañeros ya que con ellos siento más confianza para realizar el proyecto*”⁷ (Students’ questionnaire, October 31, 2022). In general, collaborative learning makes students more focused on building their confidence and expertise in expressing ideas they have in learning

⁶ “What I have not liked during the project are the distractors because sometimes I don’t understand very well”

⁷ “I learn more with my partners because around them I feel more confident to do the project”

when answering questions, listening carefully and responding to questions from other friends (Goodsell & Maher 1992). “I felt that students were very open to collaborate with each other, they were really comfortable in their groups and if they had doubts, they constantly asked questions to their classmates” (Journal entry excerpt, September 23rd, 2022).

Collaboration is another aspect to mention as Benson (2001) suggests that in a project implementation, collaboration and discussions among participants are communicative opportunities for social interaction and language learning. During the summary for the panel discussion, positive interactions and collaboration among the students were noted. Each one had a role to play and at the end they brought everything together for the final delivery and clarified doubts (Journal entry excerpt, October 26th, 2022). In relation to this, a student indicated: “*Me gusta porque cada uno colabora y cada uno aporta, entonces completamos todas las actividades muy bien*”⁸ (2nd focus group, November 7th, 2022).

In relation to student’ motivation, it was evidenced in the journal “I consider that the students were quite motivated to participate, they had fun and solved doubts among all” (Journal entry excerpt, October 26th, 2022). A student mentioned: “*Me siento muy motivada y tranquila ya que la convivencia con el grupo ha mejorado y hay un mejor rendimiento académico*”⁹ (2nd focus group, November 7th, 2022). Besides, another student stated: “*Me motivan más los trabajos en equipo ya que socializo mejor y aprendo más*”¹⁰

⁸ “I like it because each person helps and provides ideas, so we complete all the activities very well”

⁹ “I feel motivates and calm because the coexistence with the groups has improved and we have a better performance”

¹⁰ “I feel more motivated by the tasks that are in groups because I interact more and learn more”

(Students' questionnaire, October 31, 2022). Benson (2001) states that: "Intrinsic motivation produces more meaningful learning and is promoted in situations where students are self-determined and feel that they control the learning process". This finding suggests that the effort made, and the attitudes shown reflect the motivation that the students had to participate in the collaborative project.

Increase in Student Participation in the English Class

Data analysis revealed an increase in student participation because participation was active, voluntary and students developed good communication skills. It was evident that the students were more open to participate since the collaborative work began because when they worked individually, they were shy and did not practice oral communication with their classmates. Gillies (2008) states that collaborative activities are ideal for implementing in the classroom to stimulate learners' interest through interaction with their peers and improve participation and engagement in more useful activities. "The students participated actively, there was good communication within the teams and good results at the end of the activity" (Journal entry excerpt, September 28th, 2022). In relation to good communication skills, a student stated: "Intentamos hablar para convivir en paz y ayudarnos" (1st focus group, September 12th, 2022)¹¹. This finding suggests that it is important to create a context of trust as it motivates students to participate and enhances their involvement in the learning process.

Conclusions and Suggestions

This action research was carried out with the purpose of promoting collaborative work through project work. Data revealed that the objective was achieved. From the data

analysis, the results suggest the use of different strategies to implement the project such as giving clear instructions and establishing clear routines help the students get a better understanding of the expected outcome and have a suitable learning environment. In addition, data about the teacher's strategies to evaluate the project such as: Self-evaluation and co-evaluation revealed that the students liked the experience of self-assessing and co-assessing their work and expressed that it is good to have some participation grading their learning and to have others' perception on their performance.

Furthermore, according to students' strategies, students felt owners of their learning because they could make decisions about group division, content, and evaluation criteria so they were allowed to have an active participation in the project design. It is noted that allowing students to decide aspects of what they will work on and what tools or resources they will use will help with the outcome and learning process.

Additionally, during the whole process it was possible to identify challenges, such as difficulties in dividing the group, distractions, and lack of engagement. However, despite the marked challenges, they do not drastically affect the learning environment and project work was very useful to promote collaborative work. Concerning opportunities. I can conclude that the collaborative project promoted confidence, collaboration, and motivation in the students.

Furthermore, it was possible to perceive an increase in student participation because participation was active, voluntary and students developed good communication skills. Additionally, working in groups helped students to increase their confidence which promoted their motivation to learn the target language and participate in class.

Regarding the implications for teaching practice in this context. A first implication is that teachers must take into account that it is necessary to provide equal attention to all

the groups that are carrying out the project. Although all the students are performing the proposed activities, some groups require more support from the teacher than others. In addition, I consider that some actions that I had prepared before the implementation could not be fully carried out due to lack of time and various extracurricular activities that were carried out in the institution at the end of the school year. I think that to carry out a project, it is necessary to have continuity between classes to meet the proposed objectives. Leaving that aside, I would like to suggest more research on the different project work strategies to improve the implementation of the collaborative project.

Finally, further research on these issues needs to be conducted taking into account some rules about collaborative learning. I consider it a highly effective and positive tool that helps students to mainly facilitate the division of roles, participation within groups and problem solving. In addition, it would be interesting to show the differences between collaborative and cooperative learning in the target language.

Reflection

Foreign language teaching practicum and teaching action research have contributed to my professional development in different aspects. First, I have had the possibility to learn and teach. In relation to learning, every day I learn from the students, their interests, difficulties, perceptions, and feelings. Besides, I have had the opportunity to implement different teaching strategies, mainly the promotion of a student-centered approach through a collaborative project which have allowed me to have a closer approach with students and I have been able to collect some of the interests of students that will be very useful for my professional development. I recognize that I must continue to learn a lot from the students.

Likewise, I have had the possibility to question my ideals and to have different perspectives thanks to my cooperating teacher, my practicum advisor, and my classmates. It is very rewarding to have different points of view and to learn from the experiences and knowledge of others. As for my teaching experience, I think that the educational practice is a very complex action due to the diversity of the students, the different ways of learning, the different tasks that the teacher must perform daily, the contextual influence and the unpredictable situations.

Regarding the research process, I have had very positive experiences in the development of the research actions and other experiences that have been challenges but that I have been fulfilling with the support of my professors and classmates. I have learned to be more patient, organized and responsible. Moreover, I have learned the steps that are required for the fulfillment of an action research such as identifying a problem, supporting it with various authors, devising an action plan and making data analysis. I recognize that I still have a lot to learn but it is interesting to perceive all that is learned in the process and how it reflects important aspects that were considered during my major. On the other hand, in relation to the implementation of the collaborative project, even having difficulties in collecting data due to school constraints, I consider that we have had the possibility to advance a lot even though we had one action undone. I have seen that students participate more actively and feel more motivated when they are the center of the class, they can make decisions and share their ideas with their classmates through the collaborative project.

Finally, I believe that the reflection of the educational practice is necessary to establish links of growth and professional development because one acquires experiences and innovative ideas to put into practice and at the same time rethinks the dynamics of educational practice. There are many changes and challenges in education, therefore it is a

commitment on my part to be practical and reflective about my future work. Ultimately, it has been a very incredible experience that has motivated me to continue learning much more and to continue researching.

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