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Enhancing Student Engagement Through Collaborative Learning

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### **Abstract**

This study is an action research project carried out with seventh graders at Institucion Educativa Juan María Céspedes; a public institution located in Belén, Medellín. The aim of this project was to enhance student engagement through the implementation of collaborative learning strategies developed in pair work and group work. The data collection method included a Cooperating Teacher interview, a student survey, and observations registered in the student-teacher's journal. Data were analyzed using the triangulation method with all the sources. The results showed that promoting interactions among students, allowing them to form the groups under their own criteria, increase their confidence for participating in class, create an enjoyable experience that facilitates their interest in learning and develop autonomy, enhancing student engagement.

***Keywords:*** Collaborative learning, student engagement, pair work, group work

Título del proyecto en español: Mejorando el involucramiento de los estudiantes a través del aprendizaje colaborativo

### **Degree Requirement**

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

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## **Preface**

When I started to develop this project, I was too nervous and anxious because I had never had the opportunity to be a teacher in a school. Fortunately, the first stage of the practicum was just observation and that helped me to realize the real dynamics that happen in the classroom. Through the observations, I realized that the main issue was that students did not have interactions with their peers, basically because all of us were immersed in the virtual environment due to the pandemic. This situation inspired me to develop the current action research project.

### Description of the Context

Institución Educativa Juan Maria Cespedes is a public school located in Medellin, in *Belén Miravalle* neighborhood, close to Belén Park. Regarding the building, it is composed of three floors. It has 19 classrooms and most of them are placed on the second floor including the offices of bilingualism coordination and discipline coordination, the library, and some bathrooms. Precisely, the classroom where the English class is settled down is placed on the second floor; this classroom is provided with a television, a chalkboard, a desk, and 52 seats; additionally, it has several windows that allow adequate ventilation and lighting inside the room.

The education system of the institution covers from kindergarten to eleventh grade. Moreover, the institution offers the service of virtual high school and on-site high school at night. Additionally, the institution offers three technical secondary courses addressed to the students of the tenth and eleven grades in automotive mechanics, systems, and the third one is in English. In total, the institution has 2500 registered students and 72 teachers. Concerning just the English teachers' team in high school, the institution has six English teachers.

Currently, Institución Educativa Juan Maria Cespedes focuses on being the first bilingual public institution in Medellin. For this reason, the institution has designed a bilingualism project which is based on *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo* developed by *Ministerio de Educación Nacional* (MEN). The project has as its mission "the academic training of boys, girls and young people with a high academic, human, technical and communicative level (English - Spanish), in an environment of safety, respect and discipline, under the criteria of the International Baccalaureate " (I.E. Juan Maria Cespedes, 2020, P1). By 2025, the institution has the vision to graduate the first cohort in the International Baccalaureate program. Given the complexity of this project, it was needed to create a



Coordination for the bilingualism program. To accomplish this objective, the institution implements some CLIL strategies, such as giving the content of math, arts, and sciences in English. To reinforce this strategy, the teachers of these subjects receive training in learning the English language. Another strategy related to this objective is the implementation of reading and conversation clubs.

Concerning my Cooperating Teacher (CT) I have to mention that I started with an initial CT but due to an administrative decision from the school, I implemented the project with the support of a different teacher for the second semester. The latter CT graduated in 2000 from *Universidad de Medellín* with a B.A. in Computer teaching. She has over 20 years of experience teaching in public and private institutions and in the last three years, she has been working with I.E. Juan Maria Cespedes.

The target group for this action research project is 7th-3 grade; this is a group of 50 students. During the first semester, due to the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the learning process was merely asynchronous and through a virtual platform. However, in the second semester, for the return to the schools, the group was split into two groups: group A and group B. The institution made this decision based on the regulation provided by the MEN, in which the capacity in the classrooms must be limited. In this way, group A attended classes for a week while group B stayed home working in asynchronous activities. They changed weekly, allowing that all the students could attend classes in the school. In this modality, the students went to the English class on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday, and each session had a duration of fifty-five minutes.

Furthermore, the students that stayed home should work independently on the activities uploaded in the Moodle Platform. This was the same platform used during the first semester when all the students were at home. The institution chose the Moodle platform for

carrying out all the academic activities; this platform allows teachers to upload materials, workshops, and web pages for asynchronous activities. Moreover, Moodle keeps track of the students' grades and enables teachers to export those grades in an excel or pdf format.

Concerning the English syllabus, this is based on the Basic Learning Rights provided by the MEN. A teacher is appointed by the institution for the design of the topics, the main activities, and the assessment for each term. The syllabus content is uploaded to the Moodle platform, where the students find all the material and resources during each term.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Within the current context produced by Covid-19, the most drastic change in the education field, during 2020 and 2021, was the turn from face-to-face classes to an online environment. This shift has represented a significant challenge for all the agents involved in the education field as administrative staff, teachers, parents, and students. During the first semester of 2021, I had the opportunity to observe the group as a student-teacher; the synchronous sessions were developed virtually through Google Meet. The observations helped me to realize that just around 10 students out of 50 participated actively from the whole group. This situation evidenced a critical situation related to their reluctance to participate in class.

Dialoguing with my first CT, he was conscient about this circumstance, and precisely about this issue, he implemented some actions. For instance, he employed a rewards system, where he gave points to the student that answered any proposed question and participated actively. Additionally, in some classes, he appointed a student to be the monitor of the class,

with the intention that students could engage in the class. Nonetheless, he recognized that many students were still reluctant to participate, no matter what he tried.

Reflecting on this problem, the lack of students' participation in the classroom could mean that they were not engaged in their learning process. I consider that it is essential to provide a suitable learning process in which the students feel confident to participate in class, showing an improvement in student engagement. To achieve that, the students must construct a good relationship with the teacher and their peers. Nonetheless, it is known that virtuality and distance learning has drastically transformed the way students interact with each other, specifically with their classmates. According to Malganova, Dokhkilgova, & Saralinova (2021), a disadvantage of distance learning is that it produces students to work in loneliness; this was evident when the institution closed its doors and sent the students to study from home since the beginning of the pandemic. Most likely, with the virtual environment, the way students interacted with their peers changed and even restricted their interactions. For Malganova, et al., (2021), an online environment cannot replace the natural process of socialization that schools provide. Undoubtedly, the school is where the children acquire some rules and learn to live in a community where they forge strong relationships with their peers. Then, the school must guarantee that although the students are physically studying at home, they can maintain certain levels of interaction with their peers.

Regarding this topic, by exploring the activities designed by the CT, I found that there was a lack of promotion of collaborative work. The activities uploaded on the Moodle platform were all designed for students to work in isolation. Moreover, through the class observations, it was evidenced that no activity was designed to be carried out in pairs or groups. Likely, the lack of collaborative work affected student engagement. This issue left students without the opportunity to interact with their peers and in general, a very low level of participation in English class during the whole first semester (besides the previous year).

The second semester also brought new challenges and opportunities. The students had to adapt to a new environment with a new routine, sharing a space where the biosafety standards must be met. Undoubtedly, one of the main challenges in this new context was to ensure the students remained focused on their learning process while taking advantage of every class to have some interactions with their peers in English.

### **Theoretical Background**

Undoubtedly, the situation produced by the Covid-19 pandemic has challenged the teachers to create successful strategies to engage the students in the learning process. Considering what I stated in the problem related to their reluctance to participate in class, this theoretical background includes the exploration, and discussion of the following concepts: Student Engagement and Collaborative learning.

#### **Student Engagement**

After exploring numerous studies related to the definition of student engagement, it is possible to say that there is not a consensus about its meaning. However, the Great Schools Partnership (2016) states that “student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning” (para.1). This definition is appropriate for this research since it reflects the intrinsic aspect of this concept related to the affective and emotional aspects of the students.

Student engagement seems to have been one of the main concerns for teachers and researchers during the last decades. The previous year, due to the drastic turnaround of education to a virtual environment, and recently with the reality of returning to the classrooms but with the limitations in the number of students per room regulated by the MEN

(Ministerio de Educación Nacional), student engagement has become a significant challenge. Indeed, the dynamics developed in a virtual session in comparison with a face-to-face setting are not the same. In this regard, Malganova, et al. (2021) claim that the students in the online environment are working in solitude, and the contact with their peers is poor. Unfortunately, this is evident in the type of tasks that 7th-3 graders had during the first semester in the virtual sessions, when those tasks did not promote interaction among the students.

Even with the complexity of this concept, it is crucial to establish the factors that affect student engagement. In this way, Ali & Hassan (2018) found that three factors contribute to student engagement: family, school, and peers. The first factor is the family and it refers particularly to parents; the authors state that they can influence student engagement when they show interest in the children's learning process, support and monitor their progress in the school. The next factor is the school; Ali & Hassan (2018) explain that this is crucial in student engagement when the school could provide a favorable environment where the students can feel they are an essential part of the institution and on a smaller scale, the classroom when the students find that this is a safe and suitable environment for their learning process. Finally, the third factor refers to the peers; according to Ali & Hassan (2018), the importance of this one lies in that students tend to make relationships with people with whom they may share common interests and qualities. Ryan, North, & Ferguson (2019) call this phenomenon "homophily" and state that overtime the students who spend time with peers who are disengaged, their level of engagement will reduce but in contrast, the students who spend time with peers who are highly engaged, their level of engagement will increase. It can be concluded that student engagement is an interrelation of three factors that play an important role. Moreover, the teacher can contribute directly with two of these factors providing a suitable learning environment and spaces where the students can interact with each other.

Apart from the factors, it is essential to mention how to recognize if the student is engaged. According to Wang, Fredricks, Ye, Hofkens, & Linn (2016), engagement is a “multidimensional construct.” Concerning this perspective of engagement, Ryan, et al. (2019) state that four dimensions need to be considered: cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social engagement. These authors claim that (1) cognitive engagement refers to the strategies that students develop for self-regulation in the learning process as also the development of critical thinking; (2) behavioral engagement refers to the observable acts or the way the students react to a stimulus given in class as their participation or their attitude; (3) emotional engagement considers the students’ feelings as enjoyment, anger or frustration; and (4) social engagement includes the interaction patterns that take place into the classroom. Furthermore, Ali & Hassan (2018) claim that “the school environment has had a strong influence on student participation” (p.2165). Therefore, it is possible to affirm that participation is directly related to student engagement.

Interestingly, social engagement has a strong connection with collaborative learning. According to Ali & Hassan (2018), strengthening the relationship among peers contributes to the best construction of student engagement. Similarly, Ryan et al., (2019) claim that peers play an essential role in improving student engagement in the classroom. Accordingly, regarding this factor, it can be said that when a student finds a peer who shares similar interests, this facilitates collaborative work. These statements suggest that the implementation of a class methodology based on collaborative learning could contribute to improving student engagement.

### **Collaborative Learning**

First of all, it is essential to establish the definition of this concept. According to Smith & MacGregor (1992), collaborative learning refers to a determined amount of

approaches focused mainly on promoting workgroups of two or more participants to answer questions, develop tasks or projects, create a product or participate in a process. Something important about this statement is that although there are different ways to promote collaborative learning, the most critical aspect is the interaction among the students.

The implementation of collaborative learning in the classroom could show several benefits as well as challenges. For instance, regarding the positive effects of collaborative learning, Martinez-Carrasco (2018) and Saenz, Bermeo, Fernando, & Chaves (2013) mention that students' level of motivation can increase when they have something in common with their classmates or do something together. Even more, Saenz et al. (2013) state that "giving them the opportunity to interact with one another empowers them with trust and confidence to participate" (p.22). Precisely, this is one of the most crucial points for this study because, as I mentioned in the statement of the problem, a considerable number of students are reluctant to participate in the English class.

On the other hand, concerning the challenges that students and teachers face in the classroom, Martinez-Carrasco (2018) carried out a study with students from the second year of a university and found that some did not like to work in groups. It is well-known that everyone has different learning styles, and this could be a way to explain the preference for some people to work independently and others to work in groups. In this situation, the point is to provide spaces for students to interact, creating a sense of community among the students and explaining the importance of working together to accomplish an important goal.

Regarding implementing tasks addressed to collaborative learning, Smith & MacGregor (1992) state that rather than creating a product, the fundamental importance is the process itself. To appoint roles into the group and explain the importance of every function for the excellent gear of the group and the benefits of participation within the group could

forge a powerful sense of collaborative work. Furthermore, according to Saenz et al. (2013), collaborative learning is meaningful when the learners feel that their opinions and thoughts are taken into account for the group and receive positive comments, resulting in highly motivating and encouraging. The challenge in this context is to create a suitable learning environment within the group; it should be an integrated exercise between the students and the teachers.

**Collaborative learning and foreign language learning.** Concerning the acquisition of a foreign language and academic achievement, Saenz et al., (2013) and Martinez-Carrasco (2018) affirm that collaborative work positively affects language acquisition. Likewise, teachers could implement any specific collaborative learning strategy since it has been said that students working in collaboration make the construct of knowledge more accessible, and even those with the lowest level in the language could integrate harmonically into the group (Saenz et al., 2013). This construction of knowledge shows a crucial advantage for teachers because they expect that the students achieve an average level of the language for the whole group in the classroom. Showing similar results in their studies, these results reinforce the need for incorporating strategies within the classroom that promote collaborative learning and at the same time help to improve the student's language proficiency in the English class.

Several collaborative learning strategies have been developed for implementing them in the classroom. In this matter, Gjergo & Samarxhiu (2011) claim that the most common strategies to promote collaborative learning are pair work, group work, small groups, whole-class grouping, discussions, dialogues, and peer evaluation. Exploring the variety of activities that can be implemented in class and considering the new context produced by the pandemic related to social distancing, and safety protocols, it could be suitable for this research project to focus on pair work and group work, developing the activities in small groups.



Through pair work and group work, it is possible to monitor the reactions when a student is working with a partner and contrast them with the reactions when working collaboratively in a group with 3 or 4 students. According to Harmer (2007), in terms of language learning, in pair work, students can do several tasks such as “practice language together, study a text, research language...” (P. 165). In contrast, this author explains that group work is employed when the proposed task is likely not appropriate for doing it in pairs. Renou’s work (as cited in Rakab, 2016, p. 86) states that both pair work and group work are an essential part of Communicative Language Teaching. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that these strategies are separated from techniques used in traditional approaches, since they allow exploring other abilities apart from the acquisition of grammar rules and vocabulary.

The implementation of group work and pair work implies a set of advantages and disadvantages. Regarding the advantages of pair work, Harmer (2007) mentions that it increases the time for the interactions in the language, promotes autonomy, allows personalized support when the teacher focuses on each pair, promotes collaboration among the students, and is easy to organize into the class. Similarly, Harmer (2007) claims that some aspects form pair work as the interactions in the language, autonomy, and collaboration are also present in group work. These advantages can encourage the teacher to implement pair work and group work, searching to potentiate collaborative learning.

Concerning the disadvantages, which are important to consider when implementing these activities in class, Harmer (2007) relates that both, pair group and group work share a similar problem which is that their implementation can be very noisy and unlike pair work, the organization of group work in the class takes more time. Furthermore, Phipps and Borg’s work (as cited in Rekab, 2016, p. 90), state that these strategies can produce some disruptive behaviors making it difficult to monitor students. This aspect may represent a challenge for teachers, but it is possible to create strategies into the group that could reduce in some way

the impact of the disadvantages and get the balance between the advantages and disadvantages of both pair and group work.

### **Research Question**

How can the implementation of collaborative learning strategies enhance seventh-grade students' engagement in the English classroom at Institución Educativa Juan María Céspedes?

### **Objectives**

#### **General objective**

This research aims to evaluate how collaborative learning strategies enhance seventh-grade students' engagement in the English classroom at Institución Educativa Juan María Céspedes.

#### **Specific objectives**

- To monitor the students' progress concerning their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement through some collaborative work strategies.
- To explore the different patterns of interaction and participation that take place in the class through the implementation of some collaborative work strategies.
- To analyze the effectiveness of the implementation of some collaborative learning strategies in terms of students' engagement.

### **Action Plan**

Considering the statement of the problem, the research question, and the objectives already mentioned, for this Action Research project, I plan to carry out some activities based on two collaborative learning strategies, pair work and group work.

This action plan is divided into two cycles. During the first cycle, the students will be exposed to two activities focused on pair work; I will gather data through observation during the sessions by using a journal. Then, I will implement the other two activities based on group work as a collaborative learning strategy during the second cycle, also gathering data through a journal. Adopting the suggestions provided by Hendricks (2017), I chose the observations because they allow me to monitor the students' progress regarding the proposed objectives and to know the impact of the actions implemented in class. Therefore, the objectives will be focused on the students when they are working in pairs and groups. Moreover, all the observations will be registered through a journal. For writing the observations in the journal, I will use the observation chart employed by Saenz, et al. (2013) in their study.

Additionally, at the end of the two cycles, I will administer a student survey, because as supported by Burns (2010) "this type of data is to do with what people think, believe and perceive and also the way they explain their personal histories, experiences and actions" (p. 74). Reflecting on this statement the purpose of applying this method is to inquire about some data that is not possible to gather through just observation.

Finally, a third data collection method will be integrated into the data gathering process. I will conduct an interview with my Cooperative Teacher (CT) who is a valuable source since she knows the students, and the students know her. She will be present in the implementation of the activities for the development of this research project, and she will be

able to observe the students' progress. Besides, according to Phillips & Karr (2010), through the interview with a person connected with the research project, who is not directly a participant of the project, it is possible to obtain information from a different perspective. An advantage to having a different perspective is avoiding bias in the process of analyzing data. The questions for the interview will be designed with the intention to explore how the CT perceives the students' actions and reactions through the development of the class activities concerning the dimensions of the students' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement.

To sum up, three data collection methods will be used in order to accomplish the proposed objectives for this research study: 1. Observation, 2. Student survey 3. CT's Interview.

### **Development of Actions**

First of all, there were some circumstances that drastically affected the initial action plan. The main limitation was the division of the group into two sub-groups: group A and group B; this decision was made following the regulation provided by the MEN concerning the capacity and social distancing in the classrooms. The division of the group represented an opportunity, for each class had 23 students allowing, in my concept, to have better control of group management and to better monitor the students' progress when they were working in pairs or groups.

Nevertheless, the division of the group was also a challenge, for the implementation of the units that were planned to be developed in four or five sessions had to be compressed in three or even two classes. To explain this situation, I should say that students had classes three days a week, during each week we worked with a subgroup and the next week with the

other subgroup. Then, if I started a unit of four sessions with group A, I would have to finish the unit in two weeks when group A returns to the classroom. This situation could have generated a disorder in the development of actions. For this reason, in agreement with the CT, I decided to take advantage of each week of classes for the implementation of the activities. Additionally, another limitation was the constant cancellation of English classes mainly due to cultural events at the institution; practically, 1 out of 3 classes were canceled every week, resulting in most of the cases that units were developed in two sessions.

The actions for the development of this research project started on September 14th, with the implementation of the first unit. The topic for the first unit was free-time activities. During the first week, I worked with group B and the first action was to explain the concept of collaborative learning and the way we were going to work (Personal Journal, September 17th, 2021). The main activity for this week was pair work about the designing of a poster where the students included a drawing referring to an activity that they had in common and a short description of that activity.

During the second week, I worked with group A. However, I started to be affected by the cancellation of classes, for the class of September 24th was canceled because the institution was celebrating an event. During the first session, I explained the idea of collaborative work; and the students designed their posters in pairs (Personal Journal, September 22nd, 2021).

On September 28th, the class was canceled due to a national strike. Consequently, I just had two days to develop the activity. During that week, I worked with group B. I decided to combine the activity with pair work and group work with the intention that every student could get the experience of working in pairs and groups. The topic for this week was classroom rules and the activity was to design a card where the students expressed which

classroom rules they considered most important. In pairs, they created a list of three rules they considered relevant for the English class. Afterwards, in groups of 4, they created a new list of rules considering the previous list they had developed in pairs; then they had to categorize those rules and give a short explanation arguing the importance of rule number 1 for them.

During the fourth week, the class of October 6th was canceled due to Parent-teacher conferences. That week, I worked with group A, and I implemented the same strategy used in group B with the same activity.

The second week of October was the vacation week. After this week, I worked with group B on the topic of typical food and restaurants. For this topic, students worked in groups of 4 or 5 for a role-play, simulating a situation in a restaurant.

The classes from October 25 to November 5th were canceled due to extracurricular activities. Consequently, I did not have the opportunity to implement the role-play activity with the students of group A.

During the implementation of the pair and group activities my role in the observation was the “participant-observer” (Hendricks, 2017). This is because I was the teacher and I was involved in the environment. Also, I had the role of being the facilitator promoting that relationships into the groups could be harmonic. Concerning my CT’s role, she tried to be a non-participating observer, taking notes and helping to monitor the progress of the groups, however, just in some specific situations she intervened.

Moreover, with the intention to accomplish the process of gathering the data, a student survey (See Appendix A) was conducted on November 9th to group A; and with group B on November 16th. 36 students out of 50 answered the survey; 6 of them had

canceled their school enrollment, 3 of them decided not to participate in the project and 5 of them did not attend classes those days. The survey consisted of a set of 14 questions divided in two sections; the first 8 questions were open-ended questions where they had to justify the answer; the rest of the questions were rating scale questions where they had to rate between 1 to 5 (Burns, 2010). The questions were designed in Spanish language with the intention that the survey could be successfully understandable for the students. The survey also had the intention to integrate the proposed objectives for this research project.

Additionally, the teacher interview was conducted on November 10th (See Appendix B). This interview was composed of 10 questions; all of them were open-ended questions. I tried that the questions for this interview were connected with the survey in order to find relations for the process of analyzing data; in addition, the design of the interview was also connected with the research objectives. In this way, the development of the actions was finished.

Finally, I employed a teacher-student journal as the third source for gathering data obtained through the class observations. Those observations were registered using an observation chart. I considered the use of this chart useful because I could register the data for each group. Additionally, the observation chart has an important label titled, “activity”; within this label it is possible to observe two more labels: the first is “individually” and the second is “group work”. Using these labels, I could monitor the progress of each group and also the individual student progress into the group. The observation chart also has a space for the goal of the activity which is important to focus the data I registered.

### **Data Analysis**

This is an action research study carried out in a public institution of Medellin with the participation of fifty students from seventh grade. The data were gathered from three sources: observations, student survey, and the CT interview. The data from observations were obtained during the implementation of proposed activities between the third and fourth school term. The student survey and the CT interview were administered at the end of the fourth school term when the entire plan was implemented. Once I gathered data, I decided to take into account the steps proposed by Feldman, Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh (2013) to carry out the data analysis. These authors propose an analytic process composed of four stages: 1. reading data, 2. selecting data, 3. presenting data, and 4. interpreting data and drawing conclusions.

After having read all the data I found some important evidence concerning the proposed objectives. After this procedure and following the second stage proposed by Feldman et al. (2013), I grouped the most important factors in a summary sheet trying to organize them into common patterns. Then, using a triangulation method, I organized the data from the three sources into categories in a different summary sheet, in which I wrote the proposed objectives of this study with the purpose of being focused on them; then I organized the categories focused on those objectives. The first category that emerged was participation. However, this category was part of another bigger category which was behavioral engagement. After this, I realized this category was strongly connected with the first and third objectives; then, the next categories, which are emotional engagement and cognitive engagement, were organized regarding this first category. In this respect, three categories were needed to accomplish the first objective and partially the third objective.



Considering the same process used for the first three categories, I focused on the second objective and the successful accomplishment of the third objective; then, with the triangulation of the data, the fourth category emerged related to patterns of interaction. Following the suggestions provided by Burns (2010) I chose the most relevant data collected through the observations in the observation chart; this data was concerning the frequency of interactions among the students when they worked in pairs and groups and the interactions between the groups and I, as the teacher. For this fourth category I made a contrastive analysis between work and pair work.

### **Findings and Interpretation**

I identified four main categories in the analysis from the three sources: Collaborative Learning and Behavioral Engagement, Collaborative Learning and Cognitive Engagement, Collaborative Learning and Emotional Engagement, and Patterns of Interactions.

#### **Collaborative Learning and Behavioral Engagement**

This category refers to the ways in which the students reacted to the activities based on the collaborative work and includes those aspects that could be observable such as their participation in the group being one of the crucial aspects of this project. Therefore, I created the subtopic of participation.

**Participation.** Collaborative learning gives the students confidence for participating in the proposed activities both in pairs and groups. This finding is evident from the analysis of the student survey that showed that the word confidence was repeated constantly when asked if working in pairs or groups helped to improve their participation in the English class. Two students mentioned that they were more confident when they worked in collaborative

activities: “*Porque cojo mas confianza y seguridad a la hora de hablar*” (Student I, Survey), “*Porque me siento más confiada y no me da tantos nervios*”. (Student H, Survey). This first finding is supported by Saenz et al. (2013) who state that promoting the interactions provide the students with the needed confidence for participating in class. This finding suggests that the implementation of activities based on collaborative learning can increase the level of confidence, encouraging the students to participate in the group and enhancing their level of behavioral engagement.

Promoting activities into the classroom where they encourage the students to interact with each other and monitoring the positive development of those relationships provide a suitable learning environment to the students. In this regard, Ali & Hassan (2018) state that school is a crucial factor for improving student engagement and when the school provides a suitable environment, then it has a direct influence on the level of student participation. Through the interview the CT mentioned that the activities based on the collaborative learning promoted the participation of the students because everybody was focused on it: “*Me parece que si mejora la participación haciendo estas actividades es muy bueno porque todos trabajan*” (CT Interview). This finding suggests that the teacher is responsible, in the name of the school, to create a favorable context where students can feel comfortable and can develop an active participation in classroom activities improving their involvement in the learning process.

### **Collaborative Learning and Cognitive Engagement**

Analysis from the collected data suggests a direct correlation between the activities based on collaborative learning and the students’ interest in learning. Concerning this issue, according to the participants and the CT, knowledge was seen as a collective construction. This was evidenced when the CT mentioned: “*Porque mirá que hicimos una construcción*

*colectiva...el uno dibuje, que el otro opine, que el otro se atreva a escribir en inglés”* (CT Interview). Similarly, one of the students expressed that working into the group, if somebody does not know something any other could know it, when asked about the desire for learning English when they worked in pair or groups: *“porque en el grupo los otros pueden saber algo que yo no o yo saber algo que ellos no.”* (Student AA, Survey). Regarding this issue, Saenz, et al. (2013) claim that students working in collaboration make the construct of knowledge more accessible. Therefore, working in a group allows the students to take advantage of others’ knowledge and to support the group with their own knowledge to construct a new one for accomplishing the proposed objectives.

Moreover, the acquisition of knowledge seems to be connected with participation. The results from the student survey showed that 91.7% of the participants (33), when asked about their participation in the English class, when participating in activities based on collaborative learning, reported that those activities helped substantially. One of them mentioned: *“Porque ellos (the participants of the group) me han ayudado a aprender más, entonces participo más”* (Student AF, survey). Then, this finding shows that children have the perception that if they can understand easily with the help of their peers, then they can also increase their level of participation.

### **Collaborative Learning and Emotional Engagement**

The activities based on collaborative learning allowed me to monitor the students’ progress concerning their emotions which was also complemented with the student survey. Working in groups or pairs seemed to be an enjoyable experience for the students mainly because they had the possibility to group with friends, promoting good relationships and communication into the groups (Personal Journal, October 22nd, 2021). This was also supported by the CT when she expressed that students were happy from the moment they

knew they would work in groups: “*Ellos desde que uno les dice que van a trabajar en equipo se ponen contentos.*” (CT Interview). Concerning this finding, Ryan, et al. (2019) state that a suitable emotional environment is reflected in friendly relations, esteem and dialogue. This finding suggests that students created an emotional supportive context doing the proposed activities which allowed them to have a good attitude towards the activities making it an enjoyable experience.

Moreover, the construction of a suitable emotional environment was also evident in some statements from students when asked if working in groups helped to understand the class topic: “*sí porque si alguien no entendía y alguien del grupo sí, nos explicaba detenidamente y me ayudó a ver que trabajar en grupo no es malo y es muy bueno y divertido*” (Student Q, Survey) and “*si porque si alguien no entiende el otro le ayuda y así nos apoyamos*” (Student G, Survey). Regarding the aspect that students understood the topics easier because they had a sense of collaboration in the group, Saenz et al. (2013) state that collaborative learning is meaningful when the learners feel that their opinions and thoughts are taken into account in the group and receive positive comments, resulting in highly motivating and encouraging tasks. This reflects that students working in groups are able to create a strong sense of community where they can work collaboratively enhancing also their emotional engagement.

### **Patterns of interaction**

In this study, it was possible to observe that children form groups taking gender as the main criteria. The tendency forming the groups was just boys and just girls and rarely they formed a mixed group (Personal Journal, October 22nd, 2021). In addition, after analyzing the observations during the collaborative learning activities and comparing them with the CT interview, it is relevant to mention that friendship was another important aspect for forming

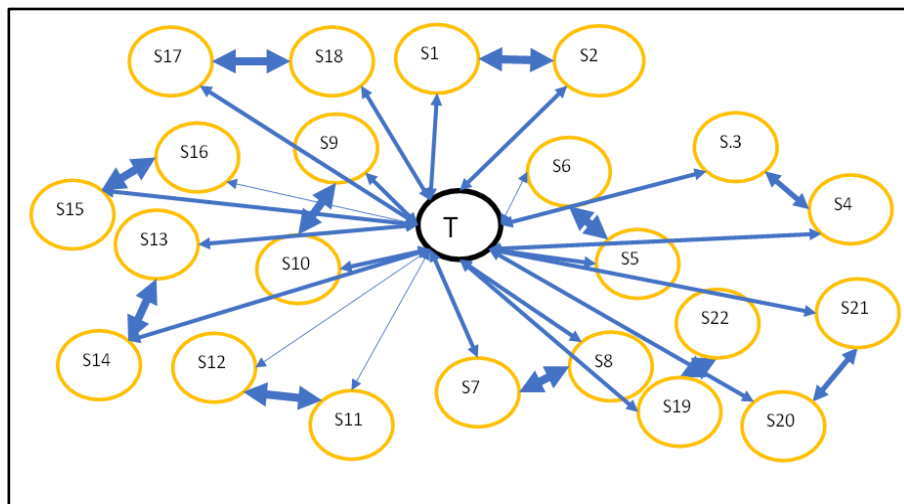
groups. When talking about the effects of the activities based on collaborative learning on the students, the CT mentioned that it was evident the students wanted to work with their friends, being this a positive aspect: “*Sin embargo uno ve que siempre quieren trabajar con los amiguitos... me parece que el efecto es positivo, es motivante, les gusta*” (CT Interview). Concerning this aspect Saenz et al. (2013) mention that students’ level of motivation can increase when they have something in common with their classmates or do something together. Since the beginning of the classes and in accordance with my CT, I allowed students to form the groups considering their own criteria and it was a positive experience for them and the development of classes since they could form the group taking their own interests, likes and considerations and not under the pressure of the teacher’s decisions. This situation improved their engagement towards the proposed activities.

Comparing and analyzing the patterns of interaction when students worked in pairs (See Graphic 1) and when they worked in groups (See Graphic 2) it is possible to see that the interactions were more frequent among the students than between the teacher and students. The patterns of interaction between teacher and students were stronger when students worked in pairs. A possible explanation for this finding is that when working in groups, the presence of the teacher was not quite relevant because the students were able to solve most of the doubts among themselves.

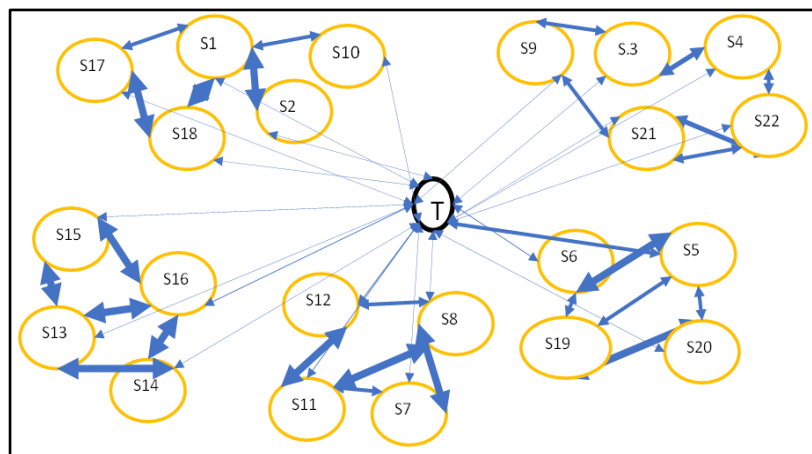
This finding suggests that students developed some degree of autonomy when working in groups. This is supported by Harmer (2007) when he claims that group work “promotes learner autonomy by allowing students to make their own decisions in the group” (p.166). Therefore, the promotion of autonomy could represent that students were participating in the activities effectively given that they were able to make agreements and decisions needed for the accomplishment of the goals proposed for the activities and

according to the evaluation of the students' performance most of the groups successfully reached these goals.

In the graphics, adopting the ones employed by Saqr, Fors, & Tedre (2018) each node (circle) represents a student, except for one of them that represents the teacher (T). In addition, each edge (arrow) corresponds to the interactions, the arrowheads represent the direction of the interactions, the size of each node is relative to its degree of centrality, and the thickness of edges represents the frequency of interactions.



**Graphic 1. Patterns of interaction in Pair Work**



**Graphic 2. Patterns of interaction in Group Work.**

### Conclusions

The results of this Action Research study showed that an essential aspect is crucial for the success of the implementation of collaborative learning in the classroom: confidence. This aspect seems to be strongly connected with participation in class. The findings suggest that working in groups helped students to increase their confidence, resulting in a higher level of participation. Since participation is one of the characteristics of behavioral engagement, it can be affirmed that collaborative learning enhances student behavioral engagement through the promotion of affective interactions where the students could feel comfortable and where they feel that their thoughts and points of view are taken in consideration into the group.

Furthermore, according to the findings, the implementation of collaborative learning in the classroom was effective in terms of enhancing student engagement given that the students had the opportunity to create their own groups. This strategy allowed them to choose peers who shared similar interests. In this way, it was possible to promote an enjoyable learning environment where students could enhance their emotional and cognitive engagement, resulting in the integration of the main dimensions of student engagement.

The findings regarding the patterns of interaction suggest that the activities based on collaborative learning promote a certain degree of students' autonomy, given that the students were allowed to form their groups and make their own decisions. The teacher's role is the facilitator, monitoring that the interactions could be positive for everyone.

Despite the constraints marked mainly by the continuous cancellation of classes and the division of the group into two subgroups, the implementation of this research project had positive results. The students participated actively in the development of the activities; although some disruptive behaviors emerged in class, these did not drastically affect the learning environment.

### **Reflections**

Reflecting on the practicum, I have to recognize that it was a challenging experience because it was my first time teaching at a school. This experience allowed me to grow up not just professionally but personally. Furthermore, this experience helped me to realize my beliefs, resulting in the continued progress addressed to the new realities in the academic field.

Additionally, in spite of the limitations due to the pandemic, I had a meaningful connection with my students, and my CT and I forged strong relationships with most of the students. For this reason, I consider the practicum as a great opportunity in my life.

Finally, I had never had the experience to work in a school and to have the responsibility of connecting it with the development of action research was a great challenge. Certainly, the support of my research advisor, the CT, and the students were essential for successfully accomplishing the proposed objectives. Undoubtedly, this experience reinforced my desire to continue my professional career in the academic field.



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## Appendix A

### Student Survey

**Nota:** Apreciado estudiante, el propósito de esta encuesta es obtener información más detallada acerca de cómo se sintieron y en general como fue el impacto del trabajo colaborativo desarrollado en clase a través del trabajo en parejas y en grupos. Recuerde que no hay respuestas acertadas ni equivocadas, por ende, no tiene ninguna nota académica. Por favor conteste con total sinceridad. La información aquí suministrada como los resultados derivados de esta encuesta serán completamente confidenciales y con fines académicos.

Nombre \_\_\_\_\_ Fecha \_\_\_\_\_

1. ¿Qué significa para ti trabajo colaborativo según las actividades desarrolladas en nuestras clases?
2. ¿Crees que trabajar colaborativamente en pareja y en grupo te ha ayudado a mejorar tu participación en la clase de inglés?  
 SI     NO  
 Explica por qué
3. Teniendo en cuenta las actividades basadas en el trabajo colaborativo en pareja y en grupo consideras que tu deseo por aprender inglés ha :  
 A. Mejorado    B. Seguido igual    C. Disminuido  
 Por favor explica por qué
4. ¿Crees que a través del trabajo colaborativo implementado en las clases (en parejas y en grupo) le ayudaron a entender mejor los temas de inglés?  
 SI     NO  
 Por favor explica por qué
5. Cómo prefieres trabajar en la clase de inglés  
 A. Solo    B. En pareja    C. En grupo (tres o más personas)  
 Por favor justifica tu respuesta
6. Mientras estabas trabajando en grupo ¿Cómo fueron las interacciones con tus compañeros de grupo?
7. ¿Crees que el trabajo colaborativo te permitió socializar de una mejor manera con tus compañeros? ¿Por qué?
8. ¿Crees que el trabajo colaborativo te permitió socializar de una mejor manera con tu profesor? ¿Por qué?

En una escala de 1 a 5 siendo 5 la nota más alta:

9. ¿Cómo calificarías tu participación en el trabajo en pareja?

1	2	3	4	5
Nada bien				Excelente

10. ¿Cómo calificarías tu participación en el trabajo en grupo de tres o más personas?

1	2	3	4	5
Nada bien				Excelente

En las siguientes afirmaciones vas a escoger una opción de 1 a 5, donde 1 es completamente en desacuerdo y 5 es totalmente de acuerdo.

11. A través del trabajo colaborativo me sentí cómodo(a) para participar en las clases de inglés.

1	2	3	4	5
Completamente en desacuerdo			Completamente de acuerdo	

12. El trabajo colaborativo fue divertido.

1	2	3	4	5
Completamente en desacuerdo			Completamente de acuerdo	

13. El trabajo colaborativo ha mejorado mi relación con mis compañeros y con los profesores

1	2	3	4	5
Completamente en desacuerdo			Completamente de acuerdo	

14. Siento que aprendí mucho trabajando colaborativamente con otros compañeros

1	2	3	4	5
Completamente en desacuerdo			Completamente de acuerdo	

## Appendix B

### CT Interview

**Importante:** Esta entrevista tiene como propósito abordar desde una perspectiva diferente a la del investigador sobre la efectividad de las actividades desarrolladas en clase basadas en el aprendizaje colaborativo. Conteste las preguntas de acuerdo a lo observado en clase. El tratamiento de la información que de esta entrevista se derive será totalmente confidencial y sólo será utilizada para propósito académico

1. En general, ¿Qué efecto pudo observar en los estudiantes durante el desarrollo de estas actividades?
2. ¿Crees que las actividades desarrolladas en clase basadas en el aprendizaje colaborativo han mejorado la participación de los estudiantes?
- 2.1. En este mismo aspecto ¿qué efecto pudo observar en aquellos estudiantes que tienen dificultades para participar? Mejoró, siguió igual, empeoró
3. ¿Consideras que estas actividades basadas en el aprendizaje colaborativo desarrolladas en clase trabajando en parejas y en grupo han mejorado el deseo por aprender inglés en los niños? ¿De qué manera?
4. ¿Crees que las estrategias de trabajo colaborativo ayudaron a mejorar las relaciones entre los estudiantes? cómo? ¿por qué?
5. ¿Crees que las estrategias de trabajo colaborativo ayudaron a mejorar la relación entre los estudiantes y el profesor? cómo? ¿por qué?
6. En general, ¿crees que los estudiantes se sintieron más cómodos trabajando colaborativamente con otros compañeros? ¿por qué?
7. ¿Cómo evalúas el cambio que tuvieron los estudiantes durante la implementación de estas actividades?
8. ¿Cómo evalúas las estrategias implementadas en clase basadas en el aprendizaje colaborativo? fueron acertadas?
9. ¿Crees que se podrían continuar haciendo este tipo de actividades?
10. ¿Qué harías diferente?