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Creating a Safe Learning Environment for the English Class Through Project Work

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of an action research project which aimed at creating a safe learning environment through the implementation of a project work unit focused on students' realities. The participants of this project were fifth graders at a public institution located in the rural area of Rionegro, Antioquia. Data collected for this study included teacher journals and students' artifacts. Additionally, due to local and national measures adopted during the COVID-19 crisis, the data included family involvement. The findings showed that the inclusion of learners' realities, the way teachers mediate relationships and the quality of parental involvement foster a positive and collaborative learning environment which also affects positively students' academic achievement.

Key words: Safe Learning Environment, Project Work, Relationships.

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 El Carmen de Viboral, Colombia.

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Preface

I have always heard people saying that teachers are heroes. During my school time I did not understand this premise because, from my experience, most of my teachers had been villains. I spent a considerable amount of time during my undergraduate studies understanding why I was studying to become a teacher. Then, in my practicum, I found this context that helped me to understand everything. The most amazing thing about my context is that it was full of challenges.

From the very beginning, the CT told me that I had chosen a problematic group. I tried not to be influenced by those tags, but then I understood them. I had a group of students who mistreated one another. They did not respect each other; they did not even know who their classmates were. In addition to these characteristics, I could notice that the English classes did not provide students with opportunities to freely express themselves in the target language. In order to respond to these necessities, I designed a project that fostered the creation of a space in which everybody felt safe to be themselves, to learn from their mistakes, to freely participate and to make mistakes, in other words, a safe learning environment.

This project ended up being a reconciliation with some of my traumas as a child. I was able to offer these children a community that actually took them into consideration. An English class designed to fulfill their necessities and interests and a place that embraced them. Once many other concerns were clarified, these students were more in an attitude to learn. We all felt safe in our class.

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Description of the context

This Action Research (AR) project was developed at *Institución Educativa Barro Blanco*. This public institution is located in the rural area of Rionegro, east of Antioquia, approximately one kilometer away from the urban area. According to what is stated in the Institutional Educational Project (PEI in Spanish), the institutional mission is to provide students with complete education while promoting values that will prepare them to face different contexts. The main goal is to include the hearing-impaired community.

Concerning its vision, by 2020 the Institution will lead inclusion processes and will supply students with enough tools to properly perform in society (Institución Educativa Barro Blanco, 2019). This institution works under the socio-critical and inclusive pedagogical model, which aims at the construction of life in community and the development of elements to actively participate in society (Institución Educativa Barro Blanco, 2019).

The school population is composed of approximately 800 students, including deaf ones, and around 35 teachers, some of whom are interpreters of sign language. Besides the regular classes, the institution offers extra support for students who require assistance due to academic, disciplinary or cognitive problems. The group where this AR was carried out corresponded to a fifth-grade course composed of 35 students whose ages ranged from 9 to 15 years old. There were students with disciplinary procedures, students repeating the school year, and over-age pupils. The relationships that were observed in this group were mostly violent interactions which included hitting or insulting each other. Most of these pupils lived near the school and belonged to socioeconomic strata one, two, and three (Institución Educativa Barro Blanco, 2019).

As for the English course, it was a two-hour class taught once a week. Respecting to the content for these lessons, it was based on both the curriculum map, a plan created by the teachers at the beginning of the school year that includes topics and assessment proposals for each term of the year, as well as the suggested curriculum proposed by the Ministry of Education under the framework of the *Colombia Bilingüe* program. Regarding the assessment, the Institution proposes to evaluate three competences: procedural, behavioral, and conceptual (Informal interview protocol, August 23rd, 2019). The classroom that was assigned for this group was wide and well illuminated. It had several windows that were covered by white paper. It was also equipped with a TV, a whiteboard, a desk and enough chairs for 35 students (Journal Entry 1, February 19th, 2020).

In addition to the group, this Action Research project involved a cooperating teacher (CT) from the Institution, an advisor from the university, and myself, the pre-service teacher researcher. As for the first one, she holds a Bachelor Degree in Basic Education. She has 16 years of experience as a teacher, the last three of them in this institution. Concerning my practicum advisor, he is a professor at the School of Languages at Universidad de Antioquia and an English teacher in a public institution. He holds a BA in foreign language teaching and a Master's degree in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. With respect to me, the researcher, I am a pre-service teacher in the tenth semester of the undergraduate program in Foreign Language Teaching at Universidad de Antioquia. I have been teaching children, teenagers and adults for three years.

Statement of the Problem

Teaching and learning are processes that go beyond giving and receiving content. Many factors can affect learning due to the fact that classrooms are not only inhabited by

inanimate concepts, but also by students' and teachers' contexts, stories and varied personalities. Every person we interact with is a unique world that deserves respect. This respect is shown by listening and recognizing others, accepting and celebrating differences, and providing spaces where everybody feels free to be themselves (Thompson & Wheeler, 2010). However, these concepts tend to be overlooked in many educational settings, and the language teaching and learning field is not an exception.

The context where this action research project was carried out was full of challenges. To begin with, in this class there were over-age pupils, students repeating the school year, children whose backgrounds were difficult due to their economic or family issues. Some of these learners had to walk long routes to get to the school, some others had been abandoned by one of their parents or had suffered from domestic violence (Informal Interview Protocol, August 23rd, 2019). The students brought all these difficulties to the classroom, and as an effect of these conditions, it was hard for them to focus and to behave properly during classes.

In addition to the pupils' environments, another recurrent and problematic situation was that learners' interests and abilities were not taken into consideration when planning the lessons. In the survey carried out on August 23rd 2019, the pupils expressed their interest in doing collaborative work as well as including activities such as listening to songs, playing games, and performing role plays during the lessons. However, the classes observed did not include any of these features, which led me to conclude that students' participation in both the mother and the target language was limited and poor as a result of the aforementioned circumstances.

The combination of all these characteristics created an environment where English learning and teaching processes did not have the main role. In this case, most efforts and class time were invested in trying to discipline students, which was achieved by means of raising the tone of voice or punishing students who misbehaved (Journal entries 1, 2, 3, 4). Nonetheless, although the learners reacted to the teacher's warnings and changed their behavior during some minutes, these strategies did not work in the long term, given that learners continued having serious discipline issues throughout the development of classes. All of these problems had permeated the English class, leading to the absence of safe spaces for children to live a healthy learning process. Thus, this lack of a healthy space had contributed to creating a linguistic gap: Students were reluctant to freely participate during the English classes, not only because of the exclusion of their interests and abilities, but also because of the class environment.

The way I saw the situation, these pupils needed to be understood before understanding anything (Devine & Cohen, 2007; Reeves et al, 2011). One of the ways to understand them was by giving them voice, by listening to them, by recognizing who they were and what they wanted. The learners needed a space where they felt they belonged, a space that embraced them. As Devine and Cohen (2007) point out, "feeling safe in school—socially and emotionally as well as physically—shapes student learning and development. We all need to feel safe to discover, learn, and relate in healthy ways" (pp. 1-2). In this sense, creating safe spaces for these learners could mean an improvement in their reactions towards the English class and the school itself.

Considering the idea that through the existence of safe spaces students can take healthy risks in class, which is translated into active learning (Devine & Cohen, 2007), I

proposed as a starting point the tenets of project work as a means to address the aforementioned problem. Blumenfeld et al. (1991) claimed that “projects can enhance student interest because they involve students in solving authentic problems, in working with others and in building real solutions” (p. 373). The nature of project work could allow students to have a scaffolded process, with evident continuity and where learners were encouraged to participate and make decisions on their own language learning process. In addition, the characteristics of project-based learning transform the role of the teacher from an instructor to a guide who provides learners with tools that help them give more significance to the content they are going through. Moreover, teachers are expected to promote learning environments that benefit students’ interests and risk-taking abilities (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). On that account, language knowledge is expected to take place not as an isolated issue, but as a construction by both students and teachers.

In essence, the basis under which project work was established was intended to benefit the creation of spaces where all learners felt they were actually included. Students needed places where their passions and talents were seen as a means that contributed to the creation of knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the paradigm, concepts, and principles that guided this action research study. To begin with, I present the sociocultural approach and its implications for language teaching and learning. In the second place, I propose some definitions for the concept of safe learning environments, their characteristics as well as the conditions and steps that some authors have proposed in order to create safe learning environments and their importance for an EFL class. These two theories were the lenses

through which this action research project was developed. Finally, I suggest the tenets and characteristics of project work as the means to create a safe EFL learning environment.

Sociocultural Orientation

Vygotsky introduced the sociocultural approach, according to which the human mind is mediated by relationships that foster changes in our world (Lantolf, 2000; Stetsenko, 2017). Following this perspective, the mind is shaped by the interaction with other people as well as the participation in activities that belong to larger social practices and collective projects (Stetsenko, 2017). As for knowledge, the Vygotskian theory holds that it is “an act of creation and change” (Stetsenko, 2017 p. 319) given that both the person and the world are composed of shared activities, objectives and projects aiming at transforming the world. This theory also permeates the language learning field, entailing a shift from the behaviorist approach, to one where the learners have a more active role through the creation of the context for their own learning (Kim & Yoon, 2012).

A key component of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory is the introduction of the concept of Zone of Proximal development. In Vygotsky’s words, the ZPD is “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (as cited in Shabani, Khatib & Ebadi 2010, p.86). That is to say, learning objectives can be more achievable by working collaboratively with more skilled people. ZPD works by grouping students with more competent peers to develop a task, so that at the end of the task, the learner that was struggling, is able to perform a second time without any colleague’s or adult’s help

(Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010). The ZPD will evolve depending on the student's progress.

Another vital component in Vygotsky's ideas is the concept of scaffolding. This notion has been understood as "a way of operationalizing Vygotsky's ZPD" (Wells, 1999, p. 127). According to Wells (1999), there are three main characteristics of scaffolding: 1) The essentially dialogic nature of the discourse in which knowledge is co-constructed; 2) The significance of the kind of activity in which knowing is embedded and 3) The role of artefacts that mediate knowing. In this sense, the learner becomes a more active agent in their own learning process, which is affected by the relationships that the individuals establish with their peers and their environment. The role of the relationships, the way agents interact in the learning process, should be positive and collaborative. In this way, the participants do not worry about violence or other concerns that could prevent them from focusing on the content or the information that is being presented. In other words, creating safe learning environments.

Safe Learning Environments

Safe learning environments are educational settings where students are meant to feel safe to learn, not only in terms of physical safety, but also in terms of intellectual and emotional safety (Devine & Cohen, 2007; Reeves et al. 2011; Thompson & Wheeler, 2010). These spaces must provide students with tools that allow them to freely express, to accept and to recognize that sometimes we do not know everything and to perceive mistakes as a means to obtain knowledge (Devine & Cohen, 2007). In addition to these features, several authors have agreed on the fact that safe learning environments are created by an educational community that embodies common interests and characteristics,

highlighting the importance of reciprocal respect (Devine & Cohen, 2007; Reeves et al. 2011).

In regards to the creation of safe learning environments, several authors (Devine & Cohen, 2007; Reeves et al. 2011; Thompson & Wheeler, 2010) have agreed on some characteristics that these spaces must fulfill as to promote learning. To begin with, Devine and Cohen (2007) bring up the importance of understanding the influence that students' individualities have on the relationships that are established. These authors also introduce three categories that must be considered when creating safe learning environments. The first one is the individual level, aimed at identifying and recognizing students' interests and needs. The second level is the classroom, related to the relationships that are established among students. Finally, the third level has to do with how both educators and pupils build a safe climate for learning. According to the authors, these features of the school life are vital when promoting safe learning environments.

In addition to these steps, the aforementioned scholars propose some principles that guide the creation of safe learning places, such as the incorporation of collaborative discussions among students and teachers to set up rules that clearly establish what is and what is not allowed as to promote social and emotional safety. Along with these dialogues, the authors highlight the importance of giving voice to students, which will help them to take risks, and to accept that sometimes we do not know everything. Besides this, it is vital to highlight that respect must be at the core of a safe learning space (Devine & Cohen, 2007; Reeves et al., 2011).

In the same vein, Thompson and Wheeler (2010) introduce three principal elements to take into consideration when striving for a safe learning space. The first one is the

physical learning environment that refers to classroom arrangement. The authors hold that classrooms should be organized in a way that allows both teachers and students to discuss, debate and communicate their points of view (Thompson & Wheeler, 2010). The second component corresponds to an intellectual learning environment which, according to Oblinger (as cited in Thompson & Wheeler, 2010) is grounded on four elements: “problem solving, relevant projects, critical thinking, and complex activities” (p, 238). The third item to create a safe learning environment according to the authors is the emotional learning environment. This feature is created by having mutual respect and support in the classes as well as recognizing cultural diversities (Thompson & Wheeler, 2010).

There are spaces where learning is expected to occur, and those spaces must attain certain parameters in order to achieve their goal. The first condition is safety, not only in terms of physical safety, but also emotional safety. “When students feel safe emotionally, they are most able to be active learners” (Devine & Cohen, 2007, p. 56). Education must take place in an environment where students can focus on the content that is being proposed; where pupils have no distractions related to threats, hunger, abuse, among other feelings that could raise the levels of stress under which it is not possible to learn (Thompson & Wheeler, 2010). Taking this into consideration, educators need to be aware of the needs that must be satisfied and the conditions that must be guaranteed before trying to teach anything to the students with the aim of promoting spaces when learners feel free to explore, to learn, and to create (Thompson & Wheeler, 2010).

Project Work

Project work is a teaching and learning methodology in which learners have an active role since they are expected to propose solutions to realistic problems by means of

debates, experiments, data collection and analysis, among others (Blumenfeld et al, 1991). This perspective also allows students to create their own artifacts and to share them with their peers to give and to receive feedback from them. That is to say, this learning approach advocates for the construction of knowledge in the community through the interaction with different modes of thinking (Blumenfeld et al, 1991). Another tenet of project work is the inclusion of real-life situations that allow a connection between the classroom and learners' realities, which also fosters students' engagement in the activities that are developed in classes.

Given the characteristics of project work and taking into consideration the core ideas of safe learning environments, they could go hand in hand to create a space where learners felt safe to participate, to ask questions, to propose solutions, and to make mistakes that will help them to learn.

Research Question

How may the implementation of a project work unit help to create a safe EFL learning environment for fifth graders in a public school in Rionegro, Antioquia?

Objectives

General Objective

To identify how project work may help to create a safe EFL learning environment for fifth graders.

Specific Objectives

1. To explore how the tenets of project work could help to create a safe learning environment for the English class.

2. To promote a space where pupils have an active role in their own learning process.

Action Plan

This action plan was created based on the needs identified through observations performed during the second semester of 2019 in an English class for fourth graders. Thanks to the observation process, some problems were diagnosed, mainly related to the relationships that students established. Therefore, the actions and activities proposed in this action plan were oriented towards the creation of a safe EFL learning environment by promoting healthy interactions in the classroom (Devine & Cohen, 2007; Reeves et al., 2011).

This action plan was designed under the tenets of project work which establishes that learners should have an active role in their learning process (Blumenfeld et al, 1991). Taking into consideration the theories previously mentioned, the first action consisted in negotiating the rules for the EFL classroom with the aim of explicitly defining what was and what was not allowed in class. Along with this action, the project in which students will work in couples during the upcoming sessions would be presented. Students and teacher would also agree on conditions and assessment for the project. Field journals would be used to collect and analyze data on students' reactions towards rules as well as on interactions in the classroom.

The project was named "This is me!" and it consisted of two main actions. The first one aimed at identifying pupils' identities and self-perceptions. It had two parts: first, in couples, students would design a poster in which they portrayed personal information about them. Subsequently, they would present their creations in a face to face presentation.

Teacher journals, students' creations as well as video recordings of learners' presentations were used to collect and analyze data in terms of pupils' realities, interactions and attitudes when presenting for their classmates.

The second big action was a puppet presentation divided in three stages. The first stage corresponded to the elaboration of puppets. Every student would create their couple's puppet, trying to make it as similar to the reality as possible. In the second stage, students would write the script for the presentation and would give and receive peer feedback. The final stage was the puppets theater itself for which students would have a trial presentation to prepare them before their final presentation and to lower their levels of anxiety. I planned every stage to be developed during class time.

I would use journals and students' productions to register and to interpret information on children's behaviors, negotiations and interactions when working with others. This information also helped me to identify how pupils' personal beliefs affected their creations and the decisions they made. Additionally, I resorted to video recording and pictures of pupils' presentations to have information on students' attitudes, feelings, interactions and relationships at the end of the implementation of the project work unit.

Development of Actions

I implemented the following actions during the first semester of 2020. These times were particularly special because of the COVID-19, the virus that completely modified our lives. Several actions were planned, but then, in order to respond to the new conditions, it was necessary to modify the final parts. The project unit was called "This is me!". It was designed with the aim of knowing more about students' realities and to promote a safe learning environment by working collaboratively.

The first action that we developed was establishing rules for the English class. With students' help and ideas, we decided on what was and what was not allowed for our classes. For doing so, I distributed some small sheets of paper on which every learner wrote a rule for the class. After some minutes, I asked pupils to share the rule they proposed. Most of the rules that students proposed were oriented towards good treating among themselves, so we agreed on "respecting the others" as our golden rule.

While we were creating the rules, I realized that students' relationships were more problematic than I had seen during the previous semester, so another action appeared. This one was called "I'm sorry". To perform this activity, I distributed a piece of paper to every student and asked them to write *Perdón*. I did this part in Spanish so pupils freely expressed themselves. Once everybody wrote the word, I asked them to hand in the piece of paper to a person they needed to say "I'm sorry". Some students received several apologies, so I asked them if they wanted to share how they felt. They first mentioned why their peers were apologizing, and at the end they replied. I noticed that a child was crying when reading his letters. He had received six "I'm sorry" notes. I did not ask him to share. I just gave him time to cry and to calm down. To close this activity, I proposed a big hug and asked students to shout out loud the prompt "I'm sorry" three times.

The subsequent action was presenting the class project to the students. During this short stage, we agreed on the couples, the conditions, and the assessment for the project. The project was divided into two big actions. The first one was a poster creation and presentation, and the second one was a puppet creation and presentation. The "this is me" poster was created in the classroom. I asked students to bring materials, and pictures of themselves or their families, if it was possible. We worked in couples or in groups to

design the poster. Then, we presented it. I explained to the learners the face to face procedure to present, but they proposed to present in front of everyone. We did both. First, we had twenty minutes to present one peer to another and after those minutes, some volunteers presented in front of the whole class.

The following actions corresponded to the second part of the project, which consisted in a puppet presentation with puppets and dialogues created by the students and their peers in the classroom. Nonetheless, due to the measures taken by local and national governments due to COVID-19, the last actions had some modifications. The interest in knowing and understanding pupils' emotions and feelings remained as a main objective during the development of the project. As to achieve this goal, I asked students to write letters in which they described how they and their families were feeling during the lockdown as well as the strategies they were using to deal with the issue. The letters were written in Spanish since I mainly wanted students to feel free to express themselves.

Afterwards, I communicated the changes in the project. To begin with, every student created their own puppet. As for the construction of the dialogue, given that students did not have classroom interaction, I decided that every student would create a monologue in which they described their own routine during the quarantine. To continue with the puppet's presentation, I asked pupils to video record themselves presenting the puppet they had designed along with their own routine. Thanks to these modifications, it was possible to include learners' new realities and to identify how these can affect the learning process. The decisions I made allowed me to continue fostering a safe learning environment from students' homes since these latter became our contexts.

Data Analysis

In order to carry out this stage of the process, I organized the journals and pictures of students' artifacts and productions in different folders that were later analyzed using the software atlas.ti. Then, I read the data and assigned preliminary codes that were extracted from the theoretical framework. Next, following Clarke and Braun (2012), I performed thematic analysis, a methodology that allows researchers to identify common meanings that can be divided in broader themes, which fit my research interests. I collected data from two main sources: on field journals and students' artifacts and productions.

The first instrument that I analyzed was the journals. I organized them in the software and assigned codes to the most relevant information pertaining to my research interest. I named the codes with the help of the theory. Once I finished analyzing the journals, I started to explore students' artifacts and productions. Firstly, I examined the poster with personal information that students created in the classroom. Secondly, I analyzed the letters that they sent to the school, and thirdly, I analyzed the puppets that they made to represent their daily routines. These data were analyzed in terms of students' self-perceptions and reactions, as well as their feelings during the quarantine.

After finishing this stage, I re-read the data and grouped some codes in broader categories. I also merged codes that were very similar among them with the aim of being more specific with the data. Afterwards, I created a mind map that allowed me to identify recurrences and to establish connections among the codes and categories. Thanks to these processes, I found some main topics that I interpreted in light of my theory. The combination of these steps helped me to draw conclusions and to answer my research question.

Findings and Interpretations

After analyzing the data collected during the implementation of the actions, three themes emerged: 1) students' assumption of an active role, 2) healthy relationships and 3) the importance of adults in the creation of a safe learning environment. In this section, I develop the aforementioned findings.

Students Becoming Leaders of Their Own Process

The analysis of data allowed me to identify that students' role in the English class had some transformations since the implementation of the project. The creation of spaces where students could freely express themselves in the target language fostered participation in the class and helped students to develop autonomy. Both findings will be developed in this section.

Increase in participation. Data shows that two main factors impacted most of students' participation which increased in a significant way. The first one was having a space where students could freely express themselves. A space in which their opinions, doubts, questions, and suggestions about the class development were listened to and incorporated. This could be evidenced in some class activities, as the following excerpt from one journal evidences "...I walked around the classroom showing her work. Her classmates liked the poster. They were saying it was beautifully created, and they were even asking about the people in the pictures she displayed". (Journal Entry, March 4th, 2020). The evidence suggests that, if students do not have to worry about violent comments or responses in the classroom, they are more willing to take part in the class. Following the same line, Devine and Cohen (2007), affirm that if students do not feel safe in their learning setting, it would be difficult to place themselves as active learners.

Bringing students' realities to the English class, which is one of the tenets of project work (Blumenfeld et al., 1991), triggers them to participate even in the target language, thus promoting a starring role in learners. Besides, Following Vygotsky's ideas, language is one of the most powerful tools we have to connect with the world. This is why it is necessary that languages allow us to communicate from our inner context, that is to say, from our own realities (Lantolf, 2000). This factor is portrayed in the following excerpt from one of my journals during the "all about me" poster presentation shows that "Students were actively participating; I asked if there were volunteers to present today, and many kids raised their hands" (Journal Entry, March 11th, 2020). As this excerpt showed, learners wanted to share who they were to their classmates through the target language, which represented a significant change from the first semester of the practicum until the implementation of actions in regards to students' attitudes and roles in the classroom.

Autonomy. Another finding that emerged from this study was the growth in students' autonomy since they started to make proposals and decisions in regards to the procedures and activities that were proposed. Those decisions that the students made were oriented towards the improvement of their own learning as well as the relationships among them. In one of the classes, they proposed a different procedure to present the "all about me" poster because they wanted to present in front of everybody and to see their classmates' presentations. This reflects what Little (cited in Ariza, 2008) holds when he mentions decision making, which means taking position towards one's own learning as one of the learners' independent actions.

The creation of an environment in which students felt free to participate, to give opinions and to make proposals about the class itself benefitted the emergence of

autonomy. Data also allowed me to see a change in students' attitudes, efforts and commitment towards the activities proposed for the English class. In this sense, Piaget and Helier hold that collaboration among all the participants in a learning process is crucial to build learner autonomy (cited in Perdomo, Rico & Huepa, 2011) At the beginning, students' devoted minimum efforts to develop the activities, but at the end of the project, learners evidenced more commitment and efforts to create an artifact through which they felt identified (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Students' puppets

The data evidenced how pupils' autonomy and commitment with the English class grew throughout the implementation of the project. Nonetheless, all the pupils did not respond in the same way.

Positive and Collaborative Relationships

Another interesting finding from the research was the change in the relationships that were established in the classroom. In this section, I will address how the constant repetition about the importance of respect and the sense of partnership that emerged were

vital in the transformation of the interactions in the English class, so we could have a safe learning environment.

Respect the others. The data allowed me to identify a shift from problematic relationships among students towards healthier ones. This transformation was facilitated by several factors, the more salient one is the creation of rules. The first action that I developed was negotiating rules with students. Together, we decided what was and what was not allowed during the English class. We agreed on “respecting the others” as our most important rule. This rule was actually mentioned several times by different students who complained about the mistreatment they received from their classmates, as it exemplified in the following excerpt: Learners proposed to act respectful with all members of the classroom. We started talking about bullying. Students said that they considered bullying all physical and psychological aggression, also jokes about appearance and mistakes (Journal Entry, February 19th, 2020).

The previous evidence from one of my journals as well as some students’ proposals for the rules demonstrate students’ necessity to feel safe and respected in their classroom. As a matter of fact, the most salient rule that students proposed had to do with respect (See figure 2).



Figure 2. Rules proposed by students during the first class.

As suggested by Devine and Cohen (2007), discussing and negotiating rules for our class allowed the creation of a more egalitarian classroom in which everybody felt included. Also, as it is stated by Thompson and Wheeler (2010), one of the components of a safe learning environment is the emotional safety, which comprises feelings of safety, support and respect. These scholars agree on the importance of creating a healthy emotional climate inside the classroom. Moreover, given that learning takes place thanks to the interaction with the community, the relationships that are established must be positive, collaborative and supporting (Stetsenko, 2017).

Partnership. At the beginning of the project, I had a group that did not feel like a team. They spent most of the time fighting among themselves or insulting each other. They were also selfish with their school elements, their knowledge and their time. It was a challenge to have them working in groups, mainly due to the problematic interactions that thrived in the classroom. During the implementation of the project, there were changes towards a group that behaved more like a community in which every participant was valuable, important and respected. Pupils were more willing to help their classmates, as it is portrayed in the following excerpt: “Some students had forgotten the poster, so I asked the students who had brought the poster if they agreed on giving a second opportunity to their classmates so they did not fail the grade. They accepted” (Journal Entry, March 11th, 2020).

As this excerpt shows, students shared their materials and agreed on giving a second opportunity to some partners so they did not fail a grade. These cooperative actions take part in a learning community since, according to the sociocultural approach, learning takes place in a commonly shared context (Stetsenko, 2017). Besides, following the

The following section shows how including learners' realities, mediating relationships and stimulating students appeared to be crucial in the creation of a safe learning environment.

Including learners' realities: this is me! this is us! Thanks to the activities that I proposed, students in this English class were taken into consideration, which promoted a relationship among the content studied in class and pupil's realities. According to Becerra and McNulty (2010), when students can make those connections, significant learning takes place. The project that aimed at promoting healthy interactions was called "this is me!". Project work was chosen because its nature is to place students in real-life situations in which learners are free to generate, to share, and to evaluate their own artifacts (Blumenfeld et al, 1997). Throughout this project, pupils could connect what they learnt in classes to their own lives. It was possible for them to use the foreign language to talk about themselves, to show the others who they were and to know more about their classmates in this learning community.

Conflict resolution: apologies heal. The data showed that the way I interfered in the relationships that were established among the students had a direct influence on their responses. In this study, my role was that of a mediator, that is to say, I was attentive to how pupils treated each other, how they addressed their classmates and their teacher. This was evidenced in the negotiation of rules and the conflict resolution activities, like it happened during the first class when I noticed there were interaction problems that needed to be solved, as it is shown by the following evidence from my journal about saying sorry.

I asked students to raise their hand if someone had handed them an apology. Almost half of the class raised their hand, and some of the pupils started to share the

reasons why they said sorry to the others. To close this activity, I asked students to stand up and hug one of their classmates. (Journal Entry, February 19th, 2020)

As the evidence showed, it is important to devote time in addressing violent interactions among learners. Caring and paying attention to students' feelings was vital in this context, and it is actually one of the roles that Usma (2015) identified for Colombian teachers in order to transform current teaching practices. This author found that many educators in our context not only perceive themselves as language teachers, but also as nurturers for students and their families, which in turn, positively influences learners' wellbeing.

Stimulating students: You can do it! Thanks to the data analysis, it was possible to perceive my role in the classroom as a person who encourages students to speak and to ask for further explanations by giving them stimuli. One of the stimuli I gave to learners was linguistic input that helped them to recognize what they knew about the target language and what they could do with it. During the classes, when learners struggled with the use of language, I started asking them the vocabulary needed to perform the activities and they answered perfectly, which helped them realize they knew more about English than they thought. Thanks to these in-class conversations, students started to perform more independently. This process goes in line with Vygotsky's ZPD and Scaffolding. In this case, the teacher created the conditions to guide students from where they were at the beginning towards where they should be in their learning process (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010). At the end of the project, students were able to develop activities without any constant guidance nor monitoring thanks to the stimuli they received during the different

stages. These scaffolded actions allowed both teacher and learners to better identify the learning necessities that needed to be fulfilled.

Parental involvement (commitment). The activities that I proposed inside the project allowed me to bring some relatives to the school, which in turns, improved academic achievement. The main purpose of this project was to create a safe environment that facilitated learning. Given the circumstances due to COVID-19, half of the project was developed from every students' home. Once the quarantine ordered by the government started, parents became the bridge between teacher and students. The communication that was established fostered the inclusion of students' families in the school life. As it is asserted by Ávila and Garavito (2009), this collaboration among school and parents is a vital instrument in education to produce positive results.

Additionally, family's company and support during the English class were evidenced through the quality and accuracy of the activities that the students developed from their homes. Devine and Cohen (2007) assert that taking relatives into account in students' processes is one of the conditions to create a safe learning environment. For these authors, it is necessary that all the adults that are in contact with learners collaborate during the educational practices.

Conclusions and Implications

The objective of this research was to know to which extent project work could help to the creation of a safe learning environment. From the data analysis, I can conclude that the integrality of actions that I developed during the project contributed to the achievement of my purpose in my specific context, since the activities allowed me to know students' interests and needs to be satisfied during the process. The evidence showed how a healthy

school climate influenced not only the relationships, but also the academic performance of the participants. Engagement and commitment with the activities were a result of promoting a space in which everybody mattered.

Additionally, this AR project encompassed some implications for teachers, not only in the field of language teaching, but also in other subjects. The first implication is that teachers should know the interests and necessities of the context in which they are working. Every educational setting is different, so we will need different responses. In education, one size does not fit all. By identifying our pupils' necessities and interests, we can design lessons that fulfill those requirements without neglecting teaching the language.

A second implication to take into consideration is the necessity of creating spaces in which every person feels free to be and to express themselves. Learning takes place thanks to the interactions and relationships that are established in an educational setting. These relationships need to be safe, positive, and collaborative. It is impossible for a person to learn if they have to worry about other issues like violence or fear. Every person is a world that needs to be respected, so it can develop healthily. A third implication would be the involvement of parents in children's education. Academic achievement has many factors, and one of them is how adults guide and accompany this process. Bringing parents closer to the school is vital to create a bridge through which learning can come and go.

Reflection

This teaching experience was highly significant for me. Teaching was not new to me, but the context was a completely new challenge. Teaching in a public school located in a rural area allowed me to see many problematic situations that still prevail in education.

One of these problematics is how the school, as an institution, fails in its objective of transforming lives and communities through education.

I have always said that I do not want to be a teacher because that is a lot of responsibility on my shoulders. I cannot ignore facts that students bring into the classroom like domestic violence, hunger, mistreatments, fear, and many other factors that hinder learning. Some people affirm that it is my weakness, but I strongly disagree. I believe that caring about others is my strength. I am an English teacher, but more important than that, I am a person who was always afraid of everything. As a child, I had troubles establishing relationships with other people, I had trouble recognizing and expressing my feelings. I did not feel I fitted anywhere. Some years later, I found that there are still many children who suffer from these same difficulties.

I think that this project allowed me to shine a light, at least in some of my students, and that is what made this experience worthy. Once I heard a very inspiring teacher saying that every kid needs a champion. I do not really think I was the champion those students needed, but at least I can say I was the champion that I, as a child, needed.

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