



Universidad
Zaragoza



Facultad de Educación
Universidad Zaragoza

COMMUNICATIVENESS AND GROUP WORK: TOWARDS TBLT AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING

68500 TRABAJO DE FIN DE MASTER – MODALIDAD A

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Artísticas y Deportivas

Especialidad: Lenguas Extranjeras (Inglés)

Facultad de Educación

Universidad de Zaragoza

Curso 2014/2015

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the year, the *Master in Teacher Training for Obligatory Secondary Education, Sixth Form, Professional Training and Language, Arts and Sports Teaching*, provides prospective teachers with the essential theoretical background and essential practical skills that they will need for their future development as teaching professionals. And at the end of it, the final dissertation provides students with the opportunity to consolidate these theoretical and practical skills. It constitutes the final expression this year-long learning process and aims to demonstrate a comprehensive acquisition of the knowledge, strategies and skills worked on during the master's degree.

In order to comprehend the different areas worked on during the master's degree, it will be structured into different sections that cover the following areas. First, it will contain a reflection on the teaching profession from the perspective of the theoretical and legal framework that it is immersed into and the working conditions and organization in the educational centres (taking into account the concepts learnt in different subjects and experience during the placement periods). Secondly, it will contain an analysis and critical reflection upon two selected projects among those elaborated during the master's and a justification for that selection. Finally, the dissertation will include some final conclusions and proposals for the future.

Regarding the focus of this dissertation, apart from integrating the skills and experience previously mentioned, it will focus especially on some of the concepts and experiences acquired during the second semester, which are closely connected to the teaching of English as a foreign language and which have been worked on in the design of activities, lessons and unit plans as well as tested during the placement periods. Concretely, the common thread in this dissertation will be group work and communicativeness and which is the best approach in order to implement them in the classroom.

1.1. The teaching profession: theoretical and legal framework

In Spain, education laws such as the currently phasing out Organic Education Law (LOE) and the new Organic Law on the Improvement of the Quality of Education (LOMCE) regulate the structure and organization of the education system in all stages except university level. Education laws act as a framework to be developed and complemented by further legislation in each autonomous community, taking into account their particular contexts. In Aragon, this has resulted in the LOE Aragonese Curriculum (and the new LOMCE Aragonese Curriculum), which provides teachers in the region with the guidelines and requirements they should follow when carrying out their job. Teachers must, therefore, bear the legal framework in mind as an essential part of their profession, as they will have to apply it and adapt it to context of their school and the particular needs and circumstances of their students when elaborating their course, unit and lesson plans.

The methodology teachers apply in the classroom will, or should, be as consistent as possible with the specifications of the education laws and regional curriculum applicable at that time. The LOE Curriculum, for instance—which was the one that received more focus during the master as it was the one being applied at the time—, specifies some methodological principles for Secondary Education and states, according to Bernal (2014: 89), that educational activities in this stage must favour the students' capacity to learn by themselves, work in teams and apply the appropriate investigation methods (my translation). The LOE Aragonese Curriculum follows and further develops these principles, and includes among its general objectives for Secondary Education the capacity to develop habits of self-discipline as well as of individual and group work, and the ability to develop skills for selecting, organising and analysing information.

Apart from this, teachers must also take into account the Curriculum's specifications for their particular subject that, for English, takes the form of the curriculum for Foreign Languages, which observes principles established by the Common European Framework of Reference (from now on, CEFR). This document, elaborated by the Council of Europe was designed, as stated in the official website:

[...] to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency.

The CEFR is a document of reference across Europe. It describes what it calls an ‘action-oriented’ approach, which can be summarised with this paragraph from its second chapter:

Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular **communicative language competences**. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in language activities involving language processes to produce and/or receive texts in relation to **themes** in specific domains, activating those **strategies** which seem most appropriate for carrying out the **tasks** to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences. (my emphasis)

It describes, in short, a communicative approach, focusing on getting learners to use language in context, developing and using different communicative strategies, in order to accomplish communicative tasks and purposes.

The LOE Aragonese Curriculum for Foreign Languages also places a great emphasis on communicativeness when it states that the four blocks of competences (morphosyntactic competence, pragmatic competence, intercultural competence and procedural competence) will have as an axis the development of the communicative competence. And it includes the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal competences as part of the previously mentioned procedural competence. This involves not only knowledge of the self and of their own development and learning process, but the capacity to relate and cooperate with others through group work.

All this reflects the evolution that the curriculum and the teaching profession have undergone over time, as these specifications clearly show that traditional methods have been overcome. Teachers of English are no longer supposed to provide their students merely with grammatical rules and vocabulary lists, as was the case in the Grammar-Translation method according to Richards & Rodgers (2001), and the Natural methods

(Direct Method, Audiolingual Method...) and Humanistic approaches (Suggestopedia, The Silent Way...) have also been overcome.

Nowadays, bearing in mind the LOE Aragonese Curriculum, teachers should take into account the developments in learning theories and approaches, and be able to apply in their classrooms those that comply with the Curriculum's guidelines. For instance, the Communicative Learning Teaching approach (from now on, CLT) and the Task-Based Language Learning (from now on, TBLT), both of which emphasize the achievement of a communicative outcome as the goal of lessons and communication as the goal in learning a language.

Reality is, however, that many teachers neglect these aspects and fail to implement new approaches that would improve their students learning process and experience as well as contribute to the development of the key and specific competences described in the Curriculum.

As regards the change in the legislative framework that is currently taking place, as seen during the first semester in subjects such as *Contexto de la Actividad Docente*, the legislative framework on education has undergone a constant evolution in Spain and the different governments have been prone to modifying the legal framework and producing a series of education laws. Teachers must keep up with frequent changes in the legal framework and be able to transfer the new guidelines to their classrooms, though always adapting them to the particular context of the school and the needs of the students.

For teachers, these changes in the legislation often involve carrying out modifications not only regarding the contents in their subject, but also taking into account the new guidelines for their planning (of units, lessons...), methodology and evaluation criteria and tools. In fact, currently, a legislative change is taking place from the LOE curriculum to the new LOMCE curriculum, which has already been introduced in Primary Education and will soon start to be applied in Secondary Education. Consequently, as prospective teachers, it is essential to become acquainted with the new legal framework, which elaborates on the LOE Curriculum.

For instance, communication is also the goal for the English subject in the LOMCE Aragonese Curriculum for Secondary Education, as it states that the subject contributes directly to the development of the *competence in linguistic communication*. It goes, however, a step further in requiring, for instance, that teachers organise their learning units around learning situations, activities and tasks, which must either have a clear and observable communicative goal and be comparable to real-life situations or act as a support or enabling step towards the accomplishment of the communicative task. This points clearly to a task-based approach and constitutes an advance in the methodological guidelines that present and future teachers will need to take into account.

In any case, teachers should not make decisions unilaterally, instead working together both within and among different departments when deciding on methodologies, strategies and manners to teach the different competences in an integrated manner. The LOMCE Aragonese Curriculum establishes that there is a need for ‘an adequate coordination among teachers on the methodological and didactic strategies to be used’ (my translation) and highlights the importance of common reflection and coordination.

1.2. The teaching profession: working conditions and organisation

Although the legal framework in force is, as previously explained, central to the teaching profession, it is not the only factor that should affect the decisions taken by teachers. Legislation provides a general framework to be worked with, but in the day to day development of their profession, teachers must also be aware of the particular contexts and characteristics of their students and of their educational centres when planning their units and lessons and deciding on the methodology and resources they are going to use in their classrooms.

As studied in *Contexto de la Actividad Docente*, each educational centre—be it a state, private, or state subsidised private school—is immersed in a particular socio-economic and cultural context, which must be taken into account both by the direction of the centres and by the teachers in the classroom, as it affects the number and kinds of students teachers will work with. This influences the way the teachers carry out their profession as they must adapt their teaching, their methodology, the rhythm of the lessons, they have to carry out curricular adaptations for special needs students, high capacities students or students from other cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

For instance, the subsidised school where I spent my placement periods, La Milagrosa, is a small religious school which—according to the demographic data that I consulted from Zaragoza’s *Padrón Municipal* for one of the assignments in the first semester—, is placed in a district with some immigration from several South and Central American countries, as well as some immigration from Asia and Africa. In fact, during my placement period, I could observe that though most of the students were Spanish, a couple of the ESO students came from Africa and from Central and South America. This meant that a few of the students in the school came from other cultural backgrounds and educational systems and needed additional attention and support.

The adaptation and processes to be applied in cases related to attention to diversity are always detailed not only in the national and regional legislation but also in some of the internal documents of the educational centres, such as the Attention to Diversity Plan (PAD) which is usually contained within the School-based Education Project (PEC).

In fact, my placement periods also allowed me to observe first-hand the documents that regulated the internal functioning of the school and which teachers had to deal with when carrying out their profession. These included not only the documents that can be found in any educational centre such as the previously mentioned PEC, or the yearly elaborated PGA (Annual General Program) but also documents specific to the centre such as those related to the educational project of the religious organisation that managed the school.

Although during my placement periods some teachers often complained about the amount of bureaucracy and argue that it diverts time and attention from the essential part of their profession, others acknowledged that all these documents also have the advantage of creating an organised and structured working environment as well as providing teachers with clear guidelines and protocols to be followed in cases, for instance, of attention to diversity. They also set clear rules, especially in the Internal Regime Regulations document (RRI), regarding the rights and obligations of both teachers and students and the treatment of misconduct in the centre.

Finally, as teachers of English, a factor that may affect our teaching experience as well as our students learning process in the presence or absence of a bilingual program

in our school. If properly implemented, this kind of programs can help students improve their command of the language and may also give us more and better opportunities for close collaboration with other departments.

1.3. Professional challenges

Taking into account all the factors affecting the teaching profession, which have been previously discussed, it seems apparent that as prospective teachers we will face a series of challenges and circumstances during our professional lives. To begin with, we need to be aware of the importance of lifelong learning, as our profession is everything but static. The legislative framework that shapes our professional life is likely to undergo several changes during our working life, and research on learning theories and foreign language teaching will continue advancing and producing new approaches and ideas. We must ourselves evolve as professionals, keeping up with these changes and advances and working to improve our teaching practice and the teaching and learning process.

Currently, as previously stated, this means becoming acquainted with the new LOMCE Curriculum, which is now coexisting with the LOE Curriculum, and take into account the new guidelines, which means for instance introducing a task-based approach into our classrooms as well as cooperating with other departments. Although some teachers and educational centres are already applying these two principles, they are still far from generalised. Having teachers and educational centres actually involved in the renovation and improvement of the teaching and learning process in their classrooms is an important challenge that if achieved would contribute to the improvement of our educational system and the students learning experience.

Apart from this, we must also bear in mind that the Curriculum is not something prescriptive and monolithic. In the same way that regional curriculums work on the national one and adapt it to the context and needs of each particular autonomous community, we as teachers we must be able to take into account the guidelines that it provides and adapt them to the particular contexts and characteristics of our educational centres, taking into account the particular circumstances of our students and finding ways to cater for the needs of the diversity of students that we are likely to find in our classrooms.

2. JUSTIFICATION OF THE PROJECTS SELECTED

As stated at the beginning of this dissertation, its main objective is to provide students of the *Máster Universitario en Profesorado de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria, Bachillerato, Formación Profesional y Enseñanzas de Idiomas, Artísticas y Deportiva* with the opportunity to prove a comprehensive understanding and acquisition of the concepts and skills worked on during the master. In the following sections, this will take the form of a critical reflection and analysis of two of the projects elaborated during the year. For this purpose, the two projects that I have selected are the learning unit designed for *Diseño, organización y desarrollo de actividades para el aprendizaje de la Lengua Extranjera* and the innovation project designed for *Evaluación e innovación docente e investigación educativa en inglés*.

These have been some of the most challenging and demanding of the projects elaborated throughout the year, but also some of the most gratifying and constructive. Both projects were developed in pairs or groups during the second semester, which is the specialist half of this master's degree, and are therefore closely connected to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language and they allowed me to research and put into practice some of the main concepts and approaches dealt with in several of the subjects. In the following pages I will further disclose the reasons for my selection.

Regarding the **learning unit**, I designed it together with another classmate. It was, as previously said, very challenging and demanding, but we also found it highly rewarding. First of all, the design of the learning unit was also very useful in terms of our future development as teachers. It was a change for us to develop some very useful skills regarding some of the most important issues in the teaching profession, which is the design and planning of activities. And it made me realise the importance of careful planning rather than improvisation, of having clear objectives and clear ideas as to the steps to follow in order to achieve them, for the improvement not only of your teaching experience but of the teaching and learning process as a whole.

Furthermore, it provided us with the opportunity to put into practice and further develop our skills on planning and design. We had already had some experience with syllabus design in the first semester, with the design of part of a course plan for *Diseño Curricular de Lenguas Extranjeras*, and the design of the learning unit permitted us to

put into practice many of the skills and knowledge gained in the elaboration of the first. We were, for instance, already acquainted with the LOE Aragonese Curriculum.

Besides, although we could not implement it in a classroom—since learning units were elaborated after our placement periods—it also allowed us to apply and the knowledge, methodology and techniques learnt in different subjects not only of the first semester but also of the second semester such as *Diseño, organización y desarrollo de actividades para el aprendizaje de la Lengua Extranjera* and *La comunicación oral en lengua inglesa*, since we could adapt and include in the unit some of the activities and lesson plans designed in these subjects for the development of different skills and sub-skills.

As to the **innovation project**, it was elaborated in group with four other classmates. Each of us was allocated in a different educational centre, and therefore worked with different groups and levels and under different conditions, so our finding and experiences varied accordingly. This allowed me, in the end, to benefit not only from my personal experience in my placement period but also from the experiences of my teammates during theirs. Being able to put together our findings and contrasting our ideas and experiences was definitely very enlightening and enriching.

However, one of the aspects of this project that I find most interesting is the fact that it deals with some of the most important aspects and principles that were later implemented in the design of the learning unit: group work and communicativeness. The main topic of research was “group work in compulsory education and vocational training” and the communicative nature of the group activities implemented was one of the sub-topics.

These are concepts that have received an intensive focus throughout the master and, personally, I consider it essential for them to be observed by teachers of foreign languages, who are in charge of providing their students with enough opportunities for developing their command of the language as well as other non-linguistic skills. In fact, as mentioned in previous sections of this dissertation, they are favoured in the LOE Aragonese Curriculum as they contribute to the development of several key and specific competences.

Communicativeness is a key element in the English classroom. The subject contributes to the development of the *competence in linguistic communication* as well as to the four blocks of competences that constitute the communicative competence: *morphosyntactic competence*, *pragmatic competence*, *intercultural competence* and *procedural competence*. What this entails is that the English subject does not only include grammatical and lexical aspects, but it also covers the sociolinguistic, discursive and functional aspects of the language, intra and interpersonal aspects to the knowledge and use of it, and knowledge about the cultures related to it, including being able to overcome stereotypes.

This is also related to the implementation of pair and group work in the classroom, since these dynamics provide students with opportunities to develop the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills mentioned above, as students must learn to collaborate with their peers and can acquire useful interaction abilities. Thus, group work contributes to the development of the *procedural competence*, and also to the development of the *social and civic competence*, as it prompts students to negotiate, solve problems, respect other people's rights and opinions and, in short, find ways to communicate constructively.

It is, therefore, undeniable that introducing communicative and group work activities in the classroom bears numerous benefits for the students. Surprisingly, however, they are not always found in the classrooms. During my placement periods, I expected to witness some significant methodological changes from the kind of approaches used in the English classroom when I was a high school student, when most work was done individually and little focus was put on actual communication. What I found, however, is that often, students are still not given enough opportunities to engage in collaborative or cooperative work or to develop real life communication skills.

Besides, this project is closely connected with the learning unit since its main focus was the implementation of group work in the English classroom as well as finding out whether it promoted motivation, equal participation and, most importantly, communicativeness. This means that although we were not able to implement our learning unit during our placement periods, we could put into practice some of the basic principles that both projects shared by means of communicative activities and group

work. In addition, as I will explain later, in the learning unit we could further develop these concepts by means of using a different approach in our design.

In short, both projects are closely tied since they offer different perspectives on the topic of group work dynamics and the implementation of communicative activities in the English classroom and since they show an evolution from a more general approach based on communication and group work in the innovation project to an approach based on TBLT and Cooperative Learning in the learning unit. Seeing the limitations of the approach followed for the innovation project gave me the necessary perspective to change the approach in the learning unit, trying to achieve cooperation and communication by means the previously mentioned approaches, which as I will elaborate on later, also solved many of the problems found with the project and brought interesting benefits for the students learning process.

3. CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE EXISTING AND POSSIBLE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SELECTED PROJECTS

As stated in the previous section, the projects selected for critical reflection and analysis in this dissertation will be the learning unit and the innovation project elaborated during the second semester of the master. Both of them share some basic **premises** that will act as the common thread for this analysis. The two main ones are group work and communicativeness in the English classroom. In my analysis of these two projects I will try to explain how each of them were treated in each of the projects and how the methodology used to achieve them evolved from one to the other, reflecting on the advantages of that methodological change.

3.1. Innovation Project: group work and communicativeness

The perception that communicativeness and group work are still sometimes neglected in the English classroom was the starting point for deciding the topic for the **innovation project** that my teammates and I developed for *Evaluación e innovación docente e investigación educativa en ingles*. The title we chose for it was *Group Work in Compulsory Secondary Education and Vocational Training*. Our purpose was to prove that the combined implementation of group work and communicative activities

would have positive effects on the students in terms of motivation, participation and learning.

In order to design our innovation project we took into account the legal framework provided by the LOE Aragonese Curriculum—as discussed in previous paragraphs—and also underwent an extensive research on the literature available on the subject, thus becoming further acquainted with the work of authors such as Hedge, Richards, Swarbrick, Larsen-Freeman and Loritz. Personally, I found this highly constructive as it gave me the change to dig deeper into CLT and group work, two topics that had been core throughout the master's degree.

This also helped me to be more aware of the implications of the activities and methodology used by my tutor during my placement periods and to have a more solid basis in order to judge their appropriateness and effectiveness, measuring them against the principles and recommendations made by these authors and being able to form more informed judgements and reflections. Besides, reading literature on these subjects also made me more conscious and self-reflective during my implementation period, since not only I designed and adapted activities to fit with these principles but I was also attentive to the students' reactions, opinions and learning.

Nevertheless, in retrospect, however constructive the elaboration of this project was, it had some flaws that, if corrected or carried out in a different manner, would probably have led to the production of a much more solid and meaningful research. To begin with, although we did an extensive research on the literature available to get better acquainted with the topic selected, our innovation project would perhaps have been more effective if we had based our research on fewer principles, so as to make the measuring of our findings both simpler and more homogeneous. In fact, in my opinion, one of the main problems in our innovation project was that we did not establish a clear enough set of principles that we were going to use in order to measure the effectiveness of our innovation. We did set a series of aspects that we wanted to observe such as the students' attitude and opinions about group work, if they found it motivating and participated equally, and if the group activities implemented were really communicative. However, they were perhaps too general and more specific parameters would have resulted in a more methodical and precise gathering of the data.

As to the tools we used for data collection, they included not only direct observation but also questionnaires about the students' opinions and experiences with pair and group work activities, as well as one minute papers that were passed at the end of the lessons. This gave us a good perspective regarding students' opinion on the matter and, in my case, for instance, the one minute papers allowed me to see if the lesson had been effective. Again, however, our findings would have been more meaningful and easy to compare with each other's if we had had more clearly defined principles and criteria. We could, for instance, had included a checklist among our tools, comprising the defining aspects of CLT in order to measure the communicativeness of our group work activities.

Another potential weakness in our project was that we had to adapt our research to the particular circumstances in our school, which included, for instance, our tutors' course plans or the kind of activities and approach the students were used to. In my case, I was given liberty regarding the methodology and could adapt and create activities. However, I was restricted to a specific topic and a series of grammatical and lexical contents that had to be covered. Students were also unfamiliar, and sometimes unwilling, with the new approach, since they were used to working mostly individually and engaging in little meaningful communication during the class. These circumstances made the implementation of communicative and group work activities not fully successful in some of the groups—as I will elaborate on later—and, since we had but a very short period to carry out our project, we could not see if attitudes and results would have changed in the long term.

In spite of this, I consider that we obtained some good results and could verify through real life observation and implementation—as well as through comparing my experience during my placement period to that of my teammates—that introducing group work dynamics and communicative activities in the English classroom have some positive effects for the students.

In my opinion, both can work together in improving the students' learning process and helping them in their acquisition of the language. Group work, for instance, tends to have a positive effect for communicativeness in the classroom given that, as Larsen-Freeman states, 'having students work in small groups maximizes the amount of communicative practice they receive' (2000:126). In turn, CLT can also enhance and

facilitate pair and group work dynamics in the classroom since ‘communicative interaction encourages cooperative relationships among students’ and gives students ‘an opportunity to work on negotiating meaning’ (2000: 127).

Larsen-Freeman is not the only one to relate pair and group work with a communicative approach. In fact, according to Richards (2000: 4) CLT brought a shift in focus ‘toward the use of pair work activities, role plays, group work activities and project work’. These kinds of activities have, for him, a series of advantages for students since ‘they can learn from hearing the language used by other members of the group’ and ‘they will produce a greater amount of language than they would use in teacher-fronted activities.’ (2006:20). Students are, therefore, exposed to more comprehensible input as they also have more opportunities to engage in communicative oral production.

Group work and communicativeness seem to work hand in hand, then, in improving the students’ learning process and outcomes as well as in promoting good relations among students and an atmosphere of collaboration. Nevertheless, as I will try to explain in the following paragraphs, upon reflection on this project’s results and deficiencies, I came to the conclusion that, in spite of their positive effects on the teaching and learning process, none of them provides an ideal alternative to traditional teacher-fronted instruction based on teacher to students interaction and individual work. And perhaps, our research and findings would have been more significant if we had used a slightly different approach.

To begin with, as several of us detected, not all students were willing to engage in pair or group work. The reasons they provided were diverse, but several of them, for instance, showed a rather individualistic personality. As to the students who did like to engage in group work, who were the majority, they were not actually aware of the advantages that it could have in their learning—such as learning from their peers—and in general saw it as a way to socialize with their classmates and break out of the routine. Besides, participation during these activities was not always equal, and some students were not totally committed to the group or contributed in the same extent as their teammates.

This is perhaps due to the fact that we adopted too general an approach towards group work, which was not ideal in ensuring equal commitment. In my case, I managed to engage students in group speaking activities, but in some of the groups the least outspoken members relied on the others and contributed very little to the conversation. This situation could have been solved by applying new forms of group learning that truly provide the adequate conditions to ensure that students see the need for working together and that all the members of the group are equally engaged as well as equally participate.

One of these is Cooperative Learning, which has a series of advantages over other forms of group work, since it manages to create in the students a real need for working together. As Jolliffe (2007: 8) puts it: ‘Cooperative learning is not just group work – tasks are structured to necessitate the interaction of pupils in pairs/groups’. Besides, having a common purpose—such as the successful completion of a task—encourages solidarity and cooperation among students, who work together towards a goal that benefits all the members of the group. This creates positive interdependence, which is one of the basic principles of Cooperative Learning, and helps students to overcome their individualistic view of class work and achievement.

Slavin also points out some of the benefits of Cooperative Learning, since this approach also encourages both group and individual accountability, making students responsible for the final outcome of their group work as well as for their individual contributions and performance. As he states: ‘the importance of group goals and individual accountability is in providing students with an incentive to help each other and to encourage each other to put forth maximum effort’ (Slavin 1996: 52-53). Also (1996: 53) ‘If students value doing well as a group, and the group can succeed only by ensuring that all group members have learned the material, then group members will be motivated to teach each other’.

Taking this into account, using Cooperative Learning as the basis for our implementation and research would probably have produced better results and might have solved our problem with the individualistic attitude of some students and would also have made it clearer to them that working in groups can have many benefits apart from social interaction.

As to communicativeness, when gathering data about the effectiveness of our innovation project, we could have based our group activities and project on a task-based approach (TBLT), which not only involves group work and interaction but, in addition, ensures that students produce observable—and, therefore, assessable—outcomes, which is one of the pillars of this approach. The kind of activities that I for, instance, carried out in my implementation were perhaps closer to a CLT approach than to TBLT, which means that they were communicative, but there was not always a clear and observable outcome. I could have improved this by using a task-based approach, since, in TBLT the goal for the students' work and interaction is the fulfilment of a *task*, which can be observed and evaluated. In fact, the trend nowadays seems to be towards TBLT. In Kumaravadivelu's words:

‘The trend away from CLT and toward TBLT is illustrated in part by the fact that *communicative*, the label that was ubiquitous in the titles of scholarly books and student textbooks published in the 1980s, has been gradually replaced by another, *task*.’ (2006: 64)

In my case, for example, when doing speaking activities in groups, I could have done something more in line with the speaking task that we designed for the learning unit, and on which I will elaborate further in the analysis of the learning unit. Not only it was communicative but it also included an observable outcome—each group's reasoned decision regarding which film to see at the cinema—.

In short, the elaboration and practical implementation of this innovation project allowed me to confirm the benefits of group work and communicative activities in the classroom, as, among other things, they provide opportunities for interaction among students. However, posterior reflection upon the strengths and weaknesses of the project and how it may have been improved made me consider other alternatives, such as the previously mentioned Cooperative Learning and TBLT, for future projects as well as for my future development as a teacher.

3.2 Learning Unit: communicativeness and group work through TBLT and Cooperative Learning

The second project that I am going to critically analyse in this dissertation is the learning unit, which I elaborated with a partner. The title we chose for our learning unit

was *Cinema and Films*, which reflects the topic that acts as a common thread throughout the whole of it. For its elaboration, as was the case with the innovation project, we took into account the LOE Aragonese Curriculum. It seems important to mention it, given the change in legislation towards the new LOMCE Curriculum that is currently taking place.

This project constituted, in my opinion, an opportunity to demonstrate our acquisition of the concepts and approaches learnt in class and our ability to put them all in practice through the elaboration of our planning of lessons and activities. I was also able to take into account what I had learnt from previous assignments including the feedback received on lesson plans, as well as the feedback and my reflections on the innovation project, which I have already discussed in the previous section.

Thus, for the design of our learning unit my partner and I took into account both TBLT and Cooperative Learning, both of which, as was the case with CLT and group work, contribute to the development of communicative as well as intrapersonal and interpersonal competences. They permitted us, consequently, to make, again, communicativeness and group work the basis of our project. However, as I am going to explain in the following paragraphs, they presented, in addition, a series of advantages over the kind of approach followed in my innovation project.

Regarding **TBLT**, it has the advantage over CLT—as explained in the previous section—that the goal is not only interaction and communication by themselves but the completion of a task. In fact, we based our learning unit on the accomplishment of two main communicative tasks—a speaking task and a writing task—and sequenced the activities and lessons so that they would provide students with the necessary steps to complete them successfully.

As to what these main tasks consisted in, the speaking task required students to look for information about a series of films and decide, in groups, which one they were going to see at the cinema. The writing task consisted in the students writing a film review, which they would later post up at a blog that they would have created in the Technology class.

This was, in my opinion, one of the most interesting aspects of our learning unit, as it involved cooperation between two different departments, the English and the Technology departments. As Jolliffe (2007: 5) affirms: ‘cooperative learning in the classroom requires cooperative learning in the staffroom’. For students, it offers them the chance to develop several competences—such as the *linguistic competence* and *digital competence*—linked to different subjects, in an integrated manner.

In addition, basing our unit around the accomplishment of communicative tasks had, in my opinion, a series of advantages. First of all, both tasks involved the production of a communicative outcome, which is described by Ellis’ (2003: 10) as one of the ‘criterial features’ of a task. I consider that this outcome is something beneficial not only because it is communicative but also because it makes students see a purpose in what they are doing, making learning meaningful to them, and also in terms of the assessment of their progress. Both tasks have observable outcomes, be it the written review or the communication of the final justified decision reached by the group as to which film to see.

This means that the teacher can observe and assess the students’ performance. In fact, students can also participate in this assessment if provided with the necessary tools. In our case, we designed checklists to be used by the teacher and others to be used by the students in peer and self-assessment. This implies that students will be more involved in their learning process and also that of their peers and will learn not only from the teacher’s feedback but also from that of their partners and their own self-reflection.

Secondly, in both tasks, as well as in the unit as a whole, we tried using authentic materials such as actual comments about films made by users on cinema related websites. But, perhaps most importantly, we tried to link learning to its potential applications in real-life because it also contributes to students seeing a purpose in what they learn and helps to motivate them. Thus, we made every effort to relate tasks to real-life situations given that, according to Ellis (2003: 10), a task must involve ‘real-life processes of language use’. Regarding the speaking task, for instance, students have probably experienced the situation of discussing which film to see at the cinema with their friends and may need to do it in English if they ever go on an exchange program or meet with foreign friends.

The writing task was also related to real-life as it involved the production of a real-life genre. We had already included a film review (in that case, for a contest in a magazine) as the final task for a previous lesson plan, and, as the teacher pointed out to us, although this is a real genre which students are likely to encounter, they may not immediately see the need to write it, apart from winning the contest. A plausible solution that we found was linking it to a much more likely situation which is posting on a blog. Nowadays blogging is very common and many students are likely to have their own blog where they post about their life experiences or their opinions on a range of subjects, one of which may be cinema.

Another advantage of using these tasks in our unit is that they required students to engage in cognitive processes. These include, according to Ellis (2003: 10): ‘selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning and evaluating information in order to carry out the task’. The speaking task, for instance, requires students to look for information about a set of films, evaluating and selecting which one they want to see and discussing—therefore reasoning—with their partners in order to reach an agreement.

The final writing task also demands students to engage on several of these processes, as writing a film review involves evaluating it, providing reasons for your opinion and ordering your ideas so that the review makes sense and has a proper structure. Besides, the previous steps required students, for example, to classify some ideas about films either as positive or negative aspects and use a checklist to assess your own and your partners work and give constructive feedback.

Finally, using this approach in our unit fostered not only communication but also cooperative group work, or, in other words, it encouraged cooperative learning. As already noted in the analysis of the innovation project, several authors such as Jolliffe and Slavin point out the benefits of Cooperative Learning, which is defined by basic principles such as positive interdependence and individual accountability.

Kagan (2002) describes four basic principles of **Cooperative Learning**, including Positive Interdependence and Individual Accountability. As to the first, he states that ‘Positive Interdependence places students on the same side so a gain for one is associated with a gain for another and students cannot succeed alone’. Regarding Individual Accountability, it consists on students being responsible and accountable for

their own contribution, so that they cannot ‘choose not to participate’. He also describes another two principles. These are ‘Equal Participation’ and ‘Simultaneous Interaction’, the latter consisting in ensuring that more than one student at a time is actively participating.

Our speaking task, for instance, had a jigsaw structure, meaning that students would first look for information about a film, work together in groups of experts so as to talk about their findings, and finally move back to their “home group”—where each student has researched a different film—and discuss with their partners which film they were going to see. This structure ensured Positive Interdependence as well as Individual Accountability since students had a common goal while each of them was in charge of a distinct part of the activity, of a different piece of information and the success of the final discussion and agreement depended on each student doing their part.

As regards Equal Participation, since we were aware—especially after our experience during our placement periods and my experience with the innovation project—that some students tend to be more outspoken than others, we thought that this may be a potential problem. In order to solve this and ensure a more balanced participation, we decided that the weakest or least outspoken member of each group would be designed as the ‘secretary’ and would be in charge of communicating the final decision and the reasons for it to the rest of the class.

Finally, by dividing the students into groups and encouraging student to student interaction, we ensured that at least one of the students in each group would be actively participating at a time, complying with the principle of Simultaneous Interaction. This is positive not only because it makes the task truly cooperative but also because students are given more opportunities for both receiving comprehensible input from their partners and for oral production in the target language. According to Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, as described in Mitchells (2004: 47) ‘Speech cannot be taught directly but ‘emerges’ on its own as a result of building competence via comprehensible input’. This sort of interaction with their partners should therefore help students to acquire the target language and develop their linguistic competence in it.

Apart from this, including Cooperative Learning in our unit was also meant to promote other aspects essential in any lesson plan or unit that can ensure their

effectiveness for all students. As I have discussed in a previous section of this dissertation, part of the role of the teacher is to adapt their teaching to the context and the particular needs of the students. In any class, for instance, teachers will find that some students find it harder than others to succeed in their subject. It is their responsibility, as teaching professionals, to adapt their lessons so that both the stronger and the weaker students can progress. Cooperative learning can be used for this purpose, by means, for instance, of differentiation.

One of the activities in the fifth lesson, for example, involved students working first individually and then cooperatively in pairs on a series of texts so as to discover the structure of film reviews. Differentiation was achieved by having texts of different difficulty levels and by means of providing, or not providing, students with glossaries, which would also be more or less comprehensive depending on each student's level. Besides, by having the weaker and stronger students work together in heterogeneous pairs and groups allows for students to learn from each other and help each other in their learning processes.

In short, by applying Cooperative Learning and a task-based approach in our unit we tried to get group work and communicativeness a step further. And in fact, I think that we managed to create a purpose for students to interact and work together and used cooperation and communication as a means not only to engage students, but to maximize their opportunities for interaction and for developing both their *learning to learn competence* and their *social and civic competence*. In other words, it gives them better chances for developing their social skills as well as for learning communicative strategies that they can apply in real-life. Besides, learning was enhanced by requiring students to engage in cognitive processes and by prompting them to cooperate with their partners and learn from each other.

Besides, although the unit was designed in accordance with the LOE Aragonese Curriculum, after consulting the methodological guidelines described in the new LOMCE Curriculum for the elaboration of this dissertation, I have reached the conclusion that having designed this learning unit taking a task-based approach into account as well as including cooperation between two different departments of the educational centre means that it complies with some of the LOMCE specifications that I discussed in the first part of the dissertation. Therefore, this learning unit would also be

in accordance to the LOMCE Curriculum, which clearly states the importance of using tasks in the English classroom, of getting students to engage in cognitive processes and of cooperation between teachers and departments.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PROPOSALS

One of the main topics throughout this dissertation as well as during the master has been the Aragonese Curriculum—mainly LOE, since it was the one in force, but also LOMCE, which now coexists with the previous one—since it has an essential function not only in regulating education and the teaching practice, but also because it can be a very helpful tool for teachers when making important decisions related to the contents, tools, techniques and methodology that they are going to use in their planning or the course, units and lessons and, consequently, in their daily activity in the classroom.

Although both of the projects analysed had been elaborated taking into account the LOE Aragonese Curriculum, this dissertation has also allowed me to investigate and learn more about the new LOMCE Aragonese Curriculum, and to appreciate the need to adapt to the new curricular guidelines, which involve, among others, the use of tasks—either communicative or enabling—and consequent engagement of students in cognitive processes such as organising, classifying, selecting or evaluating

After elaborating the innovation project and the learning unit and analysing them and the implications and repercussion of their methodological differences in the effectiveness of group work and communicativeness as well as other related aspects, I have reached the conclusion that Cooperative Learning and the task-based approach do indeed lead to a much more meaningful and overall beneficial form of both communication and group work in the classroom. Not only does having a clear and observable communicative outcome as a goal make it easier for teachers to assess their students performance but it also helps students see a purpose in what they are doing, since they can appreciate that what they are learning to do will be useful for them in real life. Besides, following the principles of Cooperative Learning when designing pair or group work activities fosters an atmosphere of cooperation rather than competition. Students have a common purpose and can achieve common gains and are therefore

better disposed to help each other, which in turn enables them to learn from each other and benefit from each other's contributions and different abilities.

Both TBLT and Cooperative Learning can also be easily adapted so as to cater for the needs and learning rhythms of different students, by means of using differentiation strategies, such as the glossaries and texts with varying levels of difficulty that I have mentioned previously. This aspect is particularly important since we definitely cannot expect our class to be made up by students with a homogeneous background or with the same abilities. We will always find classrooms with mixed levels of ability and students with different learning rhythms.

It is surprising, nonetheless, to find that neither TBLT nor Cooperative Learning are used in a generalised manner in our educational system, and many English teachers are reluctant to implement either of them in their classrooms, perhaps because they involve devoting more time and effort into designing and planning activities, rather than just following the book, which is often the fastest and easiest option. Designing these projects, especially the learning unit, taught me that it is not only possible but highly desirable to design, or at least adapt, activities in order to make them more cooperative, communicative and meaningful and thus introduce new methodologies and approaches that are both in accordance with the curriculum and contribute to enriching the students' learning process and experience.

I have also learnt the importance of cooperation not only among students, but also among different teachers and the different departments. It is something that can greatly benefit students in terms, for instance, of the integrated development of different skills. Besides, in my opinion, if we want our students to work and learn cooperatively, it is essential that we are the first ones to set example by establishing channels of communication and cooperation with the other teaching professionals in our educational centre. As teachers we must, in other words, practice what we preach.

As to **my personal objectives** as a prospective teacher of English in Secondary Education, I hope to be able to take into account what I have learnt and experienced during this master, including all the aspects discussed throughout this dissertation and in the previous paragraphs. In the same manner that students can benefit and learn from the knowledge and abilities of their partners, teachers can also learn from each other and,

after this master, I think that my classmates and I could bring new ideas and techniques to our future educational centres and our colleagues.

This does not mean, however, that my training has finished. I think that something that all teachers should do, and definitely one of my intentions as a prospective teacher, is to keep in touch not only with the changes brought by potential new educational laws but also with the new developments in teaching approaches and techniques and new theories of learning and foreign language acquisition.

TBLT and Cooperative Learning are themselves subject to development and new and interesting approaches may be developed in the future that create better conditions for the acquisition of English and the development of the competences and skills students may need in their future. My personal goal, consequently, is to always maintain an open mind and be receptive towards the implementation of new methodologies and techniques that could improve the teaching and learning process or be beneficial to my students.

Finally, I think it is important to always try to bear in mind that the students and their needs should be the centre of my professional practice. As teaching professionals we must ensure that they are always active participants in the classroom, and that we provide them with the necessary tools and conditions to enable them to have an active role in their learning process and the development of their skills and competences.

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