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| TÍTULO | Collaborative Learning and Autonomy in EFL University Students |
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| PALABRAS CLAVE | colaboración, autonomía, interacción. |
| TIPO DE TRABAJO | Trabajo de grado de investigación. |
| PROGRAMA | Maestría en Didáctica del Inglés con Énfasis en Ambientes de Aprendizaje Autónomos |
| RESUMEN | <p>El propósito del presente estudio fue determinar hasta qué punto el aprendizaje colaborativo promueve la interacción oral en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua EFL y fortalece el aprendizaje autónomo. Los objetivos del proyecto fueron diseñar un plan de acción usando actividades colaborativas; analizar los posibles efectos que las estrategias colaborativas puedan tener en el aprendizaje autónomo; y observar las características de colaboración y autonomía que son recurrentes cuando se interactúa en la lengua extranjera.</p> <p>Los resultados revelaron que a través de estrategias colaborativas, los participantes pudieron ver una forma diferente de mejorar su interacción oral en la lengua extranjera y sentir el proceso de aprendizaje como algo en el que ellos son los protagonistas.</p> |
| ABSTRACT | <p>The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent collaborative learning promotes oral interaction in English and strengthens autonomy in EFL learning settings. The objectives of the project were to design an action plan using collaborative learning activities; to analyze the possible effects that collaborative learning strategies may have on autonomous learning; and to observe the features of collaboration and autonomy that are recurrent when interacting in the target language. The results revealed that through collaborative strategies, the participants could see a different form of increasing oral interaction in the foreign language and make their learning process something in which they are the main characters.</p> |
| PALABRAS CLAVES | colaboración, autonomía, interacción. |
| KEY WORDS | collaboration, autonomy, interaction. |

Collaborative Learning and Autonomy in EFL University Students

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Research Report submitted

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master in English Language Teaching –Autonomous Learning Environments

Directed by Raul Mora Velez

Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures

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Chía, Colombia

Abril, 2013

Declaration

I hereby declare that my research report entitled:

Collaborative Learning and Autonomy in EFL University Students

- is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared and specified in the text;
- is neither substantially the same as nor contains substantial portions of any similar work submitted or that is being concurrently submitted for any degree or diploma or other qualification at the Universidad de La Sabana or any other university or similar institution except as declared and specified in the text;
- complies with the word limits and other requirements stipulated by the Research Subcommittee of the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures;
- has been submitted by or on the required submission date.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent collaborative learning promotes oral interaction in English and strengthens autonomy in EFL learning settings. The objectives of the project were firstly, to design an action plan using collaborative learning activities; secondly, to analyze the possible effects that collaborative learning strategies may have on autonomous learning; and finally, to observe the features of collaboration and autonomy that are recurrent when interacting in the target language. Action research methodology was utilized in this study. The qualitative research data was collected through field notes, video recordings and a students' questionnaire; the last one was applied at the end of the implementation phase.

The results revealed that through collaborative strategies, the participants could see a different form of increasing oral interaction in the foreign language and make their learning process something in which they are the main characters. Collaboration promoted changes in the oral communication, encouraging the learners to use the foreign language and therefore, increased their interaction. According to the outcomes collected from the final questionnaire, the participants found pleasure and benefited from working in groups. Regarding autonomy, the participants gradually began to develop strategies such as scaffolding, negotiation of meaning and the use of different resources that allowed them to become more independent from the teacher. .

Key Words: *collaboration, autonomy, interaction.*

RESUMEN

El propósito del presente estudio fue determinar hasta qué punto el aprendizaje colaborativo promueve la interacción oral en el aprendizaje de una segunda lenguas EFL y fortalece el aprendizaje autónomo. Los objetivos del proyecto fueron, primero diseñar un plan de acción usando actividades colaborativas; segundo, analizar los posibles efectos que las estrategias

colaborativas puedan tener en el aprendizaje autónomo; y finalmente, observar las características de colaboración y autonomía que son recurrentes cuando se interactúa en la lengua extranjera. La metodología utilizada en el presente estudio fue la Investigación Acción. La información fue recolectada a través de notas de campo, grabación de videos y un cuestionario aplicado a los estudiantes. Este último fue hecho al finalizar la fase de implementación.

Los resultados revelaron que a través de estrategias colaborativas, los participantes pudieron ver una forma diferente de mejorar su interacción oral en la lengua extranjera y sentir el proceso de aprendizaje como algo en el que ellos son los protagonistas. La colaboración promovió cambios en la comunicación oral motivando a los estudiantes a usar la lengua extranjera y por lo tanto mejorar la interacción. De acuerdo con los resultados recopilados en el cuestionario final, los participantes manifestaron su placer y el beneficio de trabajar en equipo. Con respecto a la autonomía, los participantes gradualmente comenzaron a desarrollar estrategias que les ayudaron a ser más independientes del docente como son: el andamiaje del lenguaje con diferentes recursos como los diccionarios, libros y otros materiales de soporte.

Palabras claves: *colaboración, autonomía, interacción.*

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Chapter I: Introduction

In university settings, the long-standing traditional pedagogy of lecture-based learning has shifted to a new era of technology, learning theories, and different ways of how knowledge is acquired. Those trends have emerged in order to give new generations a fresh perception of knowledge and a new learning style. Collaborative learning, a theory put forth in the late 1980's (Whipple, 1987) implies a process of finding partners to interact with, create knowledge and develop learning skills. In the collaborative model, knowledge is created and located in a learning community by the students and facilitators. Both facilitators and learners are active participants; there is no hierarchy between them, and the boundaries between teaching and research are less distinct (Whipple, 1987). Learning EFL in the student interaction and acceptance to be successful. Different researchers (Beckman, 1990; Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Collier, 1980; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Kohn, 1986; Whitman, 1988) have reported that students learn more and retain longer when they work in small groups. Therefore, the present research collaborative model requires project inquired for the effect of collaborative activities in promoting and increasing oral interaction in English and raise autonomy in university students.

The researcher first approached the problem at the institution where she taught. She first noticed that after 16 weeks of English instruction and observation, students demonstrated sub-standard speaking skills regarding to what was established in the institution curricular plan. There was little oral practice, interaction, or class participation. The whole session was limited to what the teacher was teaching in every class, turning the lesson in a teacher centered methodology where the only voice heard was the teacher's, and therefore, the students expressed a minimum of creativity and autonomy. There was no attitude or interest for asking or inquiring

about what was being studied beyond the minimum requirements of a task. Students did not move further than what was indicated. The teacher had to elicit most of the information from the students in order to have them talk in the target language.

To this point, learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) did not seem to be a priority, useful or practical on a daily basis. Surprisingly, the majority of the students did not demonstrate the level they were at (IV), according to the standards established in the university language program. The researcher found a basic user of the language level (A1) according to the CEF. Lack of vocabulary and grammatical structure limited the students to communicate basic information in the target language. This prevented them from being able to communicate in English; having a short social basic conversation, talking about family, likes and dislikes, and even to introduce themselves, proved to be a very hard task to accomplish. Regarding to Autonomy, it was observed that the EFL university students, have not implemented or developed the concept yet. They were not aware of their own learning process neither accepted the idea that their own efforts were crucial to progress in learning and neither behaved accordingly. One positive thing observed by the researcher was the students' willingness to participate while working in small groups; students showed eagerness to talk when they felt supported by their partners working in groups

The main issue that the researcher found was the fear to oral interaction in class. The students were not aware of their own learning process and therefore they were not able to reflect, plan and evaluate themselves in order to become independent learners. The researcher wondered if and how these students would benefit from teaching and learning strategies that incorporated collaborative activities. The researcher's belief is that students, through these strategies, might

demonstrate more autonomy and enthusiasm to talk in order to become more communicative and competent in English.

This study then aimed to determine to what extent collaborative learning promotes oral interaction in English and strengthens autonomous learning in university students. The following research question informed this study, How can collaborative learning strategies promote oral interaction and strengthen autonomy?

Considering the previous goal and research question, the researcher followed a series of steps to complete the study:

- Design an action plan using collaborative learning activities;
- Analyze the possible effects that collaborative learning strategies may have on autonomous learning;
- Observe the features of collaboration and autonomy that are recurrent when interacting in the target language.

In this project the students worked in groups (collaborative learning) in order to share abilities and information; they solved problems, explored knowledge, and reinforced critical thinking. The current project also involved suggesting, innovating, acting, doing, learning through one's own learning strategies and styles, and changing the students' roles with the purpose of making communication meaningful.

The development of this project contributed to the improvement of the students' English level and also to finding the relation between students' autonomy and collaboration as a social strategy to foster oral communication in English. Additionally, the confidence of the learners was built up, in that the success of collaboration learning relies on the learners themselves, so they gained confidence in the process of interaction.

The Language department of the university will be able to use the results obtained from the study to reevaluate curriculum, bearing in mind the learners' interests and the program they are studying; this will make the standards more achievable and therefore, increase the quality of the university program. Teachers may have the chance to reflect on their teaching methodology and may want to embrace collaborative learning as positive and active way to motivate students in the class.

This thesis will present the different elements that comprised this study. The first part of the thesis (Chapter Two) will describe the main constructs from the theoretical framework and the analysis of the literature the researcher reviewed. The second part (Chapters Three and Four) will introduce the elements of the research design and the different features of the pedagogical intervention that the researcher carried out, including the type of study, setting, participants, instruments, and the actual process. The last section (Chapters Five and Six) will discuss the process of data analysis, the findings that surfaced from the data, the conclusions, pedagogical implications, some of the limitations faced in the process, and the lines of future research arising from the findings.

Chapter II: Theoretical Framework

The main goal that the researcher set for this study was to determine to what extent collaborative learning promotes oral interaction in English and strengthens autonomous learning. In order to set the ground for the analysis, this chapter will first define collaborative learning and explain the differences between *collaborative* learning and *cooperative* learning, as this difference is fundamental to understand what the researcher did for the pedagogical intervention. The next section of this chapter will focus on the concept of *interaction* as the foundation that helps one understand concepts such as communication and communicative competence, as well as its implications in the classroom. Finally, this section explains the concept of autonomy and its implications in the acquisition of a FL.

Defining Collaborative Learning

According to Gokhale (1995), the term "collaborative learning" refers to an instruction method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal. The students are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own. Thus, the success of one student helps other students to be successful. Different researchers and proponents have claimed that collaboration in learning settings increases interest and critical thinking among the participants. Johnson and Johnson (1986) stated that there was evidence that collaborative teams achieved at higher levels of thought and retained information longer than students that work quietly as individuals.

Collaborative learning represents a significant shift away from the typical teacher centered or lecture-centered lessons in the classrooms. Teachers who use collaborative learning approaches tend to think of themselves less as expert transmitters of knowledge to students, and more as expert designers of intellectual experiences for students-as coaches or mid-wives of a

more emergent learning process (Smith & McGregor, 1992). When students get involved in a collaborative environment, they become more responsible and autonomous, able to monitor their own learning. That also gives the students freedom to make the FL part of their learning process and see English as an important tool in their academic settings.

Collaborative Learning and Cooperative Learning: Setting the Differences.

In the field of education the terms *collaborative learning* and *cooperative learning* have been broadly used to the point of considering them interchangeable. Although there are similarities in their structure, in recent years, each one has different implications in the classroom. Since this study is interested in collaborative learning instead of cooperative learning, it is particularly important to understand the similarities and differences among these three concepts.

Matthews, Cooper, Davidson, and Hawkes (1995) established that one of the differences between collaborative and cooperative learning is the level of teacher structure one may find in the classroom. Cooperative learning, the authors argued, is considered more structured, more prescriptive to teachers about classroom techniques, more directive to students about how to work together in groups, and more targeted (at least in its beginnings) to the public school population than to postsecondary and adult education. In line with this argument, Olsen and Kaigan (1992) defined cooperative learning as

Group learning activities so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learner in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others. (p.8)

Thus, *cooperative learning* has taken on the connotation of a set of highly structured, psychologically and sociologically based techniques that help students work together to reach learning goals. In contrast, the concept of *collaborative learning*, as Matthews (1995) explained,

derives from different intellectual roots grounded in “theoretical, political and philosophical issues such as the nature of knowledge, as a social construction and the role of authority in the classroom” (Matthewes, 1995). Collaborative learning helps students become members of the knowledge communities they already belong to.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher chose collaboration over cooperation because it promotes intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together. Through collaborative learning students are working in groups, reciprocally searching for understanding, solutions or meanings to create a product. While cooperation focuses more in the classroom structure for classroom learning, collaborative learning activities vary widely, but most center on learners’ exploration or application of different materials and not simply the teachers’ presentations. This leads to a new way of teaching in university settings, different from the old lecture based model; consequently, students may become more motivated to learn a FL and increase their autonomy.

Collaborative Learning in the Classroom.

Collaborative learning affords different advantages for the students not available from traditional instruction. Team work can accomplish meaningful learning and solve problems. Therefore, there is a significant change in the role of the teachers and the students that interact in the classroom.

According to Tinzman, Jones, Fennimore, Bakkler, Fine and Pierce (1990), collaborative classrooms seem to have four general characteristics based on teacher-student relationships, teaching approaches and classroom composition. The first characteristic is to shared knowledge among teachers and students. In contrast to traditional classrooms, where the teacher is an

information giver and knowledge flows from teacher to student, in collaborative settings knowledge is shared

...the teacher has a vital knowledge about content, skills, and instruction, and still provides that information to students. However, collaborative teachers, also value and build upon the knowledge, personal experiences, language, strategies, and culture that students bring to the learning situation. (Tinzman, et al., 1990, p. 1)

When the students' relevant experiences and reality are taken into consideration within the lesson, they not only maximize their confidence and self-esteem, but also the whole class is enriched. In addition, the students' motivation increases, making learning an interesting and fruitful process in which they make connections between their own learning and school learning.

The second characteristic is shared authority among teachers and students in collaborative classrooms. Teachers share authority with students. In collaborative classrooms teachers invite students to set specific goals, provide options for activities and assignments that capture different students' interests and goals, and encourage students to assess what they learn,

Collaborative teachers encourage students' use of their own knowledge, ensure that the students share their own knowledge and their learning strategies, treat each other respectfully, and focus on high level of understanding. They help students listen to diverse opinions, support knowledge claims with evidence and participate in open and meaningful dialogue. (Tinzman, et al., 1990, p. 2)

In collaborative learning, the teacher's role increasingly emphasizes mediated learning. This third characteristic is teachers as mediators. Successful mediation helps students connect new information to their experiences and to learning in other areas, helps students figure out what to do when they are stumped, and helps them learn to learn (p. 2). The teacher as mediator

transforms the level of information and support so as to maximize the students' ability for taking responsibility for learning.

As for the last characteristic is Heterogeneous student grouping. The goal of heterogeneous grouping is to provide students with the chance to share among themselves while keeping in mind their experiences, perspectives and background. There is no exclusion due to cognitive level or learning style.

A critical characteristic of collaborative classrooms is that students are not segregated according to supposed ability, achievement, interest or any other characteristic. Segregation seriously weakens collaboration and impoverishes the classroom by depriving all students of opportunities to learn from and with each other. (Hidson, et al., 1990, p. 2)

Even though the students' social and linguistic needs are very different, in collaborative classrooms no student is deprived of making contributions to the group.

Classroom Interaction

A benefit of collaboration and team work is interaction. It refers to the situation in which people act upon each other. In educational settings, interaction involves teachers, learners and others acting on each other and consciously or unconsciously interpreting (giving meaning to) each other. Thus, interaction involves meaning, but it might or might not involve learning new concepts (Oxford, 1997). This research focuses mostly on verbal interaction as opposed to non-verbal interaction. Interaction involves interpersonal communication and therefore it is important to keep in mind the type of language tasks, as well as the learners' willingness to communicate with each other.

In the case of classroom interaction, it is necessary to start reviewing, on the one hand, some concepts of communication and communicative competence, and on the other, clarifying the role of interaction in the process of learning a foreign language.

Over the years, people have found different ways to ‘communicate’ with others, not only through a linguistic code, but also through other manifestations of language: arts, gestures, or drawings in order to share their feelings, thoughts and views about their world. When people have the ability to communicate with others in a L1 or in a L2, communication is: “meaningful, conventional, appropriate, interactional and structured” (Richards, 1990). Gaining proficiency in a FL and being able to interact has many purposes: approaching other cultures, meeting new people, sharing customs, valuing the native culture, respecting lifestyles, etc. Additionally, students might be motivated to get better professional opportunities, and to share real-life experiences.

Students and teachers spend most part of their classes in a classroom. We cannot deny that teachers need to do more than just supply learners with a number of language structures to manipulate, but to create classrooms where learners and teachers have the opportunity to interact spontaneously; where they both draw on their experiences, ideas, and imagination. Byrne (1991) described the foreign language classroom as the place to socialize, to bring the outside world into it, to escape on an imaginative level.

Interaction has taken a relevant role in foreign language learning; there are different conceptions of interaction. Thomas (1991) defines interact as “acting reciprocally, acting upon each other” (p101), highlighting the need to communicate with others. Brown (1994) writes, “Interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about; we send messages; we receive them; we interpret them in a context; we negotiate meaning; and we

collaborate to accomplish certain purposes” (p. 159). Learners need opportunities to interact with other speakers allowing modification of speech to take place, leading learners to negotiate meaning through interaction.

Some authors such as Baker and Freebody (1993) focused on the organization of literacy activities in the classroom work, specifically on the social production of classroom competence as they consider the way classroom interaction influences literacy. Ramos (2004) explained this case as a clear example of how the social relations that happen in the classroom do affect the learning situations. Ramos explained, “when students are in contact with other students and when they are involved in literacy activities, they grow together and learning is achieved” (p. 7). Furthermore, Ramos mentioned that interaction in the classroom is not just unilateral, but a two-way type of relation in which not only students but also teachers are expected to play roles through which learning can be enhanced. Through interaction and the use of language we show who we are, the culture or community we are part of, our beliefs and our identity. Therefore is in this context where Foreign Language Learning takes place.

Besides the chance to enhance students’ knowledge through classroom interaction, the interactions that take place in the classroom also highlight the previous knowledge and experiences that students bring to the classroom. Ramos asserted: “Students’ previous experiences and their culture and society are valuable when empowering them in the classroom.” (p.95). It implies that the use of students’ previous knowledge in the classroom through interaction empowers students’ learning and may help to develop their oral skills.

Principles of Interaction

Brown (1994) suggested seven principles for structuring a theory of interaction in the classroom. In mind with the academic and social needs of the target group chosen for the current analysis, this study considered the following four:

- **Automaticity:** Interaction focuses attention on meanings and messages and not on grammar. Therefore, students are free to interact without language pressure.
- **Intrinsic motivation:** Students become engaged with each other in speech acts of fulfillment and self-actualization, and they appreciate their own competence in using language.
- **Risk –taking:** Interaction requires a certain degree of risk of failing to produce intended meaning, or failing to interpret intended meaning, of being laughed at, of being shunned or rejected.
- **Interlanguage:** The complexity of interaction entails a long developmental process of acquisition. Numerous errors of production and comprehension will be a part of this development. In addition, the role of teachers' feedback is crucial to the developmental process.

Autonomy

In the past decades, the concept of learner autonomy has been the center of many discussions in the language education field. In the literature one will find that there are different interpretations for different people, in different contexts, and by various implementations. Considerations on autonomy are often characterized by the misconceptions of the nature of the concept and its implementation; it is regularly assumed that autonomy denotes learning in isolation, learning without a teacher or outside the classroom (Benson, 2001). There are also

other terms used for the same basic concept such as self-regulation, open-learning and self-management. In North American adult education, for example, self-directed learning defines a broad field of study in areas of non-institutional learning. Other terms associated with self-directed learning include independent study, self-instruction, self-education, and autonomous learning (Knowles, 1975). In the new century, the concept of autonomy in language learning has taken a strong importance as a precondition for developing an effective learning. Students who become autonomous not only succeed in language, but develop more responsibility and critical thinking skills.

According to Benson (2001), autonomy is the capacity to take control of one's own learning; it is a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals and even for the same individual in different contexts at different times. Holec (1981) describes autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. He elaborates on this basic definition:

To take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.: determining the objectives; defining the progress and progression, selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.); evaluating what has been acquired. (p. 34)

The autonomous learner is himself capable of making all these decisions concerning the learning with which he is or wishes to be involved. (Benson, 2001).

In order to avoid the passive role students adopt because they feel that the teacher should be in charge of everything that happens within the confines of the classroom, it is important to start developing their sense of responsibility and have them realize how they can become active

in their own learning process. According to Scharle and Szabo (2000), there are three important phases in order to change the students' attitude: Raising awareness, students see the difference with their contribution; changing attitudes, students need well-structured practice in their new attitude as responsible learners; and transferring roles, students take some of the teachers' role, starting with responsibility. He also stated that those phases are related to the students' motivation, learning skills, empathy and collaboration. The combination of these aspects leads to a gradual change in the students' attitudes rather than advocating the abolition of teacher control or radical changes in the classroom practice.

Three Concepts, One Way

Collaborative activities encourage learners to realize the importance of their contributions in the learning of a FL and to develop the abilities they will need to take charge of their own learning. Effective communication, through oral interaction, and collaboration are essential to becoming a successful and autonomous learner. It is mainly through dialogue and examining different perspectives that a student becomes knowledgeable, strategic, and self-determined. Furthermore, involving students in real world tasks and linking new information to prior knowledge requires effective communication and collaboration among teachers and students. Certainly it is through interaction that curriculum objectives become alive.

Collaborative learning gives students enormous advantages not available from more traditional instruction because a group can accomplish significant learning and solve problems better than any individual can alone. Collaboration in the classroom encourages the students to rely on themselves and not only on the teacher, making them more autonomous and therefore responsible of their own learning. Also, group work also creates opportunities for active interaction receiving feedback from peers and consequently more independent in the learning

process. Lastly, collaboration within a group work, as compared to whole class work, may help the teacher to get higher proportion of students actively involved in completing a task and taking the risk to interact in the FL with the freedom to make mistakes when completing a task.

Chapter III: Research Design

This chapter presents the design of the research study, the type of study, followed by the research question and the objectives to be achieved in the implementation phase of the project. It also presents a description of the participants, stating the criteria for including them in the project; additionally, the chapter elucidates the researcher's role, the instruments to be used in the data collection, as well as the explanation of the ethical considerations taken into consideration for the development of the current project, and the action plan as well as the validity and reliability.

Approach for the Study: Action Research as Qualitative Design

The researcher used a qualitative research design (Stake, 2010; Yin, 2011) for this study. The choice of using a qualitative design aligned with the immersion in the field that the researcher did to complete this project. In that line of qualitative work, the research found that the principles of action research (Burns, 2005; Castillo, Jaimes, & Chaparro, 2001; Yasmeeen, 2008), and its emphasis on planning, action, systematic observation and reflection, repeated as many times as the process produces the changes sought, was the most effective way to conduct the pedagogical intervention.

According to Yasmeeen (2008), Action Research is a formative study of progress commonly practiced by teachers in schools. Yasmeeen said, "an action research is a spiral process that includes problem investigation, taking action & fact-finding about the result of action. It enables a teacher to adopt/craft most appropriate strategy within its own teaching environment." (p. 1).

Therefore, the researcher chose to work on action research because this kind of research design aims at improving and acting in specific fields of study, in this case, the development of oral interaction and learning a L2 through collaborative activities. As Burns (2005) explained, "the

processes experienced by action researchers are best viewed as necessarily adaptive to the educational situation and circumstances of the participants and to the particular social cultural, and political exigencies that motivate and surround them”. (p.59)

According to Castillo, Jaimes, and Chaparro (2001), this kind of research has a special process in which we can find some specific steps: exploration, reflection, planning, action and observation, and evaluation. It could be summarized as plan, action, observation, and reflection. The following figure shows the two cycles of action research according to Kemmis and McTaggart (1985; p. 8)

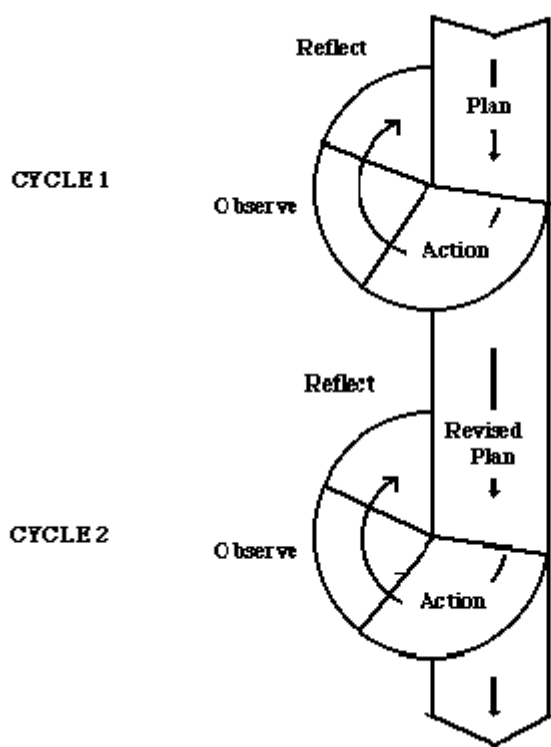


Fig. 1 The Action Research Spiral

Burns (2005) added that Action Research is a cyclical process that never ends but always provides a conclusion with more ideas to bring upon progress and improvement.

In line with this principles of Action Research, the present study was developed in the university where the researcher was working as a teacher; therefore, she had the opportunity to observe, analyze and reflect on her own teaching practice in order to respond the question and the objectives given below.

Research Question and Objectives

The question that this study intended to answer was How can collaborative learning strategies promote oral interaction and strengthen autonomy in a FL learning setting? The main objective for this study was to determine how collaborative learning promotes oral interaction and strengthen autonomy in a L2 learning setting. More specifically, this study had three additional objectives, (a) to design an action plan using collaborative learning activities; (b) to analyze the possible effects that collaborative learning strategies have on autonomous learning; and (c) to observe the features of collaboration and autonomy that are recurrent when interacting in the target language.

Setting

The study was carried out at an institution of higher education in Tunja. This is a university of approximately 1,500 low and middle class students. One of the principal goals of the Language Department is to provide students with an integrated educational process, which will allow students to develop human capacities in order to participate competitively as professionals in different social contexts. The language department is in charge of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for those students who attend professional careers. One of these programs is Veterinary Medicine, which strives for interdisciplinary education for their students. The university wants all its professionals to have skills that enable them to participate in a global market and English becomes an important part in its curriculum as support for students'

education. The researcher found, however, that the lack of vocabulary and the old lecture-based pedagogy in the classroom they had followed in the previous semesters, framed them in a silent and reluctant attitude in the English class. This turned oral interaction and the purpose of communication in FL into an unpleasant and irrelevant activity. As a language teacher, that called the researcher's attention and made her wonder about the possible ways to improve the learning and teaching process that might change the vision and purpose to learn English.

Participants

The researcher selected the students of fourth semester of Veterinary Medicine at a local institution in Tunja as the target population for this project. There were 20 students, nine (9) women and eleven (11) men, whose ages ranged from 20 to 24 years. Most of them come from small towns and cities near Tunja. Their English level corresponded to A2 (Basic User) according to the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24). They attended English classes twice a week for two hours. Their motivation for learning a second language was very low; furthermore, they were too shy to talk and participate in class.

Even though this was a group of fourth semester students, they needed to be trained in the use of different strategies to learn on their own. They were very dependent on the teacher's instructions in the classroom; they needed to increase autonomy in their learning process. In other words they needed to believe in themselves in order to succeed at a set of tasks (Brown, 2007). In this sense, and as a way to develop their self-efficacy, students needed to develop the willingness to communicate and lessen their inhibitions when talking.

Regarding their speaking skills, the students needed to expand their vocabulary and thus, feel more confident to initiate short dialogues with their classmates about real life situations. The students needed to develop reading strategies to understand short texts, such as decoding words

in order to find meaning in context; they also needed to acquire the habit of using the dictionary to help themselves in learning English.

Researcher's Role

According to Mora Vélez (2010), in qualitative inquiry, researchers operate under the assumption that participants are not blank slates; they bring their background and their experiences to the studies and those shape what they tell and share as one collects data. Therefore, this chapter aims to describe the researcher's views.

For this research study, the researcher took the role of a participant observer. Trochim (2006) suggested that this is one of the most common methods for qualitative data collection, but also one of the most demanding. It requires that the researcher become a participant in the culture or context being observed. In this study, the researcher was the English teacher of the group, and she implemented the activities with students, observed and made records of experiences that could serve as useful data of her study.

Regarding interaction, Brown (1994) stated that theories of communicative competence emphasize the importance of interaction as human beings use language in various contexts to “negotiate” meaning, or simply stated, to get one idea out of your head and into the head of another person and vice versa. Thus, one of the teacher's roles as participant in creating a collaborative language classroom was the initiation of interaction. Therefore, the best way to develop the initiator's role and to sustain the interaction is to develop a repertoire of questioning techniques through collaborative strategies. In this way, the researcher provided students with opportunities for meaningful interaction as Reyes, (2003) remarks, “establishing content which motivates the students, so there is a real need and willingness to negotiate meaning” (p.21).

As an observer, the researcher's role was to witness and analyze the students' roles when taking the risk in answering questions, even if learner made mistakes. Additionally the researcher decided to participate in the study because she became deeply interested in looking for an alternative solution to the problem that this group was having regarding oral interaction and their appreciation for the subject itself.

Data Collection

In order to gather information in this research project, the researcher collected video-recordings, field notes and questionnaires. This section will briefly explain how they were useful for the analysis.

Video-recording becomes a "valuable tool for the classroom researcher" (Hubbard and Miller, 1999, p. 95) because it provides valuable data for this research study. It is increasingly being used by teachers as a means of gathering general information about their teaching. It allows the teachers to observe many facets of their teaching quickly and provides heuristic and accurate information for diagnosis (Hopkins, 1995). This instrument allowed the researcher to observe the interaction in the activities carried out with the target group using collaborative strategies (see Appendix A).

Field notes are a good strategy to compile information about students and their processes in class. They are transcribed notes or written accounts derived from data collected during observations and interviews. They were used in each lesson. While the students were at work, notes about students' performance during the collaborative activities gave important information to be analyzed during the process. The field notes were based on observation charts, that allowed the researcher to write a description of what she observed (setting, actions, and conversations)

and, at the same time, to reflect on the data collected (ideas, thoughts, questions, and concerns) (see Appendix C).

Field notes reflected general impressions generated in the classroom, its environment or specific details. Regarding this matter, Ramos (2004) asserts “this information should be descriptive rather than speculative, so that broad picture amenable to interpretation can be built up” (p.26) (see Appendix C).

Questionnaires are a widely used and useful instrument for collecting survey information, providing structured, often numerical data, being able to be administered without the presence of the researcher, and often being comparatively straightforward to analyze (Wilson and McLean, 1994). This instrument helped the researcher to elicit useful information to characterize the features of collaborative learning that the students perceive in relation with this methodology (see Appendix B).

The use of these data collection techniques provided relevant data in terms of students’ oral interaction and autonomy in the developing of every planned unit. Going over the information helped to confirm, disconfirm or expand on the ideas the participants shared (Mora Velez, 2010).

Ethical Considerations

The present proposal applies the three fundamental principles of ethical research: informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and protection from harm. Regarding to informed consent, Norton (2009) argued that “it involves two equally important elements: ‘consent’, which means asking people to agree to take part in our research without any coercion; and ‘informed’, which means giving them sufficient information.” Thus, the participants of the project, as well as

the head director of the program received a consent letter in which clear and detailed information is provided (see Appendices D and E for samples of the consent letters).

Triangulation and Validity of this Study

Validity tells us whether an item measures or describes what it is supposed to measure or describe (Bell, 1999). It is the degree to which the researcher can provide relevant data by making inferences and interpretations of the data collected. In qualitative data, validity might be addressed through the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants approached, the extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005). Validity was given to the present research by applying three (3) instruments in different moments of the process, by applying tests and by using accurately collected evidence that gave constancy and stability to the research on the topic.

Triangulation may be defined as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behavior (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005). It is a physical instrument used in order to verify how valid and reliable the research project is. For triangulation purposes in the current project, *journals*, *video-recording* and *questionnaires* were the instruments to analyze the gathered data by taking into consideration three different perspectives as shown below.

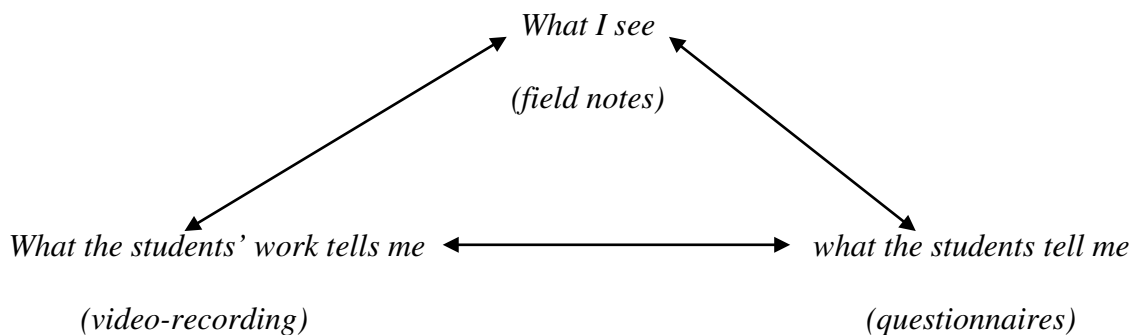


Figure 2. Triangulation

Chapter IV: Instructional Design

Through collaborative activities, the students explored the use of the language in a social context, where the personal experiences, language, and culture that students bring to the learning situation, constitute an important component of every lesson. This chapter describes the pedagogical intervention the researcher applied in this research in order to give an accurate answer the main question. The researcher will describe the three phases that comprised this study: analysis, design, and implementation. This chapter will also present a sample of the lesson plan used in the development of each unit.

Analysis

This study intends to give the students the opportunity to view the experience of learning a second language in a different way from that old lecture –based pedagogy. In group work, learners perform a learning task through small group interaction. It is a form of learner activation that is of particular value in the practice of oral fluency (Ur, 1991). For instance, activities in which learners are organized into six groups increase the opportunities to talk by six, which might not be the case in a full-class setting. Besides activating oral interaction in the foreign language, the researcher found that collaboration is a means of fostering responsibility and independence, motivation and a sense of cooperation to the class.

Design

Bearing in mind that main point is to help the students to increase their oral interaction through collaborative work, the assignments were designed under the principles of *interaction, approaching, engagement, collaborative learning decision- making and commitment* Richards (1996). *Interaction* means a reciprocal act where the teacher acts upon the class and the class

reaction subsequently modifies his or her next action and so on. *Approaching* means that while the students are giving opinions about any topic, they are using the target language, and the teacher is observing how they are learning the new language. On the other hand, *engagement* causes the students to be interested in learning the foreign language. In *collaborative learning*, classrooms are organized so that the students work together in small collaborative teams.

Decision-making constitutes a good alternative in the sense that students make decisions about what they are learning and how they are learning. Finally, *commitment* is a principle where the students are aware of their responsibility in using the FL in a specific context. Every unit implemented during the project was designed based on activities that allowed the students to experience and the researcher to evidence every principle mentioned above.

Implementation

This phase lasted about two months. As the main objective of this pedagogical intervention was to create learning situations in which students could express themselves and interact in the target language, during this time the students learned about collaborative learning by working on short projects taking into consideration the principles mentioned in the design above. The text to follow was "*Interchange 1*" by Jack C. Richards; it is a book written in American English that uses high-interest themes to integrate speaking, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, reading and writing. Its strong focus is on both accuracy and fluency, and its philosophy states that language is best learned when it is used for meaningful communication. The researcher modified the methodology creating a collaborative environment to generate oral interaction and self-awareness. Team work was the means for working on speaking as the main skill.

The following chart is a sample of the workshops that was applied in order to determine how collaborative activities increased the oral interaction in the English class.

Table 1. Workshop 1

| Activity 1. | | | |
|---|---------------------------|--|--|
| Date: Monday, April 16th | | Time 2 hours | Session #1 |
| UNIT 1. It's a very exciting place! | | | |
| Objective: To learn and use vocabulary for describing places in real | | | |
| Resources: Little word cards, students' books, handouts, CD, CD player | | | |
| Stage | Aim | Activity | Principle |
| Exploring | To explore new vocabulary | In order to form groups of work, the students will receive a little paper with an adjective written on it. They need to group up, by categories; for instance, size, shape, color, texture and so on. When they get together, they will share the words and will introduce themselves to know more about each other. In their group, the students will write a sentence using the words they got in the paper. | Interaction Approaching Collaborative learning |
| | To form work groups | | |
| <u>Think-pair-share</u> | | | |
| This activity helps to relieve the anxiety and mental block of being called on to answer a question in class: 1. Teacher will ask an open-ended question or pose a problem to the students; 2. Teacher will give the students a time limit in which they can ponder the answer; 3. Students will discuss their answer with someone sitting next to them; 4. Students will call on different pairs to share their answers. | | | |

Table 1. Workshop 1 (Cont.)

| Stage | Aim | Activity | Principle |
|-------------------------|---|--|---|
| Getting informed | To listen and understand | Students will listen to a conversation. They will find out the main idea of the conversation. In a hand out given by the teacher, as a group they will answer to the questions and then complete the form with the information they heard. | Engagement Collaborative learning |
| Focus on language | To practice using learned vocabulary | The teacher will model the grammar structure (adjectives and adverbs before adjectives) Students will develop the exercises in the students' book page 73. They will practice the conversation taking turns. | Engagement Commitment Collaborative learning |
| Expanding and producing | To describe a place | As a group, the students will think of a city they are going to describe using the vocabulary learnt. They will prepare a Power point presentation and create a guide to fun places in a city. | Collaborative learning Decision making |
| Generating | To share their products with the whole class. | Students will organize themselves for the presentation. They all need to participate and share their products. Students will prepare 3 questions to ask the other groups after the presentations. | Collaborative learning Decision making Engagement Commitment |

During these 6 units, analysis of data was constantly done in order to evaluate the steps and the process using the instruments described in the instruments described in the research design. There was a constant and immediate reflection after each lesson, making changes to the lesson planning if needed. The following timeline was designed to organize the work done between April and May.

Table 2. Instructional Design

| DATE | ACTIVITY – OBJECTIVE | DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT AND MATERIALS |
|--|--|--|
| APRIL 16: UNIT 9 Back to the Future | To talk about developments of the past, present and future. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |
| APRIL 20: UNIT 9 Back to the future | To practice describing events using time contrasts between the past, present and future. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |
| APRIL 23: UNIT 10 I don't like working on weekends | To talk about the job skills that are most important to the employers. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |
| APRIL 27: UNIT 10 I don't like working on weekends | To practice making statements with gerunds and giving short responses. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |
| APRIL 30: UNIT 11 It's really worth seeing! | Practice using the passive with <i>by</i> . Practice a conversation between people asking for a giving information. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |
| MAY 4: UNIT 11 It's really worth seeing! | Practice using the passive with <i>by</i> . Practice a conversation between people asking for a giving information. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |
| MAY 7: UNIT 12 It could happen to you! | Read three success stories; learn vocabulary for talking about accomplishments. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |
| MAY 11: UNIT 12 It could happen to you! | Practice conversations between people catching up on news; see the present perfect continuous context. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |

Table 2 Instructional Design (Continued)

| | | DATA COLLECTION |
|--|---|--|
| DATE | ACTIVITY – OBJECTIVE | INSTRUMENT AND MATERIALS |
| MAY 14: UNIT 13 Good book, terrible movie! | Learn vocabulary for talking about types of movies. Practice using present participles and past participles as adjectives. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |
| MAY 18: UNIT 13 Good book, terrible movie | Listen to people describe their Hollywood favorites; see relative clauses in context. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |
| MAY 21: UNIT 14 So that's what means is! | Talk about gestures and body language, Practice a conversation about body language; see modals and adverbs in context. | Lesson plan, Field notes, video-recording. |

With this instructional design, the students faced a different dynamic in English class. Students felt supported by each other within the collaborative groups and became more active learners. Collaborative activities generated the space to share ideas promoting oral interaction between the group members, giving them the opportunity to exercise other skills and to reflect on their own learning process. As part of the process, different values as respect, tolerance and patience, were also enhanced through collaboration.

Chapter V: Data Analysis and Findings

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the information gathered from the video recordings, field notes and the students' questionnaires. To this purpose, this chapter will start with the summary of the data collection and introduce some considerations about Grounded Theory used to analyze and triangulate data. Finally, the researcher will describe the categories that emerged from the data, using pieces from said data to illustrate them.

A Grounded Approach

The researcher relied on a grounded theory approach to analyze the data. In order to identify patterns, define the categories and subcategories, the researcher followed open and axial coding techniques proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). These authors defined open coding as "the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.61). It is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon that will enable the researcher to lighten the area under study. The findings emerged from the systematic examination of the data. The process started with naming, then turned into grouping, finding patterns and displaying.

For the data collection, the researcher videotaped the first and last sessions of the implementation. She also took notes after every session, and administered a questionnaire to the students at the end of the implementation, as the third instrument to triangulate the information. As soon as the data was collected, the researcher started analyzing it. The researcher started by reading her field notes, observing the video recordings and analyzing students' answers from the questionnaires to identify the most important information.

Data Management

After reading the information, the researcher focused on students' oral interaction and autonomy as the units of analysis in order to classify the data collected. So as a preliminary step, the researcher came to the main question posed as a result of the needs analysis, previously conducted; this helped the investigator to start labeling phenomena and conceptualizing data. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), breaking down and conceptualizing is taking apart an observation, a sentence, a paragraph and giving each incident a name that is representative of a particular phenomenon being explored.

Once in the process of collecting data, storing and retrieving information, the researcher opened three digital folders to store and classify the information: one for the field notes, with all the information and comments recorded during the sessions; another with the comments and reflections made from the video recordings about the impact of collaboration on oral interaction; and the last one with the learners' responses from the questionnaire applied at the end of the implementation. Bearing in mind the ethical considerations, the research participants were numbered in the format S1 to S3 within the different groups in each of the four groups. The instruments were dated and numbered according to the session. The data were collected from April 16th to May 25th in eight sessions of two hours.

Data Analysis

From the first day of the implementation, the researcher observed how different outcomes emerged. After the participants signed the consent letters, they had a positive attitude toward participation, but were still very shy to, at least, try to interact in the target language. The researcher analyzed the data and the findings relying on the two big units of analysis: students' oral interaction and autonomy. These units focused on the main objective for this study: To

determine to what extent collaborative activities promote oral interaction in English and strengthen autonomous learning.

The process started by analyzing the data the researcher collected in her field notes. The researcher collected the notes after each lesson and, at times, she had to handwrite them and transcribe them later at home due to the time factor and class periods at the institution. They were digitally stored in a computer file. In the same way, the researcher analyzed and reflected about the information gathered through the video recording of the first and last implementation session. For analytical purposes, the researcher created two digital folders in which each session was transcribed. Each instrument provided specific characteristics that were selected and classified according to the units of analysis mentioned above.

The researcher's field notes and the video recording were the first instruments used in the analysis of the data collection to classify common and repetitive patterns grouping them under a name; according to Corbin and Strauss (1990), open coding is the part of analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of data. "It involves breaking up data into segments and then collapsing them into one or more categories" (Stern and Porr 2010, p.64). The process of analysis started by revising the information gathered with the three instruments. The researcher carefully watched the videos and the field notes making her find some important features during the classes as risk taking, negotiation of meaning, scaffolding and use of resources. At the end of the implementation, the last instrument, students' questionnaire, was administered to the participants, generating more data about the students' attitude about the collaborative work that was done during the last English classes

After having all the information gathered from the observations and inquiries made by the researcher, a process of putting back data by making connections between categories in order to

specify a category through axial coding began. This is a process that helped the researcher to combine names and codes to exclude some of them in order to reduce and simplify the information. As Corbin and Strauss (1990) explained, “Axial coding brings the data back by making connections between a category and its subcategories” (p.97). The continuous comparisons and specific features found in some of the aspects, and by asking questions such as *what is this data referring to? Or what is the action about?*

Based on the interpretation of the findings and the analysis the researcher did during open and axial coding, the researcher grouped the ideas into one main category: Collaboration promotes oral interaction and raises autonomy, and two subcategories or specific features: Attitude toward group activities and resources used to scaffolding the learning process. The following chart, presents the research question with the core category and the subcategories.

Table 3. Categories and Subcategories

| Research Question: How can collaborative learning strategies promote oral interaction and strengthen autonomy? | |
|--|---|
| Core Category | Sub-categories |
| Collaboration promotes oral interaction and raises autonomy | - Attitudes toward group activities - Resources used to Scaffolding the learning process |

Core Category: Collaboration promotes interaction and raises autonomy

This core category expresses how through collaboration students become more active language learners during the class expressing themselves in the target language. In the same way, it makes reference to the freedom and ability of the students to start managing their level of commitment and awareness of their own learning. The process of data reduction and analysis, by

using the charts and multiple readings of the data, became the source for the different findings related to the subcategories, *attitudes toward group activities and resources used to scaffold the learning process* which the researcher will present in the next section.

The information collected through the instruments demonstrated that students understood the purpose of working in teams, in the benefit of speaking a different language through collaboration, and how important their opinion was for the whole group. Furthermore, they were able to create a confident environment without relying only in the teacher's view. They became more autonomous selecting and creating different resources that could scaffold the learning of a foreign language. The students were more engaged in the classes showing an active participation

Understanding Collaborative Learning Strategies

Through the process of analysis described above, the researcher found two subcategories that became emergent during the process of reading the data: *Attitudes toward group activities* and *Resources used to Scaffold the learning process*. In this section, the researcher will explain each subcategory, how it appeared in the data, and how the data characterized it, using the most meaningful vignettes (Stake, 2010) from selected data sources to illustrate the findings.

Attitudes toward Group Activities.

This first subcategory emerged as soon as the students were grouped to work and carry out different activities in the class. Through questions and inquiries elicited by the researcher, some students were eager to talk and participate, without fear of making mistakes. Interaction requires certain risk of failing to produce intended meaning, or failing to interpret intended meaning, of being laughed at, of being shunned or rejected. According to Brown (2007), learners have to be able to gamble a bit, to be willing to try out hunches about the language and take the risk of being wrong. Some of the students, motivated by the researcher, started to break the

silence with short sentences and a few words within the groups. The assignment to be done by the students in each group through collaboration increased the need to communicate in order to clarify instructions and ask for meanings. The following excerpt from the field notes provides an example

Ss in the groups speak very low. They are afraid of making mistakes. S1 decided to speak to the teacher because he feels the activity was not clear. He said three topics and one.....???? Then, he asked you write??? -S1 I buy the university. S2 I help.....people. S1 ...poor? S2 Yes. S1 If..... Baloto I go Paris (Field notes. Aril 20th)

As the researcher explained in the theoretical framework, interaction requires a certain degree of risk of failing to produce intended meaning, or failing to interpret intended meaning, of being laughed at, of being shunned or rejected. The researcher video notes below also illustrate how risk-taking was taking place in this classroom:

Within the groups the students talk and share the information using English to communicate. They speak and utter a few words. They do not care about the pronunciation and laugh when one of them is talking. When the teacher walks around they take the chance to talk and ask her about the activity. They start the interaction in Spanish but the teacher motivates them and encourages them to use English.

Working in groups gave the students the courage to start interacting and participating in the target language. They also shared related feelings that improved their participation in class, as the following excerpt from a participant interview illustrates:

En las actividades grupales en clase me sentí.... ¿Por qué?

S1: seguro y sociable. Porque con los compañeros se siente un más entregado.

S2: seguro sociable y activo. Puede aportar ideas al grupo.

S3: Activo. Me preocupaba por prepararme un poco más y participar más en la clase.

S4: seguro. Porque todos pensábamos muy similar y participábamos con menos temor a equivocarnos

The shift in motivation was also noticeable in their classroom interactions, as the video notes showed,

The students try out the use of English. Most of them have started to utter a few words.

Some of the utterances are not complete sentences. S1 in the group No. 2 is very motivated to interact. In fact he motivates the other students in the class to talk. S2 in group 2 follows his classmate motivation and takes the risk to discuss the task and participate.

(Video recording, April 16)

The effects of the interaction in collaborative groups gave the participants a confident and relaxing context for them to start expressing themselves in the target language. According to Dufeu (1994), to motivate learners' interaction in the foreign language it is important to establish an adequate, effective environment, so that learners feel comfortable as they take their first public steps in the strange world of a foreign language. Through the implementation of collaborative strategies, a climate of acceptance is created to stimulate self-confidence and encourage the participants to experiment and discover the target language; such strategies allow the learners to take risk without feeling embarrassed. The fact of working in groups gave the participants the confidence to start the oral interaction. Confidence is a positive attitude and a lifelong skill that requires commitment, time and consistent practice, (Wright, 2009).

In the process of learning a foreign language, attitude is an important factor that motivates or demotivates the process of a learner towards language learning in a foreign language environment. The researcher noticed how motivation was changing due to a renewed attitude in class,

The students seemed to enjoy the activities. The students laugh and some of them participate even more than what was observed during the first recording. S2 in group 1 was eager to interact when eliciting information from them. Students feel much more relaxed without having the teacher hanging over them all the time or pointing at them individually to answer a question in front of everyone. This seems to make students change their attitude and motivation to participate in the class activities. The fact of working in a group is helping the students to throw off their inhibitions when speaking so that they feel more freedom to speak.... (Video recording, May 21st)

During the implementation, the participants began to see the class as a communicative environment in which they could use the foreign language as something alive and useful to communicate with others. Students participation was supported by the group members giving confidence to them at the moment of speaking a different language, thus, they lower their anxiety and scare of being teased of in front of all. The collaborative strategies had a positive impact on the learners' learning process, as they expressed in their answers:

¿Te gusto trabajar en grupo?

S1. Sí, porque las clases fueron muy dinámicas y el trabajo en equipo funciona

S3 sí, porque es más fácil, es más agradable. Trabajando en equipo es más fácil responder las preguntas

S4 sí, porque se le facilita un poco el entendimiento del idioma ya que en grupo nos ayudamos mutuamente

S8 si, se pueden complementar las ideas y el aprendizaje se hace significativo

Today, language learners want English language teaching to be modified according to their needs. After the implementation, the participants have revealed a different attitude that facilitates their learning. They seem to have identified that through other methodologies, in this case collaboration, they are not only increasing their oral interaction in the target language, but also developing other social characteristics like respect, tolerance and acceptance for others that lead them to succeed in a team, as evidenced in their replies to the questionnaire,

Q4. Las actividades en grupo me ayudaron a mejorar :

S1. - La forma de comunicarme con los demás, a interactuar con los demás sin temor.

S4 -la forma de comunicarme con los demás, a respetar los puntos de vista de los demás, a tener paciencia, a ser activo y a aporta al grupo, trabajar autónomamente, a interactuar con los demás

S3 si, a tener en cuenta y complementar las ideas propias con la opinión de las otras personas en el grupo.

S2 si, a ser más activa y participativa sobre todo compañerista

Starting a basic communication was one of the main characteristics that the researcher planned to observe since this particular group showed no interest in learning English as a foreign language at the beginning of the implementation.

I can see that maybe the students are not interacting that much as I expected, but their attitude is very different from the first day. They seem to enjoy and they are eager to participate even more. In fact, they are showing more responsibility and attended all the

classes. They are bringing other resources to support their learning and they are eager to ask for clarification. (Field notes, April 27)

The old lecture- based pedagogy used by other teachers created in the participants the idea that learning a foreign language was merely memorizing rules of grammar with the help of their mother tongue instead of developing an internalized grammar, which can help learners utter the target language naturally, (Verma, 2005). Once students experiences collaborative activities, they expressed their interest in more work of this kind,

¿En las próximas clases te gustaría desarrollar actividades en grupo? ¿Por qué?

-Si, porque es una Buena manera de compartir ideas y sentirse más seguro.

Si, se le facilita a uno un poco más el entendimiento del idioma ya que en el grupo todos participamos.

-Si, son dinámicas y se aprende mucho.

Resources used to Scaffold the Learning Process

The idea of resources involved two aspects. One was the use of physical materials in the classroom. The other was showing students that they too could be a resource for themselves and each other. In terms of how students viewed themselves as a resource, one of the main difficulties the during the needs analysis stage was the lack of autonomy that students showed in order to carry out a task or monitor their own learning. The students always depended on the teacher's lesson, making it a teacher centered class without any participation or sense of wonder toward the lesson,

Students barely talk. Ss do not use the dictionary. None of them had one. They try to find out the meaning of some words by asking their partners in Spanish or by asking the teacher. Few of them use their books. In fact, just five of them had bought it.. They

are afraid to share in the target language. The class keeps very quiet . Even though they are organized in groups, the interaction is very basic. They always wait for the teacher to speak and to elicit information from them. When they talk, they talk in Spanish. (Researcher Field Notes, April 20)

During the first implementation session, participants were very quiet and little interaction was noticed. They seemed to be very puzzled whenever the teacher was talking to them in the target language. This attitude from the students made the researcher think about the need to lower the learners' anxiety and therefore, benefit their learning process.

The students are completely quiet. They do not answer simple questions such as *how old are you?* S1 answers but in a low voice. I also see that most of the learners are seated in the back of the class. Just three of them are in the first row. The students looked puzzled listening to the teacher talking in English. The teacher writes some questions on the board to encourage them to read and start the oral interaction with their partners. Most of the students are afraid to make pronunciation mistakes and they are shy to speak up,,it was even hard to make them stand up from their seats to do a kinesthetic activity. (Video recording notes, April 20)

However, during the process the participants began to show more interest in their own learning. Having changed the classroom patterns of interaction from T-Ss to S-S and S-T, started making a big difference during the classes. The whole class environment was now giving the learner the confidence enough to make mistakes and even more, learn from them. Within the groups, they began to realize the importance of their contributions to the group during the collaborative activities,

Today the students seem more active. Students switch groups to confirm their answers. S1 in group 1 takes the risk to talk. She says to S2 *what is the signification?* I looked at her and told, *do you mean meaning?* She laughed and then I made the correction. She repeated after me. Students in the group laughed about her new word “signification”. This time the ss are talking a more in the groups. The ss take the copy they used to switch information. S2 is very active talking and sharing with the new group. S1 in group 2 is still very quiet. But he is asking me more, in Spanish. I see that his intention is to be sure he is understanding. I walked around and sat in the groups eliciting answers from the ss. Students today showed a completely different attitude towards the English class. they became more active within the groups. They were helping each other and that encouraged them to speak in English. (Field notes, Mayo 7)

In the implementation process, the researcher also emphasized a different way to use physical resources. The use of different reference materials and other resources that the researcher provided offered the participants more independence to interact within the work groups without having the teacher’s specific instruction all the time,

All the groups are using the dictionary. They look for new words to complete their assignment. The use of dictionary has increased since the first day. Surprisingly, there was at least one dictionary in each group...the use of different reference materials like copies, posters, cards, pictures help the students to support the activities in the groups. Every time the learners used materials different from the course book, they were more active and tried to speak fearless to make pronunciation mistakes. (Field notes, May 4)

Mack Garry (1995) argued that the use of authentic materials in language learning helps foster autonomy by enabling learners to match learning opportunities to their needs. The creation

of new posters and others visual aids such as picture and reading cards, games like lottery, and bingo and spelling sound cards, created a collaborative environment in which the students suited their immediate learning needs.

One of the recurrent aspects that the participants made evident during the first weeks of the implementation, while working in collaboration, was the need for the teacher to help them to feel more confident with the content and the activity itself. Aspect that was not observed at the end of the implementation. The students became more independent from the teacher and more reliable on each one as part of a group. They seemed to be more motivated to work and learn new things. The students started to use dictionaries and the reference book to support their work instead of asking the teacher,

....During this session I see the participants more engaged in the activities. Their lack of vocabulary is evident but they are asking each other a lot for new words. Most of the students today brought a dictionary.Today the learners are interested for new expressions. S1 calls me to clarify the meaning of one expression. S2 called me to ask for the meaning of a word (Field notes, April 30)

The students' attitude while working in groups showed that the participants are becoming more pro-active; they did not wait for the teacher to provide all about language and meanings. This is an essential characteristic of autonomy.

According to Dickinson (1987), when adapting commercial materials and creating writing learning materials for self-instruction, the important thing is to provide the learner with the kind of help advice and encouragement given by a teacher using the same material in the classroom. The participants expressed how the materials, when properly used, can become a source of support,

Qué piensa del material utilizado en la clase?

S1: los diccionarios nos ayudan a conocer palabras que no conocemos en inglés. Es la primera vez que uso uno en el salón.

S2: me gustaron los papelitos y las tarjetas que la profe trajo para que trabajáramos en el grupo. Nos ayudaban a armar las oraciones en Inglés.

S3: el material que la profe utiliza en la clase me ayuda a hablar y no sentir miedo.

S4: Los afiches y las hojas que nos trae la profe hacen que trabajemos en grupo, cada uno tiene su material de referencia.

S5: cuando uso materiales no me duermo.

The participants constantly shared ideas with their partners and teacher in order to clarify instructions, pronunciation and meanings. As asserted by Pica (1994) negotiation of meaning is a series of exchanges conducted by addressors and addressees to help themselves understand and be understood by their interlocutors. In this case there were three specific characteristics identified by the researcher in the field notes: confirmation checks, clarification requests and comprehension checks. The following vignette will explain how comprehension checks took place:

S1 decided to speak to the teacher because he feels the activity was not clear. He said three topics and one.....???? Then, he asked you write???

S1 como se dice comprar? S2 buy. S1 I buy house for my mother. Y tu, que comprarias? (low voice, she does not want the teacher to hear her speaking Spanish).....S3 yo....(she corrects herself) ...I mmmm comprar? S1 buy S3 buy a car.

S1: teacher is the same? Because Facebook and computer?

S1. What is I can't stand?

S2: no se, Teaher don't understand can't stand. I clarified and gave an example of it.

S1 and S2 ask me to clarify a bit more the activity.

S1 and S2 support each other when one of them was talking. S2 asks a lot to S1 who is the most challenge and eager to talk. (Field notes, May 4)

The excerpts from the field notes showed that participants were looking for comprehension by seeking confirmation of others through repetition, with rising intonation. They also seek for assistance, recorded in video, in understanding the other's preceding utterance through repetition, through questions and statements such as "I don't understand" and imperatives such as "please repeat"

Returning to the Main Category and the Research Question

The core category and its subcategories demonstrate that collaborative activities helped students to promote oral interaction in university students, helping them to become more aware of their own learning process by raising their levels of autonomy. Most of the students started short interactions in the target language and this is a great step forward in the English class. They still struggle, but their attitude has changed as well as their participation. They are trying to ask in English and if they do not know the word, they switch to Spanish. This behavior was not manifested in the first video recording. Now, based on the gathered data, it is evident that the students are taking risks to learn English as a foreign language. They are taking advantages of different materials either made by them or reference materials, such as text books and dictionaries in order to scaffold their knowledge. They have also found in their partners teamwork and a confident environment to take the risk to speak and to initiate an effective communication in the target language.

Chapter VI: Conclusions

This chapter aims to provide an answer to the research question based on the data gathered during the pedagogical intervention. It will show the pedagogical implications, it will give suggestions for further research and finally, the limitations faced and how they were overcome throughout the research process.

Based on the implementation, the researcher discovered repeated patterns that led her to focus on one main core category that responded the research question: impact of collaborative strategies in oral interaction and in the development of autonomy.

The research showed that students were willing to participate and enjoyed working collaboratively. Through collaborative activities, the participants could see a different form of increasing oral interaction in the foreign language and make their learning process something in which they are the main characters. During the development of every group activity, students gradually began to diminish their fear of talking and took the risk of participating and interacting in the target language. However, the use of the mother tongue was a permanent component of their short interactions; participants used it to confirm their understanding of the message in the foreign language. The collaborative strategy changed the whole setting in the English class. According to the outcomes collected from the final interview, the participants expressed their pleasure and the benefits from working in group; they felt safe when talking and did not worry about being teased by others in whole group sessions. Collaboration promoted changes in the oral interaction in informal communication, motivating the learners to use the foreign language. Participants found collaborative strategies as opportunities to foster their pronunciation and vocabulary learning through negotiation of meaning and sharing personal experiences. It is also important to mention here that not all the students felt very comfortable with the groups the

teacher made by herself. They were more engaged when working with their close friends. This benefited the collaboration in a motivation sense, but not always the group performance regarding their academic outcomes. In order to benefit the group's collaboration, it is important to adjust the groups bearing in mind the students skills, so they can support each other. Through the observation and analysis done from video recordings, the researcher could evidence the process of risk taking, finding that they did not care too much about the grammatical structure; they just shared messages and interacted using what they had in their linguistic background; nonetheless, the participants showed more confidence in interacting when working collaboratively than when they had to interact in a whole group session. Collaboration created an environment of active, involving exploratory learning; learners were able to be fully engaged in the learning process.

Regarding Autonomy, it was worth noting how the participants, gradually, began to develop strategies for becoming more independent from the English teacher, such as negotiation of meaning, and the use of resources. Once in the groups, the collaborative activities and strategies supported interaction and the need to solve problems by themselves by means of different resources such as dictionaries, workbooks, books, and other resources created by the teacher and by themselves like picture cards and games. Bearing in mind the three phases to change the students' attitude suggested by Scharle and Szabo (2000), raising awareness, changing attitudes and transferring roles, the research showed how through collaboration the participants adopted a new role becoming responsible and aware of their own learning process during class activities. In the same manner, the participants saw how different the classes were, thanks to their contributions. However, it is necessary to maintain a strong motivation to continue developing autonomy outside the classroom.

Collaboration also showed that an autonomous learner was not that individual who was working on their own, isolated out of the classroom with no teacher instruction. Autonomous learners are willing to work together with the teachers and others in the group for their own learning benefit.

During the expanding and producing and generating phases of the class, findings revealed that collaborative learning afforded enormous advantages not available from traditional instruction because the group could accomplish meaningful learning better than any individual alone. This could be evident when the learners were presenting their final products in each lesson to the class; all the students were challenged to think better for individual and mutual benefit.

Pedagogical Implications

Traditional pedagogy is a methodology that demotivates the learners, and presents the foreign language as something abstract, limited to grammatical structures and false communicative experiences. Teachers cannot expect students to speak a foreign language if interaction is not strategically fostered with activities that represent meaningful learning for the students. Byrne (1991) describes the foreign language classroom as the place to socialize, to bring the outside world into it, to escape on an imaginative level. Teachers cannot have competent students in terms of using the FL without fostering and exposing them to interaction in the classroom.

Confidence boosting is one of the most important features learners need to speak fluently and keep their motivation to communicate. Therefore, educators play an important role and have the power to influence the learning process either positively or negatively. When educators limit the learners' interaction to corrections and pronunciation rectification, students can easily become nervous and block themselves about speaking. In order to motivate them to generate natural

interaction in the target language, educators can promote different strategies on the students such as automaticity, in which the learners have the chance to start an informal interaction in the foreign language, without paying much attention to the language structure. What really matters is the message they want to convey through collaborative activities.

Another important implication of the present study is for the role that teachers need to define in terms of mediating learning through dialogue and collaboration. A successful mediation helps students to connect new information to their experiences in other areas and helps them learn how to learn. Through collaboration in group work, the teacher as mediator adjusts the level of information and support as to maximize the learners' ability to take responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, learners may accept the idea that their own efforts are fundamental to progress in learning, and behave accordingly. As stated by (Scharle and Szabo, 2000) a responsible learner is willing to cooperate with the teachers and others in the learning group for everyone's benefit; and consciously monitor his own progress, and make an effort to use available opportunities to their benefit, including classroom activities and homework.

Further Research

This project may be the trigger for a future research to analyze the effect of collaboration in others skills like reading. An investigation in this field may show how the learners can benefit from the group work activities that involve not only collaboration, but cooperation as well, in order to become better readers at higher education levels. Future research can focus in how to improve reading comprehension; especially in content area texts bearing in mind the different professional careers and areas. It can also focus in the study of how different collaborative activities are important part of the scaffolded instruction, think alouds and metacognition as part of a reciprocal learning strategy to improve reading.

It is necessary to continue researching the methodology teachers are using in the FL classroom in universities and how they promote opinion, suggesting, guessing, sharing, and building up knowledge. Therefore, for further research it should be consider the implementation of technological resources to support a new way of teaching that will promote learner autonomy within the language field. It would be very advantageous for the language department to know the impact of the creation and setting up a Language Resource Center (LRC) and Virtual Language Resource Center (VLRC) in the learning of a foreign language. Being technology a big part of the students reality, it demands teachers to be at cutting edge technology to change the old lecture based pedagogy, and therefore gain motivation in the FL learning process.

Limitations

Even though the project was successfully developed, the researcher faced some limitations listed as follows:

Time and schedule: The fact that the target group was a mix of two different careers (Veterinary Medicine and Agronomy) was a limitation in terms of schedule, since sometimes when the Agronomy students were in class, the other group had a field practice out of the city or a lecture they had to attend. This situation affected the activities planned for the day and the collaborative groups assignments for the session. In such cases, the researcher had to work with the head teacher and the students to move the classes schedule for both groups to be able to attend.

Curriculum and pace calendar: The existing curriculum can be considered as another limitation due to the fact that according to the university and language department policy, the whole program must be developed within the semester, ignoring the students' academic needs;

therefore, the project activities were limited to the curricular topics given by the text book without letting explore other topics related with their careers.

Technology: The lack of technology was also a limitation to support their interaction and autonomy development. In order to overcome this situation, the researcher designed different materials students could use in the development of each unit to support interaction.

Video recording: To find a professional person to video record the classes, was also another limitation to get a good quality of the film. The university did not have the professional equipment to support the filming process. The researcher had an external person who helped her with the video recording. This did not benefit the project at the time of analyzing the data collected.

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Appendix A

VIDEO RECORDING TEMPLATE

ACTIVITY No. _____ DATE _____

| Short description of the activity | what I observed | Reflection |
|--|-----------------|------------|
| Classroom Organization and patterns of interaction | | |
| Students' attitude (collaboration, autonomy) | | |
| collaborative strategy (Did the students interact while the activity?) | | |
| Possible changes | | |

Appendix B

STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Fundación Universitaria Juan de Castellanos

Esta es una encuesta que busca más funcionalidad en la clase y recoge valiosa información para el su desarrollo de una manera más significativa e interactiva para tratar de mejorar la comunicación oral en el Inglés

1. En una escala de 1 a 5, indique que tan agradables fueron las actividades en grupo en la clase de inglés, siendo 1 nada agradables y 5 muy agradables.

1 2 3 4 5

2. ¿Te gusto trabajar en grupo? SI _____ NO _____ AVECES _____
¿Por qué?-

3. ¿Trabajar en grupo te enseno algo?

¿Que? _____

4. Las actividades en grupo te ayudaron a mejorar :

- a. La forma de comunicarme con los demás.
- b. A respetar puntos de vista diferente de los demás.
- c. A tener paciencia
- d. A ser activo y aportar al grupo
- e. Todas la anteriores
- f. Ninguna de las anteriores.

5. En las actividades grupales en clase de inglés me sentí:

Seguro _____ sociable _____ activo _____
Inhibido _____ dependiente _____ independiente _____
Otra _____

¿Por qué?

6. ¿Encontraste dificultades cuando trabajaste en equipo? SI _____ NO _____
¿Cuáles?

7. En las próximas clases, ¿Te gustaría desarrollar actividades en grupo? SI____ NO____
¿Por qué?

8. Después de las actividades realizadas, ¿cuál es la habilidad que más fortalecí en el uso del inglés? Encierra la respuesta en un círculo.

Listening Speaking Reading Writing

9.. ¿En el desarrollo de la actividad solo usaste el libro sugerido por el docente? Sí____ No____

¿Qué otros recursos?_____

10. ¿Esperas a que el docente te explique todo lo que hay que hacer o intentas primero por tu cuenta?

10. Que haces fuera del salón para mejorar tu nivel de Inglés?

11. En algún momento mientras trabajaban en equipo, pediste ayuda a tu maestra? si__ no__

12. Cuantas veces?_____

Appendix D

Consent Letter (1)

**Señores
Estudiantes de Veterinaria e Ingeniería Agropecuaria
Inglés IV
Fundación Universitaria Juan de Castellanos
Tunja**

Estimados estudiantes:

Este semestre en el programa de Inglés IV de Medicina Veterinaria e Ingeniería Agropecuaria, implementaré el proyecto de investigación: “Collaborative Learning in EFL Classes in the University Setting” (Aprendizaje Colaborativo en las Clases de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera en el Contexto Univesrio), como uno de los requerimientos exigidos por la Universidad de la Sabana, para acceder al título de Magíster en Docencia de Idiomas.

El proyecto busca determinar cómo el aprendizaje colaborativo desarrolla la interacción oral en inglés como lengua extranjera a través de actividades centradas en el trabajo en equipo y así fomentar el sentido de autonomía en cada uno de los estudiantes. Esta investigación contribuirá a validar innovaciones pedagógicas en la enseñanza del Inglés dentro del ámbito universitario. La recolección de datos se hará durante el presente semestre académico, a través de cuestionarios, grabaciones en video y toma de notas/ apuntes por parte de la docente-investigador. Su participación es de vital importancia y es de carácter **voluntario**. A todos los participantes se les garantizará:

- El uso de nombres ficticios para mantener su identidad en el anonimato.
- Estricta confidencialidad con la información que se recolecte.
- La oportunidad de verificar las declaraciones hechas en los cuestionarios en el borrador de los informes del proyecto.
- Que el proyecto **no** tendrá incidencia alguna en las evaluaciones y notas parciales y/o finales de la materia.
- Que usted no estará expuesto a ningún tipo de peligro, ni físico, ni emocional, ni psicológico.

Agradezco de antemano su autorización para contar con usted en este proyecto.

Cordialmente,

Docente-Investigadora.

Acepto Participar

Nombre _____

Firma _____

Código _____

Carrera _____

Appendix E

Consent letter (2)

Tunja, octubre 10 de 2011

Señor:

Edgar Reina

Director Programa de Lenguas

Fundación Universitaria Juan de Castellanos

Apreciado Señor:

Actualmente estoy realizando una investigación titulada “Collaborative Learning in EFL classes in the University Setting”, dirigida a estudiantes del Programa Inglés IV de Medicina Veterinaria e Ingeniería Agropecuaria de la Fundación Universitaria Juan de castellanos, la cual intenta contribuir y enriquecer los procesos de aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera y al mismo tiempo reorientar las prácticas docentes en estrategias y didácticas para fomentar la autonomía en los estudiantes.

El objetivo de este estudio determinar cómo el aprendizaje colaborativo desarrolla la interacción oral en inglés como lengua extranjera a través de actividades centradas en el trabajo en equipo y así fomentar el sentido de autonomía en cada uno de los estudiantes. Esta investigación contribuirá a validar innovaciones pedagógicas en la enseñanza del Inglés dentro del ámbito universitario. Cabe anotar que dicha investigación hace parte de mi trabajo de grado de la Maestría en Didáctica del Inglés de la Universidad de la Sabana.

Por lo anterior, comedidamente solicito su consentimiento y colaboración para realizar mi propuesta de investigación, que se llevará a cabo durante el segundo semestre académico del próximo año. Esto implica recolectar datos y analizar los resultados, por lo cual debo tener acceso a los proyectos escritos de los alumnos y filmar algunas clases con el fin de conocer y analizar el proceso de escritura académica.

Igualmente, a los participantes se les garantizará el uso de nombres ficticios para mantener su identidad en el anonimato, así como estricta confidencialidad con la información que se recolecte. El proyecto no tendrá incidencia alguna en las evaluaciones y notas parciales y/o finales del curso.

Agradezco de antemano su valioso aporte para llevar a buen término mi investigación.

Atentamente,

_____ (Docente investigadora)

Appendix F

Action Plan 2011

| Activity | Date February, March, April, May and, June, July and August | | | | September | | | | October | | | | November | | | |
|--|---|-------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|---------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Week1 | Week2 | Week3 | Week4 | Week1 | Week2 | Week3 | Week4 | Week1 | Week2 | Week3 | Week4 | Week1 | Week2 | Week3 | Week4 |
| 1. Needs' analysis | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Preliminary Investigation | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Literature Review | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Designing of action plan | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Design of data collection Instruments | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Piloting instruments | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Research Design | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Action Plan 2012

| Date | February, March, April, May, June and July | | | | August - September | | | | October | | | | November | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------|-------|-------|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|---------|-------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|
| Activity | Week1 | Week2 | Week3 | Week4 | Week1 | Week2 | Week3 | Week4 | Week1 | Week2 | Week3 | Week4 | Week1 | Week2 | Week3 | Week4 |
| 1. Pedagogical intervention | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Collection of data | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Analysis of data | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Reflection and decision making | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Selecting and analyzing data. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Reflection and conclusions | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Final paper | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Share findings | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

