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Literature Circles to Improve Classroom Management in an Overcrowded English Class

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Abstract

This action research was aimed at improving classroom management in an overcrowded English class through literature circles in a public institution in Bello. Due to the COVID-19 crisis the objective of the research had to be restructured to be centered on classroom management in two environments and exploring the possibility of implementing literature circles in a virtual environment. Data were collected using a journal, a focus group, an interview to the cooperating teacher and a students' self-evaluation questionnaire. Data analysis showed that in virtual environments discipline issues and disruptive behaviors can emerge, it also showed that students could feel apprehensive about group work in a virtual environment, but with the teachers' guidance it may be possible to implement the strategy.

Key words: Literature circles, classroom management, disruptive behaviors, virtual environments.

Degree Requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of

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Preface

This action research project was born from my desire to improve as a teacher and to transform what could be a disadvantage into an opportunity to learn. I have always felt very conscious of my tone of voice, it was not easy for me to speak very loudly and I knew that this could pose a problem when working with large groups. I wanted to find a strategy that could help me work with large groups, manage the classroom and achieve positive results with my students. When I heard about literature circles, I thought they could be the strategy I was looking for. Literature circles have been used mostly to develop literacy, but their collaborative way of working helps improve the students' engagement and gives them a more active role in the classroom. Furthermore, they give the students a sense of ownership, belonging, responsibility and achievement. They could also help students develop language knowledge more meaningfully because of their literary nature. When I started my practicum, I thought this was an opportunity to explore whether these literature circles could help me to better manage the classroom and help the students improve their language skills.

Description of the Context

Institución educativa Sagrado Corazón is located in the municipality of Bello in the department of Antioquia. Its philosophy is framed within the purposes and principles of the Colombian Constitution of 1991 and the general law of education of 1994. The mission of the institution is to educate children, youngsters and adults within the ethical and moral norms that conduce to respect for the difference and pursue the integral human development. They also intend to provide a service to the Bellanita community by ensuring the right to education with coverage, equity and quality. The institution offers pre-school, elementary, secondary, media and technical school with morning and afternoon schedules.

Regarding the students, they come from different neighborhoods in the municipality, with social strata 1, 2 and 3 with a majority coming from social strata 2 and 3. The course in which this action research took place is a seventh grade with 46 students, 28 boys and 18 girls with ages between 12 and 15. They enjoy working in groups but due to the class size, they become inattentive and get distracted easily, especially after they get instructions and when they finish the activities.

According to the school's educational project, most of the teachers working at the school have a bachelor degree in teaching; some of them hold specialization degrees, and one is a "normalista". At this moment, there are four English teachers at the school: two are working with primary school and two are working with high school; all of them have a bachelor degree and two have a master's degree. Two of these teachers are Karina Garcia and Alberto Cano who were my cooperating teachers. Karina Garcia graduated from the program of teaching with emphasis in English from Universidad Luis Amigó. Her experience as a teacher has been mostly in the private sector. She has been working in the

public sector for three years at Institucion educativa Sagrado Corazon. Alberto Cano graduated from a program of teaching Spanish-English and graduated from a postgraduate program in management of educative informatics.

The school does not count with many resources specifically directed to teach English; in the classrooms they count with a television or video beam. They do not follow a book or any kind of guide material, they only have English dictionaries for the students. The English syllabus is based on the basic standards of competences in foreign languages proposed by the Ministry of National Education. Those standards are based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The school does not apply an explicit English language teaching approach or methodology. The methodological strategies proposed in the syllabus are ICT's, presentations, reading and comprehension of texts, listening and pronunciation exercises, design of the materials, collaborative work, construction of texts, directed writing and discussion groups.

Statement of the Problem

Through my observations and reflections, an interview to the cooperating teacher and some questions to the students, I was able to identify some relevant issues such as the class size, discipline issues, classroom management difficulties, and the methodology used to teach English that encourages a passive role of the students.

In regards to my observations, the first concern I had was the class size; overcrowded classrooms is a problem that exists in most public schools in Colombia. According to Decree 3020, 2002 of Ministry of National Education, in Colombia it is recommended to have an average of 32 students per teacher as a minimum in the urban areas. However, it is common to find classrooms with a larger number, a challenging

situation that most teachers have to face in the Colombian education system. I.E Sagrado Corazón is a small school that manages a large number of students; according to the cooperating teacher the school has between 830 and 850 students at the moment.

The main sources that support the problem identified are pictures of the school where the big number of students and the small facilities can be observed. I also support this situation with pictures of the group during the English class where an overcrowded classroom of approximately 48 students between 11 and 13 years old can be observed. Because of the large number of students in the classroom, discipline issues that make difficult to manage the classroom emerge. Additionally, there is a risk that some students are neglected or some behaviors are overlooked.

Moreover, the class size might lead the teacher to use methodologies that encourage a more passive role of the students since in that way, it would be easier to control discipline. An overcrowded classroom could also hinder the process of learning and impede making learning meaningful for the students. Additionally, the way topics and objectives are stipulated in the institution English syllabus lead to a very grammar oriented way of teaching in which most of the teaching and learning activities are related to memorization of vocabulary and repetition of some grammar structures. This way of teaching conduces to less students' participation and less positive interaction among them. For example, on the observation done on July 18th, I recorded that the focus of the class was learning a grammar topic -present continuous- through a video in which the students only repeated some vocabulary. In another observation on August 5th, I noticed that students usually work individually, and when the teacher proposes group work it becomes a

chaos; on August 5th, I observed how the teacher tried to introduce group work or other activities but it was difficult due to the class size.

Furthermore, I asked some questions to the cooperating teacher through an interview. I wanted to know about the context specific issues that affected learning. She said that one of her biggest challenges working at the school was dealing with large groups. She also referred to the difficulties an overcrowded classroom had posed for her classes, and the classroom management difficulties she found in her class due to their ages. From her perspective, they are not yet able to control themselves in the classroom, something I confirmed through my observations; in general, the students talked a lot during the class, if they were not doing an activity they started walking around the classroom disturbing the class environment.

Considering that it was also important to have the students' perspectives, I asked them some questions related to their own feelings about the classroom environment, whether they were disciplined in the English class, if they thought the group was disciplined, and how they behaved when they worked in group. The students mentioned issues as constant noise, use of bad words, fighting, lack of attention, interruption of the classes and lack of respect for the teacher and classmates when they talk about their discipline issues. When they talked about their group work many of them said that they do all the job which means they need to improve their skills to work in groups and learn to share the responsibility.

Theoretical Background

Large classes pose a challenge for teachers because when there is a large number of students, problems related to classroom management, discipline, methodology, students'

engagement and participation arise. I observed all these problems in the school context in which I developed this action research and tried to formulate a strategy that could help me solve or at least manage these issues. Literature circles could be a strategy to work with large classrooms because they offer a structured way of collaborative learning towards the development of literacy. The use of literature circles in an overcrowded group could help to better manage the class, increase students' participation and engagement, and shift the class dynamics from a teacher-centered class to a student-centered class.

Additionally, literature circles could help change the way in which English is taught; literature might be a good option to make English learning more meaningful by using all the language abilities. In the following lines, I will develop the theoretical concepts that guide this action research: Overcrowded classrooms, Overcrowded classrooms in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Classroom management, Classroom management in EFL and Literature circles.

Overcrowded Classrooms

Küçükler and Kodal (2019) define an overcrowded classroom as a class in which the number of students exceed an average of 30 students per teacher. They mention different maximum class sizes for school grades; for first grade until sixth grade they set a maximum of 32 students, for college classes they set a maximum of 30 to 33 students and for high school a maximum of 34 students (p. 169). In contrast, Ur (1996), (as cited in Bahanshal, 2013) states that in spite of the number of students per class, what determines the class size as large or small is the perception the teacher has of a class in a specific context. Following this idea, large classes are "those with a specific number of students that

teachers cannot handle and [where] resources are not enough to facilitate the teaching and learning process and that pose insurmountable problems for both teachers and students" (p. 52).

Küçükler and Kodal (2019) highlight some of the problems that arise in an overcrowded classroom: it hinders the efficiency of teaching, impedes students to learn easily, and prevents students and teachers from engaging in "literary texts through concerns, conversation, and writing" (p. 169). Marais (2016) citing Opoku-Asare et al. (2014) states that an overcrowded classroom poses an immense challenge to produce fruitful learning classroom environments. Using different teaching methods such as high-order questioning and active learning is difficult for teachers and they are frequently forced to use more traditional methodologies (p. 2). Marais (2016) also mentions that overcrowded classrooms are susceptible of being teacher centered and because of that students could lose motivation; it is also difficult to give attention to individual learners and this could also lead to the students' loss of motivation.

Hussain, Ahmad, Asma, and Hakim (2017) using a quantitative descriptive survey research design chose 88 female Secondary School Teachers as a sample from a population of six hundred and thirty-eight teachers in their district to apply a questionnaire about their teaching methodologies and the disciplinary issues they faced in overcrowded classrooms. These authors conclude that most participant teachers agreed on the problems that could arise in an overcrowded classroom: high noise level, classroom discipline problems, verbal abuse, physical bullying, and cheating in examination. They also concluded that usually teachers in overcrowded classrooms use traditional methodologies to teach and the lecture method is the most used. They recommend the introduction of new teaching methodologies

as group discussion, pair tutoring, cooperative learning approach and inquiry based

learning. They mention that through these methodologies the disciplinary issues could be

managed, and additionally the students would be more academically independent (p. 60-

61).

   Overcrowded Classrooms in EFL. According to Küçükler and Kodal (2019)

English teaching in public schools is today more intensive in their curricula due to the

adoption of English as an international language. Teaching English from primary school to

higher education pose many challenges but one of the biggest impediments is overcrowded

classes since classroom management and achieving results from languages approaches is

difficult (p.169).

   As cited in Küçükler and Kodal (2019,) Leah (2018) mentions that communication

between the teacher and the students in form of written or spoken feedback leads to

increased attention and better academic achievement, but in large classes, students could

finish a term without having had a conversation with their teacher. Leah (2018) asserts that

lack of this kind of feedback lessens the student's opportunities to attain meaningful results

(p. 170).

   Bahanshal (2013) conducted a study where he interviewed six Saudi secondary

English teachers from two public secondary schools in the city of Jeddah. This study

intended to research the effect of English large classes in the processes of teaching and

learning, and suggest some strategies that could be useful to deal with this issue. The

author recounts some of the problems English teachers face in large classes such as

students' misbehavior which makes teachers focus on controlling the class instead of

spending time in more rewarding activities. The large size of the classes impedes the teacher to correct the students' oral and written production.

Moreover, due to the large number of students they receive less individual attention compared to students in smaller classes; this lack of attention could lead to discontent among the pupils, particularly among those with lower levels. Due to the large class size, students also feel uninterested in the lessons and the activities proposed by the teacher because of the absence of teachers' support; the large number of students in a limited space does not permit teachers to move freely and monitor, observe and assess pupils during the class activities. Furthermore, students have fewer opportunities to participate and use the language they are learning; therefore, this could lead to the loss of interest in the language (p. 55).

Bahanshal (2013) also found that teachers in large classes usually use a traditional passive way of teaching in which they present the information and material through a lesson-based format. He found that some teachers are trying to change this way of teaching in their classroom and are implementing different methods to teach such as a student-centered approaches that have made their students more responsible and involved in their process of learning (p. 56). Moreover, group work has been used by some teachers to cope with the problems posed by large classes. These teachers say that it is easier to monitor and assess the class if they are divided into small groups; a teacher also says that dividing the group into smaller groups and giving different tasks to each member has created a class with a more competitive environment and with almost no disturbances (p. 56).

Classroom Management in EFL

Emmer and Stough (2001) state that classroom management is related to "the actions taken by the teacher to establish order, engage students, or elicit their cooperation" (p. 103). Likewise, Brophy (1996) cited by Macias and Sanchez (2015) defines classroom management as the "actions taken to create and maintain a learning environment conducive to successful instruction" (p. 83). Moreover, Emmer and Stough (2001) following Jones' (1996) ideas, assert that classroom management includes "establishing and maintaining order, designing effective instruction, dealing with students as a group, responding to the needs of individual students, and effectively handling the discipline and adjustment of individual students" (p. 104).

Macias (2018) states that classroom management is an aspect ingrained in the teaching profession, and as such is present when teaching all areas of knowledge; however, teaching a foreign language could have an impact in classroom management because of its characteristics (p. 158). The author highlights three characteristics of the eleven that Borg (2006) identifies as particular to foreign language teaching. The first is that in foreign language teaching, teachers have to use a language that the students do not comprehend to give effective instruction. The second is that foreign language teaching requires the use of different interaction models such as group work, which is not necessary in other subjects. The third characteristic is that in language teaching there are various methodologies and the objective is create "context for communication and maximizing student involvement" (p. 158).

As cited by Macias (2018) the studies carried out by Evans (2012) and Wadden and McGovern (1991) confirmed that foreign language teachers deal with classroom management issues characteristic of this subject such as "inaudible responses, unwillingness to communicate in the target language [and] lack of respect for the study of foreign languages" (p. 161).

Macias and Sanchez (2015) following a qualitative descriptive approach carried out a research project that aimed to answer questions related with classroom management and how EFL pre-service teachers perceive classroom management as a problem in their practicum, what classroom management challenges pre-service teacher face in their practicum and what approach pre-service teachers use to face these problems (p. 86). The participants were 34 pre-service teachers, 10 practicum supervisors, 17 cooperating teachers in the EFL teacher education program. The data recollected were questionnaires and semi-structured interviews conducted initially to obtain the participants demographic information and initial ideas of the research questions and later to garner a more in-depth view of the answers and bring forth possible stories or additional understanding of classroom management (p. 86).

The authors concluded that for most pre-service teachers, classroom management is a problem in primary, secondary school and in any setting. Some of the issues that ESL pre-service teachers face are deficient conditions in the classroom environment, the fact that pre-service teachers see themselves more as college students than teachers, negative attitudes from the students, students low language level, and behavior issues such as physical aggression, bullying and disrespect to the teacher (p. 93).

Literature Circles

Daniels (2002) defines literature circles as "small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book" (p. 2). Daniels (2001) also defines literature circles as "powerful small-group structures for reading and discussing fiction or nonfiction texts at all grade levels across the curriculum. Literature circles elegantly combine two very important educational ideas: collaborative learning and independent reading" (p. 3).

Daniels (2002) states that literature circles are part of the collaborative learning movement, and that the term collaborative learning is preferred by teachers that do true inquiry in small groups, design high-order, students-centered, open-ended activities (p. 35). Moreover, the author mentions that literature circles show characteristics of genuine collaboration such as "student-initiated inquiry, choice, self-direction, mutual interdependence, face-to-face interaction, and self and group assessment" (p. 35). Additionally, the author states that collaborative learning is in part based on the field called group dynamics, and that to have successful literature circles, it is necessary to have some of the ingredients that this theory proposes to achieve mature, interdependent and productive groups, these ingredients are "Clear expectations, mutually developed norms, shared leadership and responsibility, open channels of communication, diverse friendship patterns and conflict resolution mechanisms" (p. 36). The author remarks that literature circles are well structured activities that should be able to achieve their main goal that is the clear and profound understanding of a book, but they could also "contribute to the general cohesiveness and productivity of the wider classroom community" (p. 36).

Marchiando (2013) states that there are great possibilities of achieving positive results when using literature circles. The big number of research that shows improvement in comprehension and increased engagement encourages teachers to use this strategy. (p. 19). Citing various authors, Marchiando (2013) mentions that literature circles enable participation from all students in the classroom, including reluctant readers that often do not contribute in other activities, second language learners and especial education learners. Literature circles also help include different learning styles in the form of the many roles students assume during the literature circles (p. 19).

Carrison and Ernst-Slavit (2005) carried out a study with the aim of strengthen English language learners (ELL) students literacy skills and confidence. They also aim to highlight the implementation done by a teacher of literature circles (p. 93). The study was developed in a fourth grade class where 4 of 24 students were ELL students. The school was located in a suburban area (p. 98-99). The authors found that the implementation of literature circles help students, especially ELL students, to be more outspoken. These students were very quiet during the activities and did not participate orally, but after the implementation they started participating more in class oral activities and presentations (p. 102-103).

Another aspect that improved with the implementation of literature circles was attitude towards reading. The students changed their perceptions about reading; they thought reading was for fun and/or learning, they became more confident in their abilities as reader and started reading independently (p. 104-105). The authors also mentioned that with the implementation of literature circles improve the students reading comprehension (p. 105). Finally, the authors concluded that the implementation of literature circles are a

fun and thrilling way to give students choice, help them build confidence, improve their

language and literacy skills and diminish their anxiety about reading and participation.

Literature circles also help increase students motivation, and enhance reading

comprehension (p. 110-111).

Research Question

How can literature circles help teachers manage an overcrowded English class in a public

school?

General objective

To improve classroom management in an overcrowded English class through literature

circles

Specific objectives

To implement literature circles as an alternative strategy to teach English

To use literature circles as a way of learning collaboratively

To improve students' interactions and class participation

To use literature circles to engage students and diminish disruptive behaviors

Action Plan

According to Altricher, Posh, and Somekh (1993), action strategies in action

research are actions with educational objectives planned and put into practice by the

teacher-researcher to improve a situation of their context; these actions could be seen as

exploratory answers to the researcher's questions or experimental solutions to the issue the

researcher is looking into (p. 155-156). Based on the problems I identified, the strategy I

planned to implement was literature circles as a way of improving classroom management in an overcrowded English classroom.

I planned some action strategies for the implementation of this action research. First, on the first two weeks of the school year I would socialize my research proposal with the school community and through an informed consent ask for their approval to carry out my research and analyze data. During the first three weeks, I would do a diagnosis of the English syllabus to analyze the topics they propose for 7th grade, and have a better understanding of the topics I would have to cover in my classes using the strategy. From the second week until the fourth week I would adapt or create the role sheets the students would use in the literature circles. Subsequently I would choose the texts to be used by the students on the literature circles. Taking into account the students' level of English, the first text would be short and basic, the level of difficulty of the following texts would gradually increase. The texts should be related to the topics the school proposes for the first semester of the year. I would have ten weeks to implement this strategy. The implementation would start on February 24th and finish on May 11th. I planned to divide the group into 9 groups of 5 students and I would assign a role to each group; these roles would be connectors, word wizards, illustrators, summarizers, questioners and grammarians.

During this implementation I would be collecting data that could be useful for my research objectives such as the worksheets the students would do along with the products of their readings. I would also be writing a journal where I would write my observations and reflections about the class and the research process. Furthermore, I would develop a checklist to register the response of the students to the strategy implemented.

I would also choose some students to conduct a focus group at the beginning and the end of the implementation of the strategy. This focus group would let me know about the students' perspectives about their discipline and behaviors during the English class and whether some changes occurred after the implementation. Additionally, I planned an interview to cooperating teacher at the beginning and at the end of implementation to know his perspective about the strategy. During the last six weeks of the semester, I would be working on the analysis of the data collected and writing the final report of the action research.

Development of Actions

To develop this research I implemented different strategies. On February 13 I did the socialization of my research project, most of the students were present, they paid attention to the explanation of my research question, objectives and the strategy I planned to implement with them. Due to the ethical issues present in all research projects, I created a consent form where I informed the students about my research project and asked them for their consent to participate in the research. I also revised the school syllabus for 7th grade and reorganized the topics to give them more coherence. At this moment and through all the research I wrote a journal where I registered the experiences related to my research question, reflected about them and cross them with theory.

On February 25th I did an activity to get to know the students and review some of the topics they had studied the year before. On February 27th I started working in the part of classroom management with the students; I did an inquiry about the students' discipline in the group and their ideas about group work. Furthermore, on February 27th I introduced the

students to some classroom rules and rules for group work. On March 3rd I started implementing some classes using group work and roles for group work. I planned these classes this way because I wanted students to get used to having some roles in the classroom and I wanted to see how they behaved while working in groups. I did this type of classes reinforcing group work until March 13th.

On March 15th the national government decided to close the schools in the country to prevent the spread of the COVID-19. I was planning to start the implementation of my strategy, literature circles, on March 24th so I was not able to implement my strategy. Schools had the freedom to choose how they would continue their classes and the institution decided to continue their classes using guides that would be shared in a web page they created for this purpose.

From March 23rd I started working on the guides for the group and since April 20th the students started solving the guides. Initially, I created two guides in which I wanted to continue the topics the students were studying in class, the principal topic was simple past and the sub topics regular and irregular verbs. In these guides I included some texts related with the topics. I created a third guide in which I wanted to include more the literature to teach English as I wanted to do with the literature circles and I also wanted to include some of the activities related to the roles that the students could have had in the literature circles. Moreover, I wanted to start the implementation of my strategy with a short text that could have been a poem. Therefore, for the guide I chose to use a short poem by Shel Silverstein called *The Planet of Mars.* I also decided to work the topic of description that was one of the topics proposed for the first term of the year according to the school syllabus.

On May 11th I had a virtual reunion with the students in which I answered questions they had about the first two guides and introduced the third guide and the topic. I also explained them the changes in my project and the way in which I was working with them using the guides. I also asked for some volunteers to do some interviews for the focus group. On May 21st I asked the cooperating teacher to do and interview to talk about his experience and perceptions during the virtual classes. He agreed to answer some questions in writing.

Seven students agreed to participate in the focus group. On June 3rd I hosted a virtual reunion where I asked the students some questions related to their experiences during the quarantine, the work with the guides and the virtual classes. I also sent the students a self-evaluation form for them to assess their participation in the activities.

Data analysis

I carried out the data analysis using the process of analysis proposed by Burns (1999) for analyzing data. This process implies five stages: Assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building interpretations and reporting the outcomes (p.157-160). The data I assembled to analyze was a written interview with the cooperating teacher, a focus group with the students, a self-evaluation questionnaire for the students and a journal I wrote during the process of the research project.

I coded the data based on the definition Saldaña (2009) gives of codes: "A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data." (p. 3). I codified the different sources trying to summarize the most important parts of the data that were related to the objectives of my research. The self-

evaluation questionnaire was some quantitative data that was created in Google forms which helped me analyze it using pie graphics and column graphics.

After coding the data, I the organized the codes into categories looking for characteristics they could share; later, I compared the different codes and categories and two principal themes or concepts emerged from the data: classroom management in two learning environments, and literature circles in two learning environments. In the next part of this section I will present the findings and interpretations to "make sense of the meaning of the data" (Burns, 1999).

Findings and interpretations

Classroom Management in two Learning Environments

At the beginning of the school year I started *face-to-face* classes with a group of 45 students. First, I noticed fewer disruptive behaviors compared to with the group I had had the previous year. On February 3rd I wrote in my journal that during the socialization of my research project the students were attentive and seemed interested in the presentation. Based on their behavior, I started doing some group work activities to see how the students responded and to have them get used to working in groups. I noticed that there was more noise in the classroom than when the cooperating teacher did activities with the students. On for March 3rd I wrote in my journal that this behavior may be taking place because of the nature of the activities I proposed to the students.

Before the implementation of my strategy, I thought it was important to inquire about the students' opinions and perceptions of their discipline. Hussain, Ahmad, Asma, and Hakim (2017) mention various disruptive behaviors that could arise in an overcrowded classroom such as noise, discipline problems, verbal abuse, and physical bullying. I wanted

to see if the students noticed the occurrence of these behaviors and confirm what I had observed. To accomplish this, I applied a survey in which the students answered questions related to this (See appendix A). In general, the students perceive themselves as disciplined, they like their classmates, the classes and the teachers. However, some students said that there was so much noise that they could not concentrate in the activities. When I asked them if they were disciplined during the English class, 31 said that they were disciplined, 9 said that they were not, and 1 said that he was more or less disciplined. When I asked them if they thought they group was disciplined, 32 students said it was not, 7 said it was, and 2 said more or less.

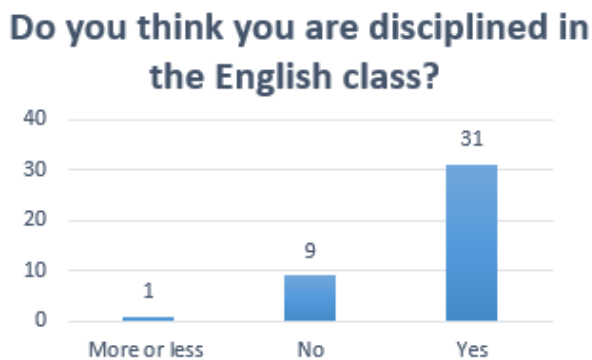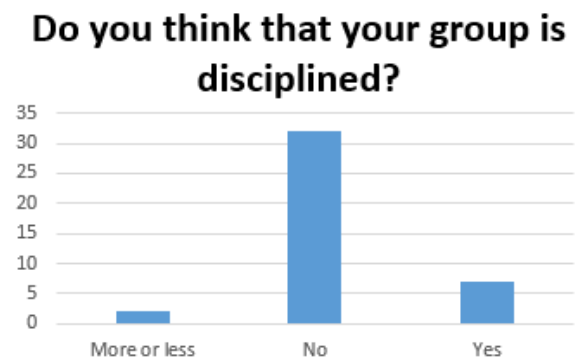Figure 1.   Figure 2.

There seems to be an inconsistency in the perception the students have of their discipline as individuals and the discipline as a group. When I observed them I noticed that they were very disciplined in the presence of the English teacher, but when he went out their behavior changed, so when they said that the group was not disciplined they may have been thinking about their behavior in other classes with other teachers.

In these *face-to-face classes*, I also considered important to set some classroom general rules and for group work. Following Macias and Sanchez (2015) definition of

classroom management, I wanted to establish conditions that could lead to a good classroom environment that allowed successful learning. I asked the students to do some posters in which they explained what they considered were the most important rules in the classroom. On March 9th I wrote in my journal about these rules: respect others, pay attention, and listen to the teacher and other classmates when they are talking.

Until March 13th I was implementing some pilot activities related to group work. I registered in my journal that the students were engaged in the activities and working fine together. I think these activities were helping them be more active and be more engaged in the classes. I believe that if I had implemented the strategy of literature circles as I initially planned it, collaborative work combined with the different roles and readings could have helped me have a better management of the classroom, and could have helped the students improve their language performance and be more active in their learning process. Unfortunately, on March 15th the national government decided to close all the schools in Colombia due to the crisis of COVID-19.

After the closure of the schools, the institution decided to continue the classes in a *"virtual modality"* using guides and some meetings through video calls. I worked collaboratively with my cooperating teacher in the design of some guides based on the topics they were studying before the pandemic. Sadly, I had only one meeting with the students to answer their questions and clarify doubts about the guides. On May 11th in the journal, I registered my concerns because many students could not participate in the reunion, probably because they did not have access to internet. I also mentioned concerns related to discipline issues; for example, some students could easily choose to turn off their

cameras and their microphones making difficult the interaction with them. Another concern I had about the virtual classes was that there could be many disruptive moments in the class that do not necessarily depend on the teacher or the students; for example, the internet connection could fail, or a student could leave the microphone on and there could be noise that interfere with the class.

I also conducted a focus group with 4 students. I was expecting to have more students participating but at the end only these students were able to be present in the video call. In relation to the advantages and disadvantages these virtual classes had for them, they said that they were able to focus more during the classes and in the development of the guides. In this respect, student A said that the guides helped him to research by himself; student B mentioned that he felt more comfortable using a computer, so for him the virtual classes represented some improvement. As disadvantages they mentioned that the explanations were not clear and there were few opportunities to ask questions to the teachers.

Likewise, I asked the teacher about the advantages and disadvantages of the "*virtual modality*" and he expressed that he sees as an advantage the fact that the teacher does not have to control the behavior of the students, or solve conflicts among the students. He also believes that these virtual classes foster autonomy in the students. However, he identified as a disadvantage the fact that the explanations might fall short compared to what teachers can do in face-to-face classes. The teacher and the students agree that one of the disadvantages of these virtual classes or the guides is that the explanations from the teachers are not as clear as they could be in face-to-face classes. Something that the teacher mentions and is

consistent with one of students' perceptions is that this modality could help the students to develop their autonomy.

Another aspect that the teacher mentions and I discussed with the students was the discipline issues during the virtual classes. Student C said that the discipline issues had improved during the virtual classes; in contrast, student D said that she did not see a real improvement: [1]"I think it is same; some people use weird names, there are interferences or they talk, they leave the microphone on and if you say something (…) [They get mad]". Student A also mentioned that the group is still undisciplined, that the students leave the microphones on even though the teacher asks them to turn them off, when the teachers use ZOOM the students write things on the screen and do not allow the teachers to continue their explanations.

Another important aspect I discussed with the students was their participation in the virtual classes. I saw that there were positive responses to this modality; evidence of this is what student D said "I did not use to have so many questions as I do now, I have more questions and I participate more in these virtual classes". However, there were also some negative responses; student B expressed that he did not participate in the virtual classes because he usually woke up late, student A said that he did not participate much in the classes and when he did, it was because he wanted to have good grades; student A also mentioned that in the virtual classes he did not make questions or participate.

When collecting the data I also sent the students a self-evaluation form that 25 students answered. They evaluated their participation in the virtual classes and their

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[1] The interview and the focus group were conducted in Spanish. The information provided in the paper was translated

responses are in line with what the students said in the focus group. When I asked them about their participation in the classes 64% answered that they participated in classes but only 44% said that they were active in the classes, asked questions and interacted with the teacher and classmates. In the journal for May 11th I wrote that many of the students chose to turn off the microphones and did not participate in the class or did not ask questions.

Figure 3. *Participation in the virtual classes*   Figure 4. *Questions and interactions*
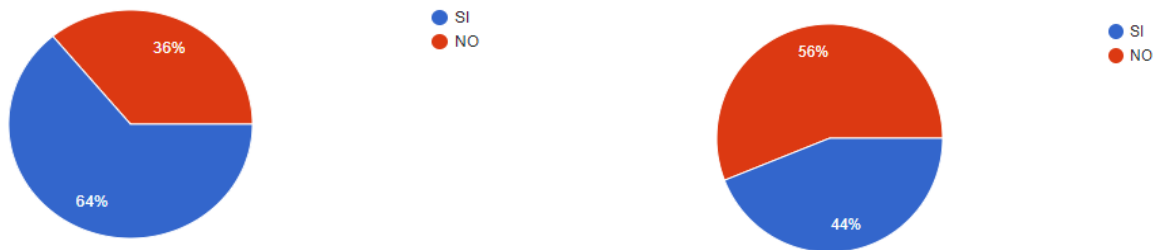
I wanted to know about the students' engagement in the virtual classes, so I asked them if they felt excited about the classes; 64% said that they felt enthusiastic about the classes but when I asked them if they asked questions about the English class and not about other topics in the virtual classes, 56% answered that they did not ask questions about the guide and talked about other topics.

Figure 5. *Enthusiasm about the virtual classes*   Figure 6. *Questions about the topics*
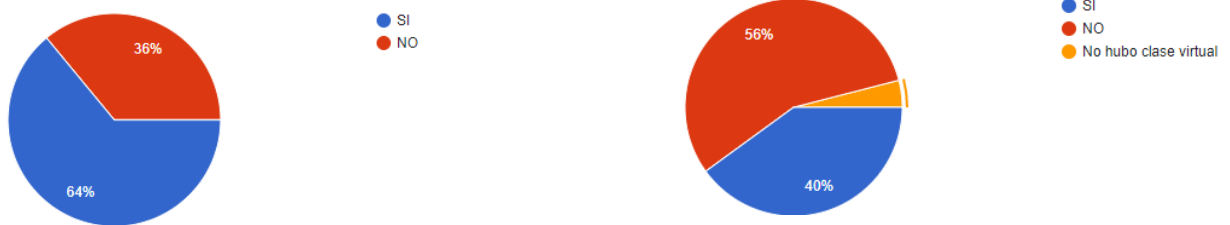
Finally, I asked the students about their behavior in the virtual classes 73%   said that their behavior was good, 12% said that it was fair, and 1 student said that it was bad. Other students had answers that show that they were not aware of the virtual classes or were not participating in them 4 students

Figure 7. *How was your discipline in the virtual classes?*
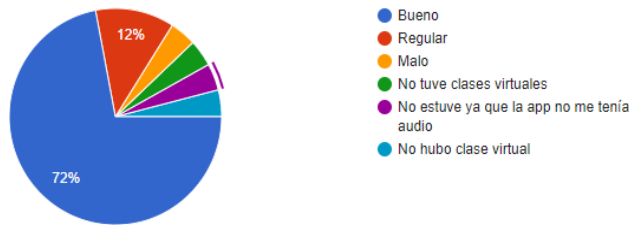
Literature Circles in two Learning Environments

In *face-to-face* classes, before the implementation of my strategy: literature circles to improve classroom management, I wanted to introduce the students to some rules to work in groups. I started with a survey where I asked the students about the discipline but also about the way in which they worked in groups. When I asked the students about group work and how they normally worked, 15 students answered that they did all the work, 9 answered that they all worked together, 7 answered that they talked with their classmates but did not develop the activity, 5 said that other classmates did the work for them, and 5 said that they did not like to work in group.

Figure 8.
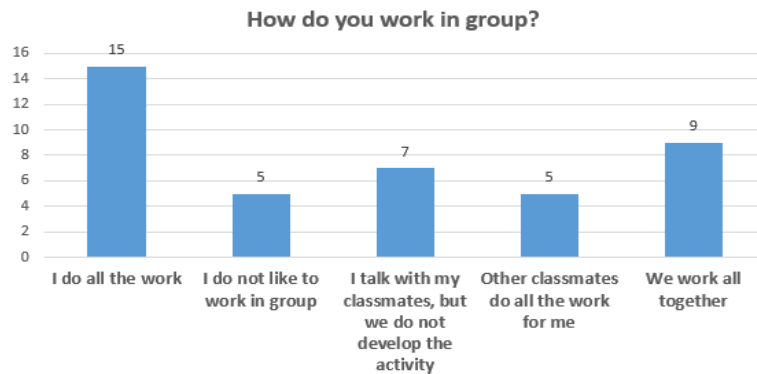
Furthermore, I wanted to do some pilot group activities taking into account Daniels (20002) ideas about collaborative work in literature circles and what he said it was necessary to have successful literature circles: "Clear expectations, mutually developed norms, shared leadership and responsibility" (p. 36). I also wanted to see how the students worked in group and after these answers I concluded that the students needed to get used to the idea of working in groups and they could also take advantage of the use of specific roles to improve the way in which they worked. With these pilot activities, I also wanted to introduce the students to short texts that were related to the topics they were studying to have them get used to reading in English.

I started the implementation of the pilot activities on March 3rd. In the journal entry for that day I said that the students reacted well to the idea of having a role inside the group, most of them seemed committed to their role and worked very well. They finished the activity in the 45 minutes I gave them to do it. Only one of the groups seemed to have problems at the beginning to read the text but with some help they were able to continue with the rest of the activity. Moreover, I wrote in my journal that with this activity in groups I had been able to pay more attention to the students' questions, but it had been difficult to be in all the groups at the same time.

In the journal entry for March 9th, I wrote that during the presentation the students did about rules for group work, they had said that the most important rule was to respect and listen to others' opinions. They also said that the previous group activity was very good, that they had finished very fast but for some students it had been difficult to choose the roles, reach an agreement about the roles and stay in them. I think this was expected

since it was the first time the students worked with the roles and probably they needed more time to get used to it.

On the journal entry for March 13th I recorded that the students were working on a new group activity related to the simple past, the students were working very well in the groups and the noise level was low compared to other moments in the class. During the interview with the cooperating teacher, I asked him if he had observed any changes in the students behavior during the implementation of the group work activities, he said that it had been beneficial for the group; the students stopped being "loose wheels" with their own interests and had shown improvement in their interpersonal relationships.

Based on these results, I think that if I had had the opportunity to continue with the implementation of the strategy of literature circles in *face- to-face* classes, it might have helped me to improve the classroom management of this large group of 45 students. I also think that the literature circles could have helped the students improve their interpersonal relationships, it could have helped them learn to work more collaboratively, be more active in the classroom, and the use of literature could have helped them learn the language in a more meaningful way.

After March 15th the institution decided to continue the school year using guides for the students and some *virtual classes* to answer questions and explain the topics in the guides. I created three guides for the students and used video calls to interact with them and answer questions. I tried to create guides that included texts to encourage reading in the students, and especially in the third guide I tried to include a literary text and some activities related to the roles the student would assume in the literature circles. I tried to include activities related with the word wizards, the illustrators, and the connectors. I also

tried to explore the possibility of doing group work and in some moment collaborative

work as the literature circles propose.

In this respect, I asked the students in the focus group and the cooperating teacher if

they thought it could be possible. The students were very reluctant to the idea of working in

groups using a virtual environment. They all agree that it could be challenging for them

because it could be difficult to coordinate the work and reach agreements with all the

participants. They also mentioned that the possibility of turning off the audio or the camera

could be a problem because some classmates could take advantage and would not

participate. They also believe that time could also be problem as well as the possibility of

losing the internet connection. I asked them if they would be more receptive of the idea if

they had the teachers' help and they said that maybe in that way it would be easier to work

in groups in the virtual environment. In contrast, the teacher said it was possible because

the students have the communication tools and they are experts using technology. Based in

my observations, these contrasting responses show that even if students have more contact

with technology nowadays; it does not mean that they are ready to use those tools for their

education.

I also asked the students and the cooperating teacher what they thought of the idea

of using literature texts to teach English through a virtual environment. The students

seemed receptive of the idea after having worked with the short poem in the third guide.

Student D said, "I liked a lot the poem we read in the third guide, in the virtual classes I

think we could read the text and get together to discuss it, maybe work in a group

summary". Students C and B said that it could be possible to use literature if they had the

help of the teacher. Student A expressed that it could be possible if they used something

similar to the guides but that through the virtual classes it could be more difficult. In the interview with the cooperating teacher he mentioned that there would not be any inconvenient to use literature because it would help the students to develop the communicative competences and their expressions in English.

I think that with the correct guidance from the teacher, the students could work in groups in a virtual environment as well as work with literature, but the teachers should be aware of the students' needs of support to do it more successfully. It is not just about the technological tool, but to help them be more responsible and have better relations with their classmates. Regarding the readings, the students would also need help from teacher to answer questions and to clarify meanings the same way it is done in face-to-face classes.

Conclusions

This research project started with the objective of exploring whether literature circles could be used to improve classroom management in an overcrowded classroom but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to implement the strategy as planned. However, looking at the experience I had with the pilot group activities, I think that the collaborative nature of the literature circles could help to improve classroom management. It could help students to be more engaged and more active in the classroom activities. Furthermore, it could help them learn to work together for a common goal and improve the relations in the group, leading to an improvement of the disruptive behaviors that can appear in an overcrowded classroom. The collaborative work could also help the teacher to be more in contact with the students and be more aware of the students' needs. In this research, it was not possible to explore in depth the different repercussion of working with

literature circles to improve classroom management, but this is an issue that could be explored in further research.

I also discussed classroom management in two learning environments, and the disruptive behaviors that could surface in a virtual environment. In this environment, disruptive behaviors could also emerge, as the lack of participation of the students which could lead to a low interaction and disruptions that would not depend on the teacher or the students as connection failures or unwanted noise.

Finally, in this research, I also tried to explore the possibility of implementing literature circles in a virtual environment. I think it could be possible, but the students in the focus group showed that they were very reluctant to the idea of doing group work in a virtual environment. To be able to implement this strategy; at the beginning the teacher would need to be present and guide the students' meetings and little by little let the students build confidence in their work.

Reflections

This practicum was an experience in which I learned from a personal and a professional perspective. In a personal level, I had never had an experience working with a big group like the ones we find in public schools in our country; so I was very concerned about how I was going to be received in the group and about how I was going to manage the group. At the beginning, I felt a little insecure but I think facing the group, through the observations and while I planned the strategy to work with them, I started to feel more capable of working with them and more confident as person and as a teacher.

This practicum was also a way of putting into practice all the knowledge I have acquired during my years as a student in the program of language teaching. I was very

concerned about the students' level of English and the attitude they could have towards English. I learned to believe more in the students' capacities, while I planned my research project I really believed they would be able to read in English and follow the roles in the literature circles. I did not have the opportunity to implement my strategy, but based in what I observed and lived with the students, I think that they would have done a good job and that they would have been able to read the texts if they were carefully selected.

The most difficult moment during this practicum was the closure of the schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For a moment I was very discouraged; I did not know how I was going to continue my practicum since a big part of my research project was based on classroom management and classroom work, but I was able to find the way to continue, to see that this was an opportunity to do research about learning in virtual environments.

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Appendix

1. ¿Cómo te sientes en tu aula de
clase_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

2. ¿Crees que eres disciplinado en las clases de inglés?
  o   Si
  o   No
¿Por qué?
_____
_____
_____
_____

3. ¿Crees que tu grupo es disciplinado?
  o   Si
  o   No
¿Por qué?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. ¿Cómo eres cuando trabajas en grupo?
  o   Yo hago todo el trabajo.
  o   Hablo con mis compañeros, pero no avanzo en la actividad.
  o   Otros compañeros hacen el trabajo por mí.
  o   No me gusta trabajar en grupo.
¿Por qué?
_____
_____
_____
_____