

Trabajo Fin de Máster. Modalidad A

# Becoming a reflective and sensitive teacher: a critical reflection of my own learning process

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## **Table of contents**

1. Introduction .....	page 1
2. Justification of the selected works .....	page 5
3. Analysis of the learning unit .....	page 6
4. Analysis of the research project .....	page 14
5. Conclusions and proposals for the future .....	page 21
6. Works cited .....	page 26
7. Annexes	
7.1. Learning Unit	
7.2. Research Project	

## **1. Introduction**

In this project I will try to bring together all the knowledge and competences acquired during this Master Degree, as well as all the skills that have been developed along all the subjects and practicum placement. These knowledge and competences are not exclusively teaching-oriented; they also refer to aspects which might also affect the learning process but are not considered as such; as for example the influence of the relationships among the people, or the psychological factors that might encourage or dishearten foreign language learners.

This dissertation is divided in three main sections, being the second one the most important one. To begin with I will justify why I have chosen to present and analyze my learning unit from "*Diseño Organización y desarrollo de actividades para el aprendizaje de Inglés*" and our research project from "*Evaluación e innovación docente e investigación educativa en Inglés*"; then some reflections will be made on the former, linking them with the literature, the knowledge acquired along the different subjects of the Master degree and with my experience in the Practicum placement. To conclude some proposals will be put on the stage on my future as a English teacher and I will critically reflect on the future of our society and the education system that is being provided.

I have been always in contact with other languages since I was a little boy. I was raised in a bilingual context: Galician and Spanish. My parents studied English and French in their leisure time and I was influenced by them. As well, part of my family moved to France in the 80s. and I used to hear them chatting in French. I strongly believe this multilingual context was the original seed that pushed me towards the study of languages. As a Galician man, emigration is inherently linked to my personal background. I have emigrated from my homeland not only physically, but also from an intellectual point of view by getting closer to the study of languages and to the sociocultural implications that are carried by them. Over the last years, I have had the chance to work and study abroad in several countries. I studied as a exchange student in Germany and Switzerland, getting to know many foreign students who struggled to learn German or English; therefore, I could be more aware of the difficulties and challenges posed to foreign language learners. My experience as a language assistant in a High School in Germany was also very valuable. This was my first approach to

language teaching. It should be noted that I got to teach Spanish without any prior training whatsoever. Given that, I taught intuitively without really knowing what I was doing, whether my practice was being valuable to the students and constantly overlooking the mistakes I made in the classroom. After this Master degree I can reflect on my experience from a much more sound judgment on the teaching-learning process that I could before.

In the English Studies, we do not get to learn almost anything from methodology or language didactics, even though education is one of the main and most common professional paths among the graduate students. I believe it to be a pity, because from learning how to teach languages and how they are acquired one can learn a lot from the very same languages. Henceforth I have found very interesting to approach English language from this new perspective. Now I can state that I can make an informed judgment of what means to be a teacher, what he/she should do and how I can try to get as close as possible to the 'ideal teacher' I would love to become.

From the students' point of view, several characteristics of an "ideal teacher" are listed. She/he should excel in building strong and healthy human relations, be able to provide fair assessment, have confident knowledge of the subject or be able and have the willingness to facilitate students' intellectual development. (Rusu, Panaite, řoitu, 2) Among these, the psycho-social and psycho-pedagogical competences are the most common ones. This evidences that autocratic relationships within the context of the school should be put to an end. Rusu, Panaite and řoitu also point out other characteristics which, in my opinion, are also related to the first one, such as for example, respectful and availability/good listener. It is important to bear in mind these results because the closer our expectations of the 'ideal teacher' are to those of the students', the more effective the teaching-learning process will be (Brown, 2009).

In my opinion there is a big factor that has been overlooked, which is motivation. The 'ideal teacher' should not only know how to motivate her/his students, but should be also motivated herself/himself. Friedman (2013) uses the term "motivational synchronicity", which implies the idea that human beings "are born to emulate the motivation and emotions of those around us". From this statement as a point of departure, it can be clearly inferred that teachers who are and show their emotions and motivation in the context of the English lessons will have a positive impact on the

performance of the students. This is especially true since the nature of the classroom is one that needs creativity and problem solving to succeed, which according to Friedman is the environment in which motivational synchronicity has the biggest impact.

It is important not only to have a look at what theorists say, but also at the legal context in which we are getting prepared to teach as we should have it in mind at any time, so that the efforts of the educational community work out correctly. The Article 91 of the Spanish Organic Law of Education of 2006 points out some of the main duties that teachers must perform in the school context:

- a) The programming and teaching of the areas, subjects and modules which have been entrusted to them.
- b) The evaluation of the learning process of the student body, as well as the evaluation of the teaching process.
- c) The tutorial of the students, the management and the orientation of their learning and support in the educative process, in collaboration with the families.
- d) Providing educative, academic and professional orientation for the students in collaboration , where relevant, with the services of specialized departments.
- e) Attention to intellectual, affective, psychomotor, social and moral development of the student body.
- f) The promotion, organization and participation in complementary activities, within or outside of the school grounds, programmed by the educational centres.
- g) The contribute to the centre activities so that they are developed in an environment of respect, tolerance, participation and freedom to be able to promote in the students the values of democratic citizenship.
- h) Periodic information to the families about the learning process of their children, and the orientation to cooperate in the former.
- i) The coordination of the educational and management activities assigned.
- j) Participation in the general activity of the centre.
- k) Participation in the evaluation plans determined by the educative administrations or by the teaching centres themselves.
- l) Continuous research, experimentation and improvement of the corresponding learning and teaching processes.

The second paragraph of the Article 91 emphasizes the importance of the fulfilment of the former functions within a collaborative and team framework. Hence we can observe that the tasks of the teachers are no strictly limited to the context of the classroom, but to the general functioning of the educational centre to which she/he is affiliated. The figure of the teacher is one which promotes the well-being of the student body, their families and a general positive push to the whole community.

Some thoughts should also be made in relation to the general context of Education in Spain, which, without any doubt, is not in good shape. The results of the PISA 2012 show that, in most of the subjects, Spain is far from the average of the countries of the OCDE in most of the results presented. Consequently a hard auto critique should be made, so that we can analyze the situation, observe what is failing in our education and in the society as the responsible of the former and find the reasons for the poor results that our students get. We, teachers, are not but a piece of the inner workings of the machinery that is education. We are part of the problem, but surely also part of the solution, because teachers, as individuals, may have a huge impact beyond the influence of the governmental education policies, the families and the media.

In some manner the Spanish Education system is capable of laying out a hard to explain paradox: it provides with highly qualified professionals to many foreign countries and at the same time has seen the birth of the famous "*Nini generation*". Having this paradox as a starting point, it could be inferred that teachers are not only responsible for promoting students' learning, but also to integrate the cross-curricular competencies within the teaching-learning framework. To address this issue, teachers should work shoulder to shoulder, regardless the subject they impart, in order to incorporate the interdisciplinary competencies within their academic curriculum. Therefore a model for cross-curricular development should be better designed so that all everyone actor involved pushes towards the same goal, trying to fulfil the requirements of cross-curricular competencies such as personal and social competencies, learning to learn, health education, education on the use of ICTs or intercultural awareness. In my opinion, all these competencies might benefit very much from creativity, as it allows to see things from a different perspective. Creativity invites the students to approach reality from another point of view from that they usually do, becoming more independent, critical and innovative. Due to its communicative nature, the English subject is a very good one to introduce this concept to tackle cross-curricular

competencies. This is the reason why I have tried to include tools and activities which promote students' creativity in the learning unit and in the conclusion I will draw some more proposals on this topic.

## **2. Justification**

The workload of essays, papers and projects related to teaching and learning English in this Master degree has been very high. I can certainly state now that when I look back in time I realize that many of them, which seemed to be empty or purposeless back then, are actually important pieces of a puzzle which now fit in the whole picture that is this Master degree. Therefore they have acquired more value as I have developed my knowledge on English teaching and experienced from first-hand the real tasks and duties of a secondary education teacher.

I will demonstrate what I have learnt all throughout this year, but not only that, I would also like to show that I can reflect critically on the knowledge that has been presented to us and not to take everything for granted. I have also written other papers which I would be willing to show and reflect on, but they do not give cause for varied and wide issues that concern the teaching-learning process of a foreign language because of their specific nature. The learning unit that was prepared for "*Diseño Organización y desarrollo de actividades para el aprendizaje de Inglés*", which I had the chance to implement in a classroom of 2nd of Bachillerato, deals with many of the most important theoretical aspects that English teachers have to confront, and at the same time, I had the chance to experiment with it in a real context, from which some interesting thoughts and implications can be drawn.

Even though I did not receive a very good grade with this paper, it brings together many of the key ideas I would like to focus on and which I find of high relevance in my formation as an English teacher. It allows me to reflect critically on different aspects such as the design of the activities or their implementation in the classroom. I had also thought about choosing the "Year Plan" we prepared in the first semester for "*Diseño Curricular de Lenguas Extranjeras*", but discarded it because, even though it received the highest grade, it is not as specific as the "Learning Unit" and therefore it is much more theoretical than practical. I question if, properly developed, it could also be brought into a real classroom and succeed in its implementation.

Regarding the research project I should say that I found extremely interesting and stimulating to look into students' opinions and teachers' perceptions on the influence and importance of team building and how it relates to individual participation of the learners of a classroom. Since I am aware of the importance of the affective factors in the acquisition of a second language, I believe that it is important to advance in this aspect and to pay attention to students' affective needs to encourage learning.

I had hardly ever considered the importance of research in education. I just assumed that progress was a natural step consequence of experience and that research and innovation was a field only to be developed by scientists or engineers. The research we carried out let me experience by first-hand how such a project is elaborated and what difficulties and concerns might arise as well as the potential improvements that could be developed.

To sum up, these are the two most practical and useful papers we have written in this Masters. With them we are able to go down to the reality of teaching and learning and start playing with it to experience the joy of success in the classroom. It is certainly needed to start from a theoretical perspective, but it should not be forgotten that we are dealing with human beings which are extremely different from one another. Therefore, theoretical claims should be verified by reality not only once, but on a regular basis, as the context in which they are usually drawn can also change very quickly.

### **3. Analysis of the Learning Unit**

I have prepared my learning unit for a class of 2<sup>nd</sup> Bachillerato in the Pablo Serrano High school, situated in the "Las Fuentes" neighbourhood in Zaragoza. I was given the topic "Celebrations" by my tutor, so this is the starting point for each of the lesson plans. English teaching has traditionally put too much weight on the formal aspects of the language such as grammar and vocabulary. I have decided to move away from this perspective and follow a more cooperative and communicative approach by using a Task-based syllabus. Students are given the opportunity to use the target language in a integrated way in the classroom beyond the typical teacher-student interaction, in order to promote the students' output, not forgetting at any moment that they should also be

given enabling tasks, so that they have the necessary assets to successfully complete the activities.

When I had the chance to take into the field the learning unit I had designed I was quite eager to see how it would work with real students. After so many months about theoretical perspectives and how to approach the design of activities in order to make them "task-like" it was interesting to observe that there was a huge gap between what I had planned and what actually happened. Class management had a huge impact on the development of the lessons. Sometimes my tutor had to leave the classroom and I was completely alone with the students. When this happened, I tried to pretend I was very confident of myself and that I was sure of how exactly exercises should be done, even though this was not totally true. This revealed the importance of the preparation of the classes. The less space left for improvisation, the better the classes will work out.

"To teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge". - Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*

After having completed this Master degree, I can say that the main idea that has left a mark on my view of English teaching has come from the teacher Violeta Delgado Crespo. Her subjects *Diseño Curricular de Lenguas Extranjeras* and *Fundamentos de Diseño Instruccional y Metodologías de Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras* put a lot of emphasis on the idea that languages are learnt for communication, not for the sake of futile knowledge. Therefore, communicative competence might be linked to the idea of a conscious change of objectives while teaching English. Where should we aim as teachers at if we are to face the educational problems that we are to confront from this new perspective? Obsolete methods and theories should left behind and accepted as unmistakably archaic in order to face up the pedagogical challenges of this new contemporary era. An interesting thought crossed my mind during a class debate related to the extensive and overt teaching of grammar. Referring to English as a vehicle for communication one could clearly understand it as the second definition given in the Collins dictionary: *a medium for the expression, communication, or achievement of ideas, information, power, etc...* (Vehicle, 2014). A metaphor arouse when reflecting about this point. What if we consciously slide from this definition to the very first one which defines vehicle as *any conveyance in or by which people or objects are*

*transported, esp. one fitted with wheels?* (Vehicle, 2014) One could then draw an analogy between these two definitions and the different approaches to English teaching. As teachers, we should consider whether our goal is to train competent drivers who will be able to drive safely on different roads, who will be able to enjoy the numerous beautiful landscapes they might come across and who will amuse themselves by the simple pleasure of driving, or if on the other hand our goal is to train skilled auto mechanics, who will have an advanced knowledge of all the inner workings of the vehicle, but will not necessarily be able to drive skilfully. The analogy between the grammar and the inner workings of a vehicle helps us to show that knowing how a car internally works does not allow that person to operate it; as it has been happening for centuries, EFL students have been provided with the formal knowledge of the grammar structures that lie behind a language, but not with the necessary skills to use it, so they were becoming experts at knowing the language, but not experts at using it. It certainly can be useful in a certain moment for a driver to be able to change a tire, but that does not mean that he should be trained uniquely to do that, at the expense of much more useful communicative skills.

Despite our history of treating the four macro skills as separate segments of a curriculum, there is a recent trend towards the integration of the four skills (Brown, 2001:232). Richards (2006:11) argues that supporters of the communicative approach to language teaching emphasizes the importance of not teaching macro skills separately, but in a integrated way. If we are to emulate real contexts for our activities we should not simply obviate that listening, speaking, reading and writing occur together on a daily basis, so students should also approach them like they would in real life situations; e.g. a reading might prompt a debate in the classroom, after which students might be asked to write a review.

This model provides teachers with a lot of flexibility to create their own lessons. It is up to the teachers to decide which of the macro skills they would like to focus on, but it is in their hand how the different skills will intertwine in their lessons. When designing my learning unit I have kept this concept in mind at every moment. The classroom activities are presented within a context which emulates one that students might come across in real life, so that the communicative needs to complete the tasks will be similar to those required to successfully carry out the different activities. For example, in the first lesson, 'April Fools' Day', students have to watch a video about a

prank. Firstly the video is played mute and students have to try to explain to a classmate what they see as if they were with their blind grandfather and deaf grandmother (Speaking skill). Then the video is played again with audio and subtitles and they have to try to answer to different questions posed by the great parents (Listening, reading and writing skills).

When I implemented my learning unit, students were quite surprised because the typical pattern of the classroom was broken. They were not given a passive role anymore. As I had already prepared and printed out all the worksheets, I asked them to put their course books aside and concentrate on the lesson. I thought that anything else would just be a distraction. They were used to classes which used the three Ps' model. Therefore, they were not really often asked to interact with each other, only sporadically. Having the students working in groups or in pairs got them really engaged in the activities. They performed the tasks with a degree of motivation and interest I had not seen in any of the former classes I had attended.

After numerous decades searching for the definite universal method with which every EFL learner would learn efficiently and as effortless as possible, we have eventually heeded the call of reason and realized that such a method is just an utopia which reflects the path of least resistance which seems to scourge our benumbed society. As Frederick Douglas said: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress", what is attained with no effort is not worth. I strongly believe that we should teach and proof that effort is worth making because it is the only way in which learners can really understand, internalize and develop real knowledge, skills and competences.

It has been realised that there never was and probably never will be a method for all, and the focus in recent years has been on the development of classroom tasks and activities which are consonant with what we know about second language acquisition, and which are also in keeping with the dynamics of the classroom itself. (Nunan, 1991:228)

It was not after the Humanists methods and approaches to English teaching that theorists started to understand that such universal method does not exist. They realized that they were definitely posing the wrong question, but as their proposals put emphasis on the importance of the human being, such as for example Krashen's Affective filter hypotheses or Curran's Community language learning, a new perspective was brought

into the field. This new viewpoint in which students started to be taken into account and were not treated as mere statistical numbers or robots had a real influence on the postmethod era.

Language teaching is much more than teaching language. It is not merely about transmitting phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic knowledge of language usage, but it is also about transforming cultural forms and interested knowledge so as to give meaning to the lived experiences of teachers and learners. (Kumaravadivelu, 2012:5)

As I had never prepared a learning unit before in my life, I have to say that I have struggled to unify all the ideas presented to us along the year. There were simply too many concepts that should be brought together and make them work smoothly. Contents, methodology, objectives, evaluation, tasks should be perfectly combined and organized in a coherent way. When organizing the learning unit one should bear in mind that it must be coherent in its whole form, in terms of contents, objectives or methodology, at the same time as it should follow the legal guidelines established by the *Aragonese Curriculum* and in the Spanish Organic Law of Education of 2006. At the same time, students should be given opportunities to use the language in contexts similar to those of real life if we are to succeed bringing the communicative approach into the classroom. Recycling and enabling tasks should be developed as well in order to prepare the students to undertake more complex activities.

In the past, a lot of emphasis was put into accuracy, but in a more communicative approach, accuracy should step down into the favour of fluency. Brown (2002) refers to the concept of automaticity as the pursue of fluency in the target language. He argues that children can unconsciously acquire foreign languages with tremendous ease because they do devote almost no effort to analyze the linguistic forms of the utterances to which they are exposed. Likewise, foreign language learners should gradually move from "the control of a few language forms into the automatic processing of a relatively unlimited number of language form. Overanalyzing language, thinking too much about its forms, and consciously lingering on rules of language all tend to impede this graduation to automaticity" (2002:56). This can be directly related to the new paradigm in which grammar does not have a central role in the classroom, but a much more tangential one. This is linked with the idea of grammar as being a tool for

communication and not an end by itself. In my opinion, this idea might be generally accepted among theorists, but actually is still not widely taken into the real field of schools. I could bluntly notice by myself in my Practicum placement and by interacting with my Masters' colleagues that still one of the most common practices is one in which grammar plays a central role in the classroom and many drilling exercises are done. Automaticity does not imply the idea that grammar should be avoided from our lessons, but simply that it should be used as a tool to provide the learners with enough linguistic information so that they can develop and build their communicative skills.

Regarding this principle, the learning unit focuses very much on the use of the language in several contexts and by means of different skills, and not on the formal aspects of it. Only in one of the lessons, the "Lottery Celebrations", grammar is explicitly worked on: the type two conditionals. This is done in an inductive way, in which students have to come up with the rule by themselves, after which they focus on the functional application of this grammar point by playing a game called "Building Around" adapted from "Fun with Grammar" by Suzanne Woodward (1997).

Automaticity is not achieved overnight, learning languages could be compared to music and sports, which do not specially benefit from intensive sessions, but rather from extensive and continuous in time training. Teachers should be aware of this concept, be patient and give time for the students to improve their fluency at their own pace.

Information that the brain determines is important is much more likely to be attended to, stored, and later retrieved than that which the brain decides is meaningless or of little consequence. (Westwater and Wolfe, 2000:49)

Ausubel proposed in 1963 the theory of meaningful learning in which the new knowledge is built around the learner's previous knowledge. Therefore the new information should be linked with the learner's own cognitive structures and not presented as isolated bits of information with no relation whatsoever to what the learner already knows or has experienced before in real life. Therefore meaningful learning moves away from the old-fashioned drill exercises in which students only duty was to repeat over and over language forms without any excessive cognitive processes workload. It is opposed to rote learning to which many of us has been subject to when,

for example, we had to learn by heart a list of verbs and their irregular forms or a list of isolated vocabulary. This meaningful learning principle does not totally erases drilling from the English classes, but this kind of exercises should not be the core of English lessons. Brown (2001:57) states that "meaningful learning will lead toward better long-term retention than rote learning".

It is our duty as responsible teachers to find the contact point between what the students know and what they learn. Brown also indicates that students' needs, personal interests and goals should be incorporated into our syllabuses. Since I was given the topic 'Celebrations' for my learning unit, I tried to organize my different lesson plans with different subtopics that could be of interest to the students. Reflecting now on how they were developed, I can say that I could have chosen topics more related to their interests and experience.

Students should be made participants and responsible for what their own learning. This idea is also supported by the *Aragonese Curriculum*, which defines as the sixth objective of the foreign languages the following one: "To develop learning autonomy by the active participation in the planning and control of one's own process." This objective could be achieved by working on the competence related to learn to learn included within the procedural competence.

I think that the one of the most relevant aspects of this Masters degree and to which a lot of focus has been put on is that of task-based teaching. I found it very exciting to learn about it, because I had not heard about it before. I thought I had not experienced it neither as a teacher, nor as a learner. I am sure I was not subject to this kind of teaching while in primary and elementary education, where most of the teaching was based on pure grammar exercises and in order to drill on specific aspects of the language. Now that I am more aware of how it works, I can say I might have attended some few German lessons in the past which certainly shared some of the characteristics of task-based teaching.

Skehan (1998:95) presents five essential characteristics of an activity in order to be considered a 'task':

- Primary focus on meaning.
- There is some communication problem to solve.

- There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities.
- Task completion has some priority.
- The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

I believe that the main breakthrough in second language teaching with the task-based approach is that the focus has shifted from form to meaning. After my experience in the school placements, I can say that, generally speaking, most of the former beliefs regarding this aspect still remain intact in the English classes I have observed. Nevertheless, I hope that the new generation of teachers will bring these ideas into the classroom in order to make English lessons more enjoyable and effective for both the teachers and the students. I tried to design my lessons as task-like as possible. I put importance on the meaning to be conveyed and not much to the form, engaging students in real-life situations in which they had to negotiate meanings and there was a non-linguistic outcome, as for example, the decision of the destination for the school trip in the second lesson "Celebrations around the world".

The idea of providing a context is also one that was often emphasized. Trying to set the activities in a situation comparable to real-world ones was one of the most challenging features to introduce in my learning unit. I was only used to prepare isolated standalone exercises which focused on one single linguistic feature. I had to reflect on how I would do it in order to create contexts similar to those of real life.

Ellis (2003, as cited in Ellis 2008:819) distinguishes two kind of tasks: unfocused and focused. While unfocused tasks might prompt many different linguistic forms from language learners, focused tasks are designed to make students "process some particular linguistic feature". Opposing any strict limits between these two type of tasks, Littlewood (2004:322) draws a continuum between the focus on forms and the focus on meaning. Thus situating pre-communicative language practice more tending to focus on forms. I believe that this is an aspect which could have been improved in my learning unit, because I have failed to recognize when and how I should provide the students with sufficient enabling tasks so that they could successfully undertake the following activities. I obviated the importance of providing the students with the opportunities to work on specific linguistic aspects because I relied too much on unfocused tasks because they are often simply easier to organize and design. I should have designed better pre- and post-task activities focusing on the language in order to

draw attention to the correct use of English and trying to smoothly shift from controlled to less-controlled practice in my lessons.

It might be surprising how much importance has been given to the Task-based approach in this Masters when one reads Richards arguing that "*there is little evidence that it (TBLT) works any more effectively than the P-P-P approach it seeks to replace*" (2006:35). Certainly there have been other second language acquisition experts whose stance is completely the opposite, such as for example Ellis, who claims that "*the study of TASKS HAS proved to be one of the most productive seams of L2 classroom research*" (2008:818). It seems that the debate is still open as models are changing and new ones are constantly being proposed, such as for example the competence-based model.

#### **4. Analysis of the Research Project**

I have worked along four other classmates in our project for the subject of '*Evaluación e innovación docente e Investigación educativa en Inglés*'. From our own experiences with the subjects of the teacher Vicky Gil related to cooperative learning and how the cohesion of our own classroom increased because of this subject, we wondered what the consequences of such an improvement in the personal relationships were. Therefore, we thought it would be interesting to study and research on the influence of affective factors in the English classroom.

In this project we wanted to focus on the importance of the concept of human being within the classroom. Each student has a little heart which, if treated with care, may open the gate towards success and a satisfactory learning process. We strongly believe that feelings matter, and taking them into account will make the learning process more profitable and enjoyable both for the teacher and for the learners. Therefore, we believe it is necessary that the issue be addressed. Historically not much importance has been given to these factors but simply to the content and to formal curricular aspects. Often studies related to language teaching do not take into account that students are not robots, but people. People whose affective needs should be fulfilled in order for them to be happy and perform successfully in the classroom. Maslow studied in his work *A theory of human motivation* (1943) the needs that people seek to fulfil. Maslow's

hierarchy of needs sets as the third step of his pyramid what he calls *love needs*, which are those we wanted to approach in our research.

In reference to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, I would like to add a little criticism to our project. We had taken for granted that the first two sets of needs, the physiological and safety needs, were mainly fulfilled in our educational contexts. Given the present situation of crisis it would not be disproportionate to also research on this aspect, because in recent years concerns have arisen regarding problems such as child malnutrition (physiological need) or domestic violence (safety need). As Maslow said, human beings try to fulfil the most fundamental needs before moving on to the next level. Therefore teachers must ensure students' basic needs before paying too much attention to the affective needs, otherwise any efforts regarding this aspect might be completely futile.

With regard to English teaching as a second language, we consider it to be a perfect subject to create groups with high cohesion which work and learn happily and effectively. As English is a subject whose main aim is communication and interaction we consider that it serves perfectly to create cohesion in groups. Moreover high cohesion makes students feel more comfortable, boosting individual participation in the classroom. So we can infer that the better they feel, the more and better they will learn.

Based on the former beliefs, the following hypotheses was written and it worked as the starting point for our research:

**If we are able to create a climate in which students feel comfortable and participate freely, learning will be more effective and enjoyable for all the participants, and individual participation will increase and improve.**

In order to approach our research, we decided that cooperative learning could be a very adequate way to promote healthy students' interactions which could potentially lead to better group cohesion and lower affective filter. Cooperative learning is a concept which I had only knew by hearsay and had not experienced in learning before this Masters. I found that it can be a very gratifying learning experience as the same as a effective one. In my opinion it can be a very interesting technique to be applied to English classes. Kagan (1997:5) affirmed that *a cooperative structure is a content-free way of organizing the interaction of individuals in a classroom*, therefore it is up to the

teachers how they use it. Thus, he proposes several different structures which can be used in order to promote group cohesion.

Without the cooperation of its members society cannot survive, and the society of man has survived because the cooperativeness of its members made survival possible.... It was not an advantageous individual here and there who did so, but the group. In human societies the individuals who are most likely to survive are those who are best enabled to do so by their group. (Ashley Montagu, 1965. Cited in Johnson & Johnson. 1994)

Cooperative learning breaks with the usual canon of extremely individualistic societies such as the occidental one which do not put special emphasis on groups. Most of the methods for teaching English, such as the Grammar Translation method or the Audio-lingual method, developed in the past did not take this into account, having students working all alone by themselves. The social nature of languages and of communication itself makes cooperative learning quite logical. If we want to convey a message, we need somebody to communicate it to. This idea can be linked to that of social nature of learning in which learning is defined not as *an individual, private activity, but a social one that depends upon interaction with others*. (Jacobs and Farrell, 2003. Cited in Richards. 2006:25)

Group work should not be confused with cooperative learning, because the latter implies not only making students work with each other, but much more. Kagan (1994) formulated the four basic principles of cooperative learning which allow the transformation of competitive and individualistic efforts into cooperative efforts:

- Positive interdependence: Students work together and each member of the group can only succeed if the other members of the group also succeed. Students should believe that they either "sink or swim together."
- Individual accountability: Each student should be held responsible for contributing his or her fair share to the team's success.
- Equal participation: There can be no "free-riders" in the groups because all students must take part in the group work in the same quantity.
- Simultaneous interaction: Several students should be engaged in producing language at the same moment.

We wanted to study if we could improve the classroom's climate with three different activities which promoted students' participation by boosting group cohesion and also if students would participate more if they felt better in the classroom. I believe we focused too much on the gathering of data and somehow ignored the importance of those which were actually the very instruments of our research: the activities we implemented. In order to understand our project, I will start by explaining each game, and I will point out some of their weak points according to the previous characteristics of cooperative learning. By carrying out these activities, we wanted the students to feel comfortable in the classroom, to get to know each other better and to promote group cohesion. Based on the structures developed by Kagan, we thought of the following activities:

**1. “Tea Party”:** Students form two concentric circles and match up face-to-face with another student. In the first round, the students in the outside circle describe for five minutes a past event of their lives using the past simple. When the time is over, the students in the inner circle do the same. Then the outside circle moves one place to the left. In the second round, the students in the outside circle describe the experience told by the previous partner.

Even though this game worked quite well in the classroom and helped students get to know each other, we believe that it was not the best one in order to promote group cohesion. Students did not feel that they were pursuing common goals, therefore the positive interdependence principle was not totally achieved. In order to improve it and meet the positive interdependence principle, we should have set certain aims for the students to feel that the group was to succeed if the succeeded themselves.

**2. “Jobs and Countries”:** Students work in teams and have to come up with an alphabetic list of Jobs and Countries. They have to be as quick as possible.

Unlike the previous game, students did indeed feel part of a team. But as this activity works like a competition between teams, students rushed to have as many solutions as possible. Students with better linguistic competence hoarded the attention of the other group members, discouraging the students with the weakest confidence from participating. As a result equal participation did not occur. We should have set a rule to oblige each student to add one idea to the list before moving on to the next

student. Teacher should also be involved while the activities are running in order to monitor students and check whether they are following the rules.

**3. “Minimal Pairs Slap game”:** Some consonant minimal pairs are presented to the students. Two groups are formed whose members will stand in a queue. Two different cards are shown which happen to be distinguished by only one phoneme. the teacher pronounces one of the two cards. One student of each group should pick up the correct card before the other does.

This is the game which we and the students enjoyed the most and thought that promoted group cohesion the most; hence, we decided to develop it further in the subject '*La comunicación oral en lengua Inglesa.*'. We decided to turn the screw a bit tighter and twisted the game into a similar one to 'Steal the bacon' but with minimal pairs instead of a handkerchief and then assigned each student a role linked to a particular minimal pair. This activity covered all the four principles pointed out by Kagan and was very successful when we implemented it in the classes of our practicum placements.

As I have just pointed out, although some criticism to these games could be put forward, we appraised them quite positively for our research purposes. They emphasized the main components of cohesion described by Forsyth (2010:123): Social cohesion, by putting emphasis on the relationships among the members of the group; task cohesion, by assigning tasks to be performed as a coordinated unit; perceived cohesion, to promote the sense of belonging to the group; and emotional cohesion; by increasing the emotional intensity of the group and its members encouraging their emotional links by relating to personal experiences.

Cooperative learning can be very a very useful tool to develop three of the main basic competences defined by the *Aragonese Curriculum* according the recommendations of the European Union.

Firstly, the *social and civic competence* is developed by means of working shoulder to shoulder with other classmates and interacting with each other. Johnson and Johnson (1994) proposed a model in which "social skills" were a principle on its own but Kagan (2001) argues that the development of these skills are already integrated within his own structures. In cooperative learning, students often have to come to an

agreement, listen to their teammates and collaborate together in order to achieve a common goal. These will certainly be very useful skills in the future outside the school environment, as students will need them all throughout their lives in order to be part and parcel of society.

Secondly, the *learning to learn competence* is built up when students work together they become more conscious of their own learning style. They can observe how other team members learn and exchange experiences with them. Thus, they will develop the ability to distinguish how they learn best.

Thirdly and finally, because cooperative learning changes the typical students' and teachers' roles in the classroom it can be perfectly used to develop the *autonomy and personal initiative competence*. In cooperative learning this competence is developed by shifting from teacher-centred instruction to learner-centred classroom. Students are asked to be responsible for their own learning and, as a result, will be more aware of the necessity of facing up any problems that may arise in the learning process.

Regarding the results of our research I should say that they were definitely quite surprising and I did not actually expect the big differences we came across before and after implementing our activities. Since groups need time to create strong links among their members, this kind of improvement in the group perception as a unified group was not expected because the activities were carried out in one single day. Certainly it would have been much better a longer project but we were limited in time and length. It was a pity to not have been able to undertake a bigger and more detailed project. As most of the schools where we did our Practicum placements were pressured because of the year schedules and deadlines, we were also subject to empirical limitations and not totally free to carry out all the activities we wanted.

Bearing in mind that we wanted to know if we could increase students' participation in the classroom by making them feel comfortable in the classroom, also some remarks should be made on Krashen's affective filter hypotheses (1982). According to his hypothesis, affective variables have an impact on the second language acquisition process. These variables include motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. A high affective filter prevents input from being assimilated by the learner. Neuroscientific research validates this theory: "Classroom experiences that are free of

intimidation may help information pass through the amygdala's affective filter. In addition, when classroom activities are pleasurable, the brain releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter that stimulates the memory centers and promotes the release of acetylcholinem, which increases focused attention" (Willis, 2007). Therefore, "our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter", that is, promoting "low anxiety among students", and keeping them "off the defensive" (Krashen, 1982: 32).

Another aspect we would have loved to include in our research but did not have enough time was the Pygmalion Effect. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) published a research on whether the teachers' expectations of their students had any real impact on their performance and achievement rate. They conducted an experiment in a public school and discovered that their hypotheses was true. Therefore, if a teacher expects that his/her students will effectively work together in cooperative work, the more like they will. Consequently, if we expect a group to be unified, the more likely this will happen. Students have to feel that that the teacher expects them to work cooperatively, then they will be able to accomplish the different challenges of the classroom together. Thus, holding positive attitudes towards our students can make a difference in their learning.

Similarly to what has happened in our other Practicum projects, it was hard to gather reliable data and develop this project properly in such a little time and given the circumstances we had to work under which were full of unpredictability external to us. We would have loved to try different games and getting to know the students a bit more, because they were actually the subject of our study. We had to trust the comments of our tutors about the attitudes and motivation of the students in order to analyze the data available to us. Even though there were areas for improvement in this project, still I would like to say that this project was really inspiring and stimulating. I will consider the ideas and concepts mentioned above for my present and future as an English teacher.

## **5. Conclusions and proposals for the future**

To conclude my dissertation I would like to point out some of the most important ideas that this Master degree has left on my vision of teaching. I will expound some opinions and constructive criticism on the Spanish education system, and how teachers play an important role in society and therefore can trigger important changes.

As it should be clear this far, language teaching has evolved dramatically in the last decades. Most of the biggest changes of society have taken place in the 20th century and will still be taking place in the 21st century which has recently started. We should not be naïve and believe we have found the final solution for all our teaching problems. With new times, new problems will arise to which the solutions of today might not be applicable or useful. I am aware of the importance of continuous and lifelong learning for a teacher. Since this Master degree will train the teachers of the Spanish educational system, it also has an influential role to play in the future of the whole society. Still, the training of the teacher cannot be confined to the mere completion of this degree, he should make a constant actualization of his knowledge and skills to adapt them to the new conflicts he may confront in the classroom.

In my point of view, a change is also needed in the attitude of some teachers who, once they have secured themselves a permanent position, become stagnated and do not worry about the actual effects of their teaching. If we want to improve our educational system, the work the teachers should be periodically evaluated. Teachers themselves, students, parents and other members of the educational community should contribute with a critical standpoint to the evaluation of the teaching and learning process. It would also be interesting to be challenged by external auditors who can observe from an objective and neutral point of view. In my opinion, the results of such an evaluation should, if not made public, at least carry consequences or rewards according to results and lead to further training in areas where the scores were low. I believe that the general performance of teachers could be greatly improved if a more useful criticism was done. Directly connected to the concept of reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action to which so much we have heard along this Masters.

I am a permanent language self-learner. I am my own teacher, and I thought that the way I learn languages all by myself could work for everyone. After this Masters I have realized that it is not the same, because each learner is different. Most people do

not have the same interests, skills and motivation that I have, especially if we speak about students of secondary school education.

I would also like to make a few remarks regarding this Masters degree. In my opinion, all subjects should be taught in English. Even though from a organizational point of view it is easier to put together students from different fields, even though the formative needs are not the same for an English teacher than for a biology one. At the same time, teachers in the Masters should be much more flexible than what they have been. Most of the times the individual needs of the students are not taken into account, and this contradicts to what we have been constantly said in this Masters.

Since this degree is taught from a Government institution, it would make sense that all schools in Aragon would be liable to be chosen to do the school placements. It was very difficult to understand how come that most of the schools we could choose from were state-subsidized schools and not state schools. Are we, as future teachers, being already guided towards the new privatized system in which education is no longer a right but a service? Given the facts shown here, it would not be crazy to think this way. It is often argued that the state could never offer the amount of vacancies needed to cover all the students, and therefore it has to support economically and institutionally state-subsidized schools. I could accept this fallacy if it were not because it does not seem to be a temporary measure, but a perennial one which has been inherited from even less democratic times. I could understand it as a temporary transition into a new society not controlled to a great extent by the ecclesiastical power. Times change constantly, therefore the methodologies and educative spaces should change accordingly. In this aspect, the educational policies and their budget allowance play a major role.

I believe it important that teachers develop their own personal interests and, if possible, apply them to their classes. Therefore, now I would like to comment a couple of proposals I would like to undertake in my future as an English teacher.

"Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn". - Benjamin Franklin

Regarding classroom management and students' motivation I was impressed by the techniques used by Vicky Gil in her classes, which most of them were based on the Whole Brain teaching. Whole Brain teaching is a large set of techniques developed by Chris Biffle (2014) whose "*goal is to create peaceful classrooms full of orderly fun.*" Biffle also defines several rules for the students to follow which "*students have more fun following than ignoring*":

Rule 1: Follow directions quickly!

Rule 2: Raise your hand for permission to speak.

Rule 3: Raise your hand for permission to leave your seat.

Rule 4: Make smart choices!

Rule 5: Keep your dear teacher happy.

Even though these rules might seem a bit childish for secondary education level, they can be very useful to keep the rhythm of the class and keep students engaged in the activities. I had the chance to try out a little bit of Whole Brain teaching during my training period at the school and I was really impressed by how it worked out. I used the "Class-Yes" technique in order to grab students' attention and have them ready for what my next instructions will be. Students were quite curious because the monotony of boring classrooms was broken and the teacher was no longer telling them off when they spoke, but involving them in the classroom activities.

I think that Whole Brain teaching suits best extroverted teachers with high motivation. I do not think that it can be successfully used by any teacher, but only by those who are willing to make the effort to involve the students in the classrooms even though this may cause, at first, some more noise and chaos. This is the reason why I am sure I will investigate it further in order to discover how I can add these techniques to my teaching.

"All the world's a stage"  
- William Shakespeare

Now I would like to introduce an initiative which I am very interested in: improvisational theatre (also commonly known as *improv*). Thanks to having founded the first group of improvisational theatre of the education faculty and having taken part in language courses based on it, I have discovered the great opportunities with which it can contribute to learning a foreign language. *Improv* is a branch of theatre in which there is no script written beforehand; the very same actors are in charge of developing the story and the characters as the play unfolds.

Because students can benefit from its practice in different levels, I think it would be attractive to introduce it in the English classes on a regular basis. (1) From the linguistic point of view students can improve their fluency in speaking and capacity to infer meanings of words and expressions from the context. Students have to respond to whatever happens on scene without much prior preparation, which is what exactly happens in real life all the time. If they do not know a certain word or expression, students have to come up with a way of expressing that idea in an alternative way, i.e., by using other words, asking someone for help or using body language to overcome the communicative problems. (2) At the same time, students develop social skills by interacting with each other, negotiating how the story will carry on, and by taking over different characters' personalities which will contribute to the better understanding of others' points of view also in real life. (3) In *improv* actors are not restricted to what they should say or how their characters should react to a certain situation; therefore, they are offered an infinite number of possibilities to choose from. Actors have to be online script writers. This certainly encourages their creativity and motivation, as they feel as an active part of the process and have a very important role in decisions that will affect the final outcome of the play. *Improv* is a very versatile way of producing drama. There are thousands of different exercises which can be adapted to a language class in order to facilitate the learning process from a more controlled environment to a less controlled one. (4) *Improv* also can also contribute to the new learner-centred perspective. Teachers should step out of the stage to which they have clung to for centuries and let students have a more important role. If they are an active part of the spectacle of learning they will definitely be more motivated and interested in what is going on in the classroom. (5) Last but not least, *improv* can be a very good method to promote cultural and artistic awareness by bringing drama closer to students. Traditionally students have linked theatre with boring old-fashioned plays to which they

are not attracted to. This can be changed if we show them that theatre can be worth and entertaining.

I should admit that this proposal might be difficult to implement in an ordinary Spanish high school today. Even though teacher might have a say in what and how is taught, they are usually quite restricted to what their department says regarding curricular choices. If this sort of new ideas are to be brought into the classrooms, support from institutions is required.

To conclude, I would like to say that there have been an uncountable number of important ideas and concepts I have had the chance to get in touch with along this Master degree. Some will definitely have a huge impact on how I will look upon problems in teaching in the future, some not. In my opinion, what is actually important is to be able to discern what can be useful and interesting in order to introduce and develop these ideas into each one's personal teaching style. I can say this Master have brought back the enthusiasm and curiosity in language teaching to which, sooner or later, my career could be heading to. Yet this is too early to say, because what eventually happens only time will tell.

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