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Trabajo Fin de Máster: Modalidad A

The Implementation of Cooperative Learning in the Teaching of English in Secondary Education

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Master's Degree we have seen different variables that affect the effectiveness of the English language teaching and learning process. One of these variables is methodology.

The methods and approaches used along the history of language teaching have changed a lot since people started learning foreign languages. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), these shifts in methods reflect the changes in theories of the nature of language and of language learning, as well as a change in the needs of the learners, since the goal of language study has deviated from reading comprehension into oral proficiency.

However, according to Kumaravadivelu (2006) the English teaching profession has changed from a method-based pedagogy to a postmethod pedagogy. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain, the history of language teaching has been characterized by the search of new methods that would solve the "language teaching problem". Nevertheless, Kumaravadivelu (2006) considers that methods are no longer viable or valuable, that they have a limited and limiting impact on language learning and teaching and that the English teaching profession does not need new methods, but an alternative to methods. The realization of this fact is, according to Kumaravadivelu, what has created the postmethod condition.

As Brown (2007) explains, although methods are no longer the base of language teaching, it is important for English teachers to know how languages have been taught in the past. In this way, teachers will be able to understand the present situation and how it has been created.

It is important to notice that, as Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain, although today English is the most widely studied foreign language, Latin was the dominant language 500 years ago. When other languages started being studied the method used to teach them was the same that had been used for the teaching of Latin. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001) this approach to the teaching of languages became known as the Grammar Translation method and it dominated the language teaching between the 1840s and the 1940s. Brown (2007:18) explains that this method is characterized by the

“focus on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary and of conjugations, translations of texts and written exercises”.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), in the mid-nineteenth century, the Grammar Translation method started to be questioned and rejected as a consequence of the demand for oral fluency in the second language. At this time, individual reformers like C. Marcel, T. Prendergast or F. Gouin developed new approaches for the teaching of modern languages, however they did not achieve any lasting impact. Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain that the work of these language specialists reflects the changes taking place in language learning at this time. This is the time when the need for speaking proficiency was recognized and a new interest on how children learn languages emerged, inspiring the development of teaching principles based on child language learning. However, Richards and Rodgers (2001) also explain that these language specialists did not have the tools for wider dissemination as the language teaching profession was not sufficiently organized at that time.

With the Reform Movement in the 1880's, important phoneticians of the time co-operated towards a shared educational aim, working together with teachers and other people related to this field. Articles, pamphlets and other publications started appearing at this time and professional associations and movements, like the International Phonetic Association (IPA), were formed (Howatt and Widdowson 2004).

The Reform movement was, according to Howatt and Widdowson (2004), founded on three principles: the primacy of speech, the centrality of connected text instead of isolated sentences and word lists, and an oral classroom methodology. But Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain that an interest in developing principles for language teaching out of naturalistic principles of language learning, as seen in first language acquisition, run parallel to the Reform movement, leading to what is called Natural Methods and, ultimately, to the development of the Direct Method.

The Direct Method is based on a naturalistic view of language: second language learning had to be more similar to first language learning (Brown 2007). As a consequence of this view of learning, this method relies, according to Richard and Rodgers (2001), on the next principles:

- Use of the target language for instruction.
- Teaching of everyday vocabulary and sentences exclusively.
- Oral communication skills developed gradually through question and answer exchanges.
- Inductive teaching of grammar.
- Oral introduction of the teaching points.
- Teaching vocabulary through demonstration, objects and pictures, or association of ideas.
- Focus on speech and listening comprehension.
- Emphasis on correct pronunciation.

A language teaching revolution took place when World War II broke out, as the United States military needed to become orally proficient in the languages of their allies and enemies. The method that emerged as a consequence of this was the Army method that came to be known in the 1950's as the Audiolingual Method (Brown, 2007). According to Nunan (1995), the development of patterns and substitution drills, used in audiolingual learning environments represent the union of structural linguistic analysis and behaviourist habit formation.

Although it can be argued that imitation is useful in the learning of certain areas of language like phonology, a behaviourist theory cannot explain the whole process of learning. Theoretical beliefs of Audiolingualism were attacked in the 1960's, the period of most widespread for this method according to Richards and Rodgers (2001), by Noam Chomsky, who rejected behaviourist and structuralist approaches to language teaching. Chomsky stated that human use of language is not imitated, but created anew from underlying knowledge of abstract rules. This theory explains how human beings can formulate sentences they have never heard before (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Stern (1983) explains that, as a consequence of the revolution created by Chomsky's transformational generative grammar in the fields of linguistics and psycholinguistics, language pedagogy was lost in a state of uncertainty. The

disorientation and sense of decline in foreign language lasted for some teachers until the end of the 70's. However, others explored new methods, such as Suggestopedia, the Silent Way or Community Language Learning.

It is important to notice that as Brown (2007) point out, the heyday of methods lasted until the 80's. Although methods had some advantages over approaches, approaches ended up substituting them. Communicative Language Teaching is the approach in which most researchers and teachers seem to agree today.

Communicative Language Teaching is based on the theory of language as communication, thus, the goal is to achieve what Hymes (1972, as quoted in Richards and Rodgers, 2001:159) calls "communicative competence". CLT's theory of Language is completed, according to Richards and Rodgers (2001) with Halliday's functional account of language use.

In terms of learning theory, Richards and Rodgers (2001) point to different principles. The first one is the communication principle: learning is promoted by those activities that involve real communication. Another one is the task principle: the use of language to develop meaningful tasks promotes learning. And the last one is the meaningfulness principle: language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. As a consequence of this, activities used in CLT will have to promote real-life meaningful language use.

As Brown (2007) explains, it is difficult to offer a definition of Communicative Language Teaching. This author describes this approach to language teaching with the following characteristics:

- Overall goals: goals combine the organizational aspects of language with the pragmatic ones.
- Relationship of form and function: form is not the central focus but remains important as it enables learners to engage in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes.
- Fluency and accuracy: these two principles are seen as complementary.

- Focus on real world context: classroom tasks must equip the students with the skills necessary for communication outside the classroom.
- Autonomy and strategic involvement: Communicative Language Teaching develops autonomous learners capable of continuing to learn beyond the classroom.
- Teacher roles: the teacher acts as a facilitator and a guide.
- Student roles: Students participate actively in their learning process.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001) CLT philosophy has been molded into quite diverse teaching practices that include:

- Content-Based Instruction: In this approach to the teaching of second languages, teaching is organized around the content or information that students are expected to learn, rather than around a linguistic feature or another type of syllabus.
- Task-Based Teaching: This approach is based on task as the basic unit for planning and instruction in the teaching of second languages. Ellis (2003:9) identifies the following criterial features of tasks:
 - A task is a workplan.
 - A task involves a primary focus in meaning.
 - A task involves real world processes of language use.
 - A task can involve any of the four language skills.
 - A task involves a cognitive process.
 - A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome.
- Natural Approach: This approach is identified with more traditional approaches like the Direct or Natural Method, in which the language is used in communicative situations without resources to the native language. This approach is characterized by the emphasis on exposure, the optimization of

emotional preparedness for learning, the period of attention to what learners hear before they try to produce language and the willingness to use written and other materials as source for comprehensible input.

- Cooperative Language Learning: This approach is part of a more general approach named Cooperative Learning. This approach involves pair or group work in the classroom.

The two projects that are going to be critically analyzed in this dissertation are based in the Communicative Language Teaching approach in terms of methodology. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), one of the distinctive features of this approach to the teaching of foreign languages is that learning a language means learning to communicate. Moreover, with this approach, the process of struggling to communicate is the best way to learn the target language system. These features are reflected in both, the Innovation Project and the Learning Unit, since in the two of them learners are expected to communicate both in a written and a spoken form.

Besides Communicative Language Teaching, Cooperative Language Learning is also an approach that strongly influences the two projects in which this dissertation is based. This approach will be the base for this dissertation as, apart from implementing it in the projects, during my placement period in the school *Sagrado Corazón de Jesús* in Zaragoza I had the opportunity to incorporate this approach to my teaching in the 4th year of secondary education, especially when focusing in writing.

From what I was able to observe in the context of my placement, not much attention was paid to pair and group work when teaching English. As I explain in my Practicum III Portfolio (see Appendix 1) a more traditional teacher-fronted approach was chosen for most of the lesson, although it is true that this approach was sometimes complemented with Cooperative Learning.

The implementation of Cooperative Learning in the lessons I taught was, in my opinion, very successful. Cooperative Learning, as explained in the Practicum III Portfolio lead to a more relaxed atmosphere and increased motivation, specially in a class where students' sitting arrangements were individual and students had few opportunities to interact with their classmates.

In the present dissertation, a definition and characterisation of Cooperative Learning and more specifically of Cooperative Language Learning will be provided and we will explore the role that this approach to teaching plays in current legislation, more concretely in the Aragonese Curricula for the LOE and the LOMCE. Moreover, the ways in which Cooperative Learning is incorporated in two of the projects elaborated during the Master will be analyzed, as well as the effects of this approach in teaching. This dissertation will end with the statement of some conclusions about the effects of Cooperative Learning as well as some proposals for its incorporation in the teaching of English as a foreign Language.

2. JUSTIFICATION

As explained in the introduction, this *Trabajo Fin de Master* will be based on two different essays elaborated in the course of the Master's Degree in "Profesorado de E.S.O., Bachillerato, F.P. y Enseñanza de Idiomas, Artísticas y Deportivas". Both of them have been chosen because they reflect the competences and knowledge acquired throughout this Master's degree in terms of methodology, teaching and learning processes, and activities design.

One of these essays is a Learning Unit entitled "Where should we go?" and elaborated for the module *Diseño, organización y desarrollo de actividades para el aprendizaje de inglés*. The elaboration of this Learning Unit was a complex task, since the unit had to combine lots of different aspects studied, not only in the module *Diseño*, but also in other modules including *Fundamentos de diseño instruccional y metodologías de aprendizaje en la especialidad de lenguas extranjeras* and *Diseño curricular de lenguas extranjeras*.

In the first place, the Learning Unit shows the knowledge acquired during the Master's degree in terms of methodology. Communicative Language Teaching is the methodological basis for both of this project, however, in terms of methodology it is also important to highlight the use of cooperative work, since the performance of most of the activities included in the Learning Unit required team work.

Moreover, the Learning Unit also shows the knowledge acquired in relation with the teaching and learning of the different language skills. Activities for the teaching of speaking, reading, writing and listening as well as for the teaching of grammar and vocabulary were designed keeping in mind the communicative approach and using in most cases cooperative work in order to offer the students opportunities for real communication and in some activities as a way of differentiation, adapting the activities in this way to high and low achieving students.

The other essay that is going to be used for the elaboration of the present *Trabajo Fin de Master* is the project for the module *Evaluación e innovación docente e investigación educativa en inglés*, entitled "The Implementation of Cooperative Learning in the Teaching of Writing". In this Innovation Project we attempted to apply

an innovative approach, in this case Cooperative Learning, to the teaching of writing, trying to solve some problems that the members of my group detected during the first placement period.

This project shows the learning acquired during the Master's degree in terms of innovation and effective teaching. Cooperative Learning was incorporated to the teaching of writing in order to solve problems detected in the teaching of this skill thus contributing to a more effective teaching of writing in the classes where team work was implemented.

Furthermore, this project seems to be an adequate choice since innovation is an important aspect to take into account for future teachers. As Hyland and Wong (2013) explain, innovation and change have always been two aspects in which both researchers and teachers have been interested. However, innovation research does not seem to be reflected in the teacher's work, as sometimes research does not reach teachers in a way in which they can use it to inform their own work. Nevertheless, in the case of this project we based ourselves on previous studies related to the teaching of writing in order to improve the teaching of writing in our placements context.

Since, as has already been explained, both of these essays are partly based in the incorporation of team work to the teaching of English, the focus of my analysis will be Cooperative Learning and Teaching. This methodology has been present in different modules throughout the Master's degree, not only in the ones related to the speciality of English, but also in general ones such as *Procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje* and *Interacción y convivencia en el aula*.

In the module *Procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje*, Cooperative Learning was presented as a methodological strategy to handle diversity and favour inclusion. On the other hand, in the module *Interacción y convivencia en el aula*, the contents related to Cooperative Learning focused on positive interdependence and the abilities that have to be taught for students to work cooperatively, such as respecting the classmates' points of views, expressing support, verifying the existence of agreement, respecting the other's rhythm or mediating in conflicts.

3. THE COOPERATIVE LEARNING APPROACH IN CONTEXT

3.1. Cooperative Learning: A definition

In order to have a clear idea of what Cooperative Learning is, it is important to point out a definition of this term. Olsen and Kagan (1992, as quoted by Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 192) define Cooperative Learning as follows:

Cooperative Learning is group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others.

According to Slavin (1985) Cooperative Learning emerged as an alternative to traditional competitive classes that frustrated teachers because of the problems this system presented, especially for low-achieving students. In Slavin's view, cooperative methods are structured, systematic instructional strategies that can be used at any grade and in most subjects.

In the case of language teaching, this method is known as Cooperative Language Learning, and according to Richard and Rodgers (2001) it is seen as an extension of Communicative Language Teaching that promotes communicative interaction within the classroom. Cooperative Learning is considered a learner-centred approach as opposed to teacher-fronted methods. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain, its goals can be summarized in the following points:

- Providing opportunities for the naturalistic acquisition of the second language by using interactive group and pair activities.
- Enabling the focus of attention in particular language items, structures and functions by using interactive tasks.
- Providing opportunities for the development of effective learning and communication strategies.
- Enhancing learner's motivation and creating a positive classroom atmosphere by reducing the learner's stress.

As Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain, the theory of learning behind Cooperative Learning is based on the theoretical work of developmental psychologists Piaget and Vygotsky. Both authors highlight the central role that social interaction has in learning. In Cooperative Language Learning, students converse in socially and pedagogically structured situations in order to develop communicative competence. Moreover, Richards and Rodgers also explain that the development of critical thinking skills, seen as central for any kind of learning, is also important in Cooperative Language Learning.

Another important dimension of Cooperative Learning, as reflected in the methods name, is that it fosters cooperation rather than competition in learning. Johnson et al. (1994, in Richards and Rodgers 2001:195) explain the benefits of cooperation in terms of learning:

Cooperative Learning is the instructional use of small groups through which students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. It may be contrasted with competitive learning in which students work against each other to achieve an academic goal.

Furthermore, authors such as Slavin (1985:1) point out the importance of cooperation in present society:

Cooperation is a fundamental concern of educators. The increasing complexity of social conditions locally and worldwide has brought to the forefront the importance of learning to cooperate.

[...]As a consequence of social changes during the past several decades, human beings have been pushed to live closer and closer together. Consequently, the schools have taken an increased role in helping young people to learn the skills necessary for living successfully with one another.

As far as the theory of language behind Cooperative Language Learning is concerned, it is important to highlight that as Richards and Rodgers (2001:193) explain, this method relies on some basic premises about the interactive/cooperative nature of language and language learning:

- A normal child that grows up in a normal environment will learn to talk.

- Most talk/speech is organized in conversation.
- There is a set of cooperative rules or maxims that guide the operation of conversation.
- Casual, everyday conversational interaction is the means through which people learn how these cooperative maxims are realized in the native language.
- Participation in cooperatively structured interactional activities is the means for the learning of the maxims in the second language.

The application of these premises is what constitutes Cooperative Language Learning. This method can be used to support structural, functional or interactional models of language, since activities can be focused on form or in the practice of a particular function.

It is also important to highlight the advantages that Cooperative Learning presents for the students of English as a second language (McGroarty, 1989, in Richards and Rodgers, 2001:195):

- Increased practice of the second language through different types of interaction.
- Possibility for use of language in ways that support cognitive development and increased language skills.
- Freedom for teachers to master new professional skills, especially those related to communication.
- Opportunities for students assuming a more active role in their learning of the second language and act as resources for each other.

Lastly, as Johnson and Johnson (1987, as quoted in Kohonen, 1992) there are five factors that are necessary for Cooperative Learning to be successful:

- Positive interdependence: Learners have to feel that they are working together towards the same work and they have to care about each other's learning. In well functioning cooperative groups learners care about their own success as well as each other's. In this way students help each other and as a consequence

positive peer relationships, social support and academic achievement are likely to be promoted.

- **Individual accountability:** Every group member should make an active contribution to the group. For this to happen all the members of the team have to feel in charge of their team mates' learning as well as his or her own.
- **Interaction:** Abundant verbal face to face interaction is important for the success of Cooperative Learning. Learners will have to explain, argue, elaborate and link current material with what they have learned previously.
- **Social skills:** Cooperative Learning requires a series of social skills that will have to be taught explicitly. The teaching of appropriate leadership, communication, trust and conflict resolution skills will be important so that the groups function effectively.
- **Team reflection:** The team should assess periodically what they have learned, how well they work together and how they might do better.

3.2. Cooperative Learning in current Legislation

Cooperative Learning is encouraged in current legislation. However, we have to take into account that at this moment education in different stages relies in two different acts that have overlapped as this is a moment of transition between the *Ley Orgánica de Educación* (henceforth LOE) and the *Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad de la Educación* (henceforth, LOMCE).

Cooperative Learning has an important role in the teaching of English in Secondary Education as stated in the methodological orientations section of the current *LOE* legislation. According to the *Orden 9 de Mayo de 2007* from the *Currículo Aragonés de Lenguas Extranjeras*, cooperative work has a fundamental role in the development of the established objectives. As the Aragonese curriculum states, this methodology allows students to learn from their classmates and other sources and to cooperate with other students in order to learn better. Moreover, the Aragonese Curriculum explains that interaction and collaboration between students encourage the development of the students' personality promoting attitudes such as respect, solidarity, and acceptance of differences as something that is natural.

However, the methodological orientations of the *Currículo Aragonés de Lenguas Extranjeras* for the *LOMCE* focus on the need for a renovation of the teaching practice and the teaching and learning process. Cooperative Learning is not mentioned in this section, but the methodological orientations for foreign languages are subject to the general methodological orientations for the stage of Compulsory Secondary Education, where Cooperative Learning is present.

According to these general orientations for the stage, the teacher will have to choose the most adequate method for the students, putting into practice more social methods such as Cooperative Learning among others, or more individual ones such as personalized teaching. The teacher will also have to make decisions as to how and when he or she will put them into practice. Moreover, in these general methodological orientations, the combination of individual and cooperative teaching is recommended in order to handle diversity and show respect for the different learning rhythms and styles.

4. THE COOPERATIVE LEARNING APPROACH: A CRITICAL VIEW OF ITS IMPLEMENTATION

4. 1. Cooperative Learning in the Innovation Project

The first project that is going to be analysed is the Innovation Project (See Appendix 2), entitled “The Implementation of Cooperative Learning in the Teaching of Writing”. This Innovation Project showed how the incorporation of Cooperative Learning to the teaching of writing had positive effects both in the students’ written product and in the atmosphere of the class.

As I explained in my Practicum II Portfolio (See Appendix 3), during our placement periods some problems in the teaching of writing were detected. Authors such as Nunan (1991) support the idea that writing should focus on the process since writers cannot produce final text on the first attempt, but they have to go through different drafts in order to get a final version. Conversely, during my placement period I could see how, in 4th year of secondary education, writing was taught following a product approach which focuses on the result of the learning process, i.e. “what it is that the learner is expected to be able to do as a fluent and competent user of the language” (Nunan 1991: 86).

According to Nunan (1991), the product oriented approach went well with the structuralist, bottom up approach to language processing and production, as this approach favours activities in which the learner imitates, copies and transforms models of correct language. This usually occurred at the sentence level, a level that students in the 60’s and 70’s had to master before they could write coherent paragraphs. However, they do not fit that well current approaches to the view of language that focus on the discourse level.

Throughout my observation I could see how writing was usually performed as homework, and thus set aside as an out-of-class activity, disregarding the importance of the process of writing. This treatment of writing contrasts with the beliefs of authors such as Morley (2011), who defends the idea that writing is a difficult skill that has to be taught even in the first language, or Hedge (1988), who explains that we cannot assume that our students are skilled writers even in their mother tongue, as many students never learn to write properly. Even when writing was practiced inside the class,

the amount of time dedicated to the activity was very small, and as a consequence students had to write the final version of their texts directly.

Since the teaching of writing was not the ideal one, neither in my placement context, nor in the one of my peers, we decided to innovate by applying a cooperative approach to the teaching of writing as a process. This innovative action was based on previous research by authors such as Storch (2005) or Syafini & Tengku Nor Rizan (2009), who defend the advantages of the incorporation of cooperative work to the teaching of writing, including the improvement of the written texts and the opportunity for the students to share their ideas and give feedback to each other.

Moreover, Murray (1992) defends the idea that in ‘real-world’ contexts writing is not a solitary enterprise, but a social act. Collaborative writing occurs commonly in the community and in the work place, where writers talk about their letters and notes with other people asking for advice about their texts and colleagues comment on and discuss each others’ text or even delegate their writing to someone else. Writing is, thus, the result of the interaction among people, context and texts, that is, writing occurs in community. As a consequence, Murray states that in order to ensure that writing lessons prepare the students for life outside the classroom, teachers have to provide them with opportunities to experience collaborative writing.

In the context of the School Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, where I taught 4th year of secondary education students, I encourage them to write two different application letters. This kind of text was chosen due to the fact that it could be interesting for them since at this age, students are already thinking about their future prospects and careers. The first application letter was written individually and the second one in heterogeneous cooperative teams organized by my mentor taking into account the level of English, background and gender.

For the first letter, written individually and out of class, students had to write a letter applying for their ideal job, but they were not provided with a context or a purpose, and the focus was on the product. The second letter was also an application letter, in this case for a volunteer program and it was written inside the class and following a process approach. The reason why the two texts were similar was that, in

this way, comparing both text and seeing if the results had improved or got worse was easier.

In the case of the first letter, marks were quite low, since students were not familiar with this kind of text and few explanations were provided. One of the problems that were found when correcting them was that most of the students did not include any salutations or closings, Moreover, the appropriate structure of this kind of text was not followed, grammar and vocabulary in general needed some improvement and content in some cases didn't fit with the type of text they were supposed to write. Finally, the language used by the students was not adequate since it was informal.

In contrast, the second letter was written cooperatively, within the class and paying attention to the writing process. Authors like Tribble (1996) encourage the teaching of writing as a process, describing the phases that have to be followed. These phases include pre-writing, composing and drafting, and revising and editing. Students were encouraged to follow these stages when writing their letters.

Moreover, Hedge (1988:21) highlights the importance of considering two questions when writing a text:

- What is the purpose of this piece of writing?
- Who am I writing this for?

In the case of the letter written cooperatively, unlike the individual one, students were provided with a purpose and an audience as a result of the writing skill being developed in a class following a Communicative Language Teaching approach. This contributes to the students' understanding of the text as it gives the writer a sense of purpose, being chosen among all the candidates, and a sense of audience, since students could choose among the three volunteer programs proposed, each having a different addressee for the application letter. This sense of purpose and audience influences significantly the first stages of the writing process, selecting the content and planning outlines context and the content of the text, stages that Hedge (1988) considers very important.

As explained in the Innovation Project, marks for the cooperative letters were significantly higher than the ones for the individually written texts. It is important to

highlight the marks improved in all the aspects measured, that is, salutation and closing, structure, content, grammar, vocabulary and language use.

The improvement in terms of salutation and closing, structure and language use can be explained by the fact that during the writing lesson students could cooperate to perform activities and analyze models that allowed them to see the typical features of this kind of text. Once they were aware of the characteristics of application letters they were able to apply them to their own writings, improving in this way their final written product.

On the other hand, in terms of grammar and vocabulary and content, the improvement can be a direct consequence of cooperation. Since four people were paying attention to the writing instead of one as in individually written letter, fewer mistakes were made. Moreover, the students performed a brainstorming activity in which they took turns within their groups to suggest different contents that could be included in the letter.

It is undeniable that the incorporation of Cooperative Learning to the writing lessons had a very positive effect in the students' writing. However, we have to keep in mind that there were other differences between the writing conditions for the two application letters.

Although in the Innovation Project it was concluded that cooperative work improved the results of the students' writing, it is important to keep in mind that this was not the only factor that affected the students' writing. Besides cooperation, there were other factors that improved the students' understanding of the type of text that they were writing. One of them was the fact that students wrote the second letter following an adequate process instead of focusing just in the final product. In this way they could go through stages that they usually undervalue and skip. Students started by generating the ideas that they were going to include, a factor that affected the letter's content, and they could revise the final product, making sure that no mistakes were made in terms of grammar and vocabulary.

Moreover, students' performed activities aiming at their understanding of the conventions and structure of the application letters and they saw models from which

they could extract the main characteristics of the type of text they were writing and include them in their own texts. These activities and models also contributed to the improvement of the written product.

On the other hand, in terms of the classroom atmosphere, since Cooperative Learning was implemented in a very limited number of lessons, it is difficult to see how the environment was affected. However as stated before, reflection is important for the success of Cooperative Learning, and in order to encourage the students reflection and see their opinion about the experience we asked students to answer a questionnaire about the experience as a whole, their group and their own performance within the group. It can be said that these questionnaires showed that most of them had enjoyed the experience.

One of the facts that I found surprising from the replies to the questionnaires was how mature the students' answers in 4th year of secondary education were. When students were asked about the advantages of cooperative work most of them agreed in pointing out the sharing of ideas, the commitment with the task, which is higher when working cooperatively as the whole group's failure or success depends on all the members of the group, and the fact that members of the group can help each other. Moreover, these answers reflected the ideas of positive interdependence and individual accountability that, as explained before, are fundamental for the success of Cooperative Learning.

Furthermore, in the questionnaires there were many students that expressed that when working cooperatively, the tasks looked like a game. I observed that this lead to a more relaxed climate and more motivation. According to Zhang (2010), motivation leads to a more extensive use of language and to the development of greater language proficiency.

Moreover, as Crandall (1999) explains, when working cooperatively, student's anxiety is reduced and as a consequence participation and learning are increased. This author explains that the reduction of anxiety is a consequence of the fact that students feel that they are more likely to succeed, since with Cooperative Learning, they have more time to think and opportunities to rehearse their answers before saying them in front of the whole class and get feedback from their classmates. When implementing

Cooperative Learning in my lessons I noticed this increase in participation, as students were more likely to answer my questions even if the questions was not specifically addressed to them, something that was more infrequent in teacher-fronted lessons.

It is also important to highlight that, when students were asked if they preferred working cooperatively or on their own, most of them agreed that they preferred team work. However, lots of students said that they would like to be able to choose their teams in order to be with more hard working people. As a teacher, I think that this would be counter-productive since students would choose their friends and this would increase distraction, which was one of the disadvantages of Cooperative Learning pointed out by the students in the questionnaire.

4.2. Cooperative Learning in the Learning Unit

The Learning Unit entitled “Where should we go?” (See Appendix 4), elaborated for the module *Diseño, organización y desarrollo de actividades para el aprendizaje de inglés*, was probably the most difficult project developed during the Master’s Degree, since it had to bring together all the competences and knowledge acquired not only in this module, but also in the rest of the modules that were related to the speciality of English.

This Learning Unit was elaborated taking Communicative Language Teaching as a starting point. One of the distinctive features of this approach to the teaching of English is, according to Finnochiaro and Brumfit (1983, as quoted in Richards and Rodgers, 2001), that with CLT learning a language is learning to communicate, thus effective communication is sought. Since communicative competence is the goal in CLT most of the activities included are designed to encourage the students to communicate with each other. Group and pair work are essential for this in the Learning Unit that is being analyzed, according to Richards (2006) learners will obtain several benefits from performing activities in this way, including learning from hearing the language used by other members of the group, producing a greater amount of language or developing fluency.

Another of the features of CLT described by Finnochiaro and Brumfit (1983, as quoted in Richards and Rodgers, 2001) is the interaction with other people, either in the flesh, through pair and group, or with their writings. In the Learning Unit that is being analyzed interaction is promoted with the use of Cooperative Learning, and writing is also used for communicative purposes since students have to write a letter asking for information.

Moreover, as Finnochiaro and Brumfit explain, intrinsic motivation in CLT is expected to spring from an interest on what is being communicated by language. The topic that works as a unifying thread for the Learning Unit is “traveling”, a topic that is expected to be interesting for most students. As a consequence, students are expected to participate actively in the lessons, using the target language to communicate. Furthermore, as explained by Richards (2006) the group work, basic in Cooperative Learning, would also contribute to the increase of the students’ motivational level.

Cooperative Learning is another of the methodological basis for this Learning Unit. One of the reasons why this approach was included in the Learning Unit was the fact that in order to cooperate, students have to communicate using the target language. As Zhang (2010) explains, one of the benefits of Cooperative Learning is that it provides the students with lots of opportunities to be exposed to comprehensible input, produce output and participate in processes of negotiation. In the particular context for which the Learning Unit is intended, the students are divided in five groups and as a consequence they can get five as many opportunities to talk as in class where they are not organized in groups. According to Zhang (2010), a natural, interactive context is created in the class when students work cooperatively, thus students listen to each other, ask questions, and clarify issues. Since, as Richard and Rodgers (2001) explain, for CLT the target linguistic system is learned best through the process of struggling to communicate, it seems that cooperative work can be a very interesting way for the students to learn English.

My interest for this teaching method caused by its implementation during the placement period was another reason why Cooperative Learning was incorporated to the Learning Unit. As explained in the previous section, the experience of implementing Cooperative Learning as part of the innovation project during the placement period in 4th year of Secondary Education turned to be very positive for the students, as reflected in their questionnaires about Cooperative Learning. As a consequence, I thought that it would be interesting to design activities based in this approach.

However, it is also important to notice that, as I explained in my Practicum III Portfolio (See appendix 1), when implementing Cooperative Learning some problems can emerge. For example, when I implemented Cooperative Learning in 4th year Secondary Education, there were a limited number of cooperative teams in which participation of the members was not equal as one or two of the students ignored their tasks. This “diffusion of responsibility” is one of the risks defined by Slavin (1999:25). This author states that this problem can be solve in two basic ways: the first way consists in making each member of the group responsible of a different part of the group’s task. The second one is making student individually accountable for their own learning.

Another problem that can emerge when Cooperative Learning is implemented is the use of the mother tongue. During my placement period, I could see how some of the students only used the target language when they were being watched by the teacher or immediately after the teacher reminded them that they had to speak in English. This is a consequence of the fact that students were not used to work in groups and only spoke in English when interacting with the teacher, thus they were not used to interacting with their classmates in English. Moreover, in spite of the fact that they had a good level of English they had some difficulties when expressing themselves and even if they were trying to speak in English their output contained words in Spanish.

In spite of these problems, caused mainly by the fact that students were not used to work cooperatively, Cooperative Learning was an interesting experience for both the teacher and the students. As a consequence of this it seemed appropriate to include this approach in the in the Learning Unit.

Besides CLT and Cooperative Learning, as far as methodology is concerned the Learning Unit is also based in the Task-Based Approach. In most of the lesson plans conforming the unit the task is the central unit of planning and the whole Learning Unit is organized around a final task consisting in an oral group presentation of an English speaking city, explaining the strengths and weaknesses of the city. Taking into account the information presented by all the classmates, students will have to choose a final destination for an exchange trip. Most of the tasks in the lesson plan have to be performed in groups or pairs allowing the students to take part in real communication.

As Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain, group formation is important for the creation of positive interdependence, which as explained before, is a key element for the success of Cooperative Learning. The size of the group is an important factor. According to Rance-Roney (2010:21) small groups allow student to “practice for the whole-groups discussion that follows, to practice the pronunciation of words, to structure conversation conceptually and to build conversation efficacy in a less formal and less anxiety-ridden context”. According to Richards and Rodgers the typical size of the groups is from two to four. In this case, just like in the implementation of the Innovation Project, students are arranged in groups of four people, a combination that allows the division of the groups in pairs for certain activities

Groups in this Learning Unit will be fixed. Although authors like Rance-Roney (2010) suggest that in fixed groups the diversity of viewpoints and language interaction might be lost, the structure of the Learning Unit makes it impossible for students to change groups, since each group works in a concrete city for the whole unit. This type of group is what Johnson et al. (as quoted in Richards and Rodgers, 2001:196) call “formal Cooperative Learning groups”, which can last from one class period to several weeks, as opposed to “informal Cooperative Learning groups”, which only last for a few minutes or a class period, or “cooperative base groups”, which last for, at least, a year.

As far as the groupings are concerned, it is also important to state that they will be teacher- selected. The teacher will base the decision in past achievement. In this way, each group will be formed by a high-achieving student, a low-achieving one and two medium- achieving ones.

If this Learning Unit was implemented, it would be important to keep in mind that when Cooperative Learning is incorporated to the teaching of English, the role of the teacher moves away from the one in traditional teacher-fronted lessons. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain, the teacher in Cooperative Learning has the role of facilitator of learning, thus he or she has to move around the class in order to help students and groups that need it.

During the implementation of the writing lesson in which the Innovation Project is based, as a teacher I spoke less than in a teacher fronted classes. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain, the teacher has to provide broad questions to challenge thinking. In my case, I asked students, for example, about the content they would include in the text that they were going to write. With this question they could reflect on what they knew about this type of text and start the prewriting process.

Moreover, the role of the teachers in the cooperative classroom would also include other duties. These duties include preparing the students for the task they will have to complete, assisting the students with this task, giving less commands and imposing less disciplinary control than in teacher fronted lessons (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

If the Learning Unit “Where should we go?” was implemented the teacher would also have a similar role that the one we have just described. He or she would have to facilitate the students completion of the task offering them the opportunity to collaborate in an autonomous way towards the goal of the different tasks included in the Learning Unit.

Furthermore, the students’ role when working cooperatively is also different from the one they have when they work on their own. Their primary role is that of member of a group that has to collaborate with the rest of the members in order to carry out a task. Moreover, in cooperative work learners are also monitors of their own leaning (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). As Zhang (2010) explains one of the benefits of the incorporation of Cooperative Learning to the foreign language classroom is that it fosters learner responsibility and independence. According to this author, Cooperative Learning places responsibility for action and progress on each of the members of the group rather equally. Positive role and goal interdependence will make students become more autonomous and self-controlled, and thus, less dependent on outside authority. With the time they will move from interdependence to independence.

As far as the role of materials is concerned, according to Richards and Rodgers (2001), materials are important in order to create opportunities for the students to work cooperatively. According to these authors the use given to materials requires variations when used for Cooperative Learning. One of the variations proposed by Richards and Rodgers is the use of different sets of materials for each group. This is what happens in Lesson 3 in the Learning Unit since, in this lesson, each group has a different text dealing with a concrete city, with a different set of activities that they will have to carry out. The same happens in Lesson 5, where the task is based for each group on the city they have been working on during the unit.

It is also important to state that since interaction in Cooperative Learning has to be structured, several of Kagan’s structures for Cooperative Learning are included in the Lesson Plan. According to Kagan and High (2002), all of Kagan’s structures are carefully structured to implement what they consider the four basic principles of Cooperative Learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation and simultaneous interaction.

The first of these structures, the Round Table, can be found in lesson 1. According with Kagan (2005) with a Round Table, students take turns to write something on a common piece of paper. In this case, the structure is used to revise vocabulary, as students have to write words related to the topic they are dealing with, traveling. This structure is also used in the lesson 2, dealing with writing, as students will have to take turns in order to suggest contents that they could include in the letter they have to write in order to ask for information. This activity is part writing process as it contributes to the generation of ideas which is an important step within the pre-writing stage.

The Rally Coach is the other structure for Cooperative Learning included in the Learning Unit (lesson 4). As Kagan (2005) explains, in this structure students complete a worksheet in pairs, taking turns each solving a problem while the other plays the role of a coach. In this case the worksheet contains a series of statements explaining problems and students have to take turns in order to give advice to solve the problems. Kagan (2005) explains that with this structure both students share the goal of obtaining the correct answers, knowing that the gain of one is the gain of the other. Moreover, in this situation weak students are not likely to give up, since they are encouraged by a stronger student that provides support. In this way, Cooperative Learning contributes to differentiation, since low-achieving students are helped by high-achieving ones contributing to the learning to both of them.

Lastly, it can be said that thanks to the implementation of Cooperative Learning, if this Learning Unit was implemented, students would benefit in different ways. First of all, they would have the opportunity to take part in natural interaction, since the different task would provide them with different opportunities for communication. Moreover, they could learn from their classmates since groups are heterogeneous and high-achieving students can help low-achieving ones, something that contributes to the learning of both of them. Finally, students could become more autonomous since with this approach students are responsible for their own learning.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that as Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain, the incorporation of Cooperative Learning in the foreign language classroom places considerable demands on teachers. They have to adapt to their new role that according to Harel, (1992, as quoted in Richards and Rodgers, 2001) includes interacting, teaching, refocusing, questioning, clarifying, supporting, expanding, celebrating and emphasizing. Moreover, depending on how the class evolves the teacher will have to give feedback, redirect the group with questions, encourage the group to solve their own problems, encourage thinking, manage conflicts, observe students and supply resources.

Moreover, the teacher will also have to restructure the lesson so that students can work cooperatively. For this task the teacher will have to take his or her existing lessons and structure them cooperatively; adapt cooperative lessons to his or her needs, circumstances, curricula and students; and, finally, diagnose the problems that can take place when students work together and intervene in order to increase the effectiveness of the lessons (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

However, the demands placed on the teachers seem worthwhile because, as many authors state, students obtain different benefits when working together. One of these benefits, as explained in the Innovation Project, is the improvement of the classroom atmosphere. As explained in this project most students said that they had enjoyed the experience and they prefer fulfilling the tasks in groups than on their own as in this way they find the work more enjoyable.

The Innovation Project presented yet another advantage to the incorporation of Cooperative Learning to the English subject, that is, the improvement of the results as far as writing is concerned. From what we saw in this project, students' written productions obtained better marks in all the aspects that were measured when working cooperatively.

Another benefit provided by Cooperative Learning, is the opportunity given to the students to interact with each other. Students have to use the target language in order to perform the task and, as a consequence, Cooperative Language Learning creates natural, interactive contexts, where students listen to each other, ask question, and clarify issues. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), conversational interaction is

considered by authors such as Hatch, Gass, Long or Pica an essential condition for the acquisition of a second language. Moreover, as Zhang (2010) explains, with Cooperative Learning students are exposed to comprehensible input and produce comprehensible output, something that contributes to the learning of English.

Finally, Cooperative Learning also offers the students the benefit of fostering their responsibility and independence. In Cooperative Learning students are responsible of their own learning and less dependent upon outside authority, in this way, students become according to Johnson and Johnson (1991, as quoted by Zhang, 2010) more autonomous and self-controlled.

All these benefits of Cooperative Learning as well as its presence in current and future legislation make this approach attractive for English teachers. Moreover, as Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain, Cooperative Learning can be used in combination with other approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching or a Task-Based approach, as happened in the Learning Unit. Thus, it seems that Cooperative Learning is an appropriate approach for the teaching of English in the context of secondary education.

6. PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE

As has already been explained, Cooperative Learning can have many benefits when applied to the teaching of English as a foreign language. However, if we want to gain these benefits in our classes, Cooperative Learning has to be implemented in an adequate way.

In my experience during the placement period, this methodology is not used frequently when teaching English and when used, its implementation presents important errors that make this methodology less effective. During my placement period I could see how the activities that students had to perform in groups were not adapted to Cooperative Learning and were not communicative or meaningful for the students. At one point students were provided with a list of sentences that they had to rephrase cooperatively. In most groups, either the student that had a higher level in English ended up doing all the work or students divided up the items among the members of the group and each student rephrased his or her own sentences. In this way one of the basic elements for the success of Cooperative Learning, positive interdependence, is not achieved.

When implementing Cooperative Learning it is important to keep in mind that this approach to teaching does not simply consist in arranging the students in random groups and ask them to perform the same activities as when they work individually. If teachers do this, most of the benefits of Cooperative Learning are lost. During my placement period I could see how my mentor formed the groups only taking into account the students' seating in order to make the students seating arrangements easier. However, authors like Stahl (1994) support the use of heterogeneous groups in terms of academic abilities as well as background and gender, as in this way students not only interact and achieve better, but also become more tolerant towards their classmates viewpoints.

Planning is important for the implementation of Cooperative Learning. If teachers want it to be effective they will have to arrange the students into groups beforehand, design, adapt and structure the tasks carefully so that they offer the students opportunities for real communication, build a spirit of support and positive interdependence within the groups and promote individual accountability.

One of the difficulties that teachers must face, as a general rule, is the adaptation to legislation. This is especially true in the current situation in our country since teachers still don't know if the LOMCE will substitute the LOE in the next academic year. As far as Cooperative Learning is concerned, the Curricula for both of them include Cooperative Learning among the methodological orientations. As a consequence, teachers should start using this approach, since, even if it requires a greater involvement on the part of the teacher, it provides the students with many more opportunities for communication.

Finally, it is important to notice that students have very different learning styles and personalities, and what works for one is not necessarily effective for another. As reflected in the Innovation Project, although a great majority of students stated that they preferred working cooperatively, some of them preferred working on their own. The reasons for this were varied and included being shy, avoiding distractions and having problems such as lack of participation with the rest of the members of the group.

As a consequence, as stated in the methodological orientations for the secondary education stage in the Aragonese Curriculum for the LOMCE, Cooperative Language Learning should be used in the classroom, but as teachers, we cannot neglect more individualistic teaching, adapting in this way to all the different students in the class.

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