

The cooperative conundrum: Idealizations and realities in today's classrooms

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INTRODUCTION

As students of this Master's degree, it seems rather relevant to ask ourselves what is the purpose of education. The first aspect to consider is whether we are fully aware of the objective we are fulfilling by studying or not. To answer such question, there is an inherent need to interpret reality, because education is nothing but a tool to reflect on the features integrated within the tapestry of reality (Ramsden, 1992; Beckett & Hager, 2002). This idea of learning as 'a window through which aspects of reality become visible' (Entwistle and Marton, 1984, in Ramsden, 1992:46) points that education is, in fact, a resource to promote societal development or, avoid societal stagnation.

Therefore, one way or another, education appears to be a relative matter, rather than an absolute one. Education is not a notion *per se*, but it is instead a notion dependent on the current framework in which it is developed (Kettley, 2006:2). This is an intrinsic characteristic reliant on the idea that education should aim towards human development, not human stalemate. And development requires from a point of departure, so as to assess whether such evolution has taken place, to which extent and whether it was carried out efficiently or not.

Consequently, it seems to be logical to say that our current reality framework could be interpreted as that point of departure, that relative reference, due to the fact that it already is the referential environment in which we evolve and grow. Thus, and given that education depends so much on its point of departure so as to determine its own purpose, reality and its influence in education should be the start line of this paper.

Towards an Information Society

Therefore, following the structure established for this dissertation, so as to properly set a context for the role of the teacher nowadays, it appears as necessary to question what defines today's reality. To really grasp the notion of reality we are moving in, we need to take a look at what has driven us to our current circumstances and features. The birth of the capitalist society could be a reference for that, given that it is thanks to such kind of society that education began to be established (Bale & Knopp, 2012), acquiring a degree of importance that lacked up to that moment. This sort of society emerged in 17th-century England (Hilton & Shefrin, 2009), and was the next

step to the long-lasting feudal society, which was mostly based on honor and glory in opposition.

Capitalism brought a paradigm shift, and economic values and trade became the core of the social sphere. It was a social system that privileged the notion of the individual above the collectiveness, and which eventually developed other cultural elements that influenced education to some extent: democratic ideas, the notion of functionality and pragmatics, the importance of creativity, and the intertwining of the role of the individual and the idea of community (Machan, 1998).

Nevertheless, our present capitalist society does not resemble the first stages in which it was born. Instead, the current context we are living in is the result of a process of constant change, within which improvements have been made for the sake of its own development (Hodgson, Itoh & Yokokawa, 2001; Scott, 2011). Thus, we can speak of merchant capitalism, an early stage of capitalism in which its main groundwork was settled, followed by industrial capitalism and its latter imperialist exponent, which preceded the financial capitalism – still present nowadays- that gave way to the ongoing technocapitalism. This can be said to be the framework in which we are living, a capitalist Information Society with strong financial features (Webster, 2004).

However, focusing on the ‘capitalist’ aspect of such definition, capitalism has a particular need for organization and order. One of the main characteristics of such feature is that, so as to create a capitalist system, there have to be “unequal distribution of material and symbolic rewards” (Crompton, 2008:8). This is not intrinsically bad, but rather something unavoidable: an organism, a system, has to be composed of several parts interacting with each other, and such fragments are, by definition, different from each other. This is closely related to the notion of individual accomplishment too, basis of liberalism (Midlarsky, 1997).

The problem arises when the aforementioned inequality moves from being a mere functionalistic view to a concept that emerges from domination, a situation in which some parts within society rule over others. It is in such sense that capitalist society has moved historically, at least in light of the conceptualization of education, which could be seen as an interpretation of factory Taylorism, some sort of “social Taylorism” (Kumar, 1995:58). This means that students were seen as future laborers and, as such, education was modelled in order to make them as profitable as possible, in

a utilitarian way that resembled the *à-la-Huxley* Fordism present in *Brave New World*: children as products in which to invest. Which, in the end, is not far from current reality (OECD, 1998:41).

Nevertheless, the evolution of society towards our current framework has taken place after several changes in the educational paradigm, being the first one that of Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938) model of progressive education, which intended to move the focus from utilitarianism to critical thinking, for instance. However, in spite of the integration of different perspectives within education since its inception, social determinism is still present as a direct result of capitalist organization, and the role of social mobility enabler that education allegedly has to play (Izquierdo, 2009), is nowhere to be found.

In any case, the present framework in which we are supposed to implement our views on education is that of the Information Society which, in many respects, is completely different from society during the 20th century, not to mention during the first stages of capitalist society. In fact, the first and foremost aspect to consider when speaking about Information Society is precisely that, information, which is central to the present paradigm. Reality has moved from being dependent on the actual value of goods and services to the value of intangible notions. Such centrality of the information has replaced Fordism –mainly based on tangible products-, inserting networking as the frame in which articulate social structures (Castells, 2010).

Such networking means a revolution in the way to interpret who is playing the main role in today's environment, particularly in education. Given that information is composed of ideas, which in turn derive from individuals, it is not school and memorization, but rather individuals and groups who play the main part in this performance. Networking has to do with the main objective of this paper, cooperative work within the classroom, because it implies that a group of work is composed of individuals that contribute to common outcomes, so as to reach personal achievements, thereby establish a feedback relationship with their environment.

Another example of the different features that this Information Society presents in relation to the past paradigms is global consciousness. There are many ways in which globalization plays a major role nowadays in our lives: culture, economics, politics, ecology, and so on: “people now have a greater chance of knowing about others’

cultural way of life—the good, the bad, and the ugly” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012:11). Therefore, globalization is highly interwoven with the whole notion of coexistence, due to the fact that it has made the borders blurry and, consequently, the idea of ‘global village’ is something to take into account when implementing any kind of educational system.

The need for competences

This leads us to the present situation in which traditional western education is at. The last two decades have witnessed a progressive evolution in the politics behind education, a process in which the views on what education means and how it has to be conducted have been supported by laws, studies, scholars, and so on. In relation to the ever changing society we currently live in, the most important shift has taken place according to the features inherent to globalization. Given that, out of its own characteristics, globalization implies a constant process of evolution (Beck, 2000), a great part of today’s students will probably have jobs in the future which do not exist today. Thus, there is no actual way to properly teach them how to conduct themselves in such positions.

That is why the idea of competences is so necessary. By using previous standards of education, students were told to memorize and repeat a certain amount of contents which, eventually, would lead them to an ideal state of ‘being-educated’. However, this method, apart from being teacher-centered among many other features, quickly proved to be useless as soon as we evolved into an Information Society: “a conventional mode of education [cannot] tackle the growing demands” (Kanjilal, 2002:188). A competence-based model tries to cover that aspect, by helping the students acquire the needed skills to perform and keep on learning, so as to “prepare for the reality of the 21st century” (Trilling & Fadel, 2009:78). In other words, the most important shift education has experienced consisted on, instead of forcing them to react, help the learners be proactive assets.

It is now when we can reprise the initial necessity of asking ourselves what is the purpose of education. In the light of what has been said, education could be useful to encourage autonomy, self-reliance and, above all, a sense of responsibility in future generations. It also contains a major cultural element, an information-sharer essence, but in any case, and given today’s ‘official’ route map, the main goal of education is to train

people to be able to keep up with the constant process of evolution society is experiencing. And, to some extent, the purpose of education can be paralleled to the purpose of the teacher.

The teachers' role

The current educational situation in Spain is nothing but one that is in constant change. Not actually developing towards some specific goal, but rather making modifications that influence the process of providing an education for generations to come. However, the current legal framework does reflect the need for working on competences – as specified by European institutions, for instance-, and that is allegedly present within the actual classroom. Nevertheless, out of nowadays' real circumstances in the classroom environment emerges a contradictory situation: educators are supposed to provide individualized attention, while also managing overpopulated classrooms.

Consequently, teachers' training needs to put emphasis on such aspect, the continuous oxymoron educators have to face on a daily basis. Teachers in the 21st century have to pay attention to a myriad of day-to-day issues, being the first one the challenge that education is today, reflected on the opposition between academic excellence and human development. There is a constant emphasis on the obstacles students have to overcome in order to prove they have learnt what they are supposed to, a direct result of the meritocratic model followed by our society: social position is achieved thanks to merit, which is quantified in terms of education, which in turn is accessible to people in different degrees according to their possibilities.

Perhaps, if we were to follow the competence-based model our social framework demands, quantifiable merits that solely depend on income will neither be the only yardstick nor the end of education itself. However, the presence of both models can be said to be a double standard in the current situation, a conundrum teachers have to think about in order to improve their own performance which, in the end, is what learners are exposed to. As, so to speak, 'state-of-the-art' teacher needs to appeal to his/her own inner reflection on its own teaching, which Kumaravadivelu already stated as one of the tools for contemporary teaching in his *post-method condition* (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). This interrelates as well with Richards' view, who says that:

“An alternative approach to the study of teaching (...) is the examination of the total context of classroom teaching and learning in an attempt to understand how the interactions between and among teacher, learners, and classroom tasks affect learning.” (Richards, 1990:9)

This is nothing but a reflection of what teachers should add to their already wide range of roles. So far they are not only teachers, but also, metaphorically speaking, confessors, police officers, psychologists, and so on, all of them within the school context. Now, they are also supposed to be investigators, observers, and witnesses, too. As a matter of fact, it is fundamental for them to lose some of the historical preponderance they have always hold in the classroom, so as to move the focus from teacher-centered lessons to student-centered ones. Given that today they have to *help* the students find out their own knowledge, rather than *impose* that knowledge, their main weapons should be observation and reflection.

This teacher role can be seen as both origin and consequence of the purpose of this paper, which is analyzing the role of the aforementioned networking techniques, or rather cooperative work, within the educational context. An origin, because by stepping back in a controlled environment, the teacher is giving the students the chance to find solutions to their own problems and, even better, find their own problems; a consequence, because by giving the students the chance to do so, the teacher is stepping back in a controlled environment.

In addition to this, the teacher of English as a second language (or, ESL) has to bear in mind several other circumstances in order to conduct lessons properly. For instance, according to Richards (1990:6), teachers have to keep a high amount of time-on-task, or engaged time, in which students are actively engaged in instructional tasks. This is vital so as to increase their rate of linguistic acquisition which is our ultimate goal as second language teachers. To maintain such level of engagement, Long and Crookes (1986, in Richards and Nunan, 1990) defend the idea of facing the notion of ESL teaching from a psycholinguistic perspective, that is, from the point of view provided by research on second language acquisition (or, SLA) theory.

But we should question ourselves whether having many tools and strategies makes a difference between an effective teacher and an ineffective one or not. It is true that the larger the strategies repertoire a teacher has, the more scenarios s/he will be able

to conduct and, consequently, the wider the range of students s/he will be able to guide towards SLA. But, as Gebhard, Gaitan and Oprandy (1990) state, most educators will point out the value of providing a 'real' classroom setting to learn the foreign language. Authentic materials, genuine purpose, meaningfulness... these are just some of the main topics that have been covered throughout the past months during this Master's Degree, and all of them point in the same direction: equating in-class skills to real world needs.

Thus, it seems logical to infer that an effective teacher does not only fulfill the goal of being a guide to the learners' SLA, but also does it in a particular way, in which acquisition takes place through reality –among other aspects such as exposure to input and interaction in different levels-, so as to promote the students' personal investment in the subject. In overcrowded classrooms, however, this seems rather impractical, which is why I chose cooperative as the object of this paper. As suggested by Gebhard, Gaitan and Oprandy (1990: 17, in Richards and Nunan, 1990), “a microteaching experience becomes a 'real' as opposed to a 'simulated' experience”. Cooperative work encourages peer teaching and peer assessment, being the sort of microteaching that could, eventually, enable effective teaching in such impractical environments.

JUSTIFICATION

As it has already been stated before, cooperative work will be the main topic this dissertation will be dealing with. In the light of what this Master's Degree is based on, it seems rather logical to use such focus, mainly due to the fact that cooperation and peer interaction have been a major factor in the interpretation of the teacher's role within the classroom. In fact, among the variety of subjects and topics that have been covered throughout this past academic year, cooperation has always been present in one way or another –either in the form of promoting peer assessment, peer teaching, group work, and so on-, a circumstance closely interrelated with the urge of giving the teacher a less prominent role.

For this analysis I have considered two papers which had cooperative work as main premise in their composition. They will be analyzed in terms of their cooperative work characteristics, so as to decide whether they reflect them in a way that could be implemented within a real classroom. Besides, a subsidiary aim of this essay is to compare both papers and discover whether there has been an evolution in the interpretation and understanding of cooperative work, which would be a relevant outcome given that the first paper was completed before the first placement period took place, and the second paper, right after the second placement period.

Such context is to be taken into consideration, due to the fact that the *Practicum* periods have certainly been the opportunity to reflect on classroom contents and, therefore, a way to test ideas on an empirical basis. Those ideas were, in my case, mostly related to the implementation of cooperative work in real classroom environments and, consequently, have been modified upon real experimentation. This is the reason why analyzing the differences between the papers in terms of pre- and post-*Practicum* interpretation of the topic seems so relevant, for it will give insight on the evolution that my perspective has undergone through this Master's Degree.

Objects of analysis

Being this dissertation an analytical one instead of a research study, the presence of objects of analysis is required. The objects considered for the purposes of this essay are two papers conducted throughout the development of the school year and, as it has been said, reflect the acquisition of techniques and knowledge to different degrees,

which is a logical assumption as well, given that they were composed in different moments of my development as student teacher.

The first paper to be analyzed corresponds to the first semester subject *Fundamentos de diseño instruccional y metodologías de aprendizaje*, and it is focused on the implementation of project-based dynamics within the 4th of ESO classroom. The paper, present in Appendix I, mainly exposed views on how the project-based approach was understood and, by means of a practical approach, that is, by offering the design of a project, it tried to offer an interpretation of its attainability in real contexts.

This is a rather theoretical paper, mainly because the perspective was more focused on establishing a certain basis according to which we (the composers of the paper), as teachers, would be able to begin developing a critical understanding on both curricular framework and the literary background on the subject. Thus, this paper can be said to mark a departure point for the papers to come which, to a greater or lesser extent, would include aspects of cooperative interaction within the classroom environment.

The second paper, included in Appendix II, consists of a Learning Unit designed for the second semester's subject *Diseño, organización y desarrollo de actividades para el aprendizaje de inglés*, and it contains the development of a whole unit in which the main linguistic skills and subskills were practiced and developed, by means of focusing on a process-centered approach in which cooperative work played a major role. Aside from that, the previous pages to the development of the lessons within the paper showed, as an introduction to the topic, the contextualization of both school and students, as well as the integration of the current legal framework as a justification for the use of cooperative work, showing it as a fundamental approach to promote effective SLA.

In opposition to the first paper, this Learning Unit represents the evolution that this Master's Degree has made us undergo, for it reflects the effort in being as realistic as possible while, at the same time, implementing as many *post-method* ideas as we could. It is a quite practical approach that pays attention to real student needs, witnessed and analyzed during *Practicum II & III* periods, and shows lessons that have been implemented in real classrooms as well, proving that cooperative learning can be achieved if given enough opportunities.

These papers have been chosen for this analysis for one simple reason: they can be seen as initial and final steps in the development of the perspective on cooperative work. While the first, more theoretical paper played the function of an approach to the concept of cooperation, in which no real contact was established with the students from the placement period school –*Practicum I* had just passed, but offered no in-class experience-, the second paper represents, being a Learning Unit as it is, the experience gathered from actual interaction with the students, therefore having the first paper as a basis and only using it as a baseline. Consequently, both papers are relative to each other, complementing and, given that their topics represent the same subject (that of cooperation within the classroom), it seemed relevant to analyze their relationship.

Justification based on the hypothesis

The main idea behind the analysis of these two papers is that cooperative work, even though it can be proven to be an effective, if not the most effective, way of teaching, it is incompatible with nowadays' vision of education. There are several aspects to cooperative work (further explained in pages 12-17), summarized in the needs that are fulfilled by implementing peer teaching and peer assessment, that contradict the current methodologies needed in the classroom.

While it is true that today's framework is based on the European legal framework, when coming into contact with a real classroom such phrase can be reformulated into "*loosely* based on the European legal framework". The document 'Key Competences for a Lifelong Learning – A European Framework', annex to *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning*, published in the Official Journal of the European Union, or Common European Framework of Reference (henceforth, CEFR), suggests the foundations for education to be structured around the concept of competences. Analyzing such criteria, it is justified to say that cooperative work is a main concern, paying attention to competences such as the "Learning to learn" and the "Social and civic" ones.

The first one implies that students have to acquire the skills to be constantly recycling their own abilities, adjusting them to their predictably ever-changing future circumstances. Cooperative work helps building it by making the students aware that

they learn not only from teachers, but from the interaction with their peers, from which they “meet their individual goals” (Good and Brophy, 1987: 438).

The second one refers to the fact that, so as to become citizens in the aforementioned globalized world, students have to acquire strategies on how to behave in societal environments, a circumstance mainly based on interaction and peer feedback. Cooperative work within the classroom influences the acquisition of such competence as well, since group work creates “positive interdependence” (Kagan, 1989: 13) between high achieving students and low achieving learners.

The aforementioned CEFR competences are present in the Spanish national curriculum that rules the educative framework, both in the *Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación* (or, LOE) and the *Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa* (or, LOMCE)¹. And the legal regulation established for Aragón, the *Orden de 9 de mayo de 2007* (or Aragonese Curriculum, henceforth AC), which emerges from the national curriculum, pays attention to competences as well. However, it does so in a more specific manner, since its main addition to that respect is that of subcompetences, or particular skills that lead to the acquisition of high order competences.

Nevertheless, and even though the framework seems rather prone to promote a competence-based approach and, consequently, cooperative work, there are two factors provided by the curriculum that obstructs such approach to be feasible. On the one hand, resource management: the amount of students per class usually stands in the way of individualized teaching attention; on the other hand, the assessment criteria required by the legal framework compels schools’ syllabi to be product-based, instead of process-based, leading to teacher-centered, memory-focused lessons.

¹ For the purposes of this paper it has to be noted that, during the design and composition of the objects of analysis, the LOE framework was taken into consideration, although the regulations regarding competences in LOMCE state no difference in relation to LOE.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Throughout the following pages, the main purpose is to analyze the role that the papers used for this dissertation have played in the process that I have undergone in the recent course year, as well as to analyze their contents in terms of cooperative work and their feasibility inside real classroom environments. To do so, my very own hands-on experience both in the Master's Degree and in the placement period will be taken into consideration as a tool, in order to properly define what cooperative work is and how it could be implemented within schools, if it is possible at all.

However, the very first aspect to consider is what cooperative work refers to. Communicative Language Teaching (or, CLT), an approach to SLA processes often equated to cooperative work and learning, is based on the notion that students have to know the global purpose to which they are aiming in order to perform better. Thus, we should ask ourselves if purposefulness is what defines cooperation and/or effectiveness. In any case, so as to provide a clear analysis of cooperative work within the classroom, a first step would be asking ourselves, as teachers, the reason why we should use cooperative work in the classroom.

Why using cooperation?

First of all, it is important to note that cooperative work has been a phenomenon a century in the making. It represents the result of a series of developments revolving around the culture of education, which include conceptions and misconceptions of what the teaching-learning process is, the role of students within the classroom environment and its relationship with the teacher's role, the teacher's own self-perception and, in sum, an overall shift in the educational paradigm that has happened in unequal degrees depending on the society and the time frame we are dealing with.

In any case, cooperative work can be defined, on a superficial level at least, as the perspective that has emerged from observing societal needs and developments and equating them to the real methodologies that take place behind the classrooms' doors. As a matter of fact, as Kagan (1999) has stated throughout the years, the current western society values and practices, always set in an ever-changing process of development, have created what can be understood as a "socialization void". This can be appreciated in terms of changes in familial structures, for instance, which may lead to a higher

individualization of the learners already in their family environments and not only in their school, which in turn may result in the absence of social ties –required to convey meaningful learning processes (Draper, 1985).

Thus, cooperative work emerges as a response to the growing needs of the aforementioned Information Society, and represents an attempt made by educators to substitute old-fashioned, traditional methodologies with new, empiric approaches. For example, in previous models raw facts were all that mattered, and the acquisition of knowledge was verified by assessing what can otherwise be understood as the student's memorization skills. As Kagan (2004) says, cooperative work initiatives intend to place process over content, thereby perceiving learning as an educative entity itself, with value and weight within class. Consequently, the learning process can be understood as being parallel to the notion of competences, in the sense that both ideas refer to the learners' acquisition of skills to perform in real frameworks, not to the products to be performed.

In the long run, cooperation within the classroom represents the “various ways [with which] to fill the socialization void, including the development of social skills, character virtues, emotional intelligence and leadership skills” (Kagan, 2004). It is an approach towards making the students think, reason and argue, in opposition to traditional conceptions in which learners did not develop social skills involving deep, analytic, logical thinking.

But that is not all there is to it, and from my very own experience both as a student and as a teacher during my placement period it could be said that the global purposes of cooperative work are deeper and, somehow, involves and influences nowadays society. Such involvement takes place due to the fact that, first, cooperative work increases student effectiveness within the educative sphere, giving the same opportunities to each and every student, regardless of their capabilities. In a more concrete way, I have observed that cooperation not only improves the learners' knowledge and skills, but also enhances their communicative abilities by promoting peer-to-peer interaction.

Also, cooperative work transcends the school by encouraging a more reflective, competence-based learning. This is obviously a way to ease the students' own role inside school, since it bases the acquisition of skills on the learners' own notion of

responsibility and relies on their understanding to make the most out of their effort. This begins by letting the learners know what they are doing and to what purpose –an aim to which project-based and task-based models are quite useful-, and develops the students' ability to self-assess their own performance. This is a rather needed quality in today's society because, given that networking is a thriving trend in business (O'Murchu, Bresling & Decker, 2004; Klyver & Foley, 2012) representing a shift in the notion of hierarchical workplace environments, self-accountability has become a rather fundamental requirement in modern workers' profiles.

Yet another major result of attempting cooperation within the classroom environment is the integration of students both inside and outside the classroom, by means of substituting the regular inner classroom structure with teamwork-based structures. From the data I gathered in my placement period –represented in the *Practicum III* reports-, cooperation improves the teaching-learning processes making them more efficient, due to the fact that it removes the competitive factor from the scene, a factor upon which education has relied for too long, perhaps (Cropper, 1998; Resnick, 2011). Furthermore, cooperative work enables the presence and meaningful performance of different learning capacities, since there is a feedback learning among the students and, consequently, their gaps in knowledge and skills acquisition are fulfilled by other learners.

Cooperative work today

From what has been said so far, it certainly seems that cooperative work is the solution to any kind of problem in the classroom, either present or future, since it is the kind of approach that prevents unwanted or inefficient behavior from happening. However, truth be told, cooperative approaches are far from being the panacea for in-classroom issues, although not because of its very own features –at least not in principle-, but rather because of its incompatibility with nowadays' educational framework.

Nevertheless, speaking of the features of cooperative work, they are the result of a series of developments within the subsequent educational frameworks that have been present throughout time, although always being, so to speak, faithful to its origins. Cooperative work emerged as an approach to close possible existing gaps between learners' capabilities and features, while improving the overall academic results and the

students' own persona in various ways: sense of achievement, self-accountability, responsibility, socialization skills, self-esteem, and so on.

Since its beginning, profuse investigation and research has been conducted, both on the theoretical background over which cooperative work practice stands and on such practical approach as well. This research, according to Johnson, Johnson and Stanne (2000) has been mostly centered on comparing cooperation with competition in the development of the teaching-learning process, paying great attention to the role played by the individualistic factor in it –or its absence- and the global effectiveness achieved. As a matter of fact:

“There are over 900 research studies validating the effectiveness of cooperative over competitive and individualistic efforts (...), conducted by many different researchers with markedly different orientations working in different settings and countries and in eleven different decades” (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000: 2).

And that whole corpus of research has aimed not to just one single aspect or benefit allegedly provided by cooperative work, but instead to a wide variety of features that, once and again, have been proven to be the result of the direct implementation of cooperation. Aspects such as higher-level reasoning, retention, transfer of learning, motivation –intrinsic, continuing and related to achievement-, social and cognitive development, moral reasoning, interpersonal attraction, social support, reduction of stereotypes... The list seems to be endless and, just like Johnson, Johnson and Stanne state, “there may be no other instructional strategy that simultaneously achieve such diverse outcomes” (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000: 3).

According to Johnson, Johnson and Stanne, from the 1960s through the 1980s a series of practical approaches to cooperative work took place, among which Kagan's approach –to be used when analyzing the core material of this dissertation- is present. Such classroom cooperative strategies are said to be a combination of theory, research and practice, and attempt to make cooperation a powerful learning procedure for in-class development. However, even though such approaches may be theoretically right and may seem accurate in terms of design, Johnson, Johnson and Stanne imply that less conceptual, more direct approaches could provide better results. This proves that, even though cooperative work ideally represents the paradigm shift in education that some authors have been demanding (such as Robinson, 2001), it still requires the feedback

provided by true implementation, which may show precisely this: within cooperation, not every kind cooperation is worth it.

One perspective on how to define an appropriate approach to nowadays' cooperative work would be that of Kohonen (1992), who talks about experiential learning. This refers to an approach through which experience is processed consciously by reflecting on it, in a cyclic process involving "immediate experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization and action" (Kohonen, 1992: 14). Following this experiential learning model, based on Kolb's (1984) works, effective cooperative work can be seen as composed of two dimensions: *prehension* and *transformation*.

The first one refers to the processes through which the learners get to assimilate their own experience from their environment. As Johnson, Johnson and Stanne stated and was mentioned above, the approach by means of which individuals acquire skills and/or knowledge influence the effectiveness of the whole process. Kohonen's model, which can be aligned with Krashen's (1985, 2003) input hypothesis to some extent, talks about two different ways of assimilating the experience, either from 'apprehension' –instant, intuitive acquisition- or 'comprehension' –conscious, analytical learning.

The second one, *transformation*, involves the outcomes of the process of assimilation and, in a way, the stages of trial and error that individuals undergo so as to reach full acquisition of a concept or a skill. It has been said several times through the present dissertation that self-accountability, self-assessment, is a fundamental factor in cooperative work, mainly because of the absence of an omniscient teacher figure, and this experiential model dimension relates to it. This stage, like the first one, presents a duality: either the possibility of being too reflective or, on the contrary taking risks and checking the validity of the assimilated experience through hands-on practice.

Consequently, it is the interrelation between such dimensions which defines the concept of cooperative work today, because they comprehend four orientations to learning that are inherent to cooperation: concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation and active experimentation (Kohonen, 1992). Concerning the field of SLA –the one this dissertation is interested in-, these orientations are related to the learners' input/output ratio which, from reflecting upon

the implementation I conducted through my placement period, has to be $=1$ or <1 so as to consider that a lesson has been effective.

Finally, and even though there are several authors that talk about this input/output ratio (Long & Porter, 1985), about group work dynamics (Pallarés, 1990) or even about the implementation of cooperative work within the ESL classroom (Cassany, 2004), this dissertation will try to use Kagan's (1989, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2005) principles for cooperative learning as a core for analysis –positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, simultaneous interaction-, given that they complement Kolb's and Kohonen's notion of experiential learning, but from an interactional perspective deeply integrated with the *prehension* and *transformation* dimensions.

Purpose of the papers

So far, the groundwork for the following pages has been set, on various aspects. First, on the context itself, within which the teaching practice is located and which influences the circumstances that take place inside the classroom, both in terms of students and teachers. After that, the current state of the educational paradigm was established, a competence-based model through which a reflective teacher guides students to the acquisition of skills. Also, the papers to be analyzed for the purposes of this dissertation have been given a framework and a proper justification, and even some academic literature referring to our main topic has been noted. However, there has been little to no explanation on the actual content of such papers, which are the core of this analysis.

The first paper, called *Project-based learning approach with ESO students*, intended to describe the basis for Project-Based Learning (or, PBL) and its possible implications within the classroom. That is, by means of its background, the paper reflected a possible scenario in which a project-based approach would have been carried out with a regular, 4th year of ESO group. Such scenario consisted of a yearlong project in which students would have to work in groups, covering cultural and societal aspects of a given English-speaking country because, as Held & McGrew (2007) said, traditional cultural barriers are not as thick as they used to be.

This paper has been chosen for this dissertation due to the fact that it shows what I understand cooperative work should mean, in terms of the processes that teachers have to follow so as to make students' needs the main aspect of the subject. More importantly, it does so in such a way that both theoretical background and practical approach feedback on each other, due to the fact that the paper presents a framework within which teachers are to perform, although always leaving place for reflection-in-action and improvisation according to the situation. Thus, this paper emphasizes a broader view on the teacher role within the classroom, in opposition to a more constricted traditional view, primarily focusing the teacher's performance in terms of implementing cooperative work techniques while explaining why this should be the path to follow in SLA.

The second paper, the design and development of a Learning Unit called *Shopaholic*, is different from the first one in many respects. On the one hand, it was composed by the end of the year and it shows the development that I have undergone as a student of the Master's Degree in terms of, for instance, perspective on education. After several months studying theoretical trends and educative models, my views on what effective teaching means have shifted, and a progression can be appreciated: from the naivety of a rather naturalistic view in which students were to be set free from regular in-class patterns –seen in the first paper to be analyzed-, to a more moderate perspective, in which some basic structures within the classroom are needed and students, instead of being given full responsibility all at once, they are rather elicited into controlled scenarios.

On the other hand, a major difference between this second paper and the first one is the main approach followed when designing the activities. While in the first one it was all about a project-based focus, in the Learning Unit that perspective moves towards some sort of micro-management, and the focus is rather a task-based one. This variation will be explained further on, but suffice it to say for now that such difference is based on what experience taught me about students' motivation during my placement period.

However, the most important difference between both papers is the fact that, while the first one did not enjoy the opportunity of real implementation with a group of students, the second one did. This meant that the theories upon which it was based were tested in real situations, thus providing appropriate feedback on the effectiveness of the

plan and, consequently, enabling the possibility of assessing the feasibility of implementing cooperative work successfully.

This, in the end, was a by-product of the second paper: although it was designed with the purpose of showing possible implementations of what this Master's Degree is teaching, checking how realistic cooperative work is in a regular classroom environment was another intended outcome of the Learning Unit. Therefore, it seemed rather relevant to add it to this dissertation, even more so considering that, as I see it, it represents the ultimate goal of a designed Unit: implementing what was planned. And even though it is not evident in the final product, this second paper was modified many times during its composition, based on the real results provided by the implementation of its own lessons. This shows, once again, the entanglement inherent to the theory/practice duality, and how such dependence should not be overlooked if we are to be realistic as well as effective during our teaching performance.

To this respect, in order to be realistic and effective, both papers are based on the notion of what Kumaravadivelu (1994) called the post-method condition, that is, a non-traditional approach to the process of SLA. As it was already stated in the introduction, today's society requires the presence of self-reflecting teachers, due to the fact that such kind of educators guarantee constant educational development, needed to meet the students' needs as these arise. But this feature, an important aspect of this post-method era too, is also needed to create self-reflecting learners, students able to assess their own performance and level of acquisition.

That is why both papers focused on a CLT approach (as suggested by Richards, 2006) because, since the aim is to promote self-accountability, in order to self-assess their performance students need to know what their purposes are and, in a foreign language classroom, the main goal is to communicate. CLT implements such perspective, attempting to generate as much communicative practice in the SLA process as possible, in a meaningful way.

Such meaningfulness was also something intended in the papers because, as many authors have stated, there is a close interrelation between student motivation and effective SLA (Schiefele, 1991; Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Chen, 2014). Real, meaningful communication gives a sense of purpose and, eventually, achievement which, in the end, influences student motivation to a great extent.

Because even though a major framework that both papers shared was that of the notion of a competence-based model, the fundamental idea behind them was the achievement of student motivation. As Deci, Kasser and Ryan (1997, in González, 2005) stated, the students' amotivation is the main reason why learners do not involve in classroom processes and, as teachers, our first goal should be to encourage the students to proactively perform in the lessons' development.

This is the reason why, in the end, I understand cooperative work to be so fundamental in a classroom. If we pay attention to Kagan's principles for cooperative learning, they all deal to some extent with making the students engage in the learning process, which is why the papers considered for the purposes of this analysis have been chosen. These papers are relevant to our current views in education because they reflect the way in which teachers should understand the students' role: as something which is constantly subject to change, depending on the situational needs. However, even though such scenario looks slippery, there is a constant present in both papers with regard to the learners' performance: they have to be guided towards being interdependent, reflective, proactive and interactive because, otherwise, effective teaching becomes a rather impossible task.

Kagan's principles in the objects of analysis

As it has been mentioned before, in order to analyze the features of cooperative work present in the papers, Kagan's principles for cooperative learning are going to be considered. Besides, such principles will be of use too when establishing the relation between the idealized scenarios proposed in the papers and their actual feasibility, that is, they will serve the purpose of being the point of departure from which to determine if the conditions for cooperative work are met in regular lessons.

Kagan's principles for cooperative learning are four and appear throughout his work in several occasions, being usually understood as a checklist so as to decide whether cooperative work is taking place within a given environment or not. Such cooperative work has to be defined as:

“A student-centered, instructor-facilitated instructional strategy in which a small group of students is responsible for its own learning and the learning of all group members”
(Li & Lam, 2005: 1)

This definition, however, can be understood as being somewhat ambiguous or, at the very least, vague, thereby leaving place to interpretation and addition of meanings to the very nature of what cooperative work is. As a matter of fact, there are authors such as Panitz who state that cooperative work also enables the teacher to remain in control of the learning process, given that s/he is in charge of designing and implementing activities as well as in charge of structure how work happens within the classroom. He even goes further by saying that “cooperative [work] does not empower students” (Panitz, 1999: 6).

To some extent, Kagan’s principles establish a sort of middle ground and try to tackle a series of critical questions that refer to inherent aspects of cooperative work, which allegedly end up showing “dramatic academic and social gains” (Kagan, 2005: 1). Such questions are linked to internal cooperative dynamics that, according to Kagan, are essential to the overall success of both the learning activity’ development and the students’ skill acquisition.

Positive interdependence

The questions linked to this first principle are, according to Kagan (2005), related to whether the success of each individual within a given group of work benefits the global success of the whole or not; it also focuses on finding the real value of individuals within cooperative structures, by considering to which degree is everyone’s contribution necessary.

This principle is composed of two elements, referred to in its own name. First, there is the *positive* side to it, which makes reference to the fact that, according to Kagan (2011), cooperation within the classroom almost always results in the general improvement of the overall results of the group, based on the notion that there is a positive correlation among the outcomes. This means that, thanks to the dynamics promoted by cooperative work, students become aware that the more each of them improves, the more the group improves as well, and vice versa. To some extent, this can be seen as a rather social value defined by solidarity within the classroom environment, the kind of solidarity that yields benefits.

The second aspect of this principle is that of *interdependence*, which encloses the notion of necessary help. The main idea behind the design and development of

cooperative work tasks is that, within a given group, no student can accomplish the established objectives on his/her own. In fact, cooperative activities are supposed to be devised in such a way that only by means of the sum of each student's efforts the final goals can be met. Thus the idea of necessary help, because cooperation raise students' awareness on the fact that, in order to let individuals thrive, the whole group has to strive.

In the case of the first paper, positive interdependence was rather overlooked. While it is true that, as a project-based approach, cooperative work is somewhat implied under its surface, there is little to no mention to anything related to the concept of 'necessary help'. In this paper (for clarification purposes, Paper I or PI), the main objective towards which the project explained aims is a final presentation. It is true that in such performance students have to acknowledge the presence of an audience, which is intrinsically related to the need for their peers in order to pitch their presentation and receive proper feedback, but interdependence here seems rather a by-product, instead of the fundamental aspect it should be.

As a matter of fact, it can be appreciated that during the composition of PI the notion of cooperative work was a rather unclear one, thereby reflecting a perspective on its implementation that could be called 'empiric' since:

"(...) the presence of a public environment [will help] students organically learn how to implement teamwork techniques with the perspective of a subsequent presentation" (Appendix I: 2-3).

Notwithstanding that the ultimate goal of having the students be dependent on each other's participation would be accomplished, the notion of an 'organic' acquisition of cooperative techniques showed no knowledge of how teamwork should be promoted or, in other words, elicited. Simply organizing the students into groups does not make cooperation grow out of the blue; experience has taught me that positive interdependence has to be a created need, arising from the very same activity design with which the students are challenged.

This is something that was taken into consideration for the composition of the Learning Unit (or, Paper II, henceforth PII). Even though the theoretical background present in such paper is rather scarce –which proves once again that it was a composition primarily focused on practical approaches-, being mostly focused in

justifying the ensuing design in terms of CLT, activities are conceived considering the need of creating learners' interdependence.

For instance, the first activity (Appendix II: 17-19) relies to a great extent on the students skill to interact with each other in order to carry out a transaction. It is based on a role-play dynamic in which some learners pretend to be sellers while others are customers, and the task cannot be completed without each and every one of them considering the role played by their peers together with their very own performances. It is a quite simple way to integrate learners' interdependence because, not only they are instructed to help each other complete their half of the role-play in order to get the whole class to succeed, but also does it by using social structures students are comfortable with: a buy/sell dynamic is one to which they are accustomed, being consumers as they are.

However, when it comes to implementing the concept of positive interdependence in a real classroom environment, I have found quite difficult to make it happen on a regular basis. Even though some of the activities promoted in PII were developed successfully during my placement period, I noticed that doing so could be considered a feat on itself. The attempt to design and conduct a lesson out of the ordinary was already a remarkable fact, let alone doing so in such a way that students were to be assessed on terms of how they interact with each other.

In the current educative paradigm, as it has been said before, the main criterion is individual accomplishment. Students are graded as individual learners, and the main classroom strategies are focused on assessing them as if they were isolated from their environment. As a matter of fact, students' marks emerge from their 'soloist' performance in exams, essays, homework and so on, and instead of making the most of the natural inclination of the learners to cluster, groups are reorganized. This tendency towards constantly rearranging students is allegedly reasoned upon 'classroom discipline' motives; however, there would be no need for such discipline if students were motivated enough through non-traditional techniques like, for instance, positive interdependence.

Individual accountability

In this second case, cooperation is measured in terms of the individuals' performance as part of a bigger entity. Reflecting upon what this implies, it means two different notions for the learners: role awareness and self-reflection. On the one hand, they are supposed to be aware of the role they play within the class as students, meaning that they have to be proactive and engaged in the teaching-learning process; the purpose of such proactivity and engagement is to reach personal achievement, linked to the mentioned accountability by means of motivation: "when we know we will be held accountable for an individual performance we are more motivated and try harder" (Kagan, 2011: 1).

On the other hand, self-reflection emerges from the previous role awareness. Since students are conscious of what they are expected to do, the only information they are lacking is the way in which they have to perform to reach such expectations. That information usually comes from the environment –traditionally from the teacher's feedback-, but in order to enable the learners to conduct themselves as responsible individuals which are part of a group, self-reflection needs to be encouraged. This happens through cooperative work because, given that regular cooperative dynamics rely on the group's autonomy, students have to be constantly checking their progress and development, thereby optimizing their resources –time and space, for instance- and gathering information on what they are doing to reach the goals they are expected to.

Analyzing PI, the first aspect that comes to mind is the emphasis on the role of students as the main designers of the development of the course. Theirs is the decision to choose the topic on which their presentations will focus, theirs is the decision on the pace and stages to follow, being ultimately empowered to the position of conducting the development of the lessons in any way they considered relevant. This is a positive approach for two reasons: first, students are located in a much more prominent position in the classroom organization, centering the teaching-learning process on them; also, the objectives that students will set for themselves within the provided framework will be realistic, achievable and, above all, motivating.

However, and much like in the stage referring to positive interdependence, PI left too much to either fate or the students good will. Even though the PBL approach presented in PI contained a defined framework which students had to follow, it also

implied that such framework could be modified indefinitely according to the students' needs. It is true that it is necessary to give prominence to students' choices, particularly with respect to their own education, but always bearing in mind that the teacher's management and lesson design is equally important. Make the students aware of their role does not imply giving them full control of what happens inside the classroom.

Such misinterpretation was later corrected in PII by making the students aware of the ultimate lesson goals on a regular basis. Thus, their role is set to be not designers, but rather developers of a previous design. Since they are told the outcomes to achieve they are free to conduct themselves in the most effective way they can, giving them the proper tools and instructions, but only to the point of letting them figure out the appropriate way to use such resources. Also, in opposition to PI misconception, learners are encouraged in PII to become peer teachers, which means that the difficulties are intended to be solved via teamwork micromanagement, ultimately pushing the development of the Unit forward.

This peer-teaching role was also reinforced by the importance given to self-assessment. PII's lessons are always completed by using self-evaluation/peer-evaluation tools, so as to raise the students' awareness of the fact that the first ones to assess their development are themselves. This attitude towards self-accountability in PII is intended to make the students responsible for their own learning, in line with the 'learning to learn competence', and represents an improvement with respect to PI, which mostly relied on external sources for assessment.

In the case of a real classroom environment, attempting to implement self-evaluation was an objective almost impossible to accomplish. Since learners are never given the chance to assess their own performance, there was no actual way to develop an activity of that kind and make its results relevant or valid in any sense. Teachers in real classrooms value learners' responsibility a great deal, but they often fail to encourage them to take responsibility of their own actions. This oxymoron finds its roots, once again, in the individualistic features of the current educational model.

Given that students characteristics are to be assessed as if they represented an isolated system, the reference for such assessment needs to be external. Much like a given fact cannot be justified by its own terms, students cannot be their own point of reference if they are supposed to be isolated entities; thus, teachers have to

implement evaluation tools that will not –and cannot- take into consideration the learning strategies each student has undergone. This way the educative system claims to be equally fair by providing an allegedly impartial set of evaluation standards, while the truth is that the system is nothing but an *argumentum ad logicam*: since the law expects certain standards to be met in order to verify academic accomplishment, if the standards are not met then no accomplishment is verified. Which, considering for instance Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), is a fallacy, since each student’s learning should only be measured in terms of his/her own abilities.

Equal participation

This third principle speaks for itself in terms of which question, essential to cooperative work, does it answer. Equity in the students’ participation in the work dynamics feeds back on the motivation of the students and, consequently, on their engagement in the lesson development. A major issue in any classroom and lesson development is the matter of the students’ affective filter which, so to speak, can be defined as the fear of failure and subsequent peer judging. Cooperative work intends to lower such affective filter by compartmentalizing the students’ group and, consequently, relieving the stress of facing broader audiences.

To make the process effective, students have to participate on the promoted tasks and activities, although not in any random manner, but rather in a structured way that places the same amount of prominence in each and every learner. Thus, if there is no balance in the students’ participation in the development of the group’s dynamics, the learners’ role begins to differ in terms of importance, which leads to different degrees of interdependence and, eventually, to a different perception of what each student is achieving. This situation can derive in the student’s understanding that s/he is not progressing as his/her peers, which in turn equates in the decrease or even in the absence of motivation, therefore influencing the learners’ engagement.

During the design of PI’s practical approach, Tidwell-Howell’s approach to motivation was considered: “one of the most effective ways to motivate students is to give them knowledge and choice” (Tidwell-Howell, 2010: 9). Knowledge on what they are expected to achieve, choice on the way to achieve it. It turned out to be particularly true, although PI’s lacked the proper design to provide such students’ choice.

Again, empower students in their roles making them proactive is an important and necessary improvement, but it has to be supported by proper lesson design. The flaw in PI's practical approach was to guide the students towards the final goal, expecting them to find their way through the stages before that, somehow. In such process, chance could make them come across organizational strategies which included equal participation among teamwork individuals, not an irrational thought given that nobody likes to work more than the rest of the peers within a group. However, there was no way to ensure that it happened, and sheer luck should not be any teacher's *modus operandi*.

In PII's lessons, tasks were consciously designed in such a way that every student was burdened with the same workload, including mechanisms to check on such equity. For instance, a segment from Lesson 2 task was designed to be divided among the members of the group; Lesson 6 contained a section in which the same amount of participation was required so as to make the activity advance, otherwise it would not.

Thus, from PI to PII there was a development towards more controlled environments, although such control does not mean turning the lesson into a teacher-centered one. In this case, as in the whole cooperative work implementation process, the main tool teachers have to use is elicitation, concealed guidance. Thus, equal participation in PII's tasks looks rather a requirement to be met in order to carry out the exercise, instead of the main objective it really is, needed to fully achieve cooperation.

However, in traditional environments equal participation is barely attempted, an entelechy prevented from happening by the lack of resources. Considering that none of the previous principles can be met within a regular classroom but in extraordinary circumstances, it seems logical to think that this one will not be any different. Since students are not encouraged to organize in manageable groups, entertaining the idea of having sets of 20-30 students participate evenly in 55 minute lessons is absurd.

This circumstance is the result of combining both the legal educative framework and the social situation in which Spanish education is nowadays. On the one hand, the legal provisions state that a given number of contents have to be developed in a 9-month lapse of time; on the other hand, classrooms are overcrowded due to the increasing number of students and the decreasing number of job positions, which exacerbates the teacher-student ratio. Given that educators have to teach specific contents in a fixed

time frame while managing increasingly bigger groups of students, it becomes a matter of practicality not to pay attention to equal participation. Consequently, Kagan's third principle for cooperative work becomes yet another collateral damage caused by educational policies.

Simultaneous interaction

This final principle tries to tackle the question of how many students are engaged in the teaching-learning process at the same time in a given moment. Considering that one major objective that cooperative dynamics try to accomplish is to make the learning process a networking experience, in which everyone benefits from the overall results while also providing his/her own share of effort to it, the requirement of promoting simultaneity is an undeniable need in cooperative work.

Such simultaneity is influenced, to a great extent, by the implementation of the three previous principles, because if those are properly integrated within the lesson's development, then simultaneity is enabled by the already high level of engagement that the students present. This is related to what this idea of 'simultaneous interaction refers': traditionally, when the teacher asked a question, only one student out of twenty was engaged in the process of answering such question and, eventually, acquiring an objective; however, if the learners are aware of the relationship between students' interdependence and success, being responsible of their own learning whilst considering that their own role is as relevant as the others', then when one of them participates in the learning process, the remaining nineteen will as well, since engagement will be their natural status.

In the development present in the PI approach, simultaneous interaction was, once again, an aspect that could or could not appear, depending on the students' will. The project-based approach presented hints in that direction, but it was not designed in such a way that this principle was inherent to the activities. There was no need for students to pay attention to other learners' participation save for specific occasions, like the final outcome, the presentation, when they were told to assess their partners' performance.

PII's lessons not only ask the students to conduct peer-assessment regularly, but also make them engage in their classmates' participation so as to fulfill individual and

group objectives. For instance, when considering PII's Lesson 1 development, it becomes clear that not only every student is generating output simultaneously, but they are also integrating their peers' output, so as to achieve the transactions required as lesson objective. Or in Lesson 4, in which the task is to provide feedback on items that can be bought online, being the final goal is to reach a consensus on aspects concerning such reviews, a process that requires complete engagement.

Then again, the absence of previous principles in a real environment classroom denies the possibility of simultaneous interaction in regular EFL lessons. From the experience I gathered during my placement period, most of the times classroom dynamics are based on out-of-context grammar exercises that take place one student at a time. For example, if a given exercise comprehends five sentences with gaps and a given learner calculates that s/he will have to answer the fourth one, s/he will prepare that very same sentence and pay no attention neither to the others nor to his/her partners' participation.

This is yet another evidence that, to the students, the way in which EFL regular lessons are devised is not interesting at all, let alone challenging or motivating in any sense. However, the reason for this is closely related to what causes the absence of Kagan's third principle: policies on education. Lessons have to be conceived in a mechanical way, non-responsive to students' needs or any variation at all, because of curricular requirements. If teachers were to have every single student participating, deadlines would not be met, exams would not be held when scheduled to and criteria would therefore be rendered useless.

CONCLUSION

An appropriate closure for what has been explained throughout the previous pages would oppose the very first notions this dissertation began with –those related to the purpose of education- against the subsequent concepts that have been dealt with. Thus, the idea of education as a context-dependent concept, whose design and development is based on the needs that emerge from its own framework, would be used as the background to decide whether cooperative work represents a feasible reality for nowadays' real educative environments.

Considering what I have suggested regarding that the underlying principles for our current educational paradigm arise from today's interpretation of reality, it seems a rather logical idea to say that the fundamental curricula –based upon which both syllabi and lessons are designed-, basic tool for the conception of our educative system, attempts to identify and satisfy real-life requirements. In other words, it should be safe to assume that the LOE/LOMCE frameworks are able to foretell the needs students will face upon finishing their academic training, thereby offering the necessary guidance towards the most effective possible outcome.

Consequently, by a simple syllogism an in line with that reasoning, given that the present legal provisions are greatly influenced by the notion of a competence-based model, it would appear that the final result emerging from implementing such provisions –the actual day-to-day lesson development in a real environment- represents the most effective way to accomplish the aforementioned competences. Thus, the use of teacher-centered methodologies, the focus on memorization, the premise of individual accomplishment as epitome of academic prowess and, in the particular case of EFL, the implementation of outdated decontextualized grammar-based methodologies and the absence of in-class communicative output, would be equated to the effective acquisition of competences, since all they do is follow the legal provisions' route map.

However, as of 2014, the Spanish dropout rate is still well over 20%, a percentage that represents what can be understood as a structural failure in the system's groundwork. Given that the competence-based model that the CEFR suggests for the EU member countries considers formative autonomy a fundamental skill (as suggested by the 'learning to learn competence'), it rather seems that there is no implementation of a real sense of self-accountability in the students' personalities. At least in 20% of them.

It is true that there can be a wide range of reasons behind these data concerning school dropout, and would be irresponsible simply stating that dropout is intrinsically intertwined with educational policies, but it cannot be denied that they influence the current situation to a great extent. However, the main idea behind this reasoning is to demonstrate that competences are overlooked in the real classroom. Once that situation has been accepted as the reality that empiric practice proves it is, we should question ourselves as to where does the origin for that circumstance lie.

As it has been explained to some extent in the previous pages, in nowadays socioeconomical context teachers find themselves in a particularly quicksand-ish position: while their main aim is, presumably, to have their students learn and acquire basic skills useful for their future, they have to follow a tight schedule and comply with whatever is stated by the legal framework, whichever that might be. Thus, the unfavorable environment within which educators have to play their role exempts them from the responsibility of overlooking the acquisition competences.

Consequently, it is unavoidable to consider that, out of the usual suspects, the one to blame this time is the legal apparatus. At some point between the acceptance of European standards and the ultimate design of the legal framework, the essence of what the concept of ‘competence’ means was either forsaken, or tangled in a convoluted design which paid more attention to perceiving the teacher as a quality control employee than to education itself. In the long run, the fact that competences are included in LOE/LOMCE provisions could be interpreted as an excuse, devised to disguise the Spanish standards as equivalent to those of the rest of Europe, and not as the will to provide the students with the best possible education.

Such interpretation is the reason why cooperative work, even though PI theorized about it and PII eventually proved it can be implemented successfully, is an approach as reachable as the horizon in real-life environments. Given their features in terms of assessment and success standards, LOE/LOMCE’s methodologies are so utterly opposed to cooperative work ones, it would not be misbegotten to say they are even hostile to cooperation. However, when theorizing about what education should be like, both competences and cooperation are present at all times, thus projecting the image that education today is more a matter of propaganda than the pillar upon which societal development stands.

Implications for the future

So far, it would be safe to say that the main reason why cooperative work is such a *rara avis* in schools is because there is no legal framework promoting it. Just like the way in which a lesson has to be designed in such a way that equal participation is required, and not optional, cooperation should be a requirement in order to better and faster acquire the targeted competences. But as long as the educational context is subject to the outcomes of electoral campaigns, no real change in the perspective institutions have of what education means will take place. Therefore, since no top-down evolution in the near future is in sight, perhaps it is up to the educators to make changes in their lessons, making bottom-up changes, so to speak.

Something I have learned from the designing and development of the analyzed papers –and the further implementation of some parts of them- is that, no matter how much effort teachers put in their plans, modifications are always necessary when the lessons are finally conducted. Timing is a clear example of it: the same task may be completed in half a session with group A while requiring a session and a half with group B. In the end, only the teachers' hands-on experience is what defines the contents and development of a lesson plan, of a whole course design.

Consequently, since the legal provisions seem to have banished learner-centered approaches from their dispositions, it is up to the teacher to integrate cooperative work techniques in the development of his/her lessons. Nevertheless, since such implementation cannot be fully accomplished, the task educators have to face is to complement regular, methodological lessons with non-traditional approaches and/or contents. Five minutes of cooperation out of sixty-minute lessons are not enough, but they may mark the beginning of a shift in educative trends.

And even though it might not suffice, this complementation could play a role in which, in my opinion, is one of the major challenges of teachers today: advocating for their own conception of education. A notion based on their daily work, featuring the real needs that emerge from real students, in opposition to traditional standards. Thus, the first step on the way to make learning all about the learners would be, on the one hand, understand what cooperative work is and, on the other hand, identify the obstacles standing in the process of its implementation. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

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APPENDIX