Characterization of eight graders’ social negotiation by means of project work in an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting

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This qualitative study was conducted in a public school in Bogotá – Colombia with the participation of 8 students from an 8th grade. Data was gathered through audio tape recordings, researcher field notes, students’ journals and finally a semi-structured interview; the analysis technique was the transcription of data. This paper addresses qualitative data that helped to answer the research question that directed this study: What are the main academic characteristics that emerge from eight graders’ social negotiations through an oral performance using Project Work in an EFL setting? The General objective that this study pursued was: To characterize the way students construct social negotiations through an oral performance using project work in an EFL setting. And the Specific goal was: To establish the main academic features that reveal students’ social negotiations based on project work to promote the oral language performance in the EFL setting. Data examination indicated that through Project Work activities, students developed oral interaction in EFL using city experiences. Two main academic characteristics emerged from this research: Category No 1: involvement when talking with their partners, switching meaningful communication, and Category No 2: group social negotiations: reality made possible a theoretical and practical knowledge from meaningful learning. We found that the main academic characteristics that emerge from eight students’ social negotiations are part of a rich and dynamic process in which students tend to use their skills and capacities while assisting other partners, co-construct knowledge and develop their processes of learning. In the same way, students were better able to use the foreign oral production as a result of keeping in mind both foreign language and content goals when developing the tasks assigned. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the area of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and to become a model for other teachers and institutions for the implementation and promotion of Social Negotiation and students’ reality in the academic processes as a strategy in class dynamics.

Keywords: Academic characteristics, project work, oral performance, social negotiation, students’ reality.
The idea of this research study was born when we started noticing that in the dynamic of our classes at the university there was a repetitive problem when we had to work together, in big groups, small groups or pairs. Sometimes, some of the members of the group did not help in the development of the tasks, while others undertake all the responsibility. This situation took place constantly; it was very common to hear people complaining about the difficulties to distribute the job and get to an agreement with other members of the group.

Talking and sharing ideas in different free conversations, with different people, we found that many classmates agreed with us about the fact that some people associate working together with doing less work, while others do not accept their classmates’ help, since they do not trust other peoples’ knowledge, capabilities, responsibility, and commitment. In both cases, there is evidence that some people do not know how to work together, cooperating and carrying out good and successful processes.

From here, we started wondering if this situation also occurs in other contexts such as the school. Thus, we recalled our experiences at that stage, and we found the same problem. To avoid discomfort, unconformity, as well as the fights and harm that sometimes emerge when working together, several of our teachers at school preferred not to propose these kinds of activities so frequently. Therefore, our experiences were not many.

Later on, when we were teaching in different settings—like school and universities—, we realized that many students from different schools and courses also faced problems when working with others. For some students, it was really difficult to get together with their partners to do joint work, due to a variety of reasons. Thus, we started thinking that researching this phenomenon and its implications in the students’ formative process were relevant.

Based on all the experiences and situations described above, we created a proposal which consisted in promoting the oral performance in a class for eighth graders. As a result, students had the opportunity to foster social negotiation abilities that allowed them to work together successfully, while at the same time, they practiced speaking English. The researchable issue in our study consisted in observing, analyzing, and discovering what characterized the negotiations that eighth graders performed while working together.

This study is associated with the importance to help learners appraise their emerging social negotiations in an EFL setting. On the one hand, traditionally, the English language teaching has been considered in its form, grammar and structures related to the accurate use in classroom dynamics. On the other hand, we can make the difference studying other deeper dimensions of the language such as the social negotiation. It denotes to oral language when it becomes a means of social and personal construction that puts an individual in correlation with himself/herself and with others when an opinion is expressed.

Therefore, in this qualitative study participants could carry out a self-reflective inquiry on their social situations and take part in a proposal to promote communication. Oral performance in EFL is assumed as a process based on personal experiences that provide students with sources to explore their voices. In this way, it helps individuals to express feelings, life experiences, and reflections as members of society. Thus, the research question that leads this study was: What academic characteristics emerge from eighth graders’ social negotiations through an oral performance using Project Work in an EFL setting?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical support of this study is based on three main constructs which are: Interaction, social negotiation and project work. The English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is the environment where the constructs take place.

Interaction

According to Brown (2007) and Crystal (2003) interaction is face-to-face communication with diverse and peculiar acts that involve communication like body language, silence, and people’s manners when expressing ideas while doing an activity. In this sense, the meaning of interaction is the mutual relationship that people establish as a result of the development of an activity; in other words, a cause-effect two-way relationship in which the cause is any activity that is being done, and the effect is the reciprocal relationship that is established between or among the participants. In the same vein, Lucero and Rouse (2017) understand that interaction is presented when spontaneous communication takes place from diverse topics when socializing in class.

Moore (1993) identified three types of interactions that occur in the learning environment, namely: Learner-Content Interaction, Learner-Instructor Interaction, and Learner-Learner Interaction. Following Moore’s explanations, learner-content interaction refers to those relationships that students establish with the topic of the class. For instance, how students understand the theme, how they build their perspective on it, how they talk to them about it, and what cognitive structures they use in these intellectual processes. Learner-instructor interaction refers to the connection that teachers and students create. Moore (1993) defined it as an expert/novice relationship, a
concept that we explain below. Learner-learner interaction refers to the filiations that students establish with their equals. In our study, we focus on learner-learner interaction.

In our research study, we were interested in analyzing those learner-learner interactions that result in social negotiations. That is why we focus our attention on disputational talk and exploratory talk, which are the ones in which negotiation emerges naturally and spontaneously among students. Thus, in the next part called Social Negotiation, we study how negotiation has been understood by different authors, its applications in different contexts of the sociolinguistic field, and its characteristics and approaches. The study of interaction helped us to build our conceptualization of social negotiation, which in the following section is presented.

**Social Negotiation**

According to Breen and Littlejohn (2005), three forms of negotiation are connected in this way: procedural negotiation entails interactive negotiation of meaning since the search for agreement on decisions requires the resolution of failures to understand between participants. Interactive negotiation is motivated by the wish to interpret what is said and express a particular point of view which is carried out by the personal negotiation. This interrelation can be described in reverse. So, the personal struggle to express meaning occurs on an ongoing and spontaneous way within a social environment while seeking agreement between participants about a decision about a specific work.

Breen and Littlejohn (2005) understand negotiation as the social activity where people use language to indicate their failure to understand what another person has said, this with the purpose of making that the interlocutors modify and restructure their language to make things clear so that they will be understood. Similarly, Gass and Selinker (2008) understand the negotiation of meaning or social negotiation as those instances in conversation when participants need to interrupt the flow of the conversation for both parties to understand about what the conversation is. Additionally, Vaca and Gómez (2017) understand meaning negotiation as a key element to help learners improve oral production and communicative competence.

Negotiation involves and requires the use of language and meaning to achieve the social exchange of ideas and propositions. Furthermore, Bitchener (2004) and Widdowson (1990) point out that negotiation is the continuous process of planning points of view which follow an interpretative course by adjustment and prediction. Which means that during the process of social negotiation, each one of the parts sets a path through which they expect to be guided by the making of the right decisions, they modified that path according to the emerging necessities. Also, due to the high and logical processes that social negotiations demand, it is necessary for all the participants to listen, analyze and respect carefully every single contribution that emerges when students interact.

In this sense, the Social Learning Theory proposed by Bandura (1997) emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Bandura states that learning would be extremely laborious, not to mention risky if people have to trust only on the effects of their actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, the most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from examining others, the individual forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions, this coded information serves as a guide for action. As a result, students learn to negotiate through the observation of their equals’ processes.

Duff (2002) points out that the classroom provides opportunities to create constructive learning communities in which differences are accommodated and linked, where students negotiate their identities and subject matter knowledge together through social interaction. Therefore, she makes emphasis on the fact that the classroom context is a good provision of an environment where students share, in a social way, the knowledge they have to communicate and negotiate socially through the language use. Those mentioned above help us understand social negotiation in the teaching field. In this sense, we understand this phenomenon in classrooms like the platform where students use the language as a mean to build knowledge, where students interact socially, and they exchange ideas and experiences with their classmates.

**Project Work**

Trying for accuracy when developing this research project, it was necessary to search for an appropriate tool to establish students’ experiences through oral interaction within the classroom activities. Then, Project Work illuminated the path of this study and fulfilled with the necessary characteristics to apply. In this sense, Project Work is understood from this research as the reflecting on meaning as a social and creative process, which respects the individualism. Moreover, we understand the use of Project Work as the way to facilitate students’ acquisition of knowledge working on their own experiences. In this way, Luoma (2004) declares that among different strategies, Project Work from working collaboratively increases students’ four main skills and specifically oral proficiency due to low anxiety when a group is shaped.

For that reason, as we understand Project Work, it is not only a tool with useful cognitive elements; it also promotes the construction of autonomous learners. Project Work goes beyond theory into practical activities where students can find learning meaningful through experiences. Besides, Project Work is an instrument that allows students to be active participants in the learning process, and at the same time provides learners with the opportunity to be the main makers of the learning task. According to Baker and Westrup (2003), different tasks involving collaboratively speaking projects make students participate actively and have fun. From these perspectives, we noticed that the activities developed through Project Work let students explore their skills in different fields. Then, it is decided for this inquiry to
implement Project Work approach with the purpose to be effective when implementing oral tasks.

Method

In our research study, the triangulation technique was implemented to get diverse perspectives on the same topic. In this sense, Burns (2001) and Brown (2002) declare that the key point when the researcher triangulates is to get different perspectives focused on the same topics studied. In the same train of thought, they point out that triangulation becomes the best-known form for checking validity when doing research projects. We contrasted all the instruments taken into consideration for this study, and we recognized the themes that emerged from them.

We took into account the categorization technique which, according to Merriam (1998), has three steps to follow: 1) reading of the whole instruments collected with their respective annotations, observations and comments related; 2) grouping those comments in separated lists or memos; and, 3) revise the instruments once more to corroborate the existence of those groups of aspects and compare them to those in the first list. From this revising emerged the patterns that became into categories in the study.

The qualitative research method was useful to help us to understand our students’ social and cultural contexts within which they live and the different students’ interpretations and their social components. According to that, Merriam (1998) points out that qualitative research has a main component called reality showing how it is constructed by the social interaction among individuals, and how it is interpreted and understood. This research is presented as a qualitative study since this approach is suitable to help us understand a phenomenon studied with specific population and setting (Barbour, 2008).

Participants

The study was conducted with both genders, students from a course of eight graders in a public school in Bogota. The group was formed by thirty-four students that constitute the population. For this study, the non-probabilistic research technique was implemented due to the features that involved the qualitative paradigm, for instance, the particular cases in which participation of students helped us to understand step by step the phenomena of social negotiation and the rich data collected from the focus group.

In this sense, we focused on a group of eight students due to the relevant data collected from these participants; they were five females and three males, all belonged to the morning shift with four hours of English studies on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Their ages ranged between fourteen and seventeen years old. Students belonged to the social-economical stratum one, two and three. We also recognize in the participants of our study relevant characteristics that affected or enriched the project; for example, the selfishness that affected the Project Work application and quite the opposite, the creativity that enriched all the activities proposed.

Setting

The school is located in zone nine, called Fontibón, in the southwest of Bogotá; it has three headquarters, one focused on preschool children, and operates just in the mornings, the second one that is the complement of primary and the main headquarters which operates in three shifts: morning, afternoon and overnight. The main headquarters has fifty courses of Secondary and twenty-two courses among Kindergarten and Primary school. At the moment of our study, the school had 2,500 students approximately, joining all shifts. We conducted our research in the morning shift in the main headquarters.

Instruments and procedures for data collection

All instruments in this study were designed by the researchers of this inquiry taking into consideration the review of research literature. We focus our attention on three main features established by Auerbach (2003), first to set the context of the population; second, to establish what data the researcher needs; and finally, to create instruments that help us develop theoretical constructs and form categories. Thus, qualitative data collection techniques were used as the primary research methods for this study. To obtain the data we selected four main instruments, the audiotape transcriptions, researcher field notes, students’ journals, and a semi-structured interview.

Initially, to collect information, we designed a written consent that the thirty-four students and parents signed, where each one of them accepted to be participants in the project. However, for the analysis, we collected information only from eight students. They were five females and three males. The criteria we used to select the participants’ information was that after the stage of piloting the audio tape recorder, the selected population felt comfortable and behaved naturally in front of the instrument. We decided not to use the students real names for confidentiality purposes, therefore, we created code numbers for them.

Audiotape recordings. According to Rapley (2007), the audio recording transcriptions helps the researcher notice interesting features and unique ways people interact naturally. We made six audio recordings in the class, which gave us insights about some particularities that we had to take into account when trying to get social interactions from students, behaviors, and mediations when the participants conveyed meaning when working in Project Work. This technique was useful for capture classroom interaction, students work and production.

Researchers’ field notes. Following Lankshear and Knobel (2004), field-notes provide rich accounts of observed particularities in a setting, where group structures, natural interactions, and behaviors about the participants serve to reflect deeply on the studied phenomena. With regards to the last assumption, the researcher of this study took notes while the four sessions were developed and reflected in the light of the research questions after each class. The main purpose of this instrument was to record events, thoughts, and attitudes of the participants of the study. According to Brown (2002, p.
field notes are defined as “the written records of participant observers”.

**Semi-structure interview and student’s journals.**

The former was chosen since according to Burns (2001) the researcher can talk about emerging topics in the process of getting valuable information through spontaneous conversation with participants. The latter was selected because —according to Hascher (2008)— journals help participants to write freely and describe situations originated in a setting. In our study, we took into consideration the academic categories that emerged from students represented in the journal. Both instruments provided us with valuable information about their learning process and opinions about the class activities and what were their perceptions when developing Project Work.

**Results**

In this section, we emphasize the analysis of information gathered from the participants. Also, we present the main categories that emerged from this analysis supported by some extracts taken from the instruments and other relevant data that answer the research question —What are the main academic characteristics that emerge from eight graders’ social negotiations through oral performance by means of Project Work in an EFL setting?—

We contrasted the instruments and recognized the following themes which emerged from them: actions that students perform and which they also recognize as procedures that students follow when negotiating socially, such as providing ideas, requesting information, informing, explaining/correcting/supporting ideas, disagreeing, obeying, deciding without consulting, agreeing, and ordering; behaviors they are aware of, such as comradeship, non-cooperation, discrimination, and individualism. Consequently, we obtained consecutive steps that characterize students’ Social Negotiations: These two steps were: involvement when talking with their partners, switching meaningful communication, and group social negotiations: reality made possible a theoretical and practical knowledge from meaningful learning.

**Category No 1: Involvement when talking with my partners, switching meaningful communication**

This category is about the way students made use of the language to communicate during their oral process and the language strategies that students brought up into the activities to communicate what they read from the context they live in. The category, **Involvement when talking with my partners, switching meaningful communication** regarded relevant characteristics, related to how they use language to express their point of view: how they argue, and the strategies to make their message understandable to others. Along with that, students began their subject attainment from our instructional part based on an explanation of the English vocabulary that they needed to join the topic and their perceptions of the city. Thus, they applied it in their oral presentations and journal reflections, while each topic was worked in a significant meaning keeping in mind that students used it.

In fact, we observed that students found the language-learning significant, and they included it in their speaking activities. As a result, the students who participated in the project adapted the vocabulary worked beforehand in their context. Similarly, the grammar structure did not have relevance to the message, establishing an effective communication through different agents such as code-switching, *Spanglish* use, and creation of new words. In that way, they included a lot of English vocabulary in their way to express. An example of that is the following journal excerpt:

I creo que Fontibón is a place very pretty too who offer many opportunity of study and of work opinio too who Bogotá is an place complete and tall where all person power enjoy of the who we had Bogotá (JS4F - Journal Student 4 Female).

S8: Next (he indicates on the whiteboard the word that S1 has to erase) here! (Pointing to the map)

S1: Ay, I do not know. (She continues erasing) Ay, no, change esta thing, violence, for balacera.

S8: ¡Ay! Ok, do it quickly, quickly right here! (he takes his time and shows a part of it that is dangerous). Rapid because the class is end

S1: Odio this place because it is a girlfriend and is cochino, el lugar no, jajaja.

S8: Fontibón es cochino? (she looked up in the dictionary and said:) Fontibón is dirty?

S1: No, Fontibón is limpied and yo clean my street.

S8: Yo? I, (Pointing to the teacher)

S1: Ready teacher, tenemos 28 characteristics de Fontibón en el map.

S8: List, we do this con el poquito English que manejamos.

S1: Ujum, tener paciens con we. jajaja

(ARTS1FS8M - Audio Recording Transcription Student 1 Female, Student 8 Male)

The previous information was corroborated by using the observations collected in the field notes, and audio recordings where students went beyond the structural part. Indeed, the real meaning was to communicate the experience itself. Besides, students improved the vocabulary that they adapted before, but now to included experiences. They began to find some needs later solved such as searching for the vocabulary students wanted to use, and that was not included in the lessons. Also, the students’ information clarified and showed another way to exemplify what they lived. The way they included some vocabulary apart from the one given in class work was relevant. When students were appropriated the topic, they found that the vocabulary was necessary for oral communication.

Concluding the first category, we found that students promoted language strategies to express themselves through oral language using interactive learning. Participants were involved doing tasks to make their message understandable to others when talking about personal experiences; they showed their own experiences through knowledge acquired in school and social interaction. At that moment, they acquired their strategies,
each one of them began to construct meaning from Fontibón through their perception of the world. Indeed, they defended their ideas, as we noticed before, but also acquired a critical position when some of them expressed that autonomy is needed when learning English as a foreign language. These results are similar to those presented in the study done by Dolores (2013) in which working by projects enrich the critical thinking in an EFL setting in Colombia.

Category No 2: Group social negotiations: Reality made possible a theoretical and practical knowledge from meaningful learning

This category deals with the learning experiences that students had not only in the school but also in their context and the city. In fact, participants constructed not only a perception of the city from their environment but also how they used this perception to increase an individual work that contributed to community purposes such as the group work. Also, students constructed the learning experiences in three main stages. First, through the negotiation of the project that allowed them to assume an autonomous work. Second, the inclusion of group work that allowed them to express using social interaction plus vocabulary in English, linking what they thought about a subject. And finally, Fontibón was part of the learning process as a context that gave them the experiences to make significant their learning process.

Autonomy allowed students to have direct contact with the activities. Their experiences involved them as active learners with opportunities to show what they were living and how they learned from that. We also observed that different aspects of them, like creativity and increased interest as a part of the work done during class. Here we can relate what Herazo (2010), who found in his study on the awakening of students’ responses when they feel they can participate by making decisions. In the development of the class, we faced a problem related to closer groups in the classroom that caused a competitive environment and indiscipline among students. However, we found that they go further this problem to change it for class participation, sharing critical experiences and group dynamics that promoted autonomous work. As an illustration of this, here we present the following extracts from our observations:

I could see that participation was a key element when students had to answer questions in group work while they get points for their work in competition with other classmates. I felt so comfortable looking at the students’ arrangement and gains. Students’ social meaning and respect were characteristics that emerge in the setting (TFN - Teacher’s field notes).

When students feel that they have the power of making some decisions in the class dynamics, they use learned language and look for different meanings to show what they thought (TFN - Teacher’s field notes).

In fact, at first, it was difficult to encourage students to mingle within diverse groups because they are inclined to work with those partners closer to them, which made it difficult for them to integrate others. However, the participants began to apply some suggestions that the researcher gave them in the process of negotiating with others. In that way, while they participated, we observed that group negotiation increased the autonomy of the work through their proposals, because the tasks were constructed from individual context. Then, they showed interest in expressing their experiences through the construction of the work. Also, they told about their context linking it with the learning experiences of the school. These aspects have been found by Al-Madany (2009) when she mentions that collaborative learning and language interaction is seen as a tool to promote learning significantly.

Also, we concluded in this category that learning was a construction from different agents that had relation to experiences, such as inside and outside the school. This category is very close compared to what the study done by Luo (2013), where students produced logical output building their English through meaningful contexts. In our study students used the experiences as citizens as a tool to construct teamwork, in spite of the differences. Finally, the inclusion of their reality made possible a theoretical and practical knowledge from meaningful learning.

Discussion and conclusions

The categories that have resulted from this study indicate that students have made progress as critical readers about their experiences when they need to negotiate socially; also, we realize that they recognize important social issues and take a position in front of them. In the same sense, the samples have shown that participants assume their active learning in their participation role when the dynamics of interaction are needed in real communication. Additionally, it was perceptible that students made connections between the contexts they were involved in and their lives, transposing those situations into their own experiences. Students were also able to propose answers to setbacks in some cases. In this sense, these two academic characteristics contribute to answering the research question in this study. This section presented the data samples and analysis, plus the academic characteristics we found in this qualitative study.

Regarding accomplishing the general and the specific objectives, this study shows that students are better able to use the foreign oral production as a result of keeping in mind both foreign language and content goals when developing the tasks assigned. We found that the academic characteristics that emerge from eight students’ social negotiations are part of a rich and dynamic process in which students tend to use their skills and capacities while assisting other partners, co-construct knowledge and develop their processes of learning. We discovered that two main academic characteristics that arose from this study were: involvement when talking with my partners, switching meaningful communication, and group social negotiations: Reality made possible a theoretical and practical knowledge from meaningful learning.

We found out that through the use of Project Work, students started the process of understanding social negotiation as a path to becoming aware of some
similarities and differences between points of view involved. Subsequently, students realized that Project Work allowed them to work autonomously since the beginning of the project. Students did the work, and they were aware of the social aspects that influenced their reality. Also, they showed that their personal experiences influenced all social environments around them, as well as relationships in the classroom.

Correspondingly, students included it as a setting that allowed them to make significant the social negotiation practice, using the reading of the city as a basis for being aware and produce their own points of view orally. Moreover, students arrived at comparisons and analysis about their social reality. This act of reflection provided students with skills to help them be more conscious about the conditions that surround them and how to address some setbacks they face on a daily basis. Additionally, students used language through critical thinking when they thought of the social problems they face in their community. Consequently, the students were able to express and articulate their ideas in the foreign language by decreasing the difficulties in exchanging information and interactions.

Different authors (Breen and Littlejohn, 2005; Duff, 2002; Luo, 2013; Mercer, 2000; and Moore, 1993) rely on the fact that negotiation in a social dynamic cannot be predictable or established because the ideas expressed by individuals are under the consideration of others. We agree with them. We realized through the development of our inquiry that the difficulties vary according to the needs of understanding and negotiation among partners. Additionally, the social negotiation in eighth graders was represented as a social process in their interacting performance, in this sense, the linguistic aspects were not just the focus of the class, but the meaning and construction of language according to their needs adapted to specific situations (Smith, 2001).

Consequently, students used different strategies such as drawings, new words and the use of code-switching to communicate to others their experiences. At the same time, drawings and new words complemented the comprehension of English tasks. Students invented new words to make easier the experience of communication. Besides, through the development of social negotiation the critical points of view were evidenced in the students when they constructed meaning from their experiences and at the same time they were critics of the social aspect. It was a relevant aspect when students acquired a critical position in front of what they lived and observed in their environment. As well, those approaches to the city allowed them to construct the meaning of the place they live in, and a critical analysis of the influences that the community had inside it.

Also, we consider that some recommendations based on the findings from this study to the institution are: The institutional policies must actively seek to explore language use as a core value of the school and an ongoing commitment to research in EFL. Other recommendations to the students are: It is a requirement that students perform each task with enthusiasm and creativity. What is more, students may work cooperatively with other genders and classmates instead of choosing individual work. They have to cooperate with peers to complete a task or solve a problem.

Finally, we advise for future teachers-researchers to implement and study the inclusion of students’ reality in the academic processes because it is a wide field to explore and implement other possibilities to teach in other settings. The data collected in this study also demonstrated that teacher education experiences require addressing language pedagogy from a perspective to value communication, cooperation, participation, and tolerance as main elements of learning.

References


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