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The effect of a teacher-centred and learner-centred approach on students' participation in the English classroom

Participación en clase de inglés según el enfoque centrado en el profesor o el alumnado

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Abstract

In this paper, we addressed the concept of classroom participation and the way it is affected by a traditional teacher-centred (TC) approach and a more innovative learner-centred (LC) approach which uses the principles and strategies of active learning and cooperative learning to engage students in the learning process. The study was carried out in a public secondary school in Spain with two groups of learners of English (n=54). The analysis of the number of learners on task showed that in the LC sessions learner participation increased by 20 % as compared with TC sessions. We also detected some challenges a teacher might face while implementing learner-centred sessions including the facilitation of equal participation in group work, adequate time allocation for a task, individual and group assessment, and development of learners' autonomy.

Keywords: Active learning; Cooperative learning; Group work; Learner autonomy; Classroom participation

Resumen

En este estudio, hemos abordado el concepto de participación en el aula y cómo se ve afectada por un enfoque centrado en el docente y un enfoque centrado en el alumnado que utiliza los principios y estrategias del aprendizaje activo y cooperativo para involucrar al alumnado en el proceso de aprendizaje. El estudio se llevó a cabo en una escuela pública secundaria de España con dos grupos de estudiantes de inglés (n=54). El análisis del número de aprendices que participaban en las tareas mostró que a las sesiones centradas en el alumnado la participación de los estudiantes aumentó 20% en comparación con las sesiones centradas en el docente. También detectamos algunos retos que ha supuesto implementar el enfoque basado en el alumnado. Encontramos especialmente difícil asegurar una participación equitativa en grupo, proporcionar el tiempo adecuado para las tareas, evaluar el trabajo individual y grupal y desarrollar la autonomía del alumnado.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje activo; Aprendizaje cooperativo; Trabajo en grupo; Autonomía del alumnado; Participación en el aula

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important tendencies in the educational system outlined by a number of teachers and researchers has been a paradigm shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach (Liu et al., 2006; McCombs & Miller, 2007; McCombs & Whistler, 1997; Weimer, 2002; Weinberger & McCombs, 2001, among others). In Catalan education, this process of transition in the area of teaching foreign languages started in the 1990s. In the Catalan secondary school curriculum (Currículum d'Educació Secundària Obligatòria: Àrea de Llengua, 1992) the learner was recognised as a central figure of the learning process. Since then, encouraging students' participation and motivation has been considered as one of the key goals of classroom management and teaching methodology: "L'alumne és el protagonista de l'aprenentatge i s'hi ha d'implicar de manera conscient, per la qual cosa és fonamental fomentar-li activament la motivació" (De l'escola inclusiva al sistema inclusiu, 2015, p. 10).

However, EFL classroom reality does not always match these expectations since the transition to a learner-oriented approach is not an easy process. It requires a lot of learning materials, resources, the use of new classroom management strategies and language teaching methods, as well as professional development of the teaching staff. As a result, the overall pedagogical approach to language teaching in many schools is still teacher-centred (Conti, 2004; Liu et al., 2006).

Traditionally, the teacher has been the central figure – "the one who has the knowledge and transmits that knowledge to the students, who simply memorize the information and later reproduce it on an exam – often without thinking about it" (King, 1993, p. 30). In EFL courses, this approach is usually associated with individual work, Presentation – Practice – Production (PPP) classroom procedure, numerous metalinguistic explanations, grammar drills, monotonous exercises and highly controlled practice with almost no room for creativity.

By contrast, the learner-centred approach assumes that learners are active and have unlimited potential for individual development (Liu et al., 2006). This approach places students at the centre of the learning process. They are expected to actively participate in thinking and discussing ideas, whereas the teacher's role is "to facilitate students' interaction with the material and with each other" (King, 1993, p. 30). Dupin-Bryant (2004) points out that the type of instruction associated with the learner-centred approach is "responsive, collaborative, problem-centred, and democratic in which both students and the instructor decide how, what, and when learning occurs" (p. 42). On the other hand, teacher-centred instruction is

formal, controlled, and autocratic, and the instructor directs how, what, and when students learn.

The attempts to define and promote a learner-centred approach were made in the 1980s. Conti (1985) developed the Principles of Adult Learning Scale (PALS) in order to assess teachers' teaching style. PALS is a 44-item questionnaire requiring respondents to indicate the frequency with which they practice the behaviours described on the scale from 0 to 5 (0=Never, 5=Always). A higher score indicates a more learner-centred approach. The PALS assessment is formed by seven factors: 1) learner-centred activities; 2) personalizing instruction; 3) relating to experience; 4) assessing student needs; 5) climate building; 6) participation in the learning process, and 7) flexibility for personal development.

An important step in the development of a learner-centred approach was an elaboration of fourteen learner-centred psychological principles by the American Psychological Association (1997). These principles can be developed in the classroom through a variety of learner-centred activities which help to promote active learning and cooperative learning.

In active learning, students are "getting involved with the information presented, really thinking about it (analysing, synthesizing, evaluating) rather than just passively receiving it and memorizing it" (King, 1993, p. 31). Active learning is based on a number of principles advocated by different psychologists and linguists. Some of them are:

1. Learning through meaningful reception by Ausubel (1968) who emphasised the previous knowledge and considered it a key factor in learning.
2. Learning through discovery by Bruner (1961) when students learn through discovery of ideas with the teacher's help.
3. Social constructivism by Vygotsky (1978) who claimed that knowledge was constructed through interaction with others and highlighted the importance of collaborative group work.

Active learning can be enhanced through various activities, such as think-pair-share (students individually think for a moment about a question, then pair up with a classmate to discuss their thoughts), generating examples, concept mapping, predicting, constructing tables or graphs, pair summarising, etc.

Cooperative learning procedures commonly used in classroom settings are jigsaw, debates and project work. In jigsaw activities each member of the group

has a piece of information and has to share it with other participants in order to find a solution to the problem. In a debate, students are assigned to opposing sides of a controversial issue and have to defend and justify their point of view. Finally, in project work students are asked to work together in small teams to investigate a topic and share their results with the whole class.

The main characteristics of a teacher-centred and a learner-centred approach are summarised in table 1.

Table 1. Teacher-centred vs. learner-centred approach

	Teacher-centred approach	Learner-centred approach
Teacher's role	The teacher is the central figure. He/she directs how, what, and when students learn.	The teacher's role is to design appropriate materials and to facilitate students' interaction with the materials and with each other.
Students' role	Students are passive participants. They memorise the information and later reproduce it on an exam.	Students are at the centre of the learning process and they take an active role in their own learning.
Type of instruction	Formal, controlled and autocratic.	Responsive, collaborative, problem-centred and democratic.
Type of activities	PPP, grammar explanations, drills, and highly controlled practice.	Active learning (generating examples, concept mapping, predicting, constructing tables/graphs, summarising, peer questioning, etc.). Cooperative learning (jigsaw, debates, project work and other group activities).
Type of materials	Standardised, provided by textbooks. Following a one-size-fits-all teaching approach.	Challenging and thought-provoking, often designed for a specific group of learners to suit their individual needs.

The importance of learner participation, engagement and motivation has been widely discussed from the perspective of educational psychology, cognitive science and other related areas. The Innovative Learning Environments project has analysed how young people learn and which conditions and dynamics facilitate better learning. On the basis of this research, seven principles of learning which should guide the educational practice of the 21st century have been proposed (Dumont et al., 2010). They are as follows:

1. Learners at the centre.

2. The social nature of learning.

3. Emotions are integral to learning.

4. Recognising individual differences.

5. Stretching all students.

6. Assessment for learning.

7. Building horizontal connections.

Understanding and implementing these principles is an essential part of developing teaching competences and facilitating the paradigm shift towards more learner-oriented education. The topic of the current study involves the first three principles to a greater extent. The *Learners at the centre* principle is the cornerstone of the learner-centred approach applied in the second part of this study. Principle 2, *The social nature of learning*, is taken into account since we encourage cooperative learning and aim to observe how it affects learner participation in the task performance. Finally, the third principle, *Emotions are integral to learning*, is directly related to the central concept of this work, that is, learner participation as one of the indicators of learners' engagement and motivation.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The learner-centred approach is regarded as an effective way of improving both students' academic and non-academic outcomes (Liu et al., 2006). One of the studies that support this claim was carried out by Weinberger and McCombs (2001) with a participation of 4203 upper elementary and middle school students in the USA. The researchers found that in a learner-centred classroom there was an improvement of students' academic performance, motivation to learn, school attendance and behaviour.

The current study focuses on the concept of classroom participation as one of the desired outcomes of the learner-centred approach. In general, student participation in the classroom can take verbal and nonverbal forms (Lee, 2005). The latter includes, for example, episodes when students nod their head, raise their hands, or establish and maintain eye contact. However, in second language acquisition (SLA) research, classroom participation has generally been equated with learners' L2 verbal activity since it is the most observable and quantifiable L2-related behaviour (Bernales, 2016). It has also been associated with the concept of willingness to communicate and motivation.

Willingness to communicate in the L2 was defined by MacIntyre et al. (1998) as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). As Bernales (2016) points out, MacIntyre's model solely focuses on the importance of interaction in the L2 for language development and omits other forms of communication and participation, for example those involving learners' L1. From this point of view, the concept of classroom participation is wider since it includes both L1 and L2-related verbal behaviour.

Both willingness to communicate and participation are related to learner motivation. Its importance for learning process has been widely acknowledged and emphasised in numerous SLA studies (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Williams & Burden, 1997, among many others). As Dörnyei (2005) points out, motivation "provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process" (p. 65). Various theoretical perspectives on the nature and role of motivation, as well as factors affecting it, have been advanced over the years, but this issue lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, we did bear it in mind considering classroom participation as one of indicators of learner motivation.

Broadly speaking, participation in classroom can be defined as the acts of involvement in the class activities. It can take different forms, from asking questions and interacting to taking notes and listening to the teacher. Liu (2001) distinguished four forms of student involvement in the classroom: silent observation, marginal interaction, participation in the circumstances, and full integration. During marginal interaction and silent observation, students act more as listeners and tend to avoid oral participation in the classroom. Participation in the circumstances is usually constrained by socio-cultural, cognitive, affective, or linguistic factors which result in less interaction. Full integration is the most active form of students' engagement. They participate in the class discussion and activities in a spontaneous and natural way. The current study focused on this kind of classroom behaviour.

Active classroom participation is a desired outcome of the teaching intervention, since it facilitates both acquisition of knowledge and development of oral communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving. This assumption has been supported by a number of empirical studies (Murray & Lang, 1997; Mulongo, 2013). Murray and Lang (1997) carried out two studies, one observational and one experimental, in order to measure the impact of active student participation on learning and problem-solving skills. Participants of both studies (n=59) were enrolled in an undergraduate Educational Psychology course. In the first study, two

trained observers attended all the sessions and independently recorded all instances of participation by each student, including questions, comments, and contribution to small-group discussions. Based on these observations, each observer assigned each student a participation score ranging from 0 to 100. At the end of the term, students performed a multiple-choice test and wrote four essays. The researchers found that there was a statistically significant correlation between amount of classroom participation and exam performance.

In the second study reported by Murray and Lang (1997), classroom participation was experimentally manipulated. Specifically, 20 topic areas included in the Psychology curriculum were randomly assigned to be taught using an active participation method (small-group discussions, question-answer dialogue, case study, debates), while 54 topics were taught by a 'lecture only' method. The results obtained in the second study were similar to those reported in the first study. Mean student performance was better for topics taught by promoting active student participation than for topics taught by lecture.

In a more recent study which was conducted in a different classroom setting (secondary schools of Kenya), Mulongo (2013) also provided evidence of a positive impact of active learning and active student participation on learners' achievements and their attitudes towards the subject. 176 learners and 44 teachers of different subjects participated in his study. The results revealed that students taught with the implementation of an active learning methodology participated more actively in the learning process compared with their counterparts who had more teacher-centred sessions (90% against 75%). In addition, the academic performance was better and learners' attitude towards lessons was more positive in groups who received learner-centred treatment as compared with other groups who were taught in a more teacher-centred way.

Therefore, it has been demonstrated that active learners' participation is beneficial for their academic achievements and that implementing a learner-centred approach and active learning strategies can promote student participation in the classroom. However, none of these studies mentioned how challenging teaching in the learner-centred classroom might be. The current study focused both on the benefits and drawbacks of this approach in the real classroom context.

THE CURRENT STUDY DESIGN

Goals of the study

The goal of this study was to analyse the impact of two approaches – learner-centred and teacher-centred – on students' engagement in order to find out to what extent these two approaches enhance learners' involvement in the learning process. More specifically, we aimed (1) to observe how the students' level of participation changes in teacher-centred and learner-centred lessons and (2) to detect challenges the teacher might face when implementing a learner-centred approach in a public secondary school.

Educational context and procedure

The study was carried out in a public secondary school in Barcelona (Spain) under real classroom conditions as a part of EFL course. Two groups of learners (n=41, 19 males and 22 females) participated in this study. They were Year 3 students (3º de ESO in Spanish secondary education system). Further, we will refer to them as 3C (n=17) and 3D (n=24). All the participants were 14–15 years old. All of them spoke Spanish as their L1, and some of them were bilingual Catalan and Spanish speakers. According to the rules of group assignment applied in the school where the study was carried out, these two groups of learners were the lowest Year 3 groups in terms of their academic achievements and the most challenging ones in terms of behaviour (especially group 3D).

The teaching intervention was designed to analyse learners' participation in teacher-centred and learner-centred sessions. For this reason, there was a clear differentiation between the two types of sessions. However, they were not isolated sessions. As the sequence progressed, students built their knowledge on what they had learnt in previous days. All lessons were connected by a common goal that students had to achieve at the end: to prepare a proposal with a design of a new school. We designed a didactic sequence in order to find out what learner expectations towards school would be and to provide them with the opportunity to have a say on a topic that they were familiar with. The final task of the sequence was as follows: "The European Union has announced a new initiative to create an international school designed by students. The project is called "School of the future". In groups, you will prepare a proposal with a design of a new school and a school rulebook. You will present the schools to the rest of the class in order to choose the best proposal which will be submitted to the European competition."

Initial observations showed that the teacher-centred approach predominated in English lessons, so that was the starting point of the intervention. The intervention was six hours in total, with the first three hours being mostly teacher-centred (phase 1) and the other three being mostly learner-centred (phase 2).

The first three sessions were a presentation of the topic and the task, followed by an introduction to the vocabulary and expressions learners would need in later sessions. Students were exposed to meaningful input and familiarised with the language through a number of reading and listening comprehension activities.

The following three sessions were for students to design their ideal school. In groups of four, students had to choose the facilities that their ideal school would have, to draw a plan of their school organization with all the facilities, and to write a description of their school. The final step was groups' self-assessment using a rubric and a checklist. The key elements of two types of sessions are summarised in table 2.

Methodology

During six sessions, the level of student participation was measured by calculating a number of learners on task. By being on task we refer to the episodes when students were actually doing what they were supposed to be doing after receiving the instructions and necessary materials. We included both "silent" periods of work (for example, when learners were doing a grammar exercise individually) and moments of peer interaction and Student-Teacher interaction. For each session, two observers filled in an observation form (see Appendix 1).

During the first phase, all the activities involved individual work (translation, gap-filling, answering closed comprehension questions, etc.) and were quite short. It took students about 5–8 minutes to finish each of them. Therefore, the number of students on task was counted once for each activity. The observers walked around the classroom and took notes two-three minutes after the teacher's instructions had been given.

For the second phase, a slightly different observation form was used due to the nature of the tasks. In this case, students worked in groups performing longer tasks (30–35 minutes), so they were observed at different stages of the same task. In particular, we measured their participation just after the instructions had been given (Minute 1), and then at Minute 5, 15, and 25 of their work on task.

Table 2. Session organization in the current study

	Phase 1: Teacher-centred sessions	Phase 2: Learner-centred sessions
Teacher's role	The sessions revolved around what the teacher did. The teacher stood mostly in the front and led the lessons, asking some direct questions to the students to test their knowledge. When the students were doing the activities, the teacher monitored unobtrusively and clarified any doubts the students had.	The teacher acted as a guide throughout the sessions, helping the students with their tasks, actively monitoring them and asking them thought-provoking questions to encourage their learning.
Learners' role	The learners received the information in a passive way. They watched videos, listened to the teacher and worked on the activities that they were told to do. On occasions, they answered questions about language.	The learners had an active role working in groups to design and describe their ideal school.
Type of instruction	The instruction was formal and autocratic. Students had little say on what they were learning. Most of the time, there was no room for collaborative work.	The teacher and the students collaborated to reach their goals. Each group of students worked at their own pace.
Type of activities	The activities were given to the students after the teacher's explanation and they were aimed at checking the students' understanding of it. They were short and left little room for creativity: translation, gap-filling, closed comprehension questions, word transformation, controlled grammar practice, etc.	Students worked in groups to reach a common goal, which was designing their ideal school. They had to create its physical distribution as well as a detailed description of it. This activity allowed students to think for themselves and be creative, while also learning to make compromises with the group, manage time, be responsible and work autonomously.
Type of materials	Materials in teacher-centred lessons are usually standardised books whereas materials were specifically designed from scratch for this study. However, they resembled standard books in the closed nature of the activities and the focus on language.	Materials for these sessions were mainly models of descriptions which served as a guide and did not in any case restrict the students' creativity. Students also had a self-assessment sheet to reflect on their own process.

As mentioned above, our study aimed at answering two questions. In order to compare the participation in the teacher-centred and learner-centred phases, we calculated the average participation for each session in phase 1 (the mean of however number of activities were in that session) and took the results for Minute 5 in the second phase sessions. Our second goal required to pay closer attention to the implementation of the learner-centred approach and to compare student participation at different stages of task performance in the second phase. The obtained results will be discussed in the following section.

RESULTS

Learner participation in the teacher-centred and learner-centred sessions

First, we calculated and analysed the level of student participation in each session. The results are presented in figure 1 and figure 2.

Figure 1. Number of students on task in 3C

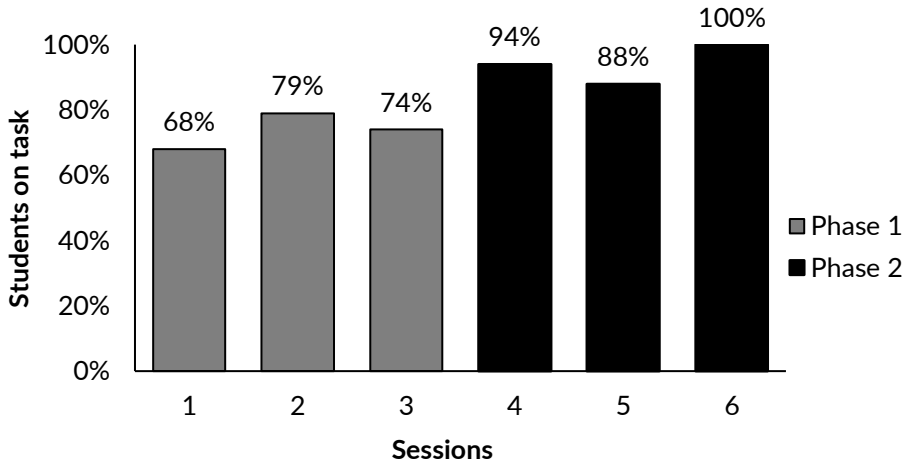
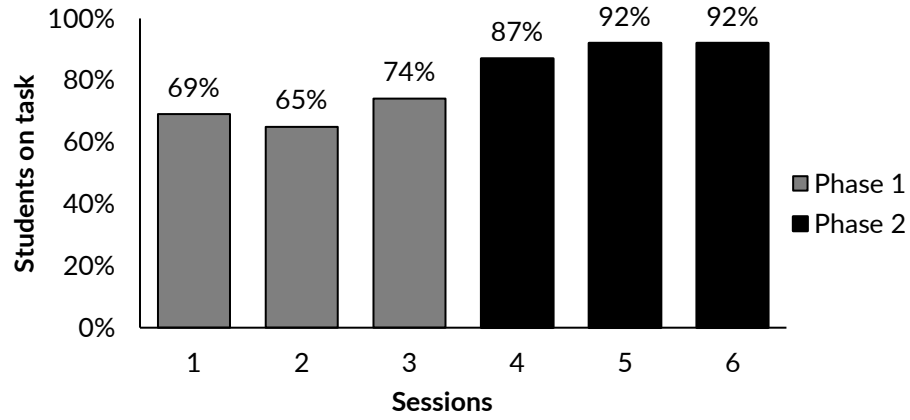


Figure 2. Number of students on task in 3D



The graphs show an increase of participation in all three sessions of phase 2 (learner-centred) in both groups as compared to phase 1 (teacher-centred). Although there are minor differences between different sessions of each phase, it is clear that the three sessions in the learner-centred phase had, on average, a higher number of students on task than the teacher-centred sessions.

The average participation of 3C went from a rough 74% to 94%, increasing by 20%, and 3D went from 69% to 90%, which is a 21% increase. Despite the average participation of 3C being higher than 3D in terms of total number of students on task, the data shows how that number grew in a similar manner in the two groups, that being a rough 20%.

Challenges of the learner-centred approach

Our second goal was to detect challenges the teacher might face when implementing a learner-centred approach in the context of a public secondary school. The analysis of observation forms for the second phase showed that learners' participation in terms of being on task was different at different points in time throughout three learner-centred sessions. The results for the two groups are presented in table 3 and visually displayed in figures 3 and 4.

Table 3. Student participation in the learner-centred sessions

Time	3C			3D		
	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6
Minute 1	76%	81%	71%	17%	42%	67%
Minute 5	94%	94%	100%	87%	92%	92%
Minute 15	100%	94%	88%	91%	96%	83%
Minute 25	88%	94%	82%	91%	79%	37%

Figure 3. Dynamic of student participation in the learner-centred sessions: 3C

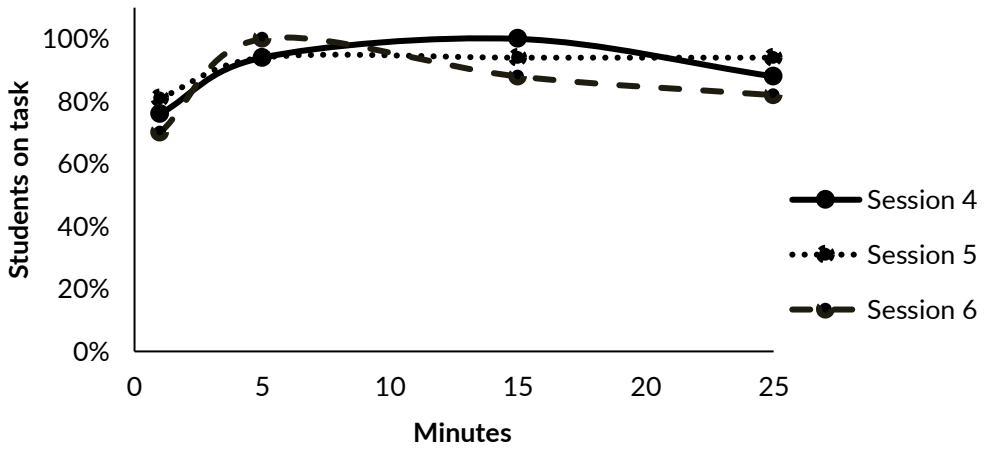
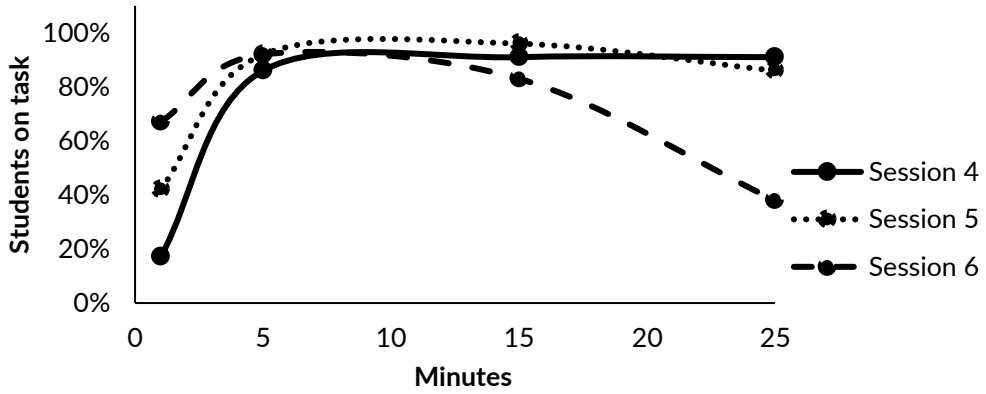


Figure 4. Dynamic of student participation in the learner-centred sessions: 3D



The graphs show that at Minute 1 (just after the teacher had finished giving the instructions) the participation was the lowest in both groups: on average, in the three sessions 76% of students in 3C and 42% of students in 3D were on task. There could be two factors that caused a low participation at the very beginning. Firstly, some of the learners did not pay enough attention to the instructions and did not know what they had to do. Only after the teacher had repeated the instructions to those students who were not on task, they started working. That was the case for both groups.

Secondly, the late start observed in 3D, especially during the first leaner-centred session (Session 4 in the whole sequence), could be related to the approach to group formation. There are three main ways of dividing students into groups: 1) random group formation using some criteria such as the alphabetic order of students' names or special ICT resources; 2) group formation controlled by the teacher, and 3) group formation based on students' decision when they choose who they will work with on their own. In this study, the teacher used the ICT tool provided at http://www.superteachertools.us/ to form groups randomly. The advantage of this approach is that it often results in the grouping of students who do not usually work together, and, therefore, it can be an enriching experience. However, there were some problems with this approach in 3D. Some students were not happy with the group assignment; they tried to protest and asked to change the group. For this reason, they were not on task when the group work started. It took some time to convince them and engage them with the task, which resulted in a very low (17%) participation at that initial stage of task performance in this group. In 3C, on the contrary, we did not have to handle behavioural issues, and their participation was considerably higher than in 3D (76% of students on task). Between-group differences will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

At Minute 5 and Minute 15 all the groups were on task; however, not all the students participated actively in the group work as illustrated in figures 3 and 4. We observed that in three sessions on average 5% of students in 3C and around 10% of students in 3D did not do anything and distracted their peers by chatting. This was not only our external observation. There were explicit complaints of those members of the group who did all the work, while others made no effort to contribute. This unequal participation was also reflected in self-assessment sheets (see Appendix 2) filled in by each group after completing the task at the end of Session 6. Students were asked to give a mark from 1 to 4 to each member of the group according to their level of participation and justify it by explaining in what way each member of the group contributed to the elaboration of the final product. In group 3C, which was divided into four working groups, the mean mark was 3,4 (out of 4), whereas in 3D with six groups working on task the mean was 2,8. In general, the process of group self-assessment went smoothly. It didn't take them long to come to an agreement about the marks. However, the teacher had to insist on the importance of filling in the second part of the rubric (justification) which some groups ignored.

Finally, five minutes before the work had to be finished (Minute 25), learner participation decreased, especially in 3D in their last session (Session 6) when only 37% of students were on task. It could be explained by individual differences. Since all learners have a different pace of work, some of them finished earlier than others. Another reason could be the fact that students had more time than they needed to accomplish the task, meaning that there were some problems with time allocation for this task.

After finishing the teaching intervention, the teacher had to handle another challenging task – assessment. Two rubrics were used for this purpose: the group self-assessment rubric discussed above and the rubric for the teacher. Designing a valid rubric for assessing the results of the group work is not an easy task because different factors have to be taken into account: a significant variety of learners' final products both in terms of content and language, a different level of individual contributions, and the need to include learners' point of view (self-assessment and peer assessment), among others. The rubric used in this study included the following criteria: creativity, lexical and syntactic complexity, accuracy, completeness, and group work. The mark for group work was based on the results of group self-assessment and could differ for different members of the same group.

All in all, the main challenges the teacher had to deal with while implementing learner-centred sessions were the following:

- drawbacks to the random approach to group formation
- unequal participation of different members of the group
- time allocation for a task taking into account learners' individual differences
- lack of learners' preparation to assume a high level of autonomy and responsibility for their own learning implied by the learner-centred approach
- assessment of both individual and group learning.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we addressed the concept of classroom participation and the way it is affected by the teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches. The obtained data on the number of students on task showed an increase of participation in the learner-centred phase as compared with the teacher-centred phase. The average participation increased by 20% with more than 90% of learners being on task during the learner-centred sessions. Student participation is directly related to their motivation (Bernales, 2016, Liu et al., 2006), and, therefore, it is an important non-academic outcome of the learning process which can be achieved through active learning and cooperative learning.

These results are in line with the previous research findings reported earlier. Mulongo (2013) found that the participation of students taught in a learner-centred way was 15% higher than in groups who had more teacher-centred sessions. Weinberger and McCombs (2001) reported that in a learner-centred classroom students' motivation and other academic and non-academic outcomes improved.

It is important to keep in mind that the increased on-task participation in the second phase of the current study could result from a number of factors, not only from the implementation of a different approach. Among these factors it is worth mentioning the organization of the implemented didactic sequence. The learner-centred sessions came after the teacher-centred ones, which could have an effect on later group work and student participation. The three teacher-centred lessons were preparatory and provided learners with necessary vocabulary (e.g., school facilities and adjectives to describe them) and gave them some ideas for their own school designs. It could facilitate their more active participation in the following sessions, along with more creative and open nature of the tasks in phase 2.

However, some problems and challenges associated with this approach were detected. Since it emphasises the importance of cooperative learning and group work, it has some drawbacks that the latter entails. We observed a large discrepancy in participation between different group members, on the one hand, and detected between-group differences, on the other hand. Unequal participation as one of the major downsides of group work (and not only in the learning environment) has been discussed in social psychology and education over the last 40 years (Petty et al., 1980). Latané et al. (1979) used the term "social loafing" in order to describe a tendency to exert less effort on a task when working as part of a cooperative group than when working on one's own. Social loafing resulted in situations that we observed during group work when two or three students in each group assumed the main workload, whilst other members barely contributed to the final outcome.

Additionally, participation was not equal in two groups. In 3C all three sessions started with 71–81% of the students participating, whereas in 3D the number of students on task at Minute 1, although increasing over the three sessions (17% -> 42% -> 67%), was still much lower. The origin of between-group differences is likely to be found in different classroom environment within each group. As mentioned above, the most disruptive students and those with the lowest academic achievement were assigned to group 3D. Therefore, personal conflicts and arguments appear to be quite common in this group. The random approach to group formation resulted in unwillingness to work together and negative emotions expressed by some students towards other members of the group, which affected their participation at the initial stage of work. Taken together, these findings might mean that although the learner-centred approach can increase the overall participation, in some cases more teacher's control is needed.

One of the ways to improve this situation is to assign roles to each member of the group (for example, a timekeeper, a resource manager, a recorder, a presenter, a group leader, a designer, a researcher, etc.) so that everyone can feel responsible for their part of work and participate more actively in the common progress. At some point it is also important to let students decide who they will work with.

Another challenge was a calculation of time needed to perform a task taking into account learners' individual differences and different pace of work. For activities that are typical for teacher-centred lessons it is quite easy to predict the time learners might need to finish the activity, and those who work faster can just do one or two additional exercises in the textbook. However, the learner-centred

approach promotes open activities which boost imagination, creativity and critical thinking, and it is more difficult to establish time limits for their accomplishment. A possible solution could include dividing these tasks into smaller chunks or steps.

Additionally, it is important to highlight the increased difficulty of assessment in the learner-centred approach. Learners are expected to play an active role in the process of self-assessment and peer-assessment, and their voices have to be taken into account. The teacher has to evaluate the process (teamwork skills and group dynamics) as well as the product, and individual contributions as well as group learning. Group grades can hide significant differences in learning, and finding out which team members did and did not contribute to the group can be difficult.

Finally, the learner-centred approach implies that learners have to be prepared to assume a high level of autonomy and responsibility for their own learning. In other words, they have to learn how to learn, and it takes time. This means that the transition from the teacher-centred to the learner-centred approach cannot happen immediately, it has to be a gradual process, with some intermediate stage.

These conclusions should be interpreted taking into account some limitations of this study. The most significant one is that the size of the sample is not large enough to make any generalisations or extrapolations to other contexts. Besides, the results are fairly limited by the observation method that was used and by the study's one-sided point of view, since the study is lacking the perspective of the learners. Finally, this study has shown how learner-centred lessons have increased participation in a particular group of learners over a short period of time (6 sessions). However, it would be interesting to see the long-term results of this change of approach. Further research on this issue could show to what extent learner-centred approaches actually improve academic performance in a context like the one described in this study. Additionally, it would be interesting to analyse more diverse groupings to have a more accurate understanding of how it affects learners' participation in tasks.

APPENDIX 1. OBSERVATION FORMS

1A: Observation form for phase 1

Group: ___			
Session	**Task**	**SS who are on task**	**Comments**
Session 1		(SS on task) / (Total number of SS)	
Session 2			
Session 3			

1B: Observation form for phase 2

Group _____				
Timing	**Session 4**	**Session 5**	**Session 6**	**Comments**
1 min.	(SS on task) / (Total number of SS)			
5 min.				
15 min.				
25 min.				

APPENDIX 2. GROUP SELF-ASSESSMENT SHEET

Names:	Date:

SCHOOL DESIGN CHECKLIST

	Yes	No
School name		
Location		
Facilities		
Materials		
What makes your school special		
School plan		

GROUP SELF-ASSESSMENT

	1 (No)	2	3	4 (Yes)
We have made decisions together				
Participation				
Student 1 (name):				
Student 2 (name):				
Student 3 (name):				
Student 4 (name):				

Work distribution in the group:

Student 1 (name): _____

Student 2 (name): _____

Student 3 (name): _____

Student 4 (name): _____

Things to improve: _____

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