Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

This is the **published version** of the bachelor thesis:

Rey Vitó, Laura del; Bernaus, Mercè, tut. Cooperative learning : learning to cooperate, cooperating to learn. 2010.

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Màster oficial en formació del professorat d'educació secundària obligatòria i batxillerat, formació professional i ensenyaments d'idiomes

Especialitat d'Anglès

UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA

COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Learning to cooperate, cooperating to learn

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Research project

June 2010

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to Mercè Bernaus for her continued support and encouragement throughout this course and for being an excellent teacher who has been constantly transmitting me her passion for teaching. It has been a pleasure to work with such a wonderful professional.

I am also very indebted to my mentor Salvador Orquín for opening me the doors of his classrooms. Thanks for all the useful advices and for guiding me during my Practical stages.

Thanks to all the students of Emily Bronte high school who have been the soul of this project and whose energy and enthusiasm have helped me to carry out this task.

I would like to acknowledge my Master' teachers for sharing their priceless knowledge with all of us and for creating such a warm atmosphere.

Finally, especial thanks to my Master's colleagues, for helping and supporting me in and out the university and especially for being always available when I needed their support. This experience would have not been possible without them since they have made this year so much easier and enjoyable.

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ABSTRACT

This research project is an attempt to give arguments in favour of using cooperative learning activities in FL classrooms as an effective approach to learning.

The arguments offered are presented from two different perspectives: the first one is based on the empirical study of three students working together to achieve a common goal. The second one is a compilation of the trainee teacher's experiences during her practicum periods in a high school regarding group work. This part is illustrated by some examples that emphasize that cooperative learning can facilitate learning, promote socialisation and increase students' self-esteem.

Key words: cooperative learning, group work, interaction, exploratory talk, role

RESUM

Aquest treball de recerca intenta donar arguments a favor de l'ús d'activitats d'aprenentatge cooperatiu a les classes de llengua estrangera atès que és un mètode efectiu d'aprenentatge.

Els arguments es presenten des de dues perspectives diferents: la primera està basada en l'estudi empíric d'un trio d'estudiants treballant de forma cooperativa per aconseguir un objectiu comú. La segona és una compilació de les experiències de la professora durant el seu període de pràctiques en un institut. Aquesta última part està il·lustrada amb alguns exemples que emfatitzen que l'aprenentatge cooperatiu pot facilitar l'aprenentatge, promoure la socialització i incrementar l'autoestima dels estudiants.

Paraules clau: aprenentatge cooperatiu, treball en grup, interacció, conversa exploratòria, rol

0. INTRODUCTION

The present dissertation focuses on cooperative learning since this new pedagogical approach has proved to be a stimulating and effective strategy to foster participation in class and, therefore, provides learning opportunities for students. The aim of this dissertation is to gain insight into the benefits of this new approach.

The author of this dissertation is at the same time the student-teacher and the researcher of the studies carried out throughout this project.

There are two focus of observation; the first one is the empirical study of three 1st ESO students working together in a cooperative activity. Their performance was recorded and transcribed and some questions were posed which mainly focus on the role of the teacher and the students. Some references to the literature were added and the results were illustrated with extracts from the transcription. Finally, some conclusions were drawn from the study.

The second focus of observation is the student-teacher's experiences during her practical periods in a high school regarding cooperative learning. Her progress and evolution can be measured through her reflections but also from the literature she has been reading in order to better understand some of the topics. At the end, some reflections on cooperative activities she has implemented are added.

This dissertation is organized as follows: in section 1, the research context has been described in order to get a general idea about the high school's identity. In section 2, the objectives and research questions have been pointed out. There are two main questions based on cooperative learning which will be answered along the dissertation. Section 3 is devoted to explain the methodology used to develop this research project. In section 4, the concept of cooperative learning is explained and some empirical research on the topic has been done. This part includes the analysis of 3'7'' video regarding a group work activity and some conclusions are drawn at the end. Section 5 is a collection of the student-teacher's experiences and reflections on her Practicum I and II. Section 6 contains the conclusions of this dissertation. The conclusions are based on both sections mentioned above (4 and 5). Some suggestions for further research are also included. Finally, in section 8, all the annexes regarding the different sections are added.

1. CONTEXT

Emily Bronte high school is located in the centre of a city in Vallès Occidental, where classes of ESO, Batxillerat and some Professional Training courses are implemented. In Emily Bronte high school, there are 110 teachers and over 1.100 students attend it. It is important to mention that most of the students who attend this centre come from high/middle-class families. However, only a 25% of the students are newcomers and live in the other side of the city, in a working class neighbourhood due to their unfavourable socio-economic circumstances. The most spoken language in this school is Catalan since most of the students are autochthons. This data is highly important since it helps to get an idea of the high school's identity and culture. Although a high school is sometimes a complex place, in Emily Bronte, students and teachers are concerned on the importance of creating a relaxed and warm atmosphere.

After having spent two months in that Secondary school, the trainee teacher can assert that this high school has good measures to cover all students' needs, giving especial attention to diversity.

2. GLOBAL OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

The main objective of this dissertation is to describe the benefits and drawbacks of using cooperative learning activities in EFL classrooms. Some studies have proved that cooperative learning activities offer more learning opportunities than traditional methods of teaching. However, some teachers are still quite reluctant to use them in their classrooms.

As mentioned above, this dissertation is focused from two different points of view. The first is carried out from the researcher's point of view. There are two main questions that she will try to answer according to the excerpt she has transcribed and analysed.

- How is communication and participation achieved among students and the teacher in this cooperative activity?

- Which guiding strategies does the teacher use in cooperative activities?

The second part of this dissertation is from the student-teacher's point of view. Some experiences regarding cooperative learning activities will be explained.

This research project may be interesting for different reasons. Firstly, it is especially interesting for the trainee teacher/researcher since it will allow her to explore on her way of teaching and, therefore, it will allow her to become better at teaching and at reflecting on her own work. On the other hand, this project may also be interesting for FL teachers because it offers new strategies in order to change the traditional way of teaching.

3. METHODOLOGY

This section is devoted to describe the research methodology used in order to carry out this dissertation. The process of collecting data as well as the treatment and analysis of it will also be explained in this section.

3.1. The process of collecting data

To start with, it is important to mention that this dissertation is based on the analysis of 1st ESO students from a qualitative and ethnographic approach since the classroom is the natural focus of observation. With the ethnographic approach, the researcher examines classroom language and interaction in its context, with no preconceived ideas, that is to say, the researcher describes naturally occurring events in the classroom from the perspective of the participants (Tsui, 1995).

Thus, the main goal of the present dissertation is to get close to the reality of the classroom and to describe the nature of those relevant elements in order to obtain empirical and natural data (not elicited in artificial ways).

In order to obtain natural data, it is important to emphasize that the researcher became part of the community studied since she was the teacher who implemented most of the activities to that group. This fact is especially important since it helped her to get familiarized with all the students so they could also feel comfortable with her presence.

Moreover, another relevant aspect that provided her with real data is that she recorded all her sessions from the beginning, so students immediately got used to it.

Finally, during the practical stages, the researcher also carried out some brief analysis and reflections in her personal journal after implementing each session in order to help her to improve as a teacher.

3.2. Data

The data used to develop this project is a collection of the audiovisual recordings, student-teacher's journal, mentor's advices, students' productions and photos which have been used to fulfil, analyse and illustrate some sections of this dissertation.

It is necessary to emphasize the importance of the videos as the major source of collecting data, since apart from the oral discourse, nonverbal communication has also been analysed. This advantage has allowed the researcher to make an accurate analysis of the selected material.

3.3.   Selection and treatment procedure of data

Since this dissertation is divided into two main parts (section 4 and 5), it is necessary to explain how data has been processed in each one of them.

In section 4, regarding the transcript[1] of the vignette which has a length of 3'7'', the researcher used some transcription symbols[2] in order to highlight some important features of the interaction, such as pauses, overlaps, rising intonation, etc. The right column in the transcription shows the non-verbal actions that have been relevant for the analysis.

It is also important to mention that the privacy of the participants in the conversation has been respected, as all the names have been changed.

In section 5, the researcher refers to her expectations before she started her experience in the teaching field in order to reflect on what she has achieved once the Master course has finished. This part is a collection of thoughts, reflections and experiences from the trainee teacher's point of view. Some of the comments are accompanied by some pieces of the teacher's journal, students' work, pictures, etc. Moreover, the final section is aimed at her experiences with cooperative activities that she carried out during her stage at the high school.

3.4. Data analysis procedure

As it has been previously explained, the teacher's reflections on collaborative learning that she has experienced as well as analysed during her practical stages have been the starting point of this research project. This section also includes an appraisal about the

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[1] See annex 8.1.1. to see the whole transcript
[2] See annex 8.1.2. to see the transcription symbols

student-teacher's improvements during her Practicum experience, that is why, it has been written in 1st person.

Section 4 of this dissertation focuses on the interaction among three students and the teacher during the execution of a cooperative activity. The interactions among the participants were transcribed and analysed turn-by-turn. This part has been analysed from the point of view of *Conversation Analysis* (CA).

Conversational analysis is the tool which has allowed the researcher to find traces in the students' interactions which indicate the benefits of using cooperative activities. As Seedhouse (2005) suggests, CA is able to explicate the reflexive relationship between pedagogy and interaction and, therefore, how learning takes place through the interaction.

CA analysis not only demonstrates *what* understandings the interactants display to each other, but also *how* they do so, that is to say, how the interaction is organized by analyzing turn by turn, to interpret the verbal and nonverbal communication that was going on during the minutes of the video.

However, in order to give answer to the questions proposed and also to ensure its reliability, the researcher has used a theoretical framework from where she has supported her theories regarding cooperative work.

4. EMPIRICAL STUDY: COOPERATIVE LEARNING

4.1. Context of the excerpt

The excerpt of the recording which has been chosen and transcribed for further analysis has a length of 3'7'' and corresponds to a B hour of an English lesson of 1st ESO. During B Hours, the class is divided into two groups, this means that the number of students is reduced and it is easier to observe and reinforce the strengths and weaknesses of each student in the class. Students are not segregated by their level of English language, so groups are heterogeneous and diversity is one of the main aspects that can be easily observed among the different groups.

The excerpt analyzed took place the third day of Practicum I in the language lab and, although this group is made up of fifteen students, during this video recording we will only observe three students working together. The English level of the students is uneven and they mainly use Catalan during the conversation. Moreover, they are not used to work in groups. The activity that is shown in the video consists of solving a Treasure Hunt about a school in the United Kingdom. Students had previously been working with subjects and timetables in class. This activity had three different aims: the first one was to revise and consolidate their previous knowledge about the topic dealt with in class, the second was to increase their intercultural awareness and the last aim was to make students work in groups. The text was hung on the walls of the classroom and students had to work in groups of three to find out the answers. This activity was done four times with the rest of groups of 1st ESO.

There were three adults in the classroom: two student-teachers who were monitoring the group work and finally their school-mentor who was explaining some grammatical concepts to some students.

4.2. Focus of the observation

Recording ourselves has been a huge challenge for most of us, since we are not used to analyse what happens in our classrooms. By watching the videos, the trainee teacher has realiSed that students and teachers play a different role in cooperative learning activities. Throughout this self-observation, she will try to give answer to the following questions:

- **How is communication and participation achieved among students and the teacher in this cooperative activity?**

- **Which guiding strategies does the teacher use in cooperative activities?**

4.3.   Literature review on the topic

The following section is devoted to analyse the concept of cooperative learning in more detail by adding some theoretical framework to the issues explained.

4.3.1.   Cooperative learning

Traditionally, teachers have been quite reluctant to use interactive tasks in classrooms such as cooperative learning activities. However, contemporary researches in the field of second language acquisition have demonstrated that cooperative learning is a powerful strategy to use in the language learning process. In fact, there is a general agreement which confirms that cooperative learning can favour target language learning and contributes to the cognitive development of students. In order to have a clear idea of this concept, it is necessary to point out some definitions of this term:

Fathman and Kessler (1993, as quoted by Trujillo, 2002, p.12) define cooperative learning as a 'group work which is carefully structured so that all learners interact, exchange information, and are held accountable for learning.' In general terms, these authors also describe the benefits of cooperative learning: 'Cooperative learning can be an effective classroom management approach for helping students develop social skills, gain better knowledge of concept, improve problem solving abilities, and become more proficient in language and communication.'

Brown (2001) believes that when students work cooperatively, they share information and help each other in order to achieve a common goal. With cooperative language learning, student's intrinsic motivation can be promoted.

Cooperative language learning can not only promote students' self-esteem but also provide a less anxious atmosphere in which to learn. (Johnson & Johnson, 1994a; Jacob, 1999). Slavin (1995) found that in eleven of fifteen studies, cooperative learning

produced bigger increases in some aspect of self-esteem (general self-esteem, academic self-esteem, social self-esteem) than the non-cooperative method with which it was compared.

Moreover, it has been proved that the output and engagement of language learners in cooperative learning strategies are widely higher compared with competitive or individualistic learning. So, as Robert Slavin (1995) said, cooperative learning has a double goal: 'Learning to cooperate, cooperating to learn.'

Finally, Barnes and Todd, (1978, as quoted by Mercer, 1995, p.96) explained in one of their articles that a successful task depends on two main factors:

- 'Students share the same ideas about what is important.
- Students have a common conception about what they are trying to achieve.'

To sum up, based on the analysis of Johnson & Johnson and Smith (1991, p.16) propose several conditions for cooperative learning:

- 'Clearly perceived positive interdependence
- Considerable promotive (face-to-face) interaction
- Clearly perceived individual accountability and personal responsibility to achieve the group's goals
- Frequent use of the relevant interpersonal and small-group skills
- Frequent and regular group processing of current functioning to improve the group's future effectiveness.'

The relationship among outcomes of cooperation was illustrated by Johnson and Johnson (1989, p.6):

Figure 1. Outcomes of cooperation
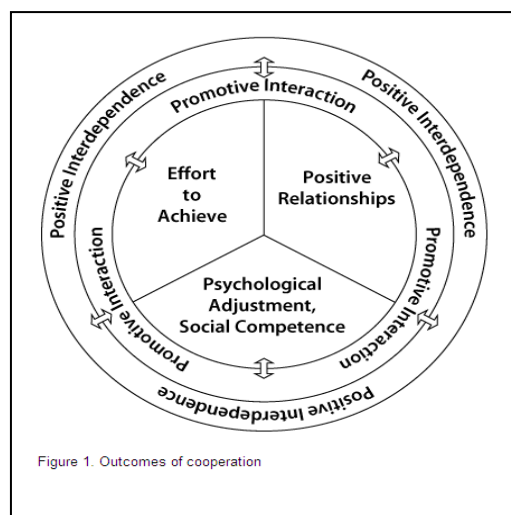
4.3.2. Symmetrical vs. asymmetrical relationships

When coopering in a communicative activity, the relationship established between the learners can be qualified as symmetrical, even though, there might be differences between the different learning styles, capabilities, interests, etc. among the learners. Precisely, these differences are the ones that can enrich the cooperation and favour the process of socialization.

It is also said that the vast majority of students feel more comfortable with symmetrical conversations. Students say that when they are talking with *experts (asymmetrical conversation)*, such as teachers, they feel afraid of making mistakes (Long y Porter 1985; Varonis y Gass 1985; Mercer 1995).

According to the literature reviewed, when implementing communicative tasks, teachers must take into account the social and cultural factors that each student can present. It is important to know that these factors can affect the way students behave, act or interact with their group mates. It is believed that there are some factors that help students to work in a more effective way. For example the relation of friendship between the members of the group can help students to be more relaxed and solve the problems more successfully.

4.3.3. Exploratory talk

Mercer (1995) classifies the quality of talk emerged from a collaborative activity according to three ways of talking and thinking:

- *Disputational talk* which is characterised by disagreement among speakers. In this kind of talk, students' relationship tends to be competitive since they do not share information and they make individualised decisions. In discourse, this type of talk is characterized by short exchanges consisting of assertions and counter assertions.

- *Cumulative talk* seems to be directly linked with solidarity and trust since they construct a common knowledge by accumulation. Cumulative discourse is characterised by repetitions, confirmations and elaborations.

- *Exploratory talk* focuses on reasoning. In exploratory talk, students offer arguments and alternative hypotheses or explanations and these are jointly

considered. Students request for clarification with responses which provide explanations and justifications.

According to Mercer (1995), exploratory talk has been found to be the most effective for learning through collaborative activities. Notwithstanding, some studies have shown that most of the talk observed when students work in groups tends to be disputational or cumulative. On the other hand, it is extremely interesting the fact that when the teacher is monitoring one group who is carrying out a group work activity, the amount of exploratory talk decreases since students feel threatened to make mistakes in front of the teacher's figure.

4.3.4. Student's role in cooperative learning activities

When talking about who take control of the activity, research has shown that in cooperative learning activities, boys often dominate mixed-sex pair and group activity although it is not always the case. On the other hand, "more able" students (of either sex) seem to be also those who tend to take control of the activity. It is important to monitor that everybody collaborates and has equal opportunities to participate, despite their abilities or English proficiency.

4.3.5. The role of the teacher in cooperative learning activities

Having discovered new pedagogical approaches and the benefits we can obtain by implementing them in nowadays classrooms, cooperative learning approach puts its emphasis on the active role of the students as the subject of the learning process. Nevertheless, which is the role of the teacher in cooperative activities?

It is important to highlight that the fact that students are gathered in groups does not mean that they are working collaboratively. In other words, students work *in* groups, but not *as* groups. In order to foster a good collaboration among students, Galton & Williamson (1992, as quoted by Mercer, 1995, p.92) recommend that 'for successful collaboration to take place pupils need to be taught how to collaborate so that they have a clear idea of what is expected of them.' That point is extremely important since students are not used to work in groups and the teacher must give clear instructions to guide them.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that when implementing a collaborative activity, 'the teacher should evaluate in terms of process and not only in terms of the final outcome produced' (Swann, 1992, as quoted by Mercer, 1995, p. 96).

Nussbaum and Tusón (1996) assert that, in cooperative activities, the teacher adopts the role of the person who advises, suggests, guides, accompanies and also monitors what students do and what students say. Teachers must help students to explicate, clarify, and sharpen their theories in order to promote interaction in cooperative learning activities.

To conclude with, Mercer (1995, p. 99) proposes some indicators that will help teachers to identify if students work in a collaborative manner:

> ➢ Do the children disagree at all?
> ➢ Do they ask each other questions?
> ➢ Do they share knowledge which is relevant to the task?
> ➢ Do they seem to have a common understanding of what the task is about?

4.4. Analysis of the transcript

As it has been previously explained, this section is devoted to analyse in depth the excerpt from Practicum I. In order to do so, the whole transcript[3] has been divided into several fragments. It is important to remember that the names of the students have been changed in order to preserve their identity.
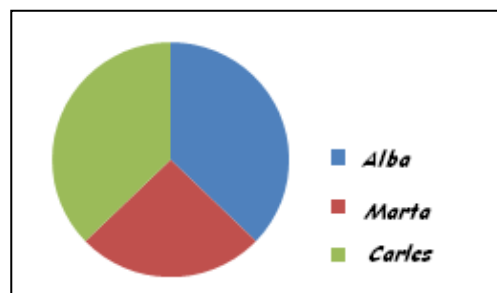
This transcript includes many indicators that students are definitely working in a very collaborative manner.

Regarding the roles, we can see that:

- 9 turns are produced by the teacher.

- 35 turns are produced by the students.
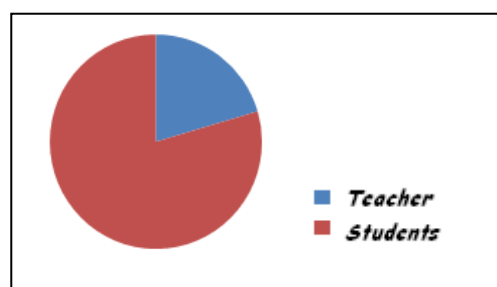
- There are 13 turns in which Carles takes part.

- There are 9 turns in which Marta takes part.

- There are 13 turns in which Alba takes part.

A strong indicator of achievement we can see in this excerpt is the real amount of time students are on-task. Although, at the beginning of the vignette Alba is not collaborating, she immediately realises that a new question has been posed by one of the members of her group and joins them. During the rest of the activity, we can see that students are reading, arguing and discussing about the possible answers. Most studies have found that in cooperative learning activities, students spend significantly more time on-task than in other kinds of activities. (Johnson et al., 1995; Slavin, 1995).

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[3] See annex 8.1.1. to find the whole transcript.

TURN	SPEAKER	UTTERANCES	NOTES
001	Carles	How ↑ many (.) children (.) are (.) usually (.) in the school? A ↑ [complete Summerhill]=	((one student is not collaborating))
002	Marta	[això] Ah! No!	
003	Carles	↑ usually ends (.) at about::=	
004	Marta	= i aquí no havia de posar:::?	
005	Alba	a veure	
006	Carles	This is not a school for a temporary break (4.0). A ↑ Summerhill education offers each child:::=	
007	Marta	=Aquí t'ho diu! Espera, a veure::]	
008	Alba	[mira, sí, sí,eh! Para! Para!] there are ↑ usually between ↓ e::r students	((pointing at the sentence in the text))
009	Marta	between eighty and ninety	

The first turn is taken by Carles. He starts reading the question '*How many students are usually in the school?*' This first approach shows that he is the first one to take control of the activity. From turn 1 to turn 6 Carles is reading the first paragraph out loud in order to find out the answer, but he ignores what his group mates are saying (turns 7 and 8). Alba finds the answer in turn 8 '*Mira, sí, sí, eh! Para! Para! There are usually between e::r students*', but she does not remember how to say the numbers in English and Marta helps her by saying '*between eighty and ninety*' in turn 9. This is a real proof that they have cooperated to find out the solution.

012	Teacher	Do you know (2.0) what begin means?	((Some of the answers are wrong answered))

016	Teacher	But ah:: do you know the age of the students (.) when they begin school?	

021	Teacher	begin is (.) when they start school	

025	Teacher	Yes because ↑ leave means finish	

In turn 12 the teacher realises that students have not understood the meaning of the words *begin* and *leave* since both answers are incorrect. In order to help them, she decides to use some strategies to help them understand the questions. She tries to paraphrase the question with simpler vocabulary (turn 16) and she also gives them some synonyms of the key words (turns 21 and 25). This way, students have more possibilities to find out the solution for themselves. This is what happens in turn 28 for example when one of the students raises the intonation of his voice showing his enthusiasm because he has found the correct answer. In turn 29, the teacher gives them some positive feedback.

It is important to highlight turn 22 when Alba whispers something to herself:

022	Alba	M'apuntaré a anglès (.) ja ho veig jo (.) No ho entenc	

She shows her disappointment because she feels that she does not understand English. However, it is interesting to emphasize that she wants to keep on learning English.

030	Alba	Nosaltres havíem posat nou, deu, onze::: Bueno va, doncs! Is the school in the town or in the country?	((the students smiles because she finally realizes that their answer was incorrect))

In turn 30, when they have already answered the question with the cooperative help of her group mates and the guidance of the teacher, Alba realises where the mistake was and decides to take control of the activity. '*Nosaltres havíem posat nou, deu, onze::: Bueno va, doncs! Is the school in the town or the country?*' It is noticeable that, despite the obstacles, she is engaged in the task and wants to continue working.

032	Teacher	Let's see if you find it	((the teacher leaves))

In turn 32, the teacher encourages them to continue working with the next question, but in this case, she does not check if students understand the meaning of the question. The teacher tries to make them work cooperatively without soliciting the teacher's assistance every time they have a vocabulary problem.

In turn 33, it starts a new sequence that shows the cooperation of the students. This sequence proves that there is exploratory talk, rather than final-draft talk.

033	Carles	↑eh! In (.) in the (.) Què hi posa aquí? (.) Què collons posa? (.) Is the school in the town or in the country? (.) Ah, si està a la ciutat o a una country=	((one of the students reads the question)) ((students search the information on the worksheets))
034	Alba	=Mira! An International school! Summerhill is an international school with children from England, Germany and Norway	((the three of them point at the worksheets))
035	Carles	Això no::	
036	Marta	Això diu que vénen d'Anglaterra (.) Germània i Noruega.	
037	Alba	Ah, vale!	

Carles reads the question in English and he asks some questions to his group mates '*què hi posa aquí? Què collons hi posa?*' Finally, he translates the sentence into Catalan in order to make sure that he had understood the question. In turn 34, Alba seems to have found a possible answer but Carles immediately answers her by saying '*Això no*' (turn 35). In turn 36, Marta realises that Alba is still confused and she translates the sentence into Catalan in order to facilitate Alba's understanding. '*Això diu que vénen d'Anglaterra, Germània i Noruega.*' Her mistake translating *Germany* as *Germania* does not hinder their interaction. Alba answers '*Ah, vale!*' This fragment shows that she has understood her group mate explanation. As we can see, students ask questions to each other and they give alternative answers which are jointly considered. Exploratory talk is an essential feature of cooperative learning activities.

038	Carles	=↑ Is is... is small…is small ↑ caring community. Ah::: it is ↑ country. ↓ No hi és.	
039	Alba	També podem buscar per aquí ↑ eh?	((the student points at the other paper))
040	Carles	[no això no és]	
041	Marta	[és una comunitat] mira! Mira, is small (.) no sé què no sé quantos! (.) Diu que aquí és una petita comunitat de nens I els adults.	
042	Carles	Vale i això també ho és,eh? (.) I això també ho és.	
043	Marta	No:: xxx	
044	Alba	Va (.) llegim-ho	

In turn 38, Carles starts reading another part of the text where the word *community* appears for the first time and he suggests that the sentence he is reading might be the answer. However, it is interesting to analyse turn 39 where Alba suggests that they should also read the rest of the worksheets hanged on the wall. This suggestion can be caused because she is probably not sure of her partner's answer but Carles takes control again and says '*No, això no és*' (turn 40). Marta again thinks she has found the solution and translates the same sentence in the text. In turn 44, Alba suggests to read the rest of the text to find out the answer.

The end of the activity has not been transcribed since the activity lasted one hour but it was considered a success despite that they had to ask for some help to the teacher.

Although it is not the topic of this paper, as we can observe from the transcript, students tended to maintain their conversation in Catalan. They especially employed their L1 to understand the instructions and the content of the task, to discuss and negotiate the possible answers and to give positive or negative feedback to the rest of the members in the group. As it happens in real oral conversations, we can observe that some sentences are incomplete and that students lack fluency in their speech and make mistakes when talking. They only used English language (L2) when they read directly from the text and when they had to talk with the teacher to ask or answer a question.

4.5. Conclusions of the analysis

The aim of this section was to analyse some minutes of a video recorded during one session of Practicum I in order to analyse how communication was achieved among students and the teacher in a cooperative activity.

To begin with, the trainee teacher and her peer student-teacher had given the instructions of the activity but some doubts emerged during the cooperation among the students. In fact, most of the problems were related with vocabulary which appeared on the text such as *begin* and *leave*. Regarding students' level of English, the teacher thought she should not take part in the students' conversation since it was a cooperative task and she also believed that the same students could find the appropriate answer for themselves. However, the teacher finally decided to take part in the activity to guide and help the students since some of them were quite demotivated. Allwright and Bailey (1991, as quoted by Tsui, 1995, p.7) add that 'interaction, in class or anywhere, has to be managed, as it goes along, no matter how much has gone into it beforehand... it has to be managed by everyone taking part, not just by the teacher, because interaction is obviously not something you just do to people, but something people do together, collectively.' Unlike teacher-fronted lessons, in this case we can see that all the members in the classroom cooperated to achieve the final outcome. This means they work collectively which was the major aim of the activity.

As we have seen in the analysis, the trainee teacher does not give immediately the correct answers, but she uses some strategies in order to make the students answer the questions. After reading the literature, the trainee teacher thinks that the teacher must take part of cooperative activities when it is necessary, like in the case analysed. Kyriacou (1997, p.24) also highlights that one of the characteristics of effective teaching is 'monitoring pupils' progress and attending quickly to pupils' needs.' As it has been analysed, the teacher, in this case, uses different guiding strategies to elicit the knowledge from the students either giving them synonyms or paraphrasing complex sentences, among others.

When considering if the activity was a success, we can see that they all asked questions, brought up possible answers and helped each other to solve the problems. Moreover, we can observe from the transcript that the interaction was a success since there are proves of exploratory talk which means that students provide different alternatives and end up

with a common final decision. On the other hand, we can say that communicative symmetry was achieved, since students had more or less the same volume of participation. Moreover, students exchanged the role of taking control of the activity which is quite important in this case. Finally, students were on-task all the time, which shows that they were engaged and motivated with the activity and they also learned to interact within the group.

Nevertheless, there are some issues that the trainee teacher would like to deal in more depth in further studies, such as how to address diversity in these kinds of activities. Regarding group work activities, she would like to investigate in more depth some aspects of classroom management such as how to deal with the noise in class when implementing group work tasks or how to create a positive environment for students to learn.

5. OVERALL REFLECTION ON THE PROCESS OF PROFESSIONALIZATION UNDERGONE THROUGHOUT THE COURSE

This section, describes the trainee teacher's experiences and reflections after her Practicum periods. For this reason, she will use 1st person singular to talk about all the issues dealt with in this section.

It is difficult to sum up so many experiences that I have lived through during Practicum I and II. Dealing with students can be an important challenge which is pleasantly rewarding when you observe students' increasing motivation.

5.1. Personal reflections on Practicum I

Practicum I started on January 2010. During the first days, I focused my attention on observing our mentor and the students in class. According to Kyriacou (1998, p.3) 'seeing how other teachers perform can stimulate your own ideas about your teaching.' One of my expectations was to learn how teachers interacted with students but also to get to know the students in order to be able to give answers to their individual needs.

Notwithstanding, after that first approach as a trainee teacher, I realised that my main focus of observation during Practicum I was my performance as a teacher. I was more concerned about my way of teaching than about my students. After every lesson I was asking myself questions such as: Have I spoken too fast? Did I use the appropriate body language? Have I used the suitable tone of voice? etc. Perhaps it was due to my lack of confidence at the beginning or because I had never faced a situation where thirty students were staring at me. Of course caring about my way of teaching is essential if I want to improve as a teacher but I have realised that students are the most important focus of observation if I want to succeed in this career.

5.2. Personal reflections on Practicum II

Practicum II started on March 2010. During this second stage in the high school, I made huge improvements regarding my teaching. This time, the core of my goals as a teacher was not my performance but my students. Therefore the questions I asked myself after implementing an activity or a lesson changed completely. I used to wonder if: were the activities appropriate to my students' level? Were my instructions, explanations and

questions clear enough? What kind of activities can engage them? Were students involved in the lesson? Have they all participated? How can I foster communication? etc. I consider this reflection extremely important because students have given me the clues to become a good teacher.

Regarding classroom management, another aspect I have improved during my experience is that sometimes we are so worried about following our plans and finishing all the lesson plans we had prepared that we do not allow our students to share their own experiences. Kyriacou (2005, p.57) states that 'While lesson plans are important, all teachers will need to tailor the development of the lesson to the needs of the moment.'

One of the aspects I have improved during my second Practicum has been the wait-time periods. I realised that during Practicum I, I used to ask questions to the class but I did not let students enough time to process the information. Therefore, if the student did not know the answer, I immediately asked another student. After my reflection, I realised that I just wanted to finish all the activities I had planned for that lesson, but I did not take into account how students would feel with that pressure. According to Mary Budd Rowe (1972), teachers usually wait 1.5 second in typical classrooms. However, she found out that when theses periods of silence last at least 3 seconds, many positive things happen to students' and teacher's behaviours and attitudes. To get these benefits, it is necessary that teachers wait 3 seconds in silence after their questions and after students complete their responses. Stahl (1994) points out that 'when students are given 3 or more seconds of undisturbed wait-time there are certain positive outcomes':

- The length and correctness of their responses increase.
- The number of their "I don't know" and no answer responses decreases.
- The number of volunteered, appropriate answers by larger numbers of students greatly increases.
- The scores of students on academic achievement tests tend to increase.

Furthermore, when teachers wait in silence for 3 or more seconds at appropriate places, positive changes happen in the teachers' behaviors:

- Their questioning strategies tend to be more varied and flexible.
- They decrease the quantity and increase the quality and variety of their questions.

They ask additional questions that require more complex information processing and higher-level thinking on the part of students.

5.3. Designing and implementing a Teaching Unit

Designing a teaching unit has been probably my major challenge in this Masters course. I have to admit that, at the beginning, my peer trainee teacher and I felt really lost since we had to implement a content-base unit to students whose level of English is quite low. We agreed that it would be a good idea to choose a social topic for our teaching unit and we immediately came up with the idea of Egypt since we thought that it was going to be appealing, motivating and interesting for our students[4].

We tried to create a very visual teaching unit with pictures and drawings to catch students' attention. Therefore, we created most of the videos which are included in our unit. Sanford et Emmer (1998, p.69) explains that 'the major goal for teachers is to keep all students actively engaged: One consideration is the lesson itself, students are more likely to be engaged by lessons that are interesting, thought provoking, and filled with examples and illustrations that help them see the relevance and usefulness of the content.'

We also wanted to focus our teaching unit on the collaborative learning[5]. Therefore, the vast majority of our activities were planned to be implemented in pairs or in groups, since these types of activities maximise students' participation and, consequently, they improve communication. In the following section, I will explain in more detail my reflections on cooperative learning.

Most of the changes we made regarding our teaching unit consisted of adding some extra information such as PowerPoint Presentations in order to facilitate students' comprehension. My peer trainee teacher and I used to take some time to reflect on before implementing each activity in order to anticipate possible problems.

Regarding the final assessment, students had to create a leaflet about one of the topics we had been dealing with in class and present it in front of the whole class. Although they could do it individually, the vast majority of them decided to work in pairs. I think that creative writing generates opportunities for students to explore their imagination and it provides chances for language practice. In fact, I think that they even work harder to find the right words to express their own ideas. Consequently such activities can be

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[4] See annex 8.2.1. to read the trainee teacher's journal.

[5] See annex 8.2.2. to find some examples of group work activities.

really stimulating and motivating for students. This activity turned out to be very successful. They created really original leaflets and they were eager to explain them to their classmates. Most specialists recommend imaginative activities since students see the result of their final work as a deserved achievement and '... most people feel pride in their work and want it to be read'. (Ur 1996, p.169 as quoted by Harmer, 2007, p.328).

I have to say that students enjoyed doing this activity but I ended up enjoying as much as them since I was not expecting such a good reaction and collaboration.

5.4. Implementing cooperative learning activities

As I explained before, our teaching unit was focused on cooperative work where students had to work together to achieve a common goal. After having analysed this topic on the previous section of this Master Dissertation, I will devote this part to explain some concerns/surprises I had when implementing cooperative learning activities during my practical stages.

Despite the many advantages of group work, I was quite afraid to implement these activities since they are usually very noisy and difficult to monitor. Research has proven that some teachers are quite reluctant to use group work activities because they generate greater levels of noise. Regarding this aspect, Kyriacou (1998, p.61) asserts that 'a certain level of noise is, of course, acceptable and desirable, and that enthusiastic and excited contributions by pupils need to be harnessed to good effect rather than squashed.' After implementing several activities from my teaching unit, I can assert that students were highly motivated since they had more opportunities to participate in class. Moreover, it is obvious that in order to learn a language, it is necessary some interaction among students. After my experience, I think that the teacher must develop some strategies in order to control these kinds of obstacles.

Another concern I had when implementing a group work activity was the initial decision of grouping students since I had to take into account the student's abilities, sex and personality. Sometimes I grouped students according to their abilities since I thought that high-achiever students would help those with some learning problems, but other times I asked them to select their group mates since I thought they would feel more comfortable. My decision was taken according to the kind of task I was implementing every time. However, research has shown that heterogeneous groups are

the ideal ones since high-achievers revise their knowledge by explaining it to the lower-achievers. Moreover, weaker students felt less pressure when they have to talk with their peers than when they had to talk with the teacher. As Tsui (1995, p.90) pointed out 'students are more ready to interact with each other than with their teacher. The responses that they produce when interacting with peers also tend to be more complex than when they are interacting with teachers.' Both kinds of students had to work cooperatively to achieve the final goal, this means that, their contributions were always important and necessary to finish the task.

Before implementing group work activities, I realised that it is very important to take care of the classroom's layout, since in group work activities students tend to be more dispersed. Kyriacou (1998, p.75) states that 'the layout of the room should be functional for the purposes intended. At the very least, you and the blackboard should be easily visible.' Emmer et al (1989, p.4) add that 'If the teacher cannot see all students, it will be difficult to identify when a student needs assistance or to prevent task avoidance or disruption. Therefore, clear lines of sight must be maintained.'

Another improvement I have seen after implementing cooperative tasks has been students' increase of motivation and self-esteem. Students had a better self-esteem since they were able to contribute in English (although their speech and accuracy was not perfect).

As Tsui (1995, p.100) pointed out 'A changed environment is a learning motivator; it presents opportunities for those students whose learning styles d not fit the traditional classroom model; it changes the classroom empowerment; it promotes a different kind of talk and opportunities for peer learning and teaching. Students more readily engage in question and answer exchanges with each other than their teachers and students' responses to fellow students are longer and more complex than responses to the teacher.'

To sum up my experience in group work activities, I think that most of the topics I have dealt with throughout this dissertation such as the noise, the classroom's layout, grouping students, the kind of interaction they have, their role and their motivation towards cooperative learning are highly important since students are not used to work in

groups and sometimes they believe that these kinds of activities are not useful for their learning. For this reason, it is important that the first step that the teacher must do before implementing these kinds of activities is to provide the students with the necessary instructions and scaffolding in order that they can develop the tasks for themselves, so they will not believe that it is a waste of time.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this dissertation was to describe the benefits and drawbacks of using cooperative learning tasks in EFL classrooms since they have proved to offer a lot of opportunities for learning a target language.

A significant change of attitude among language teachers is completely necessary, since education has to go hand by hand with the present society. As teachers, we have been exposed to different methodologies, theories and teaching strategies, however, we are the ones to decide how to apply our own strategies in class. Teachers should emphasise the importance of using listening and speaking skills in the language classroom because they play an essential role in the communication process and communication is the main goal when learning a new language. One of the ways of improving these skills is by using cooperative tasks in EFL classrooms.

Among the advantages we have seen after the empirical analysis and the trainee teacher's experience regarding cooperative activities, it has been proved that group work increases the time opportunities for practice, fosters students' responsibility and interdependence, improves their intrinsic motivation and self-esteem and contributes to develop collaborative and social skills. Therefore, group interaction plays a crucial role in stimulating students learning.

Furthermore, it has been proved that cooperative learning tasks are more effective than individualistic or competitive ones since students retain better the information.

However, group work is not always perceived to be successful by students and teachers. It is true that all the advantages explained above do not come out just by arranging the students in groups. The teacher must carry out one first task which is raising students' awareness of the advantages of group work tasks. Therefore, the teacher plays an essential role since he/she is the one to engage students on the task by creating well designed activities that maintain the symmetry among students. According to that, some studies have also proved that sometimes students are unsure of what they are expected to achieve since teachers do not give clear instructions because they assume that students already know it. This important fact provokes that little exploratory talk takes place in EFL classrooms. As teacher, it is necessary to guide our students on how to talk

in order to foster these kinds of interactions to achieve a better learning process. Furthermore, it is important to create meaningful communicative tasks and situations in order that students feel identified with them and feel the need to participate and interact.

Students and the teacher should establish some rules regarding their attitude and participation in order to anticipate possible conflicts. This way, problems such as noise can be discussed at the beginning in order to create a good atmosphere for interaction.

Moreover, when talking about arranging the groups, research has shown that students have preferences for selecting their classmates. It has been proved that they tend to choose those students who have the same level as them. It is important that students learn to work in heterogeneous groups as well as with students who are at the same level since the main goal of cooperative tasks is that all the members count as essential for the completion of the final task. For this reason, it is advisable that the teacher decides in advance how the groups are going to be arranged.

On the other hand, when students are working in groups, the teacher must take an active and supporting role in the classroom by monitoring the students and by guiding and helping them when it is necessary and must take into account the students' progress, rather than the final outcome.

Regarding the trainee teacher's experience, she has realised that there is no magic formula for success in the teaching field. However, she will try to continue working on some aspects such as how to create and adapt the different tasks to the students' level, needs and interests in order to foster participation in class and, therefore, improve students' communicative skills.

The present dissertation has been just an attempt to explain some of the benefits of using cooperative tasks in EFL classrooms and how possibilities for acquisition of knowledge can be promoted. However, this research is just the starting point for new aspects to be studied since little explanations have been added regarding role's assignment and group work evaluation which are extremely important when implementing cooperative learning activities.

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8. ANNEXES

8.1. ANNEX 1: EMPIRICAL STUDY

8.1.1. Transcript

TURN	SPEAKER	UTTERANCES	NOTES
001	Carles	How ↑ many (.) children (.) are (.) usually (.) in the school? A ↑ [complete Summerhill]=	((one student is not collaborating))
002	Marta	[això] Ah! No!	
003	Carles	↑ usually ends (.) at about::=	
004	Marta	= i aquí no havia de posar:::?	
005	Alba	a veure	
006	Carles	This is not a school for a temporary break (4.0). A ↑ Summerhill education offers each child:::=	
007	Marta	=Aquí t'ho diu! Espera, a veure::]	
008	Alba	[mira, sí, sí,eh! Para! Para!] there are ↑ usually between ↓ e::r students	((pointing at the sentence in the text))
009	Marta	between eighty and ninety	
010	Carles	Jo xulejo de que començo a tenir dubtes i després::	((the student starts laughing))
011	Alba	and	((she reads the questions and realizes that some of the answers are incorrect))
012	Teacher	Do you know (2.0) what begin means?	
013	Carles	Sí!	
014	Marta	Aquest són els que comencen l'escola aquests són els que l'acaben als 11 anys.	
015	Carles	Sí ↑ n'hi ha un que és el day i l'altre és el nou.	((some students point at the text))
016	Teacher	But ah:: do you know the age of the students (.) when they begin school?	
017	Alba	It's finish or it's start?	
018	Teacher	When they begin=	
019	Carles	=[begin?]	
020	Alba	=[begin?]	
021	Teacher	Begin is (.) when they start school	
022	Alba	M'apuntaré a anglès (.) ja ho veig jo (.) No ho entenc.	

023	Teacher	[↑no? Ok (.) how old are they when they start school? (.) It's 5 years old very well but when ↑do they finish school it's…]	
024	Alba	Però és que aquí no posa finish school	
025	Teacher	yes because ↑ leave means finish	
026	Alba	leave is finish?	
027	Teacher	yes it's the same	
028	Carles	seventeen	
029	Teacher	yes, seventeen	
030	Alba	Nosaltres havíem posat nou, deu, onze::: Bueno va, doncs! Is the school in the town or in the country?	((the students smiles because she realizes that their answer was incorrect))
031	Marta	Ah vale!	
032	Teacher	Let's see if you find it	((the teacher leaves))
033	Carles	↑eh! In (.) in the (.) Què hi posa aquí? (.) Què collons posa? (.) Is the school in the town or in the country? (.) Ah, si està a una ciutat o a una country=	((one of the students reads the question)) ((students search the information on the worksheets))
034	Alba	=Mira! An International school! Summerhill is an international school with children from England, Germany and Norway..	((three of them point at the worksheets))
035	Carles	Això no::	
036	Marta	Això diu que vénen d'Anglaterra (.) Germània I Noruega.	
037	Alba	Ah, vale!=	
038	Carles	=↑Is is.. is small.. is small ↑ caring community. Ah::: it is ↑ country. ↓No hi és.	
039	Alba	També podem buscar per aquí ↑ eh?	((the student points at the other paper))
040	Carles	[no això no és]	
041	Marta	[és una comunitat], mira! Mira, is small (.) no sé què no sé quantos! (.) Diu que aquí és una petita comunitat de nens i els adults.	
042	Carles	Vale i això també jo és,eh? (.) I això també ho és.	
043	Marta	No::xxx	
044	Alba	Va (.) llegim-ho	

8.1.2 Transcription symbols

[	indicates the point of overlap onset
]	indicates the point of overlap termination
(.)	a very short untimed pause
(2.0)	an interval between utterances (2 seconds in this case)
↑↓	onset of a rising or falling intonation shift
e:r the::	indicates the lengthening of the preceding sound
!	an animated or emphatic tone
XXX	a stretch of unclear or unintelligible speech
(( ))	non-verbal actions

8.1.3. Pictures from the excerpt
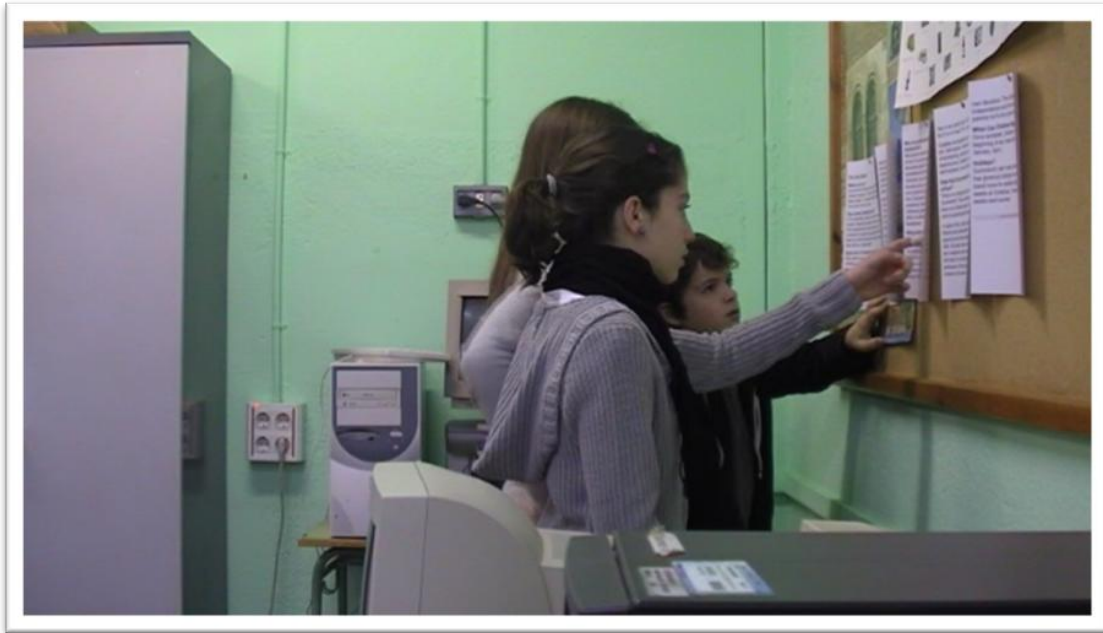
2 Read "The Very Basics" and answer the questions.

a) Is Summerhill School in the UK?

b) How old are the children when they begin the school?

c) How old are the children when they leave the school?

d) How many children are usually in the school?

e) Is the school in the town or the country?

f) Which months can children begin at the school?

g) How many weeks holiday do the students have each year?

The Very Basics

Where are we?
Summerhill School is in Leiston, Suffolk, in the United Kingdom. That's in the countryside of East Anglia, 10 minutes from the North Sea. Two hours from London.

Day school, Boarding School?
It is a boarding school, but we do have day pupils. Most are local but a few have moved here specifically to be near the school. It is common for parents of younger children to move here for the first few terms so that the child can start off as a "day student".

Ages and a Complete Summerhill Education
Day pupils may come at five years. Some children are very happy to board about six or seven. Others need more time and come later. Many children begin at 9, 10 or 11 years of age. A complete Summerhill education usually ends at about 17 years of age. Leaving early is not advised. This is not a school for a "temporary break from

the mainstream. A Summerhill education offers each child a sequence of important social, emotional and intellectual experiences that should not be missed! Summerhill does not enroll children over 11 years of age.

An International School
Summerhill is an international school with children from England, Germany, Norway, Holland, Switzerland, Israel, America, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, France etc. This makes for a wonderful multi-cultural environment.

How big?
There are usually between 80 to 90 children and 12 full time staff. There are several part time staff and many other adults who help keep the school running smoothly. Summerhill is a small, caring community of children and adults. The school is set on 11 acres of very beautiful woods and fields.

Why do parents send their children to Summerhill?

Most parents believe in the philosophy of the school, but some parents are looking for an alternative option for their children after dissatisfaction with mainstream education. Generally, the mix of children at Summerhill is the same as at any other school. Summerhill is not a school for problem children. Having said that, Summerhill's ability to allow children to experience natural emotional, social and intellectual growth often has an extraordinary effect on self-esteem and positive personal development.

What particular qualities do you expect Summerhill pupils to acquire?

Obviously this depends to some degree upon the personal circumstances of the child before and during their stay at the school. Some children who have come to the school with problems are still going to have to deal with many of them into their adult lives. Summerhill has a very good record of helping such children, but it is no magic "fix" or utopian cure-all.

Qualities we typically see in Summerhill pupils are: Self-esteem, tolerance, integrity, fairness, understanding, sensitivity, compassion, assertiveness, creativity, individuality, humor, self-motivation, and common sense.

How much are parents involves in the school?

There is no regular parent involvement at Summerhill. They are able to visit during term time on a limited basis and there is a newsletter sent to parents each holiday.
In spite of this, many parents become good friends and participate from a distance with their approval and with anything helpful they can offer. We also have really nice summer half-term weekend when parents are invited to come and stay for a few days and relax – but the philosophy of the school is to encourage children to live their own lives, and make their own decisions. The children value their independence and the vast majority prefer parents not to be a part of it.

When Can Children Begin at Summerhill?

Once accepted, children begin at the beginning of any new term. (September, January, April)

Holidays?

Summerhill, with many international students, has generous holidays to allow all students to travel home for realistic periods of time: 5 weeks at Christmas, 5 weeks in the spring and 9 weeks each summer.

8.2. ANNEX 2: PRACTICUM

8.2.1. Journal

Tuesday 6th April: The starting point

This morning I was impatient to know how this first experience was going to be like. We have been working very hard up until now . . . lots of planning and preparing. We have created every activity taking into account each student's needs, proficiency in English, motivation and interests. I must say that it was a huge challenge but I feel really proud of the final piece. Let's see how it goes...

Today, we started implementing our Teaching Unit on Egypt and the first lesson has been with 1st ESO C. We have explained to them that Maria del Mar and I would be their teachers during the next three weeks and that during this time, we would be dealing with a new topic. I do not know exactly why but I was a bit nervous before starting to explain the instructions to the whole class. I realised that I was speaking quite fast and that some students were not following my instructions, so I felt a bit unconfident. Nevertheless, I knew that it was quite normal since it was the first class.

We showed them a video we had previously created with some images and pictures of Egypt and students had to guess which country was hidden behind the presentation. This activity had to be appealing since it was the starting point of our Teaching Unit. We wanted to surprise them and also to observe their reactions towards the topic. Students really enjoyed it and so we started asking them some questions just to break the ice. In fact, it was also a strategy aimed to see what they knew about that country. Although students have a very low level of English, they tried their best to speak in class. At that point, I was completely sure that all the effort we had made would have a reward since students were very motivated.

8.2.2. Students working in groups

Memory game

Internet activity

Matching Gods and Goddesses

Running dictation

Reading comprehension

Jigsaw reading: Pyramids and mummies

8.2.3 Students presenting their final outcomes

8.2.4. Students' final outcomes