PEER ASSISTANCE IN EFL MIXED LEVEL GROUPS: STRATEGIES AND PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

This study analyses whether students with better command of English help their peers during groupwork. The data was gathered by a student-teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) during the internship in the Official Master's Degree in Teaching, offered by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Four groups of students of 2nd grade of compulsory secondary education from a state school in a locality near Barcelona were video recorded while doing a cooperative learning activity. Several excerpts were transcribed and interpreted through a content analysis of students' interaction as a way of observing the strategies they used to help their peers. A survey was also conducted among fifty students after the activity. The questionnaire contained six closed-ended and two open-ended questions, and it took around five minutes to answer. The former were analysed through descriptive statistics whereas qualitative content analysis was applied to the latter.

Keywords: *peer assistance, mixed level groups, helping strategies, students' perceptions, groupwork, EFL.*

Resum

El present estudi analitza si alumnes amb més bon nivell d'anglès ajuden als seus companys durant el treball en grup. Les dades van ser recollides per una professora en pràctiques d'anglès com a llengua estrangera durant les pràctiques del Màster de Formació del Professorat, impartit per la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Es van vídeo enregistrar quatre grups d'alumnes de 2n d'ESO d'un institut públic d'una localitat propera a Barcelona mentre realitzaven una activitat d'aprenentatge cooperatiu. Es van transcriure diversos fragments i es van interpretar a través d'un anàlisi del contingut de la interacció dels alumnes, per tal d'observar les estratègies emprades per ajudar als companys. També es va subministrar una enquesta entre cinquanta alumnes després de l'activitat. El qüestionari contenia sis preguntes tancades i dues d'obertes, i durava uns cinc minuts. Les primers es van analitzar a través d'estadística descriptiva, mentre que per a les últimes es va aplicar un anàlisi qualitatiu del contingut.

Paraules clau: *ajuda entre iguals, grups de diferents nivells, estratègies d'ajuda, percepció dels alumnes, treball en grup, anglès com a llengua estrangera.*

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1. Introduction

During my first period of internship I talked to several English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and all of them highlighted that one of the main problems that they must deal with is the differences in students' levels of English in a class. After observing some EFL classes in second and third grades of compulsory secondary education (ESO, or *Educació Secundària Obligatòria* in Catalan) I became aware of this issue.

In March 2019, I had the opportunity to implement a Task-Based Learning (TBL) teaching unit that included several groupwork activities, some of which required cooperative learning. For this reason, I thought it was a good opportunity to analyse how students with different levels of English interact while doing a cooperative learning activity.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to research and reflect on whether students with better command of English help their peers during groupwork, as well as to identify the strategies they use and to discover students' perceptions of the effects of these helping strategies. The value of this paper and the reflections included reside in a student-teacher's need to learn about peer assistance in EFL mixed level groups.

The data for this research has been gathered from a state secondary school in a town near Barcelona with about 16,000 residents. The school, which hosts 50 teachers and 530 students, was built in 1997 and is located in a middle-class neighbourhood on the outskirts of the town, next to a nursery and a primary school.

English language is considered as an important subject in the school's curriculum and, apart from EFL (English as a Foreign Language) lessons, other subjects are taught in English, for instance Geography. In addition, the school participates in different projects such as exchange programs and Erasmus+, which offer the students the opportunity to communicate in English with other European school communities.

The analysis is focused on four groups of 2nd grade of ESO learners, who have different English levels, since some of them went to international primary schools and attend extracurricular English lessons, whereas other students only attend English lessons at school, therefore, they usually have more difficulties with the language.

The students were recorded while doing a Jigsaw Reading activity about London[1]. The activity included four different short texts from a London travel guide. Each student was given one of the texts which they had to read and discuss with the classmates who had the same text. Then, they made groups of four (each member had a different text) and they had to explain their texts to each other. After that, they answered a brief questionnaire related to the activity.

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[1] See Appendix 1.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. EFL learners' collaboration in mixed proficiency pairs

Dao and McDonough (2016) studied the effect of manipulating the task role of lower-proficiency learners in mixed-proficiency dyads. One member per pair was given the role of information holder, which involved watching a video clip and retelling the story to his or her partner, who had the information receiver status. For 17 dyads, the lower-proficiency learner was the information holder, and for 13 dyads the lower-proficiency learners were information receivers.

Dao and McDonough focused their analyses on language-related episodes (LREs), which can be categorized as being about grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or mechanics. They also coded LREs in terms of how learners resolved their doubts: correctly, incorrectly or unresolved.

The findings showed that assigning the information holder task role to the lower-proficiency learner was associated with a greater number of LREs, but it had no impact on the correct resolution. They also discovered that giving the lower-proficiency learners the status of information holder reduced the probability that the higher proficiency learners could dominate the interaction and increased the lower-proficiency learners' contributions. In addition, as information receivers, the higher-proficiency learners had to elicit the information from their peers, which led them to encourage their lower-proficiency peers to talk.

2.2. Effects of proficiency differences and patterns of pair interaction

Watanabe and Swain (2007) explored the effects of proficiency differences and patterns of pair interaction on EFL learning. The study involved two different types of participants: core and non-core. Each core participant interacted with two non-core participants whose English proficiency was higher and lower than their own.

The researchers found out that the core-high pairs produced a greater frequency of LREs than that of the core-lower pairs, which may suggest that the core participants benefited more from working with their higher proficiency partner,

however, the post-test scores indicated that the core participants learned more when working with lower proficiency peers (Watanabe & Swain, 2007)

Watanabe and Swain (2007) suggest that proficiency difference in pairs may create a different pattern of interactions since their findings demonstrated that when a large proficiency difference exists within a pair, only the collaborative pattern of interaction, in which both learners contribute equally to the task and try to engage with each other's ideas, might benefit language learning for both members.

2.3.   Helping behaviours in Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)

Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) is an instructional approach designed for English language learners which is based on cooperative learning to teach reading comprehension strategies (Klingner & Vaughn, 2000). This approach has its roots in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which claims that social interaction plays a fundamental role in cognitive development (as cited in Klingner & Vaughn, 2000). Hence, according to Klingner and Vaughn (2000), through CSR, students increasingly become more skilled at applying comprehension strategies and acquiring knowledge by reading.

In their study, Klingner and Vaughn (2000) analysed the amount and type of helping utterances as well as the ways students responded to classmates' requests for clarification of unknown words. The participants were 37 bilingual students in a fifth-grade class at a primary school in the south-eastern United States. All except two students had Spanish as their L1 or learned both Spanish and English at home. Students, who had been previously taught about how to implement CSR, were assigned to groups of six or seven members including at least two high-achieving or average-achieving students who were proficient in Spanish and English. Groups were video recorded while performing CSR to learn content from their science textbook. Researchers also administered pre and post vocabulary tests (Klingner & Vaughn, 2000).

The findings showed that scaffolding for peers can be a demanding task for bilingual students that assist limited English proficient (LEP) classmates with English content learning. Hence, according to Klingner and Vaughn (2000),

teachers must carefully guide students on how to interact effectively, otherwise group work may not be successful. This confirmed the recommendations made by Fuchs (1997) et al. and Pressley et al. (1996) (as cited in Klingner & Vaughn, 2000) in previous studies. The results also revealed that peer assistance benefits both students who provide help and students who receive it (Klingner & Vaughn, 2000).

The results from the pre and post vocabulary tests indicated that LEP students improved, however their gains were not outstanding. As reported by Klingner and Vaughn (2000), this was because either the vocabulary tests were too difficult, or the explanation provided by peers was not a comprehensible input for beginning English language learners.

Another remarkable finding is that, although researchers did not observe students asking for assistance and not receiving it, they found cases in which students apparently did not understand but they did not ask for assistance, and in which students requested help with an unknown word and received a quick reply, such as a brief translation (Klingner & Vaughn, 2000). For this reason, the authors recommend that teachers implementing CSR pay attention to students' participation, so adjustments can be made if some students seem marginalised. Finally, Klingner and Vaughn (2000) suggest that smaller groups (of four or five rather than six or seven students) may increase levels of participation.

3. Objective and research questions

This study aims at answering these research questions:

1. Do students with better command of English help their peers with lower command of English during groupwork?

2. What strategies do they use to help their peers?

3. What are the students' perceptions of the effects of these helping strategies on their learning?

As stated previously, one of the main challenges that EFL teachers must deal with is the differences in students' levels of English in a class. Therefore, the final objective of the present study is to explore whether and how EFL learners assist each other in groupwork activities. The analysis of the data gathered as well as the conclusions drawn in this paper will contribute to my own professional development as an EFL teacher, since it will provide me with a view on how to tackle this issue.

4. Methodology

This section describes the methodological approach employed in this paper. Classroom research is focused on the helping strategies used by students during groupwork and their perceptions of the effects of these helping strategies. The analysis is quantitative, qualitative and interpretative.

4.1. Methodological approach

4.1.1. Collaborative Research

According to Nussbaum (2017) action research is carried out by innovative teachers who identify a problem, collect data systematically, analyse it and compare it with other research about successful educational practices; they take all this information into account to prepare their interventions and evaluate them; and finally, they share their results with their colleagues or the teaching community.

On the other hand, as it is also discussed in Nussbaum (2017), ethnography aims to provide a multidimensional description of educational institutions. To this purpose, researchers analyse various types of previously collected information avoiding external interpretations (emic approach). Researchers are required to work for a long period of time in order to engage in participant observation, which means that they are being accepted as members of the group that is being studied. Both the principles of action research and the instruments provided by ethnography are necessary to carry out collaborative research. Therefore, the three types of research can be combined, as they have been in the present study.

According to Mondada (2003), as cited in Nussbaum (2017), when gathering and analysing data, three principles should be respected: observability, availability and symmetry. Nussbaum (2017) also claims that the conversation analysis approach is a successful method to analyse data, however, it requires a thorough examination of the transcript, focusing on both linguistic data and multimodal aspects. In this study, conversation analysis is drawn on in analysing the interactional data.

4.1.2. Interactional data

In their article, Moore and Llompart (2017) describe and make some recommendations on the processes of collecting, organizing, transcribing, analysing and presenting audio or visual data. These recommendations have been followed in this study.

Before recording, researchers must consider what initial questions they want to answer and what they need to record to answer them. In addition, in qualitative research, fieldwork is usually very important not only to make decisions about how to record but also to interpret the data. Once recorded, Moore and Llompart (2017) note the importance to store the files properly and keep them backed up.

When deciding what to transcribe, researchers must think about the questions being asked. Therefore, it may not be necessary to transcribe an entire corpus. According to Moore and Llompart (2017), transcription usually involves two stages. First, researchers carry out a rough transcription, which is without any specific symbol. After the first stage, they select more specific sections and produce more accurate transcriptions.

Finally, when presenting data, researchers should make every effort to protect the real identity of the participants (for example, by using pseudonyms in the transcriptions).

4.1.3. Instruments for gathering data

In her article, Canals (2017) describes different methods for gathering data in research projects based on action research, ethnography and conversational analysis. According to Canals (2017), researchers will choose the most appropriate method based on data to be collected. If researchers need to gather data that reveal how plurilingual people define their language use, they should use open interviews, focus groups, questionnaires or surveys. On the other hand, if researchers must collect data that reveal plurilingual people's language use, researchers should choose projects, tasks or other activities that involve interaction as methods for their research.

Canals (2017) suggests different learning tasks, which are classified into one-way tasks and two-way tasks. In the first type of task, information is passed from one participant to another (e.g. description of a drawing), and in the second type, participants exchange information and cooperate to complete the task (e.g. information gap exercise).

Canals (2017) also classifies tasks according to the type of outcome expected from them. In closed tasks, a correct or incorrect solution is expected, whereas in open tasks, participants must reach an agreement or get conclusions from a debate or a discussion. The type of task chosen by researchers will be determined by their interests, objectives and research questions.

In the present study, participants were recorded while performing a Jigsaw Reading, which can be considered a two-way task since it requires students' cooperation. On the other hand, the activity was divided in two parts: during the first part, students had to discuss the text and share their answers to the related questions (close task) whereas, in the second part, students had to explain their texts to each other (open task).

Observation in the classroom is, according to Canals (2017), one of the most widely-used methods for research in language education. In this method, the researcher is also the teacher, or a participant, in a project. Canals (2017) describes other useful methods such as focus groups, debates, narratives, interviews, questionnaires and surveys.

4.2. Data collection materials and analytical procedures

4.2.1. Data collection

The data employed for this paper are transcriptions of lessons recorded in a state secondary school in a locality near Barcelona and, specifically, in four different classes of 2nd grade of ESO in March 2019. When recordings took place, students were thirteen or fourteen years old and their levels of English were not homogeneous. Recordings took place on Monday (9:50-10:45), Tuesday (12:40-13:35 and 13:35-14:30) and Thursday (9:50-10:45).

In the excerpts analysed[2], students – who had previously given consent and indicated that they were willing to participate – were doing a groupwork activity in groups of four or six. The task consisted in a Jigsaw Reading and lasted thirty minutes approximately. Four different extracts of a text from a London travel guide were distributed among students. Students read their texts individually and answered some related questions. After reading, they discussed the texts and shared their answers with the classmates who had the same text. Finally, they changed groups and sat in a group of four among whom each member had a different text. They had to explain to each other what their text was about. The task was carried out in four different classes. One group per class was recorded.

After the activity, students answered a brief questionnaire[3] related to the task and groupwork. The questionnaire, which was designed using "Google Forms", was distributed through a link, allowing students to fill it online. The questionnaire contained eight questions (six closed-ended and two open-ended), and it took approximately five minutes to answer.

4.2.2. Data analysis procedures

When choosing which data to include in the analysis, two criteria have been considered. On the one hand, the video excerpts have been selected with the aim of answering the research questions. On the other hand, the quality of the video recordings has influenced the decision to discard several excerpts, since in some cases the background noise made the audio comprehension impossible.

In the analysis, the excerpts have been transcribed using the symbols of transcription from the Jeffersonian Transcript Notation[4]. The interpretation of the data is based on content analysis of students' interaction as a way of observing which strategies they used to help their peers.

With regard to the results of the questionnaire, closed-ended questions have been analysed through descriptive statistics whereas qualitative content analysis has been applied to open-ended questions.

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[2] See Appendix 2.
[3] See Appendix 3.
[4] See Appendix 4.

The data from both the video recordings and the results of the questionnaire has been used to answer the first and second questions: "do students with better command of English help their peers with lower command of English during groupwork" and "what strategies do they use to help their peers?". As for the third question ("what are the students' perceptions of the effects of these helping strategies on their learning?"), data from specific questions of the survey has been analysed.

4.2.3. Ethical issues

In order to preserve the anonymity of the students and the school, pseudonyms have been used in the transcriptions and the name of the school has not been included in the study.

5. Analysis

In this section, some excerpts of video recordings have been chosen, transcribed and analysed to describe what was happening while students were doing the groupwork activity. In addition, the results from the questionnaire are also analysed in order to shed light on the research questions. The analysis is organised around the research questions.

5.1. RQ1: Do students with better command of English help their peers with lower command of English during groupwork?

Excerpt 1

1.	Anna:	Raised↑ **què és↓?**
2.		*What is raised?*
3.	Martí:	((he looks at his paper and looks up to S1)) (2.5) xxx
4.	Toni:	((looking at S2)) [xxx
5.	Anna:	((giggling)) [**Sí, <u>clar</u>↑! <u>Mira</u>↑...**
6.		*Yeah right!*
7.	Martí:	xxx
8.	Marina:	((she looks at S1)) **<u>Sí</u>↑, en plan un pis tope a:lt↓.**
9.		*Yes, it's like a very high floor.*
10.	Anna:	(.) **Vale↑. És un pis molt alt↑ que travessa el** River Tha...
11.		Thames↓.
12.		*OK. It's a very high floor that goes across the River Tha...*
13.		*Thames.*

In this excerpt, students were doing the first part of the activity, which consisted in discussing their texts and asking questions to their peers in case they did not understand some words or expressions.

Anna asked about a word in English (*raised*) she did not know (line 1). Martí and Toni made some brief comments (lines 3 and 4) but, apparently, they did not solve Anna's question, who replied giggling and affirming with irony (line 5). Finally, Marina answered Anna's question satisfactorily (line 10).

Excerpt 2

1.	Anna:	[ºStroll **què és↑?**º

2.   *What is* stroll*?*

3.   Marina: **[A:mb un... en plan... amb una caminada per fora↓.**

4.   *With a... like... with a stroll outside.*

This fragment also corresponds to the first part of the activity, so there were five students working on the same text. Anna asked again about the meaning of a word in the text (line 1) and Marina explained it to her (line 3).

In the questionnaire conducted, one of the questions was "*has rebut ajuda d'algun/a dels teus companys/es?*" (did you receive help from any of your peers?). There were two possible answers: "*sí*" (yes) or "*no*".

The results (see Figure 1) show that 50% of the students admitted that they had received help during the activity whereas the other 50% considered that they had not been assisted by their peers.

1. Has rebut ajuda d'algun/a dels teus companys/es?
50 respostes

- Sí
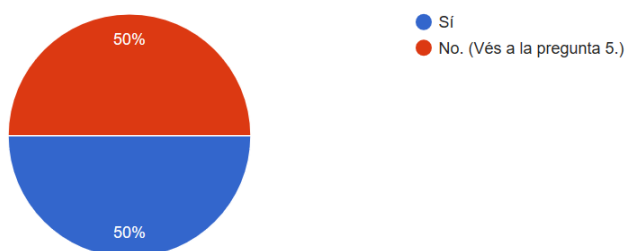- No. (Vés a la pregunta 5.)

50%
50%

Figure 1. Peer assistance received during groupwork. Graph from Google Forms.

Students were also asked whether they had offered help to their group mates during the activity ("*has ofert ajuda a algun company/a?*"). In this case, as Figure 2 shows, 74% of students stated that they had offered help while 26% admitted they had not.

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5. Has ofert ajuda a algun company/a?
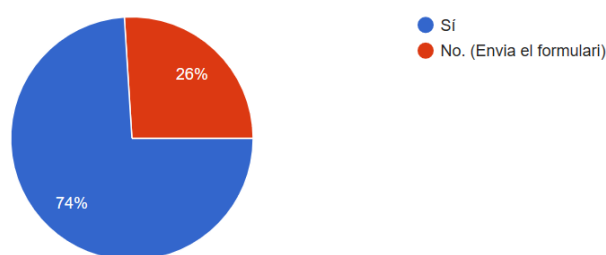
50 respostes

Figure 2. Peer assistance provided during groupwork. Graph from Google Forms.

5.2. RQ2: What strategies do they use to help their peers?

Excerpt 1

1.	Anna:	Raised↑ **què és↓?**
2.		*What is raised?*
3.	Martí:	((he looks at his paper and looks up to S1)) (2.5) xxx
4.	Toni:	((looking at S2)) [xxx
5.	Anna:	((giggling)) [**Sí, <u>clar</u>↑! <u>Mira</u>↑...**
6.		*Yeah right!*
7.	Martí:	xxx
8.	Marina:	((she looks at S1)) **<u>Sí</u>↑, en plan un pis tope a:lt↓.**
9.		*Yes, it's like a very high floor.*
10.	Anna:	(.) **Vale↑. És un pis molt alt↑ que travessa el** River Tha...
11.		Thames↓.
12.		*OK. It's a very high floor that goes across the River Tha...*
13.		*Thames.*
14.	Marina:	((she moves her right hand and looks at S1)) (.) >**EL**
15.		**TÀMESI↑, tio↓.< El riu <u>Tàmesi</u>↓.** xxx
16.		*The Thames, buddy. The Thames River.*

The excerpt 1, which was also shown in section 5.1., will be used with the aim of analysing one of the strategies employed by students when assisting their peers, which is explaining the meaning of a word. In line 8, Marina used this strategy after Anna had asked about the meaning of *raised* (line 1).

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Excerpt 3

1.	Anna:	(.) xxx **aquest restaura:nt**↑ **bar** [xxx
2.		*This restaurant...*
3.	Marina:	[**És perfecte pe:r...** [**pe:r...**
4.		*It's perfect for... for...*
5.	Anna:	[**Romàntic**↑.
6.	Marina:	[**Roman**↑**... Bueno, per... pe:r una trobada romàntica**↑,
7.		*Roman... Well, for... for a romàntic Meeting,*
8.		**<especialment quan... qua:n està combinat a:mb...>**
9.		*especially when... when it is combined with...*

In the excerpt above, which still corresponds to the first part of the activity, Marina used another strategy to assist Anna, which is correcting a mistake (see lines 5 and 6).

Excerpt 2

1.	Anna:	[ºStroll **què és**↑**?**º
2.		*What is* stroll*?*
3.	Marina:	[**A:mb un... en plan... amb una caminada per fora**↓.
4.		*With a... like... with a stroll outdoors.*

This last excerpt is also taken from the first part of the activity and shows the use of translation as a peer-assistance strategy. In line 3 Marina translates *stroll* into Catalan ("*caminada*") to solve Anna's question.

The questionnaire conducted included two questions related to assistance strategies. One of them was "*quin tipus d'ajuda has rebut?*" (what type of assistance did you receive?). There were four possible answers:

- "*T'han traduït al català o castellà una paraula que no coneixies*" (a word that you did not know was translated into Catalan or Spanish).
- "*T'han explicat el significat d'una paraula que no coneixies*" (the meaning of a word that you did not know was explained).
- "*T'han corregit un error que has fet*" (a mistake you made was corrected).
- "*Altres*" (others).

The results from the questionnaire (see Figure 3) show that 42.3% of the students who received help from their peers admitted that a word was translated into Catalan or Spanish; 26.9% stated that the meaning of a word was explained to them; 19.2% were corrected after making a mistake; and 11.6% indicated that they received other helping strategies which were related to the comprehension of the questions included in the activity.
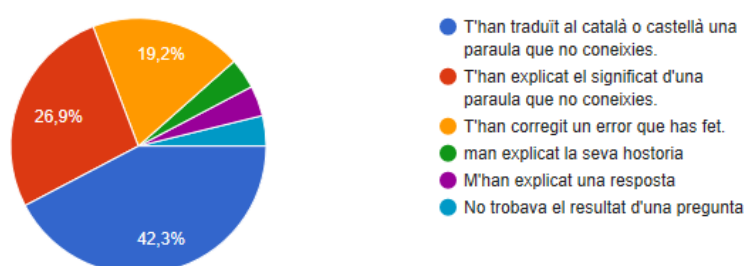

Figure 3. Assistance strategies received during groupwork. Graph from Google Forms.

The other question related to helping strategies was "*quin tipus d'ajuda has donat?*" (what type of assistance did you give?). There were four possible answers:

- "*Has traduït al català o castellà una paraula que el teu company/a no coneixia*" (you translated into Catalan or Spanish a word that your peer did not know).
- "*Has explicat el significat d'una paraula que el teu company/a no coneixia*" (you explained the meaning of a word that your peer did not know).
- "*Has corregit l'error d'un company/a*" (you corrected a peer's mistake)
- "*Altres*" (others).

According to the results (see Figure 4), the strategy most used by students to assist their peers was translating into Catalan or Spanish an unknown word (39.5%), followed by explaining the meaning of an unknown word (26.3%) and correcting a mistake (26.3%).

7. Quin tipus d'ajuda has donat?
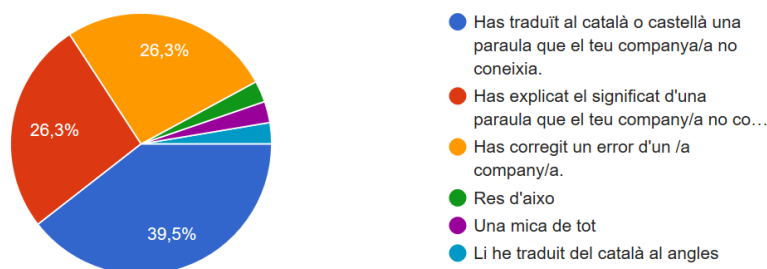
38 respostes

Figure 4. Assistance strategies provided during groupwork. Graph from Google Forms.

5.3. RQ3: What are the students' perceptions of the effects of these helping strategies on their learning?

In the questionnaire administered after the activity, students were also asked to assess how helpful the assistance they had received from their peers was, being 1 = "not useful at all"; 2 = "a little useful"; 3 = "quite useful"; and 4 = "very useful".

As the results show (see Figure 5), 48.3% of the students considered that the help their received was quite useful; 27.6% thought that it was very useful; 17.2% stated that it was a little useful; and 6.9% affirmed that it was not useful at all.

2. L'ajuda que has rebut, t'ha estat útil? Marca de l'1 al 4 com d'útil t'ha estat
(1= gens útil; 2= una mica útil; 3= bastant útil; 4=molt útil)
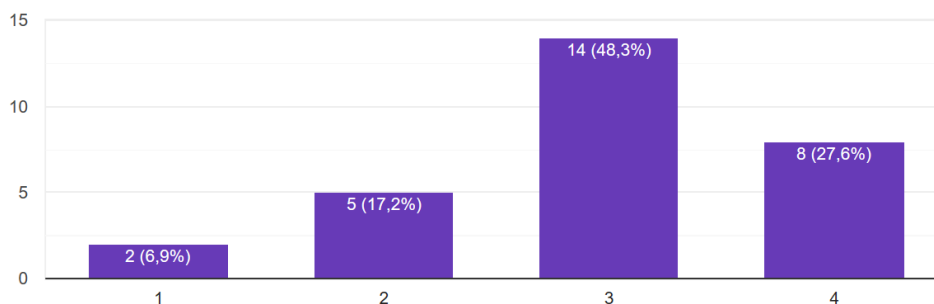
29 respostes

Figure 5. Students' perceptions of the effects of the assistance received. Graph from Google Forms.

In addition, students were enquired whether the assistance that they had provided to their peers was helpful to them to learn. Again, they had four different options: 1 = "not useful at all"; 2 = "a little useful"; 3 = "quite useful"; and 4 = "very useful".

As Figure 6 shows, most of the students (59.5%) admitted that the assistance they had provided was quite useful; for 18.9% of the students it was a little useful; 13.5% stated that it was very useful; and 8.1% thought that it was not useful at all.

6. L'ajuda que has donat t'ha servit per aprendre? Marca de l'1 al 4 com d'útil t'ha estat (1= gens útil; 2= una mica útil; 3= bastant útil; 4=molt útil)
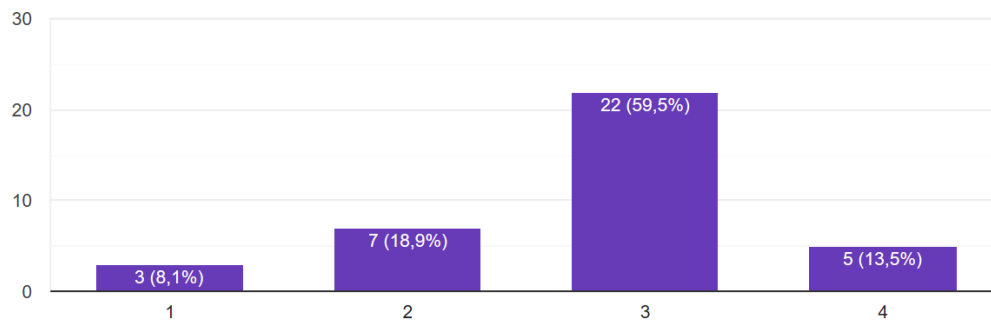
37 respostes

Figure 6. Students' perceptions of the effects of the assistance provided. Graph from Google Forms.

In the following lines, the results from the questionnaire will be thoroughly examined in order to analyse students' perceptions of each helping strategy.
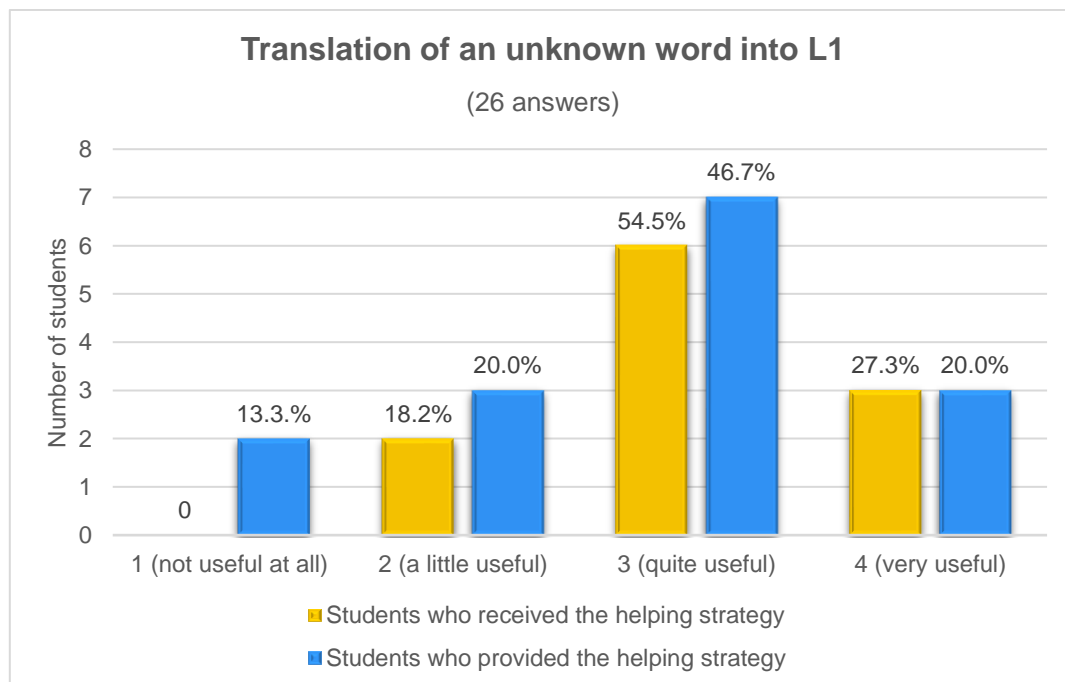

Figure 7. Students' perceptions of the effects of translating an unknown word into L1.

The overall results from the questionnaire show that the translation of an unknown word into Catalan or Spanish is perceived by students to be a "quite useful" strategy (see Figure 7). Regarding the students who received this helping strategy, 54.5% gave it a score of 3 out of 4 (meaning that it was quite useful); 27.3% admitted that it was very useful; and 18.2% thought that it was a little useful.

On the other hand, 46.7% of the students who provided assistance by translating into L1 considered that it was quite helpful for their own learning; 20% stated that it was very helpful; the same percentage recognized that it was a little helpful; and 13.3% admitted that it was not helpful at all.

Explaining the meaning of an unknown word, which was the second most used strategy, was considered to be a quite useful strategy by 57.1% of the students who received assistance through it, whereas 42.9% stated that it was very useful. None of the students who were assisted by a peer through this strategy perceived it to be little useful or not useful at all (see Figure 8).
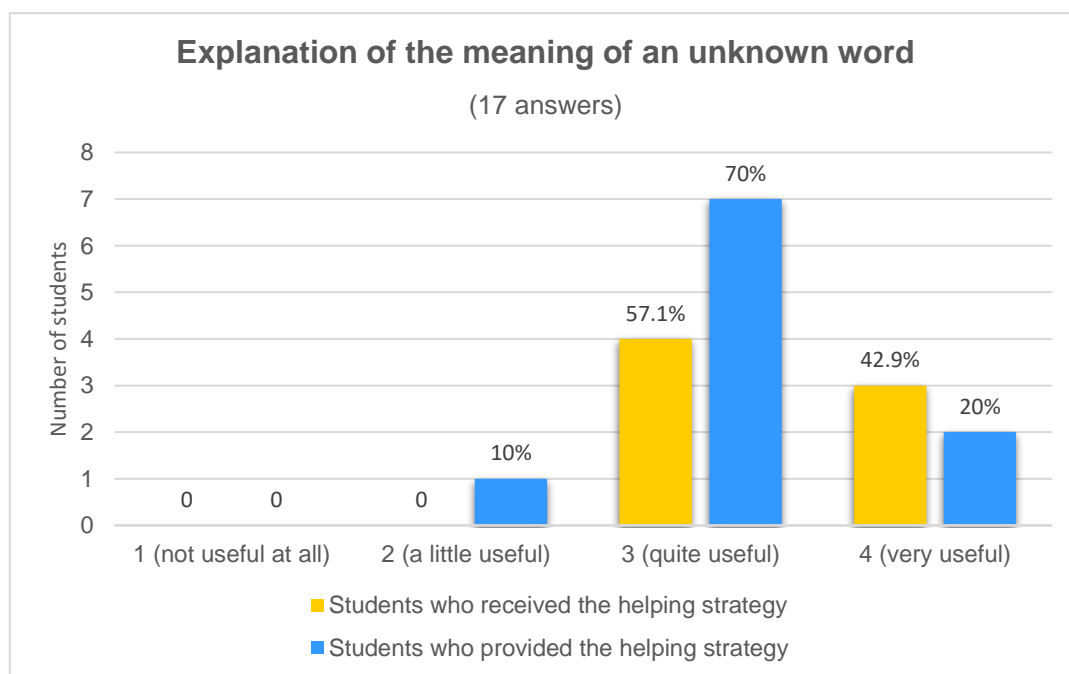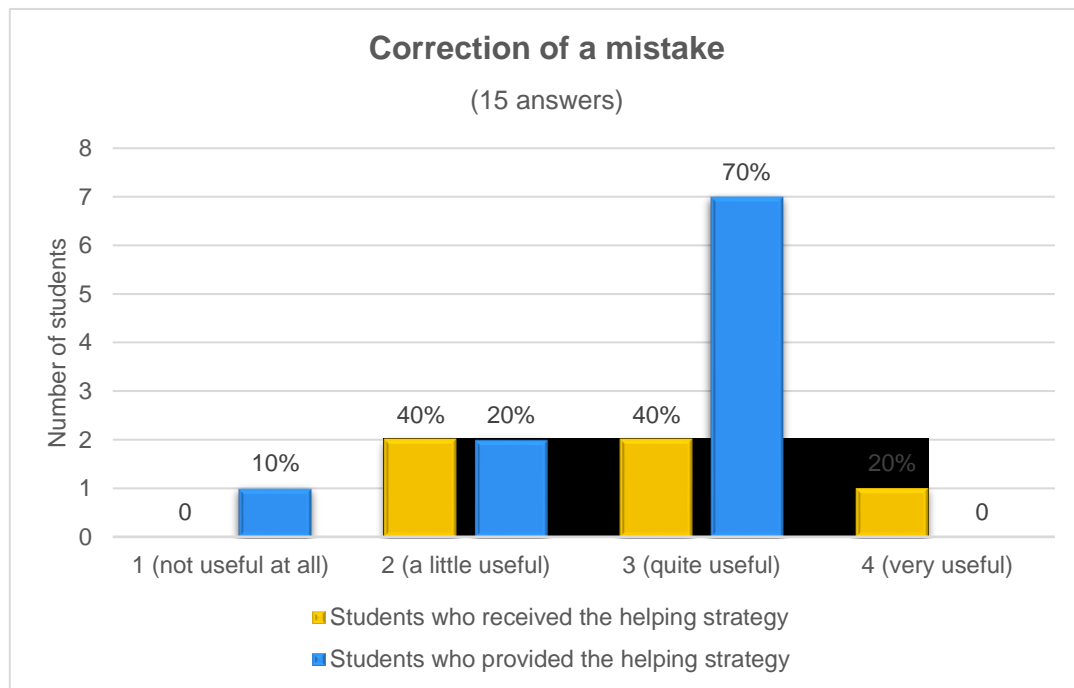

Figure 8. Students' perceptions of the effects of translating an unknown word into L1.

Regarding the students who assisted their peers by explaining the meaning of an unknown word, a great percentage (70%) believed that it was quite useful for their

own learning, 20% recognized that it was very useful and 10% stated that it was a little useful.

In respect of the third helping strategy, 40% of the students who were corrected by a peer considered that it was quite useful; the same percentage believed that it was a little useful; and 20% stated that it was very useful (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Students' perceptions of the effects of correcting a mistake.

On the other hand, correcting a peer's mistake was perceived by 70% of the students who provided assistance to be a quite helpful strategy for their own learning; 20% stated that it was a little useful; and 10% admitted that it was not useful at all.

The ranking showed in Figure 10 was obtained by calculating the average of each strategy's scores, which were gathered from the questionnaire.

Explaining the meaning of an unknown word is the strategy considered by students to be the most helpful, since it obtained the highest average score: students who received assistance through this strategy gave it a 3.4 out of 4, whereas students who provided help assigned a 3.1 to it. On the other hand, translating an unknown word into L1 was given a 3.1 by students who received this helping strategy and a 2.7 by students who provided it. Finally, the correction

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of a mistake received an average score of 2.8 by assistance receivers and a 2.6 by assistance providers.
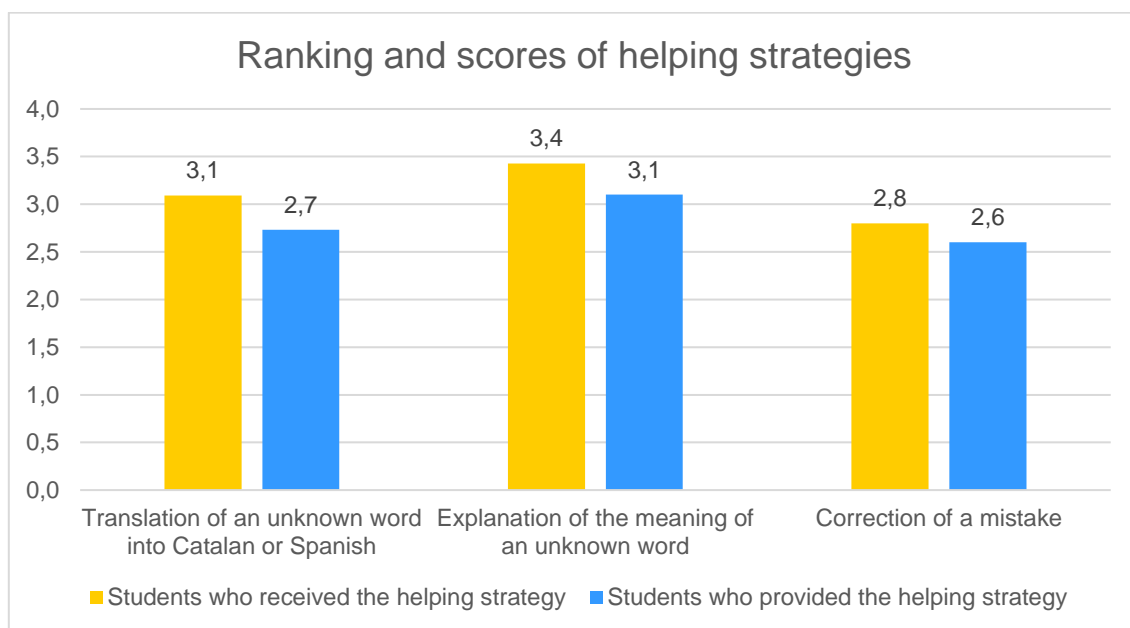
Figure 10. Ranking and scores of helping strategies.

6. Discussion

As stated in the introduction, one of the main problems that EFL teachers must deal with in a secondary school is the differences in students' levels of English. One of the purposes of this research was to discover whether peer assistance happens during groupwork.

The analysis of video recordings has shown that when a lower-proficiency student leads the activity, a great number of LRE's occurs. This finding is to some extent consistent with those stated in previous research (Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Dao & McDonough, 2016) and with what has been observed in class. However, it cannot be confirmed that this great number of LRE's are related to better effects on students' learning.

Unlike the cited previous research, which focused on pairs or groups of three, the present study analysed groups from four up to six students. And although the activity required cooperation from all members, through the content analysis of students' interaction it has been noticed that, in some cases, only two or three students were involved. These findings support what Klingner and Vaughn (2000) stated in their study. Therefore, although further research would be needed to determine how peer assistance influence students' engagement (or lack of engagement) in tasks, teachers should pay close attention to students' participation during groupwork in order to avoid marginalisation.

In accordance with what was already found by Klingner and Vaughn (2000), the results from the questionnaire showed that students' perceptions of the effects of peer assistance on their learning were positive for both assistance providers and assistance receivers, even though there is no evidence that peer assistance had a real impact on students' gains.

7. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to answer the research questions included in Section 3, which are:

1. *Do students with better command of English help their peers with lower command of English during groupwork?*
2. *What strategies do they use to help their peers?*
3. *What are the students' perceptions of the effects of these helping strategies on their learning?*

This section begins by responding to these questions.

7.1.   Responses to research questions

RQ1: Do students with better command of English help their peers with lower command of English during groupwork?

The data analysed confirms that peer assistance occurs in groupwork although, according to the results from the questionnaire, the percentage of students who admitted they had received assistance (50%) is lower than the percentage of those who affirmed they had provided help (74%). One possible interpretation regarding this phenomenon is students' perception of being assisted. In other words, students may consider the fact of receiving help as a sign of weakness, so it is probably difficult for them to admit it.

RQ 2: What strategies do they use to help their peers?

Regarding the assistance strategies, the results from the questionnaire show that translation into L1 is the strategy most used by participants: 42.3% of students admitted they were assisted through this strategy and 39.5% stated that they used it to assist their peers. This is probably because of the wide use of L1 during the task, since in the first part of the activity most of the students focus on translating the texts instead of discussing them. The second strategy most used was explaining the meaning of an unknown word, which was employed by more than 26% of participants who aided their peers. Finally, 19.2% of students who were assisted admitted that they were corrected by their peers, whereas 26.9% of students that provided assistance stated that they did it by correcting a mistake.

RQ 3 What are the students' perceptions of the effects of these helping strategies on their learning?

The overall results from the survey conducted show that students perceive helping strategies as something positive since 48.3% of the participants who had received assistance during the activity considered it to be quite helpful, and 59.5% of those who had provided helping strategies also perceived them to be rather useful for their learning. Even so, it cannot be stated that peer assistance had a real impact on students' learning.

7.2.   Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

The present study has several limitations since it is focused on the analysis of a few excerpts and the results from a questionnaire about just one activity. Therefore, further research would be needed, not only to support the results analysed herein, but also to shed light on new questions arisen from the findings of this study (e.g. "how does peer assistance influence students' engagement in tasks?" and "does greater number of LRE's have a positive impact on students' learning?").

7.3.   Personal reflection

As a teacher, this study has helped me to become aware of the opportunity to take advantage of the differences in students' levels in a class, rather than see them as a problem. However, it has also shown me the need to find a way to involve all students in groupwork and encourage them to make use of English. One possible solution to this issue would be assigning roles to students as in Collaborative Strategic Reading approach (Klingner & Vaughn, 2000).

As stated by Klingner and Vaughn (2000) teacher should also guide students on how to interact effectively during groupwork so students can take the most advantage of it. This requires involvement and commitment from both students and teacher.

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9. Appendixes

9.1.   Appendix 1: The Jigsaw Reading

A travel brochure is a leaflet that contains information about a city like its most interesting places, museums, restaurants, etc. We will read a travel brochure about London playing the Jigsaw Reading. Here are the steps you must follow:

1.   Make groups of 4 (this will be the "home group").
2.   Each member will have a number from 1 to 4.
3.   You will receive a text. Read it carefully and answer the questions you will find below.
4.   Look for the classmates with the same number ("expert group").
5.   Talk about your text. If you have questions about it, ask them. You must become an expert on it.
6.   Find your home group and explain your texts to each other.

Text taken from: http://content.tfl.gov.uk/london-visitor-guide.pdf

Text number 1

MUSEUMS

The National Gallery
You can find hundreds of the most famous, beautiful and <u>challenging</u> paintings in the world at the National Gallery. Discover inspiring art by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Titian, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Turner, Monet and Van Gogh.

The British Museum
One of the biggest and <u>finest</u> museums in the world, the British Museum is home to some of the most <u>treasured</u> historical artefacts in existence. The <u>extensive</u> exhibition includes the Rosetta Stone, Assyrian <u>treasures</u>, the Egyptian mummies and the museum's spectacular, light-filled Great Court. A new restaurant has recently been opened in the Great Court; an ideal spot for afternoon tea under the <u>magnificent</u> roof. There are also free tours and guides to <u>take advantage of</u> at the museum.

Vocabulary:

- Challenging: stimulating, interesting
- Finest: of superior or best quality; excellent
- Treasured: something greatly valued
- Extensive: of great extent, wide
- Treasure: something greatly valued
- Magnificent: splendid or impressive
- Take advantage of: use an opportunity to gain something

Questions:

1. What two museums are mentioned in the text?
2. What can you find in the National Gallery?
3. What is included in the British Museum's exhibition?
4. What has been opened recently in the Great Court of the British Museum?
5. Can you visit the British Museum for free?

Text number 2

INTERESTING SITES

Tower of London

The Tower of London is one of the most famous <u>fortified</u> buildings in the world. It's also a mysterious place full of dark secrets, strange stories and historic <u>relics</u>. Here you can admire the <u>priceless</u> Crown Jewels, explore the Medieval Palace, visit the <u>infamous</u> Bloody Tower, and go on a tour with a Yeoman Warder to learn about the many <u>executions</u> that took place here.

St Paul's Cathedral

The 17th century St Paul's Cathedral on Ludgate Hill in the City of London is one of the city's most <u>iconic</u> buildings. It was designed by Sir Christopher Wren and it was the highest building in London until as late as 1962. Use the touch-screen multimedia guides, or take a guided tour, to learn about the famous interior or, if you're <u>feeling fit</u>, <u>climb up</u> to the Whispering Gallery and on towards the golden Gallery at the top of the <u>dome</u> where you'll be <u>rewarded</u> with amazing views across London. You can also descend into the crypt where you'll find <u>memorials</u> of heroes such as Admiral Lord Nelson.

Vocabulary:

- Fortified: protected or strengthened against attack
- Relics: something having interest because of its age or its connection with the past
- Priceless: having a great value
- Infamous: having a bad reputation
- Executions: murders
- Iconic: very emblematic
- Feel fit: feel in good physical condition, in good health
- Climb up: go up or ascend
- Dome: a roof or ceiling that is rounded or in the form of a part of a sphere
- Rewarded: compensated
- Memorials: something design to preserve the memory of a person

Questions:

1. What two interesting sites are mentioned in the text?
2. What can you see in the Tower of London?
3. Who designed St Paul's Cathedral?
4. Where can you enjoy amazing views across London?
5. What can you find in the crypt?

Text number 3

RESTAURANTS

Rainforest Cafe
Rainforest Cafe <u>brings</u> the sights and sounds of the jungle to London's famous Piccadilly Circus, with elephants, gorillas, jaguars, crocodiles, butterflies, tropical fish tanks, an indoor <u>waterfall</u> and <u>roaring thunderstorm sounds</u>. Feeding time is a fun, family-friendly affair, with steaks, burgers, pasta and salads on the menu.

OXO Tower Restaurant, Bar and Brasserie
Dine in true British style with a beautiful <u>raised</u> view across the River Thames. This restaurant, bar and brasserie is a great place for a romantic meal, especially when combined with a casual <u>stroll</u> along the South Bank before and after your meal. <u>Book ahead</u> to make sure you get an <u>alfresco</u> table on the outdoor terrace and enjoy the scene with St Paul's Cathedral in the background. You can also expect to enjoy live jazz in the brasserie.

Vocabulary:

- Bring: carry
- Waterfall: a steep fall of water from a height, as over a cliff
- Roaring thunderstorm sounds: loud noise during a strong storm
- Raised: set high
- Stroll: walk
- Book ahead: reserve in advance
- Alfresco: in the open air

Questions:
1. What two restaurants are mentioned in the text?
2. What does the Rainforest Cafe recreate?
3. What can you eat in the Rainforest Cafe?
4. What is OXO Tower Restaurant Bar and Brasserie great for?
5. Why does the text recommend booking ahead?

Text number 4

SHOPPING

Selfridges

Selfridges is one of the world's finest <u>department stores</u>, with six floors of fabulous fashion, electrical <u>gadgets</u>, stylish <u>homeware</u> and tasty food. But <u>it's far more than</u> just a shopping destination, it's a <u>social hub</u> - with events, bars, restaurants, cafes and art exhibitions.

Harrods

Famous around the world, Harrods is one of the most important department stores in London. Inside the <u>stunning</u> building you'll find everything from homewares and kitchen essentials to books and beauty products. But most people <u>make a beeline for</u> the Harrods-branded gifts, fashion <u>aisles</u> and food hall.

Vocabulary:

- Department store: a large store that sells a variety of goods organized by departments or sections
- Gadget: devices (e.g. mobile phones)
- Homeware: furniture and furnishings for a house
- Social hub: place where people meet
- It's far more than: it's not only
- Stunning: very attractive
- Make beeline for: make a direct route travelled quickly
- Aisle: a walkway between or along two sections

Questions:

1. What two department stores are mentioned in the text?
2. How many floors can you find in Selfridges?
3. What can you buy in Selfridges?
4. What else can you find in Selfridges apart from shops?
5. What are the most-wanted products in Harrods?

9.2. Appendix 2: Video excerpt

<u>Protected link to the video-recording</u>

9.3. Appendix 3: Questionnaire

1. Has rebut ajuda d'algun/a dels teus companys/es?

    O Sí

    O No (vés a la pregunta 5)

2. L'ajuda que has rebut t'ha estat útil? Marca de l'1 al 4 com d'útil t'ha estat (1 = gens útil; 2 = una mica útil; 3 = bastant útil; 4 = molt útil).

   1 O   2 O   3 O   4 O

3. Quin tipus d'ajuda has rebut?

   O T'han traduït al català o castellà una paraula que no coneixies.

   O T'han explicat el significat d'una paraula que no coneixies.

   O T'han corregit un error que has fet.

   O Altres

4. Recordes la paraula que t'han ajudat a entendre? En cas afirmatiu, quina era (ex: la paraula "brochure").

5. Has ofert ajuda a algún/a company/a?

   O Sí

   O No (envia el formulari)

6. L'ajuda que has donat t'ha servit per aprendre? Marca de l'1 al 4 com d'útil t'ha estat (1 = gens útil; 2 = una mica útil; 3 = bastant útil; 4 = molt útil)

   1 O   2 O   3 O   4 O

7. Quin tipus d'ajuda has donat?

   O Has traduït al català o castellà una paraula que el teu/la teva company/a no coneixia.

   O Has explicat el significat d'una paraula que el teu/la teva company/a no coneixia.

   O Has corregit un error d'un /a company/a.

   O Altres

8. Recordes la paraula que has ajudat a entendre? En cas afirmatiu, quin/a era (ex: la paraula "brochure").

9.4.   Appendix 4: Jeffersonian Transcript Notation System

S1	Student one
S2	Student two
S3	Student three
S4	Student four

↑	Rising pitch or intonation
↓	Falling pitch or intonation
(.)	A brief pause, usually less than 2 seconds
(#of seconds)	Timed pause, indicated in parentheses
(())	Annotation of non-verbal activity
°°	Whisper, reduced volume or quiet speech
:	Prolongation of a sound
Underline	The speaker is emphasizing or stressing the speech
[]	Start and end points of overlapping speech
XXX	Speech which is unclear or in doubt in the transcript
<text>	The enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual
>text<	The enclosed speech was delivered more rapidly than usual
ALL CAPS	Indicates shouted or increased volume speech
Bold	Catalan words
Italics	English translation of Catalan or Spanish words