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# Epistemics in students' interactions in a collaborative context: a case study


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## **1. ABSTRACT AND KEY WORDS**

This master's dissertation examines the interaction between four Spanish students during an online conversation with three Swedish teenagers as part of a project in their EFL class. Focusing on the students' participation and what they say from a conversation and interaction analysis perspective, this paper aims to examine the interactants' roles when working collectively in their English class and to observe the epistemic stance and status of the different participants. The focus is, therefore, on knowledge. The present study shows how the students demonstrate having knowledge or not having it and the way in which that affects participation levels and task development.

**KEYWORDS:** social interaction, epistemic stance and status, K+ (knowing), K- (unknowing), EFL, collaborative tasks.

## **RESUM I PARAULES CLAU**

Aquest treball de fi de màster examina les interaccions entre quatre estudiants espanyols durant una conversa en línia amb tres estudiants suecs com a part d'un projecte durant la seva classe d'anglès. Centrant-se en la participació dels estudiants i en allò que diuen des d'una perspectiva d'anàlisi de la conversa i d'interacció, aquest estudi pretén examinar els rols dels participants quan treballen col·lectivament i observar la seva posició i estatus epistèmic. El focus d'aquest treball es basa, per tant, en el coneixement. El present estudi mostra de quina manera els estudiants mostren tenir coneixement o no tenir-lo i la manera en què això afecta als nivells de participació i en el desenvolupament de la tasca.

**PARAULES CLAU:** interacció social, postura i estatus epistèmic, K+ (sabedor), K- (no sabedor), EFL, tasques col·laboratives.

## 2. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Since the emergence of sociocultural theories such as that developed by Vygotsky and other researchers, it has become clear and well documented that interaction is a fundamental factor in language acquisition and that learning a language does not occur solely through the acquisition of isolated linguistic constructions and rules; rather language learning takes place through the use of the language itself.

After acknowledging the indisputable importance of social interaction, it is also beneficial that the latter can be analysed in order to see the different structures and roles (patterns of behaviour that people tend to follow in specific situations) that may appear in the relationship between individuals (Little, 2016). Ervin Goffman, in his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), developed his theory of the theatrical performance claiming that the participants in an interaction are actors with individual roles and their performance is influenced by rules and rituals that they follow, knowingly or unknowingly. Goffman's seminal work has laid an important foundation for subsequent foundational work in conversation and interaction analysis (see Garfinkel, 1964, 1986; Garfinkel & Rawls, 2005; Cicourel, 1981; Goodwin, 1981, 1994, 2000; Anderson & Sharrock, 1982; Boden & Zimmerman, 1991; Drew, 2003, to name a few).

Along these lines, the following paper focuses on the interactants' roles when working in groups and having a conversation in an EFL class. More specifically, this study examines one of the reasons that may lead to a high or low participation during interactions between students: the epistemic stance and status.

The aim of this dissertation is thus to analyse the epistemic stance and status of the different participants in a conversation, that is, to look for patterns and roles in

interaction regarding knowledge and the evidence of their epistemic trajectories.

Therefore, this study pretends to answer the following research questions:

1. Who is demonstrating K+ (knowing stance/status)?
2. Who is demonstrating K- (unknowing stance/status)?
3. Do the roles (epistemic stance) shift throughout the session?

The results of this dissertation are expected to be helpful in the future in order to improve the author's professional practice as well as providing other teachers insight into how to understand group work in their own language classrooms. Having a deeper understanding of the interaction processes that students experiment when working in group and learning a new language will allow teacher to develop better teaching performance. At the same time, having evidence of the epistemic trajectories that students may go through during a conversation (and influence their level of participation) will help teachers give them better indications when developing group interaction activities and, consequently, will lead to a better performance of the task by the students.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social interaction has been extensively studied and analysed due to the interest that its complexity and all the factors that intervene in it have generated. As Little (2016) points out in his *Introduction to Sociology*, social interaction is much more complex than we generally perceive and it is, in fact, a “rife with unacknowledged rituals, tacit understandings, covert symbolic exchanges, impression management techniques, and calculated strategic maneuverings” (p.863). The sociologist Erving Goffman based his studies on the observation of interaction rituals that occurred in everyday social interactions and concluded that participants who take part in an interaction presumably do so through universally accepted rules, despite the fact that they are frequently unaware of this (Dooly, 2019). More specifically, Goffman analysed how an individual in “ordinary work situations present himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them” (Goffman, 1959, p.7).

Social interaction and its analysis are therefore essential to understand individuals' relationships. In addition, and taking into account that interaction is also a fundamental factor in language acquisition, it is quite obvious that a detailed analysis of interaction as it takes place in an educational context may be helpful in order to understand students' participation in collaborative environments. According to the Catalan curriculum for foreign languages in obligatory secondary education (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015), “the processes of comprehension and oral expression are validated in the interaction” (p.9), thus the student must know how to “efficiently and effectively interact in a monologue, dialogue and multi-managed speeches in which different interlocutors intervene” (p.45). Consequently, “oral interaction in foreign languages



plays a fundamental role in improving language learning” (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2016, p.49) and it involves “more than learning to receive and to produce utterances” (Council of Europe, 2001, p.14).

However, no matter how generalised the utility of social interaction is, the focus of this dissertation falls on epistemics, and how this is linguistically stated in social interaction. As Rusk and Rønning (2020) explain the importance of epistemics to group work in their own research:

The relationship between learning and group work is often treated as self-evident, but the finer workings of this relationship require further study into the social organisation of group work. The aim of the research that forms the basis for the current article is to locate, describe, and gain new understanding of how peers organise their group work with a focus on epistemic negotiations. Based on detailed micro-analyses of several situations where pupils express their knowledge and orient to other’s expressions of knowledge regarding the current assignment, we focus on describing and exemplifying how participants organise their social interaction and cooperation in group work. There appear to be important factors that may affect the group work. These include access to physical resources, participants’ expressed knowledge and orientation to co-participants’ expressed knowledge, and access to new knowledge. (p. 36)

Stivers, Mondada and Steensing (2011) affirm that “in every social interaction, knowledge displays and negotiations are ubiquitous” (p.1) and that “the last ten or so years have seen a rapid escalation in work on epistemic primacy in conversation” (p.2). One of the reasons for this increase is that a better understanding of epistemics is needed in order to understand how participants in an interaction deal with issues of agreement/disagreement and affiliation/disaffiliation. These issues are of vital importance to cooperation and pro-sociality in human behaviour (Stivers et al, 2011).

Stivers, Mondada and Steensing (2011) also state that “two main strands of research have addressed how knowledge is managed in and through social interaction” and that one of these main strands of research regarding knowledge is located within conversation analysis and focused on “epistemic positions taken through language and

embodied action” (p.8). These epistemic positions can show how certain interactants are about what they know, their authority, their responsibilities and rights about that knowledge and that is why Stivers, Mondada and Steensing suggest the three epistemic dimensions described below.

First of all, epistemic access focuses on what the interactant believes to know and not to know and how the speaker treats its interlocutor. Therefore, two degrees of certainty appear due to the fact that “epistemic access is typically conceptualized as binary (K+ or K-)” (Goodwin 1981; Heritage & Raymond 2015; cited in Stivers et al 2011, p.15): the knowing or K+ and the unknowing or K-. In this scenario, the participants in an interaction can take two different positions: “speakers can work to combat implied claims of epistemic primacy inherent in initial sequential position, so too can they combat implied claims of epistemic inferiority in second position” (Stivers et al, 2011, p.20). In other words, they can either accept that one has the knowledge (epistemic access congruence) or they can fight for their position of K+ (epistemic incongruent situation).

Secondly, epistemic primacy focuses on how interactants “orient to asymmetries in their relative rights to know about some state of affairs as well as their relative rights to tell, inform, assert or assess something” (p.17). At the same time they are “concerned to indicate relative rights to knowledge and relative knowledge, particularly if their rights or authority is not being attended” (Stivers et al, 2011, p.16). In this dimension, there are again two degrees of certainty (K+ and K-), which can appear and be identified with statements such as: “because I’m your mother” (K+) or “maybe, but I haven’t done much of this” (K-) (Dooly, 2019).

As for the third and last epistemic dimension, Stivers, Mondada and Steensing talk about epistemic responsibilities. These responsibilities that one has respect to

knowledge “extends beyond highly personal information” (Stivers et al, 2011, p.22). Pomerantz (1980), cited in Stivers et al (2011), distinguished two types of knowledge and again to degrees of certainty: type 1 ‘knowables’ “have rights and obligations to know”, for example, regarding someone’s name or personal information; type 2 ‘knowables’ are “assumed to have access to by virtue of the knowings being occasioned” (Pomerantz 1980, cited in Stivers et al 2011, p. 22), for example regarding the comings and goings of other people.

With respect to the importance of observing how knowledge displays in an educational and interactional context, Garner and Mushin (2017) affirm that “classrooms are a locus for the study of epistemic trajectories because they are an institutional setting whose key focus is on the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge by children” (p.30). In addition, if verbal and non-verbal behaviours of the different participants in a conversation are examined, epistemic trajectory can be followed and it can be seen who demonstrates a knowing status (K+), who demonstrates an unknowing status (K-) and who does not give enough evidence of either knowing or not knowing (2017).

Along the same lines, the present study puts the target on epistemics in order to analyse interaction and group work, and to observe how knowledge demonstrations affect the students’ performance throughout a specific activity. Furthermore, transcripts will help identify verbal and non-verbal behaviours that demonstrate students’ K+ or K- status. As commented before, the evidence of the epistemic trajectories and status could become a useful indicator in order to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses and proceed according to this.

## **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHOD**

### **4.1 Contextualization**

The data to be analysed in this project was kindly offered and provided by Dr. Melinda Dooly, tutor of this master's dissertation as well as lead researcher of the GREIP.

The data was collected during the implementation of some of the activities belonging to the KONECT project, a telecollaborative project between two secondary schools, one of them located in Terrassa (Spain) and the other one in Hässleholm (Sweden). The activities included in the project were carried out as part of their EFL lessons in both schools and consisted of different research and discussion activities regarding Syrian refugees in Europe. In order to accomplish the project, the students from both schools had to work together using different online resources and using English as their lingua franca.

This dissertation focuses on a specific activity of the project (a 44 minutes and 22 seconds session) in which four Spanish and three Swedish students hold a Skype conversation with the purpose of introducing themselves and exchanging their personal information and emails for further work. The students were aged between 11-13 years old and their level of proficiency ranged from lower-intermediate to intermediate.

### **4.2 Data collection**

The data was gathered with the obtained permission of the Spanish and Swedish participants and their parents. In addition, the heads of the schools and the principal researcher of the KONECT project signed a protocol contract. Later, the writer of this dissertation digitally signed an ethical use of data form for working with transcripts gathered by GREIP researchers.

As specified in Dooly & Davitova (2018), the researchers used a ‘roving’ camera to record the session as well as spyglasses worn by one of the participants in order to have a better idea of the students’ perspective during the interaction. So as to respect the participants’ anonymity, their faces were blurred and their names were changed and replaced by pseudonyms.

### **4.3 Analytical approach and Data Analysis**

This dissertation takes a conversation and interaction approach to analyse the data. First of all, conversation analysis, which focuses mainly on what is said, is the “systematic analysis of the talk produced in everyday situations of human interaction: talk-in-interaction” (Hutchby & Wooffitt 2008, cited in Dooly & Davitova 2018, p.2). Additionally, conversation analysis “aims to describe, analyse, and understand talk as a basic and constitutive feature of human social life” (Sidnell 2010 cited in Dooly 2019, p.8).

In respect to epistemics, “conversation analytic approaches to the study of knowledge in social interaction focus largely on the ways in which the epistemic status of participants is made manifest in social interaction, and on any changes in their epistemic status” (Garner & Mushin, 2017, p.13). This study expands the application of CA to include interaction analysis. According to Andrade (2015), interaction analysis is not that different from conversation analysis; both focus not only on what is said but on how it is said, however interaction analysis pays more attention to the spatial organization of the activity.

In both cases, the focus of analysis is on “the different audible and visible resources that people use” (Hirvonen & Tiitula, 2018, p. 160) to mutually ‘achieve’ something. This something may be a buy-sell transaction (in which the focus would be

on the interaction between the customer and the service person) or task accomplishment, as in in-class group work. The analysis attempts to pay close attention to the way in which the interactants sequence their interaction, premised on the notions that all interaction has some 'basic organization mechanics' pertaining to turn-taking, sequence organization, repair and orientation towards the other (e.g alignment; Schegloff, 2007).

To select fragments for analysis, the author of this dissertation focused on the Spanish students' interventions and interactions between each other, giving more attention to the four Spanish students' interventions rather than the Swedish ones. The video was viewed several times and then divided into 5 sections in order to show the evolution of the students' interventions. The criteria used for the division were based on the notes taken regarding the development of the task and the different phases that it went through until its completion. Starting from contact establishment, the rest of the fragments were chosen according to the appearance throughout the whole session of comments and interactions that demonstrated and described the students' epistemic positions and trajectories. Contrarily, those fragments in which the participation of the Swedish students prevailed over the Spanish ones and those in which the conversation deviated considerably from the purpose of the activity were ignored. For transcripts, the Jeffersonian transcription method was employed.

## 5. ANALYSIS

### 5.1 Fragment 1 (03.27 – 04.07)

In the following section, 5 fragments were analysed chronologically. In the first fragment, the four Spanish students establish connection with the Swedish students for the first time. The teacher and one of the researches have just departed the room and left the Spanish students on their own. The Swedish students had previously prepared some questions in order to break the ice and start the conversation.



Image 1. Clara, Lucas, Christian and Brandon

Participants: Mary (Swedish student on screen), Christian, Brandon, Lucas, Clara, researcher

1. Mary ((to the Spanish students)) how do you feel about the activities in the
2. project ↑
3. Christian (3) sorry ↑
4. Mary how do you feel about the activities in the Project ↑
5. Brandon aah:: xxx ((Spanish students muttering)) that's good no ↑
6. Lucas **si** (.) **si** ↓ xxx ((laughing))
7. *yes yes*
8. Brandon yeaah:: ((laughing))
9. Clara **contestad vosotros**
10. *you answer*
11. Brandon no: ((raising his hand and pointing at his peers))

12. ((the researcher tells the Spanish students they can ask for a new
13. question if they don't like this one))
14. Brandon °es que no sé que decir° =
15. *I don't know what to say*
16. Lucas °come on° ((looking at his peers with a smile))
17. Clara **va xxx tu** ((staring at one of his peers)) **que eres el que mejor habla**
18. *come on you (.) you are the one who speaks better*
19. Brandon you can tell another question ↑ (.) please ↑

In this first excerpt, the Swedish students initiate the conversation by asking the Spanish students a question they had previously prepared. After a short pause, in which none of the Spanish students answer, Christian seems to indicate by saying “sorry” that they have not understood the question and they would like the Swedish students to repeat it.

Once Mary does it, the Spanish students begin to mutter and exchange a series of comments and glances with which they show confusion, perhaps nervousness, and in which they encourage each other to answer the question. Brandon (see line 5), looking at his peers, expresses his opinion and pretends to give them the floor but they never directly answer the question to the Swedish students. In fact, they seem to continuously be shifting their responsibility for answering to one of their classmates; for instance, in line 9 Clara explicitly tells her peers to answer and in line 16 Lucas impatiently incites them by saying “come on”.

It is interesting to note how Clara passes on the responsibility to her peer arguing that he should be the one to reply as he, to her opinion, is the one with a better English oral performance. As a temporary solution and in order to skip this question, Brandon



finally asks the Swedish students to change the topic for a different one.

## 5.2 Fragment 2 (10.57 – 12.01)

The following fragment takes places after the students finish exchanging their Instagram profiles. During these minutes, Brandon has been leading the conversation with the Swedish students and has been the one who has actively interacted with them, showing them their profiles by using his mobile phone screen and asking them to do the same with theirs.



Image 2. Lucas telling his peers to wait

Participants: Brandon, Christian, Lucas, Clara

1. Brandon ((to his peers)) **decid (.) decid xxx decid algo vosotros que yo ya he**
2. **hablado**
3. *you say something that I have already spoken*
4. Christian ((to Lucas)) tell something ↑
5. Lucas yes [yes::] xxx =
6. Brandon ((to Lucas)) [tell something to::: to Sweden] ((pointing at the screen))
7. Lucas em::: I'm thinking ↑ ((telling them to wait with his hand))
8. Brandon ah okay okay =
9. ((the researcher suggests something the students could ask))
10. Clara ((to Christian)) °**le preguntas si tiene hangouts**° xxx
11. *you can ask them if they have hangouts*
12. Brandon ah: do you have (.) hangouts ↑ hangouts
13. Christian [gmail]

14. Brandon [hangout] ((changing pronunciation))

15. Christian gmail ↑ google mail ↓

In line 1, Brandon encourages his peers to participate in the conversation using his L1 and arguing that they should now be the ones to intervene because of the fact that he previously had been the one doing most of the talking. Immediately, all the Spanish students put the focus on Lucas (see lines 4 and 6), urging him to say something. However, Lucas does not seem to be prepared or have anything to say at the moment so he tries to gain some time by saying that he is thinking about it (line 7).

After that, Clara seems to have an idea in order to maintain the conversation but, instead of verbalising it herself, she shares it with her peers and tells Christian to ask it for her (see line 10). Although Brandon takes the control back again and asks the Swedish students Clara's idea, Christian shyly begins to participate in the Skype conversation and asks them for their gmail account.

### 5.3 Fragment 3 (17.35 – 20.18)

In this fragment the students resume the conversation and exchanging questions after having shared their Snapchat accounts and email addresses. The Swedish students continue asking the Spanish students about their opinion on the refugees' project and the four teenagers discuss who the one to participate this time should be.



Image 3. Brandon pointing at Clara and Lucas



31. Christian ((to Lucas)) say something (.) plea:se ↓
32. Lucas ((touching his chin)) mm::
33. Brandon ((to Lucas)) say something (.) I talk all the time ↓ (.) and Christian
34. Lucas ((he tells Brandon to wait with a hand move))
35. Christian what do you thi::nk about this project ↓
36. ((the Swedish students begin to answer the question but the screen
37. freezes))
38. Researcher xxx
39. Brandon xxx **y se quedaron así** hello::
40. *and they stayed this way*
41. ((the connection comes back))
42. Lucas hello
43. Christian do you have good internet connection::n ↑ (.) o::r
44. Brandon do you have good [internet connection] ↑
45. Christian [internet problems] ↑
46. Mary xxx it's not good xxx it's in the middle
47. Christian now it's making problems ↑
48. ((Brandon touches Luca's knee and looks at the whiteboard; the
49. researcher calls him))
50. Lucas yes yes (3.4) em:: what are you learning in this project ↑



Image 4. Christian urging Clara to participate

During this fragment of the recording, the Spanish students try to intervene more frequently in the conversation but some of them, Clara and Lucas, only make small

efforts in order to say something. As a result, Brandon and Christian lead the interaction while their peers Clara and Lucas are urged to participate. At the beginning of the excerpt, Brandon continues being the most active participant and the one to answer most of the Swedish students' questions. However, he and Christian continuously try to get their classmates' attention by tapping their knees and shoulders and making them look at the whiteboard where the researcher had written some possible questions for the students to formulate (See lines 9,10, 11).

At some point (see line 26), Brandon explicitly tells Lucas and Clara that it is their turn now to intervene. He argues that he has been the one to speak for most of the connection (see line 33) and includes Christian in this group. Being under pressure, Clara and Lucas do not feel ready to participate. Lucas continues touching his chin as if we were thinking and telling his peers to wait (in line 34); at the same time, Clara snorts and makes despairing glances to the researcher and peers (see line 28).

In line 37, the Internet connection fails but comes back in only a few seconds. When it does, Christian and Brandon ask their Swedish peers about their Internet connection and Clara and Lucas remain silent. After the researcher's attention call, Lucas finally dares to intervene (see line 50) and asks the Swedish students a question.

#### **5.4 Fragment 4 (21.19 – 24.37)**

The following fragment takes place only some minutes after the fragment above. The Swedish students have just given their opinion about the project and, in all, the students have now already been talking for about 20 minutes.

Participants: Christian, Brandon, Clara, researcher, Lucas, Mary (Swedish student on screen)



Image 5. Clara hiding her head

1. Christian ((to Clara)) [say something please] ↓
2. Brandon ((to Clara)) [xxx] ((tapping Clara's knee))
3. Christian Clara say something
4. Brandon SAY SOMETHING CLARA:
5. Clara °es que :: ° (1) NO::: ((hiding her head))
6. *the thing is*
7. Christian your name:: ↑
8. Clara eh:: **si ja el sé** ((the boys laugh))
9. *I already know it*
10. Brandon Clara say something =
11. Clara no:: ((turning her face))
12. Brandon [please::]
13. Researcher [Clara]
14. Brandon plea::::se
15. Clara xxx ((looking at the researcher))
16. Christian ((to the Swedish students)) she xxx to say something bu::t
17. Lucas ((to Clara)) xxx ((Clara hits Lucas's leg and Brandon laughs))
18. Researcher °what did he say° ↑
19. Brandon I don't know
20. Researcher ((to Lucas)) °what did you say° ↑
21. ((Lucas laughs and Clara makes him shut up))
22. Researcher xxx
23. Christian well (.) eh (.) this is:: so xxx we are going to [sto::p] ((smiling))
24. Researcher no no no no =
25. Brandon no (.) don't stop the call (0.3) don't stop the call

26. ((the Swedish students continue speaking))
27. Brandon **qué hace** ↑
28. *what is he doing*
29. ((the researcher writes something on the whiteboard))
30. Christian ((whispering to Clara)) °xxx°
31. Brandon ((whispering to Clara)) °xxx°
32. Lucas ((to Clara)) **pregúntale si tiene la Play** ((the rest of them laugh at this))
33. *ask them if they've got the Playstation*
34. ((the researcher continues writing on the whiteboard))
35. Christian say something (0.3) Cla::ra::
36. Clara ((to Christian)) xxx ((Christian whispers something back to her))
37. Brandon **acércate más acercáte más** =
38. *come closer come closer*
39. Lucas **ponte al medio**
40. *put yourself in the middle*
41. Brandon ((looking at the screen)) what is happening ↑
42. Lucas xxx happening ↑
43. Mary he is xxx ((the Spanish students start laughing))
44. Christian (5) Clara i::s (.) i::s trying to::: (.) say something =
45. Clara what vocabulary are you xxx in this class ↑ (3)
46. Clara ((after the Swedish students ask her to repeat)) what vocabulary::
47. Christian °are you°
48. Clara are you in this [class] ↑
49. Christian are you learning ((they start laughing)) she try (.) what vocabulary  
are you learning in this class ↓



Image 6. Brandon and Christian whispering something to Clara

As it also happened in the previous fragment, Christian and Brandon encourage their peers to intervene in the conversation and exchange some words with the Swedish students. However, and taking into account that they already managed to make Lucas join the conversation (even if it was only for some seconds), they focus now on Clara despite her reservations.

In the first lines of the excerpt, Christian and Brandon bombard Clara with comments for her to say something. She manifests her reluctance by showing insecurity; she does not seem to feel sure or does not feel comfortable enough as is evidenced by the way in which she hides her head and bends it down (see line 5). Her peers tell her some ideas and try to make her understand that anything she says would be fine, even if she only says her name (line 7). However, Clara keeps refusing (line 11) until her classmates, and the researcher, politely insist on it.

In line 17, Lucas whispers something intelligible to Clara but he seems to be teasing her. As a reaction, Clara slaps his leg and prevents Lucas from repeating his comment when the researcher shows interest (line 21) in what had been said. Right after that, Christian makes a joke and pretends to stop the call (see line 23), to which the rest of the participants, including the researcher, quickly react in amazement and excitedly tell him not to disconnect. At this point the students, both the Spanish and the Swedish ones, seem to get distracted from the real purpose of the meeting (lines 26 and 27).

In line 30 the students resume their insistence on Clara's participation. Christian and Brandon (lines 30 and 31) appear to be giving her some ideas and Lucas proposes another possible question (line 32). In line 44 Christian helps Clara and introduces her intervention. She finally makes a first attempt but the Swedish students do not seem to understand her so she repeats the question for a second time (see line 46). Christian tries



to help Clara formulate the question but she forgets to use the verb; in consequence, Christian repeats it for her (line 49).

### 5.5 Fragment 5 (27.01 – 31)

In this last fragment the students continue asking each other questions in order to know more about each other. The researcher insists that Clara and Lucas should say something else.



Image 7. Brandon looking at his mobile phone

Participants: Christian, Lisa (Swedish student on screen), Brandon, researcher, Lucas, Clara

1. Christian are you using xxx resource in (.) this class ↑ (3) are you usi::ng
2. informati:: (.) pc and other electronic xxx
3. Lisa electronic things
4. Brandon [yeah]
5. Christian [in this class] ↑ (5)
6. Researcher ((after the Swedish students answer Christian's question)) your teacher ↑
7. no no they asked you before that question
8. Lucas our teacher [is:] ↓
9. Brandon [our teacher] ↑ (3) our teacher (.) we::ll she is coo:l and: well (.) and very
10. fun (.) very fun (1) ((looking at the researcher)) SHE IS VERY FUNNY
11. Lucas yes

12. Brandon SHE IS VERY FUNNY
13. Researcher you're not honest ↓
14. Brandon Alex is very funny ↓
15. Researcher you're not honest ↓
16. Christian xxx
17. Brandon **pelota me ha llamado**
18. *she called me an arse-licker*
19. Christian ((to Brandon)) xxx
20. Brandon ((after the Swedish students intervention)) can you repeat ↑
21. Lucas no (.) we find it in the computer
22. Brandon (5) what are you doing ↑ (2) what are he doing ↓
23. Lucas the boy
24. Researcher is he
25. Brandon **parece retrasado** ((his peers laugh at this))
26. *he seems retarded*
27. Researcher Clara what (.) °Clara° ((Clara looks at the whiteboard and snorts))
28. Christian ((to the researcher)) we already said it
29. Researcher no you said the activities are boring = (.) did you ask ↑
30. Christian yes we asked
31. Brandon xxx
32. Clara ((after Christian taps her shoulder)) **si si si::**
33. *yes yes yes*
34. Brandon ((looking at his mobile phone)) [**cómo**] **se dice que son majos** ↑
35. *how do you say they are nice*
36. Researcher [what are you::]
37. Christian búscalo xxx
38. *look it up*
39. Brandon **ves** xxx ((Clara and Christian laugh and Brandon takes his phone))
40. *you see*
41. Christian ((to the Swedish students)) he is (.) [is] trying to translate some words
42. Brandon [one moment]
43. Clara xxx
44. Lucas **madre mía**

45. *oh my*
46. Christian **han dicho algo en español** ↑
47. *did they say something in Spanish*
48. Brandon tell something in Spanish
49. Brandon ((after Lisa says something in Spanish)) **me llamo y su nombre**
50. *I am and her name*
51. Brandon ((after the Swedish students continue saying some words in Spanish)) ah
52. okay [very good] Spanish (1) yes ((he laughs)) xxx ((whispers something
53. at Lucas's ear))
54. Lucas [very good]
55. Researcher ((she calls Brandon's attention and tells them to go back to the
56. conversation))
57. Researcher (5) okay Lucas or Clara ((pointing at the whiteboard)) ((Clara
58. snorts again and Lucas puts his hand on his chin)) come on Clara::
59. Clara **Christian ayúdame**
60. *Christian help me*



Image 8. Christian helping Clara

In line 1 Christian asks the Swedish students if they use any electronic devices during the English lesson. However, they had previously asked another question that was ignored so the researcher tells the Spanish students to answer that question (see line 7). Lucas seems to want to say something and begins to answer (line 8) but Brandon intervenes at the same time and responds to them.

Some minutes after, in line 21, Lucas makes another intervention to answer the Swedish students. Due to the fact that Christian and Brandon were talking, Brandon does not understand what they said this time (line 20); however, Lucas understood the question and decided to be the one to respond to it. After that, the researcher calls Clara's attention again (see line 27) and points at the whiteboard to make her participate. In line 32, she seems to insist that she knows she has to say something but she still seems reluctant to intervene.

From now on, the students get distracted and the Swedish girls begin to show their ability to speak Spanish. In order to focus and resume the conversation, the researcher finally tells Clara and Lucas to verbalise some of the questions she has written on the whiteboard. This time, Clara decides to look for Christian's support and asks him for help.

## 6. DISCUSSION

After having observed the recording several times, a possible phenomenon to be analysed in this dissertation was identified. During the 44 minutes session, in which four Spanish students took part in a Skype conversation with three Swedish students, the participants' speaking interventions highly differed in terms of frequency and length. Rather than attributing this phenomenon to issues regarding insecurity or shyness, due to subjectivity and the improbability of offering demonstrable data, it was decided to put the focus on epistemics as a possible reason for this outcome. The aim of this dissertation was, therefore, to observe the roles of the different interactants during the session and their position regarding knowledge.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, two degrees of certainty appear when grading the 3 epistemic dimensions: the K+ or knowing and the K- or unknowing. At the beginning of the session, the four students directly intervene with their Swedish partners only slightly and, in fact, they position themselves in a K- status in general towards their Swedish partners, preferring to interact amongst themselves. Clara, for instance, passes on her epistemic responsibilities to others by saying "contestad vosotros" [*you answer*] and Brandon insists on his unknowing epistemic access when he says "es que no sé qué decir" [*I don't know what to say*], despite being positioned by the others in a K+ role.

However, as the conversation progresses, Brandon begins to acquire the K+ role. While his peers' intervention is limited to a Spanish student/Spanish student interaction, he leads the conversation and is responsible for most of the Spanish students/Swedish students' interactions. Despite the fact that he does not recognize himself as the authority and he wishes to pass his role to his peers, for example when he says "decid algo vosotros que yo ya he hablado" [*say something that I have already spoken*], his

classmates initially and for most of the session let him be in charge of it. Consequently, there seems to be an epistemic access congruence as the rest of the students accept Brandon's K+ position.

Contrary to the K+ stance, Clara and Lucas demonstrate a K- status throughout all the activity. On one hand, Lucas remains silent arguing that he is not yet ready to say anything despite being urged to participate during almost all the session. After his peers and teacher's encouragement, he finally makes an intervention. On the other hand, Clara equally demonstrates a K- status when, for example, despite having her own ideas she tells others to verbalise them for her ("*le preguntas si tiene hangouts*" [*ask them if they have hangouts*])). In addition, and differently from Lucas, she downgrades herself to K- by saying she does not want to participate, hiding her head, snorting or seeking her peers' help, while at the same time she upgrades Christian's role to K+: "*va tu, que eres el que mayor habla*" [*come on, you are the one who speaks best*]. All in all, both Clara and Lucas accept their positions and recognise Brandon and Christian as the ones who have knowledge; therefore, they do not fight for their position of K+ but willingly accept their own K- role.

As for the epistemic trajectories, and despite the fact that the roles do not explicitly shift throughout the session (Clara and Lucas begin and finish the activity in a K- role and Brandon in a K+ role), it can be seen how Christian timidly rejects his initial K- position and fights for a K+ role. He increases his interventions and starts asking and making comments. Furthermore, he helps Clara when she tries to formulate a sentence ("what vocabulary are you learning in this class?") and takes a mediation role between his peers and the Swedish students ("She xxx to say something but" or "He is trying to translate some words"). Nevertheless, and although he finally

demonstrates K+, Christian never challenges or downgrades Brandon's position and he as well accepts his K+ role.

The students' epistemic status and their position towards knowledge may be decisive for the development and accomplishment of the activity. The fact that both Clara and Lucas accept their own role as unknowing and Brandon's and Christian's role as knowing could be making them participate less and could also be the reason why they let their peers be responsible for most of the task. That, therefore, may be one of the reasons for the already mentioned great difference in participation between all the members of the group. Moreover, this outcome of the students' performance brings out the question of what would have happened if all the students had positioned themselves in a K- status: would the activity have been fulfilled? Would Clara and Lucas have increased their participation in the event that Brandon had not taken control of the conversation?

One of the factors that could have led to this final result could be the improvisation of the conversation and the fact that the Spanish students, unlike the Swedish ones, had not prepared any possible questions and roles in advance. As it can be seen in the excerpts, it is not until the researcher seems to write something on the whiteboard (presumably possible questions to be made) that Clara and Lucas bring themselves to participate and ask their Swedish colleagues about the project and their English lessons.

Moreover, it is important to state that this phenomenon cannot be seen as an isolated event of this specific activity and setting, but it frequently occurs in a collaborative educational context. This analysis, thus, highlights the importance of some pre-task activities that prepare the students and give them sufficient resources in order to complete the task and prevent and anticipate similar potential barriers such as little

participation of some of the students in this type of activities. At the same time, it seems obvious that, in an academic and continual learning context, the relationship between the students and knowledge and how this relationship affects or influences their school activities' performance is significant. Going back to what Gardner and Mushin (2017) claimed: "classrooms are a locus for the study of epistemic trajectories because they are an institutional setting whose key focus is on the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge by children" (p.30). Observing epistemic stance and status in a specific activity may, therefore, help teachers identify who demonstrates having knowledge or not having it and act consequently in pursuit of a better task development and better learning performance of the students.



## **7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Due to the extraordinary circumstances that led to the interruption of the schools activity, the author of this master's dissertation was unable to collect data during the practicum period. Therefore, the data analysed in this study were not collected by the paper's author and, as a result, some limitations appeared when proceeding with the analysis. The author was neither familiar with the context in which the data were taken nor with the students that appear in it. In addition, it was never possible to go back to that data or to the students themselves. This extra information could have been helpful in order to have a better understanding of the students' profiles and their performance throughout the activity.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

Acknowledging that the use of the target language in EFL classes is essential for language learning to take place, the usefulness of group work during the English classes becomes quite evident. However widespread this idea may be, it is also true that the implementation of group work just because does not always lead to a better learning performance of the students. Therefore, if good results are to be expected it is essential to design an effective task and observe the results taken from previous activities in order to do so.

The most relevant conclusion we can draw from the data analysed is that the students' epistemic status can highly and directly affect the students' performance throughout the development of the activity. As observed from the data, the positioning of one-self in a K- status may cause little participation from that student whereas a K+ position might mean higher participation and the combination of them both could end up in an imbalance of the different interactants in terms of participation. Consequently, the analysis of epistemics in students' interactions allows a better understanding of the process and the students' results and, at the same time, a good use of it could be done in order to design beneficial activities that helped those students improve their results. That is, if the teacher is aware of the role of epistemic stance, this could be explicitly used in the design of the task. Furthermore, having the students do their own analysis of their interactions would also be advantageous for them to see and be capable of identifying their strengths and weaknesses.

Although this paper only discusses a case study of one group in a specific context, further analysis could be carried out in the future in order to observe other groups and to provide students with better guidance. As well, the type of analysis carried out in this dissertation might be useful to apply during the author's future

professional development to observe role patterns in collaborative contexts and proceed accordingly. Learning from the results observed could enhance not only the students' performance but also professional practice of the teacher herself.

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## 9. APPENDIXES

### 9.1 Transcription Keys

These were the symbols used in the transcripts, taken from the Jeffersonian's transcription method.

(.)	Micropause
(# seconds)	Timed Pause
↑	Rising pitch
↓	Falling pitch
...	Prolonged sound
<u>underline</u>	Emphasizing or stressing
((double brackets))	Non-verbal activity
text in <b>bold</b>	Foreign Language
text in <i>italics</i>	English translation
=	Latching
[text]	Overlapping
xxx	Unclear speech