Transforming EFL Classroom Practices and Promoting Students' Empowerment: Collaborative Learning From a Dialogical Approach

Transformando prácticas y promoviendo empoderamiento en los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera: aprendizaje colaborativo desde un enfoque dialógico

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This study investigates the impact of implementing collaborative learning from a social and dialogical perspective on seventh graders' interaction in an English as a foreign language classroom at a public school in Bogotá, Colombia. Thirty students participated in this action research where field notes, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and artifacts of students' work were used to collect data during a complete academic year. Results show that taking a critical approach to language education and understanding collaborative learning as a social construction of knowledge can ignite opportunities for changing traditional teaching and learning practices where both the teacher and students take different roles, thus balancing classroom relations and interaction among participants and also promoting students' empowerment.

Key words: Collaborative learning, dialogical approach, English as a foreign language, public schools.

Este estudio analiza el impacto del aprendizaje colaborativo entendido desde una perspectiva social y dialógica en la interacción de estudiantes de séptimo grado, en clase de inglés, en un colegio público de Bogotá, Colombia. Treinta estudiantes participaron en esta investigación-acción en la cual se recolectaron datos a través de notas de campo, cuestionarios, entrevistas y artefactos producidos por los estudiantes. Los resultados indican que adoptar un enfoque crítico en la enseñanza del lenguaje y entender el aprendizaje colaborativo como una construcción social del conocimiento puede propiciar oportunidades de transformación en las prácticas tradicionales de enseñanza-aprendizaje donde el docente y los estudiantes asumen roles diferentes balanceando las relaciones y la interacción en el aula y promoviendo empoderamiento en los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje colaborativo, enfoque dialógico, inglés como lengua extranjera, educación pública.

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Introduction

Humans are social beings by nature and through social interaction they learn how to live and participate within a group and how to get along with others (Kagan, 1992). However, in traditional education, teacher-centered practices are usually favored and the students are habitually sitting in fixed rows having little opportunities for interaction and collaborative work. This type of school setting, which is typical in Colombian public schools, is also characterized by large groups, lack of motivation, unsafe environments, and social inequities (Guzmán, 2006; Parga Herrera, 2011).

Additionally, in many English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms in public schools, students' interaction is often disregarded or neglected because there is a strong focus on the teaching of the linguistic components of the language and a palpable lack of interest from the students to learn the foreign language since it is not used "for authentic communicative purposes in their social surroundings" (Palacios & Chapetón, 2014, p. 11).

Systematic preliminary observation of the EFL class at the public school where this study took place showed two additional key issues that prompted this research. First, it was noticeable that the students tended to be disrespectful and rude to each other and sometimes to the teacher. Second, students found it difficult to work in groups, to listen to each other, to help each other to accomplish a goal, or to commit and engage in the activities proposed by the teacher, that is, group work problems—which have been widely acknowledged (see for example Ruiz-Esparza, Medrano, & Zepeda, 2016)—were also evident.

As an alternative to overcome these particular situations that are affecting not only our classrooms and public schools but also our society, this study aimed at describing the impact of implementing collaborative learning from a dialogical perspective on seventh graders' interaction in an EFL classroom. Thus, the purpose of this action research project was to transform the traditional teaching and learning EFL practices at this school—that

seem to focus chiefly on linguistic aspects of the foreign language—and to consider the students' social context and a more humane and dialogical vision of teaching. This goal bears particular relevance in a society where education plays a fundamental role in preparing students to be active citizens able to interact effectively with others in and beyond the classroom boundaries.

Theoretical Considerations

The theoretical approach that frames this study is centered on a critical and dialogical pedagogy (Freire, 2002; Freire & Shor, 1987) understood as an alternative for educational and social transformation and collaborative learning, also a teaching perspective which focuses on group work and fosters social skills. These two theoretical perspectives and the way they were articulated in this study are discussed as follows.

Dialogical Education: An Alternative for Social Transformation

A critical and dialogical approach to learning implies a transformation in education. Going against the idea of education as a pure transference of knowledge that merely describes reality, dialogue, critical reflection, and praxis are essential elements to critical pedagogy (Freire, 2002; Freire & Shor, 1987). Freire (2002) proposes the notion of *praxis* as dialectic of action and reflection in the learning process; that is, confronting reality critically and acting upon that reality through a process of communication where there exists a co-participation of the teacher and the students in the act of learning. In his view, "the particular language in which dialogue takes place is not necessarily what is important. What is fundamental is that individuals, in relationship to others, find languages in which to communicate, dialogue, and create and recreate the world" (LH, 2008, para. 10).

Freire (2002) argues that "without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (p. 92). He also highlights that knowing is a social event e.g. "I am knowing something

in reality, with others, in communication with others" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 82). Barlett (2005) claims that for Freire, all learning is relational and knowledge is produced in interaction; thus, "dialogue refers to the active participation of student and teacher in discussion and analysis" (Dueñas, 2013, p. 88), going beyond the traditional culture of the teacher possessing and transferring knowledge statically. From a critical and dialogical perspective of education, the teacher is placing knowledge as a problem for mutual inquiry. In this process students gain a sense of empowerment when interaction is directed toward a critical examination of students' experiences and contexts (Shor, 1992).

This study is situated within the framework of a dialogical education because this approach enables the humanization of teachers and students. In a humanizing pedagogy, both teachers and students are subjects who engage in critical readings of their reality through reflection, action, and committed involvement. In such dialogic process, there is a social construction of knowledge and mutual learning that encourage students to understand and re-create their reality. In that sense, education becomes the means to social transformation.

Collaborative Learning: A Social Construction of Knowledge and Mutual Learning

According to Smith and MacGregor (1992), "Collaborative Learning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual efforts by students, or students and teachers together" (p. 11). The basis for these approaches is constructivism meaning that knowledge is constructed and transformed by students. Gerlach (1994) claims that collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act. Through group work, students are supposed to talk with each other, and it is in this talking that much of the learning occurs.

Collaborative learning is based on these premises: (1) "learning is an active, constructive process" (Smith

& MacGregor, 1992, p. 11); (2) "learners benefit from others' knowledge and viewpoints; (3) dialogue and active involvement promote learning; and (4) learning takes place when learners critically reflect on their knowledge" (Zygouris-Coe, 2012, p. 333). This type of learning encompasses three main aspects. First, there is social and intellectual involvement where students are more active and build closer connections to other students, their courses, and their learning. Second, there is cooperation and teamwork when students build their capacities for tolerating, resolving differences, for making agreements that take into account all the voices in a group, and for caring how others are doing. And third, there is civic responsibility since collaborative learning encourages students to acquire an active voice through dialogue, deliberation, and the consensus to foster participation and a sense of responsibility to the community.

It is our belief that taking a collaborative learning approach in this study may serve as a stepping stone to foster involvement, teamwork, and responsibility in dialogic bases, where active participation is ensured and students are engaged in discussion while taking responsibility for their learning.

In sum, the two key constructs are seen as interrelated because both consider learning as a social act where students are encouraged to reflect, talk, solve problems, and make decisions. Critical pedagogy as a dialogical education approach frames the teaching practice where the teacher and the students are engaged in examining social issues of their reality to mutually construct knowledge while collaborative learning provides opportunities to discover ways to maintain dialogue, negotiate meaning, work together, accomplish academic goals, and take actions which may contribute to the development of a more equal and tolerant classroom environment.

Research Design

This action research takes a critical perspective in order to identify and investigate problems within a specific situation; it is cyclical, evaluative, reflective,

and participatory, where changes and improvement in practice are based on qualitative data (Burns, 2003). Thus, action research centers teachers' reflections on their educational context leading to the interpretation and improvement of their context-situated practices (Cárdenas, 2006) where the understanding of students' needs and particularities is at the core.

This study was conducted at a public school located in the southeast of Bogotá with an average size of 1,200 students whose ages ranged from three to twenty years old. A seventh grade group of 30 students, 19 males and 11 females, whose ages ranged from twelve to fifteen participated in the study. According to the school English level classification, these students are in the basic/lowest level. Preliminary systematic observation at a diagnosis stage of this study showed that these students have serious behavioral and academic difficulties. Rude and usually disruptive behaviors reflect students' social context, which is affected by a lack of opportunities for social promotion, economic crisis, danger, and violence.

Data were collected through the use of an initial questionnaire, field notes (supported by video-recordings of class sessions), students' journals, semi-structured interviews, and artifacts. The systematic data collection process was developed in four cycles during sixteen weeks throughout the academic year.

Pedagogical Intervention

With a critical and dialogical perspective in mind, the cycles of this pedagogical intervention were organized around topics and purposes that fostered collaborative learning and group work. These topics and purposes were articulated to the EFL contents included in the course syllabus and were connected to the most immediate surroundings and realities of the students.

In the initial exploratory cycle students introduced themselves and introduced classmates by exchanging personal information. In Cycle 1, students built up teams, decided on each member's role according to his/her qualities, and established agreements to facilitate

group work in the team and in the classroom. In Cycle 2, students took the initiative to move out of the classroom to get to know the school community. They interviewed school members and reflected upon roles, rights, and responsibilities at school. In Cycle 3, students focused on the family as a community. They reflected upon the roles of family members, identified rights and responsibilities within the household, and reflected upon the qualities a family should have. This final cycle closed with a socialization session where students shared the experience and outcomes of the process.

Importantly, cycles one to three were developed in a way that allowed students to read their realities, learn about roles, rights and responsibilities within each community, and reflect upon those realities to later propose actions that would eventually lead to transformations in those context-situated scenarios.[1]

Findings

Using a grounded approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), data were compared and analyzed through a process of triangulation that involved line-by-line analysis and color-coding techniques to name, group, and find relationships among emergent themes or patterns that resulted in the categories and subcategories shown in Table 1. The discussion of the findings is as follows.

Transforming Practices in the EFL Classroom Setting

This category refers to the changes in the EFL classroom practices that emerged during the pedagogical intervention which, on taking a critical perspective (Freire, 2002; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Freire & Shor, 1987), focused on a humanistic approach that required adopting reflexive pedagogical practices that emerged through dialogue. Dialogue refers to the active participation of students and teacher in discussion and reflection,

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1   For a comprehensive account of the pedagogical intervention please see Contreras León and Chapetón Castro (2016).

Table 1. Emergent Categories

Categories	Sub-categories
Transforming Practices in the EFL Classroom Setting	Balancing classroom relations among participants
	Changing traditional teaching and learning practices
	Experiencing a new group work vision and practice
Promoting Students' Empowerment	Encouraging personal growth
	Building social awareness and citizenship

establishing a democratic setting where students' voices are taken into account, giving them the opportunity to be involved in class decisions. As Dueñas (2013) points out, "dialogue seeks not only to increase active student participation in the classroom but also to develop a critical social consciousness among students" (p. 88) and a sense of responsibility in their learning process.

The analysis of data showed that the activities developed in this study broke with the traditional banking model of education (Freire, 2002; Freire & Shor, 1987) where knowledge was transmitted by the teacher and the classes were focused on linguistic components of the language. By means of dialogue, a meaningful learning environment was developed. This new perspective enhanced students' capacities to change their passive roles and take it upon themselves to be agents of their own learning. This critical perspective also stimulated collaboration, decision making, participation, and social responsibility. The three most important changes identified in the different instruments gave rise to three subcategories which are discussed as follows.

Balancing Classroom Relations Among Participants

Interaction is understood in this study as a dynamic process where the participants, both students and teacher, express their own ideas or comment on those of others in a dialogical co-construction of knowledge. It implies a movement away from traditional practices that are centered on the teacher to a more student-centered classroom where students have the opportunity to use their L1 (Spanish) or the foreign language when possible—given their low English level—to express their ideas, reflect, and play an active role in the learning process.

The changes in the teacher's and students' roles and the relations of power were essential for a balanced classroom relationship. Regarding the change in the teacher's role, the following excerpts illustrate how the teacher assumed a role that values students' voices and invites them to reflect on their group work, and propose ways to improve it. Another important aspect is that the students were encouraged to challenge and criticize their social reality and at the same time take part in the construction of knowledge. In this sense, and following Freire's (2002) view, the teacher's role was as problem poser; asking questions, and proposing activities that would help students reflect on aspects of their lives:

> Before we started with this session, I, the teacher, discussed with students about their work and attitudes during the implementation of the first cycle. I also considered the comments of the students in their journals as well as the group reflections. I asked each group about their difficulties and how they would deal with them. (Field notes, Cycle 2, Session 1)
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> s.DG:[2] This is the only class, I had never seen a teacher who cares about the students . . . who likes that we make comments, that we make decisions, organize and think.[3] (Student's journal, Cycle 1, Session 4)
>
> When working on the guidelines to interview the school community, I asked students to suggest how we would approach the school community. I asked them: "What would you do first?" One student said "*preguntar*" (ask a question). I said: "and before that?" One

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2 Abbreviations are used to protect students' identities.
3 The students' original voices were in their L1, Spanish. Translation was made for publication purposes.

student said "*saludar*" (greet). I said "right, very good!" And I wrote on the board what the students suggested. I said "greeting is very important." Then, I asked them "what would you do next?" s.MF said: "*presentarse*" (introduce oneself). I said: "Very good! Introduce yourselves and your group." Then I asked them: "What else would you do? s.WA said "*las preguntas*" (ask the questions). I said: "Excellent." (Field notes, Cycle 2, Session 1)

These excerpts show that the teacher guided and provided spaces where the students could participate, express their opinions, and reflect; promoting a dialogical process where all participants contribute to make decisions and develop a mutual learning process that transforms the classroom into a place of social construction and equal participation. Thus, the teacher is not a person that transfers knowledge, but a person that perceives together with the students, and actually is a facilitator of knowledge construction (McCowan, 2006). In Freirean words, a "liberating teacher," that is, a teacher who never imposes his or her own notions about how to deal with a specific situation, but listens to students and poses questions to help them think critically about the situation and make decisions about what action to take. This is illustrated in the following sample where students made decisions about the agreements to be established to benefit group work:

I walked around the classroom listening to the groups. s.JPE told her that two teammates were listening to music. I told him: "That could be a problem to your group. So, what could be the agreement of your group?" and s.JPE said: "Don't listen to music at school". I asked him: "at school or in class?" s.JPE answered: "in class." (Field notes, Cycle 1, Session 3)

In a real dialogical relation among participants, there is equal opportunity for all members to speak, decide, and propose (Freire, 2002). This means that students play also an active role that encourages them to participate in a democratic educative process where all, teacher and students, are considered equal, and have the opportunity to choose and make decisions:

s.MO: We elected to choose the group members, then, my classmates and I started to interview each other, asking what we had in common. The teacher allowed us to choose freely. (Student's journal, Cycle 1, Session 1)

s.BG: We shared ideas to define "community" and also we gave some examples identifying the communities we all belong to, we organized and selected the school staff we wanted to interview. (Student's journal, Cycle 2, Session 1)

s.XP: I felt good sharing and listening to my classmates' ideas without looking at the textbook. With our own ideas and knowledge we defined those words [rights and responsibilities]. (Student's journal, Cycle 2, Session 3)

The previous excerpts describe the way students contributed to the decisions of the class. The first excerpt describes how they could choose freely because it was a democratic election. In the second the student describes how students could give ideas and listen to their classmates to construct knowledge and take actions to know the school community. These samples demonstrate that the students became active agents in the classroom, breaking down their traditional passive roles, and contributing to decision-making processes. The students' interest, participation, and engagement in the different activities were more evident because their voices, knowledge, and experiences were recognized and taken into account in the English class.

The new teacher's and students' roles implied a new power relationship in the English classroom, where power was negotiated and shared among participants through dialogical interaction. But it did not mean that the teacher no longer taught or set aside her responsibilities; it meant, rather, to create possibilities for students to contribute and to be responsible for their learning process:

s.LO: The teacher is the guide. She guides us and lets us rule. She lets us rule, too.
T: Rule? What do you mean?
s.LO: I mean, we, each one of us has a role to play, for example, I'm the *coordinator*, thus, I have to guide my classmates, my group, and be attentive guiding them. (First interview)

T: said that today, considering the difficulties that they have seen, each group would choose agreements to work on and have a better relationship with their teammates. (Field notes, Cycle 1, Session 3)

Giving students the possibility of establishing their own rules, taking responsibility for their own behavior and their learning process, and participating in classroom decision making enabled a balanced classroom interaction among participants through a new vision of the teacher's and students' roles. In consequence, a democratic environment was promoted where students' voices were valued with greater opportunities for equal participation and socialization.

Changing Traditional Teaching and Learning Practices

The analysis of data showed evident changes in the English classroom practices. The first change is related to the new class arrangement that includes a new distribution of the students' desks, and the use of different spaces at the school besides the classroom. In traditional classrooms, the students are seated facing the board, in rows, where the teacher takes a front position. As the purpose of this study was to promote interaction through collaborative learning, the classroom distribution was more flexible; the students sat next to their groups' members and had opportunities to work together:

S.EA: Since we chose the groups, we never sat in rows again; instead, we sit in groups, close to our teammates. I liked that because we are close, together. (Student's journal, Cycle 1, Session 1)

Seating the students in groups was important because they felt they could get closer, they could see each other and establish a connection that let them interact and get engaged in class activities. This new seating arrangement fostered students' participation, confidence, interaction, and mutual learning and helped them focus on the activities.

Besides, the students had the opportunity to go outside the classroom and learn in a more meaningful way because they connected what they were learning with meaningful experiences. As mentioned before, students visited the different school places and interviewed the school community at work:

S.DG: Going out the classroom was cool, we had never been outside, we are always enclosed, here we went out to see the school and meet people. (Second interview)

S.XP: In this class we share ideas, we share a lot in groups and we develop activities outside de classroom and that's interesting and fun. (Student's journal, Cycle 2, Session 3)

This was a new experience for students because they are usually inside the classroom. Taking students outside the classroom helped them to develop interest in knowing the school staff, which students found fun and interesting. It made learning more engaging, meaningful, and relevant because they could interact with others and explore the school context.

A second change is related to the topics developed in the English classes. These topics were not only related to the traditional content of a seventh grade English class syllabus at this public school, which includes knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, but they were also related to social and personal issues. Topics such as personal information, the school places, professions, likes and dislikes, the family, were more challenging and interesting for the students because they were connected to their own realities by exploring rights and responsibilities at their most immediate surroundings.

S.DV: I had never worked in an English class like in this one because we talk about different things like our rights and responsibilities. The great difference in this class is that we learn about different things, here we learn things to be better in class and in life. (Student's Journal, Cycle 2, Session 4)

S.SQ: Here we talk about our families and, I mean, more things about ourselves, more personal things. (Third interview)

It is important to highlight that the topics were presented to the students as situations of their reality that were known by them, so that they could share their

own experiences and ideas on the topics. Activating students' prior knowledge not only helps students to make connections between what they know and what they are about to learn, but also learning becomes meaningful because the topics are relevant to the students.

The activities developed in the English classes also changed because they enabled students to make connections with their reality and provided opportunities for interaction, reflection, participation, and cooperation. The students were interacting with different people, not only with the teacher and their classmates, but with the school community and their relatives. The interactions and activities also involved different spaces that were related to learners' social contexts, like the classroom, the school, and home:

> S.RG: We interviewed our families, also the school staff. I think that's interesting because we had never done that. (Third interview)

Students were also encouraged to reflect not only on what they had learned about group work, but on their reality, and their roles in the different communities (group, school, and family). This developed in them a sense of belonging and membership that was encouraged through reflection. The Freirean pedagogy states that critical reflection is also an essential element in dialogical education. Reflection is a mental process that goes beyond thinking or recalling information; it is a process of questioning. This reflective process was developed in this study through reflective activities according to the topics developed, through the use of individual journals, and through group reflection:

> S.ND: Here we reflect; we don't do it in other subjects. I think it's important not to throw the garbage on the floor, to have better vocabulary, to attend the class sessions, to be responsible, not to yell at teachers, etc. (Student's journal, Cycle 2, Session 4)
>
> S.DV: I think it was very good that we could write in the journals because it was not only about answering yes/no questions, but we could write what we think and feel. (Third interview)

Reflection is necessary to understand reality and be aware of the part we play as members of the different communities. This change in traditional classroom activities allowed students to explore ideas within their immediate contexts and, in doing so; they realized that actions can be performed to contribute to building a better world for themselves and others.

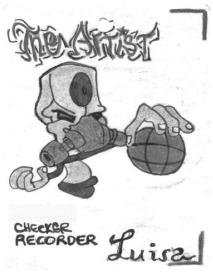## Experiencing a New Group Work Vision and Practice

Learning is seen in this study as a social process that not only involves the acquisition of knowledge but, as Oxford (1990) claims, involves some social strategies that support and regulate that learning through interaction and communication. It was found that collaborative learning was an option to promote this social learning through group work, because it was a strategy to foster interaction and actively involve students in the learning process. Unfortunately, at school many teachers and students are reluctant to do group work because they have had unpleasant experiences:

> S.LO: [teachers] don't like group work simply because we don't take it seriously, we do other things different from what we should do. (Second interview)
>
> S.XP: In the groups I had been, communication is not good, there are no ideas, people don't take it seriously, there's no good communication. (Student's journal, Cycle 1, Session 2)

As shown above, some students and teachers share a negative perception of group work because they have seen that only some students do the work, the time is wasted, and there are conflicts and indiscipline. As this problem was one of the reasons that originated this study, we decided to follow the strategies suggested by experts in collaborative learning (Gillies, 2007; Gresham & Elliott, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994; Kagan, 1992), bearing in mind a critical perspective that fostered a new vision and an effective use of group work. Placing students in groups and giving them work to do does not mean that they are working together. For

an effective group work, the participants of this study were involved in the teambuilding process; they had an active participation because they chose the members of the groups, they gave a name to the group, and chose an emblem that identified them as a group. This contributed to the development of a sense of belonging since all members were recognized by their roles and worked together in base groups, where students stayed together for a long period of time, with stable membership. Students made a name tag that included the name of the group, the emblem, the students' roles, and then students' names (see Figure 1). Each student wore the tags thus being identified by their classmates and by the school community during the interviews.

Figure 1. The Artist's Name Tag

But setting up groups is not enough; students also need to know how to function as a group. It is our belief that group work fails because we, as teachers, do not show our students how they should work in groups. For effective group work, both the teacher and students play important roles. Teachers facilitate group work and students are actively participating and taking responsibility for monitoring, planning, adjusting, and assessing their individual and group work.

Group work requires that all students become involved; it was achieved in this study by implementing some of the strategies suggested by the experts. The first strategy was that each student had a role; it helped to distribute responsibility among group members and ensured students' participation. The roles were chosen by the students from a list of options given by the teacher, a clear description of each role was given, and each group member decided which role to take. This allowed students to engage in dialogical interaction where they identified their qualities and the groups made decisions thinking about the group benefit:

> s.LT: My roles are *speaker*, *time keeper*, and *recorder*. We decided on the qualities of each group member: their abilities, their behavior, their way to be organized, and other qualities. And we selected each member so that each could benefit the group. (Student's journal, Cycle 1, Session 2)
>
> s.LG: Since each one of us had a role, each one focused on his own work: writing, reading, drawing, speaking, that's it, playing the role that each had. (Third interview)

The samples presented above show how roles promoted equal participation, facilitated group work, and ensured that all members of the group contributed. Additionally, students felt more confident and comfortable and accepted their responsibilities because they could decide the roles themselves; also, their peers recognized their qualities.
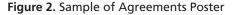
Students also established group agreements that helped them to create a better environment to work, interact, develop good behavior, and function better in groups. Having the whole class choose some agreements made for the English classroom resulted in constructing better relationships among classmates and a better learning environment:

> s.EC: Having chosen group agreements was good because there are some classmates that didn't pay attention, they were joking or bothering others and I think it's good to have agreements so that we all can help each other and can do things better. (First interview)

s.sq: We established agreements to work better in the English class, to listen to each other, to understand what the teacher said, not to bother other groups, and be tolerant.

t: and how did you establish those agreements?

s.sq: Each one, each group member gave his idea, and we reach agreement to be able to work better in the English class, to behave better, to work, to do the homework: the guidelines. (Third interview)

As shown above, students identified key aspects that fostered effective group work. They became aware that they needed each other and that it was important to help each other, to listen, and respect each other in order to have a better environment in which to interact, communicate, and learn. Each group made a poster of the group agreements (see Figure 2) then, the *artists* of each group got together to make a poster of the whole class agreements which was posted on a classroom wall.

Figure 2. Sample of Agreements Poster

Posting the groups and class agreements in a visible place helped students to remember and monitor their accomplishment. Students had time to analyze how they were working and find out what they needed to improve upon. They had time for group reflection at the end of each session. Team reflection or group processing is a very important principle of collaborative learning (Gillies, 2007; Johnson et al., 1994; Nunan, 1992), since groups need time to reflect on their experiences in working with each other as it contributes to the success of group work and to the maintenance of good group relationships. Through group work, students shared common goals, a physical place, materials, information, and resources; they distributed responsibilities and established a group identity that let them interact and develop a sense of belonging, cooperation, and unity.

Promoting Students' Empowerment

This category refers to the character traits discovered and developed by students in the dialogical student-centered environment promoted in the English classes. The analysis of data showed that the new teaching and learning practices implemented in this study helped students to become aware of their potentials as a person and as a student, and how they could contribute to their group, class, school, and family. These potentials were developed by working together, experiencing democratic practices in the classroom, and having the opportunity to be responsible for their own class work. In the critical pedagogy view taken in this study, the process where the students gain self-development is called *empowerment*. It is understood as the process that gives students the capacity to be in charge of their individual and group work and improve their own and group performances.

Findings show that students' empowerment was an ongoing process that involved both personal development and social awareness. These were fostered by students' active participation in the classroom, team members' support, constant reflection, and dialogical interactions. As Shor (1992) claims, "individual growth is an active, cooperative and social process, because the self and the society create each other" (p. 15). This process implied

self and social changes that are going to be presented and explained as follows through the two subcategories that emerged from the data analysis.

Encouraging Personal Growth

This sub-category refers to the personal development observed in the students by working in groups and having an active role in the English class. Students became aware of their personal qualities that encouraged and helped them to assume responsibility for themselves and their group work. The data analysis revealed that the support and social interaction with their teams as well as their active role in the development of the different activities provided students opportunities to discover and foster their autonomy, self-control, and leadership.

Autonomy refers to the capacity to take responsibility for our own learning (Benson, 2000). This author argues that it is a social construction that implies interdependence. Data showed that when students engaged in group work, they were less reliant on the teacher because they were in charge of their work and became more responsible:

> S.HV: To me, it's cool to work in groups because one has to be a lot more responsible, one respects more, and all the classmates change. (Student's journal, Cycle 1, Session 2)
>
> S.WA: We learnt what a group is and how to work in groups, we didn't need to have the teacher telling us what to do, but we worked. . . . We organized ourselves and we didn't need that she gave us commands; we organized the activities because we knew our roles. (Student's journal, Cycle 3, Session 4)

In the previous excerpts students expressed that through group work, they could be more responsible because they decided how to work and they made group choices and decisions. It was evident that with the collaborative work discussed in the first category, students organized the groups and assumed their responsibilities according to the roles that they had chosen. It helped them to be more independent and interdependent because they were working together without the teacher's control. This point is highlighted by Nunan (1992), who claims that being autonomous means to be independent of external authority, but it does not mean individualism. Through dialogical collaborative learning, students learned that all the decisions and choices were made by the group members, and it implies the notion of interdependence, being able to cooperate with others.

Along with the development of autonomy students also developed self-control. According to Gailliot and Baumeister (2007), it is a conscious capacity to control one's impulses and unconscious or habitual responses. Before the implementation of this study, some students used to behave in rude and disrespectful ways, or react physically or verbally rude if someone bothered them, and only some students did the work. Engaging students in reflective group activities that demand their responsibility and commitment helped them to realize that it was necessary to transform their attitudes to benefit themselves and their groups, and to facilitate collaboration and group work among group members:

> I have seen that students who were rude are now more respectful and focused on the activities. After they chose roles and selected the group and class agreements, they have changed their behavior, for example S.JE was always bothering the students that were next to him, and mocked their classmates for their answers or physical appearance, now he works and he is focused on the activity. (Field notes, Cycle 2, Session 1)
>
> S.JS: For the first time my behavior was good because I was focused all the time on the work. S.FH was working all the time, too. (Student's journal, Cycle 1, Session 2)

These samples show that when students have an active role and more responsibility in the group and class work, they transform their attitudes and habitual responses and behaviors. This is because they are focused on the activities, on their classmates' contributions, and on their own roles. It is important to highlight that roles and group and class agreements were essential elements of this change because they assumed them

as part of their responsibility and tried to be bound by them to work better.

Another finding is that through dialogical collaborative learning it was possible to identify leadership skills in some students: "Leadership is defined as the ability to motivate and enable others to contribute towards the success of the group which they are members of" (Lyne de Ver, 2009, p. 8). It was found that some students were in charge of their group, they organized and distributed the activities, provided support, and checked to ensure that all the group members were working:

> s.js: I noticed that s.je makes all the group members work; this is something that is not visible in other classes. (Student's journal, Cycle 2, Session 2)
>
> s.lt: By working in groups I realized that I'm a good leader, that I'm a very smart person, and I controlled that all the members were fulfilling their roles, I made sure that they understood and that we all did things well, always having their opinions in mind, and respecting my teammates' opinions. (Student's journal, Cycle 3, Session 3)
>
> (s.bb), (s.je), (s.lt) are leading the group work now and helping their teammates; they talk for their groups when they present the group work to the whole class, they are the ones who explain, ask, and help the others to answer according to the key samples in each activity. (Field notes, Cycle 1, Session 4)

By working in collaborative groups, leaders emerged; these students identified and demonstrated their qualities which, in some cases, they themselves did not know of. These leaders were recognized by their groups as good guides, they could engage others in the group work, helped their teammates to understand and develop the different activities, provided support, and held the team together. Importantly, as s.lt mentioned, the relation between the leader and the group members was not of authority or imposition, but instead was a balanced relationship where the entire group decided and worked, and all the opinions were taken into account. In this respect, Rothstein-Fisch and Trumbull (2008) highlight that "leadership appears to come from the desire to contribute to the group rather than to gain individual recognition" (p. 42).

Building Social Awareness and Citizenship

This subcategory refers to the social awareness that was built from the activities developed in group work, which were focused on dialogue and reflection upon the students' reality. For Freire (2002), an education for liberation is developed through an education based on dialogue, critical reflection, and praxis which are the three basic elements of *conscientization*. "Conscientization refers to the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of their reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 27). McCowan (2006) highlights that conscientization is not an individual process; it must take place in a collective context. In this study, the students developed different group activities that let them identify, reflect, and act upon their reality in order to transform it. Discussing and reflecting on the rights and responsibilities students have in their different contexts opened a new path towards conscientization that allowed them to see their own realities, develop a sense of belonging and thus, think of actions they could take to transform those realities:

> s.gc: This helped me to learn about my rights and responsibilities because we can learn about the rights people have, to be a better person, not to humiliate others, and to be able to defend oneself. (Student's journal, Cycle 2, Session 4)
>
> s.ldg: It's important to think and reflect about these topics [rights and responsibilities]; I learnt that they are part of our lives, of our future, they're important to get conscious that we are part of the school . . . part of a community; we should take care of the classroom and desks, keep them clean. (Student's journal, Cycle 2, Session 4)

The students considered that the activities of reflection developed in class helped them to learn, go beyond the topics, and be aware of their reality. As the process of conscientization involves reflection and action upon reality, the students reflected and recognized

themselves as valuable people and as part of a group and part of a community.

By empowering students to reflect on their reality, to become conscious of their roles in that reality, and to take collective actions to transform it, a social awareness grows that leads students to develop a sense of responsibility to the community. This sense of responsibility or civic responsibility is understood in this study as citizenship. To Mockus (2004) becoming a citizen means to develop collective processes to undertake actions considering the well-being of all, the common good, and establishing good relationships based on tolerance, solidarity, and respect.

Since 2003 the Colombian Ministry of Education has included a Citizenship Education Program in schools. This program attempts to develop citizenship competences that can make a contribution to overcome the current violence and the social problems of our country and enable citizens to become active and responsible participants in society. This goes along with Freire's (2002) idea about critical pedagogy that promotes social awareness. This study is focused on an active pedagogy; the students become active members not only in the classroom but in the different contexts where they have interacted during the implementation of this project. In this process, students gained experience to know about and claim their rights and understand their responsibilities, take responsibility for themselves, and act and participate constructively. It is a lifelong process that prepares students for the challenges and opportunities beyond the school context and makes them reflect on their future lives.

Conclusions

This study indicates that implementing collaborative learning from a critical perspective can foster changes in the EFL classroom. Although there were challenges to face mainly due to the big group size and to the students' lack of interest in committed group work—mostly at the initial stages of the process, evidence showed transformation in the teaching and learning practices. First, changes in the teacher's and students' roles, where the teacher was a facilitator who questioned and promoted dialog to guide students toward knowledge construction while students were active agents who participated, chose, and made decisions. Here both the teacher and students had equal opportunities to speak, decide, and propose actions to be implemented, thus balancing classroom relations among participants. Second, linking the syllabus topics to students' realities was also relevant. A critical approach to education relates class topics to social and personal issues, thus making learning interesting and meaningful for the students because topics are connected to students' world and they can share their own experiences and knowledge (Palacios & Chapetón, 2014).

Students transformed their view of working in groups into a meaningful experience because they worked on collaborative teams being motivated to organize, sustain, and reflect upon group work. Learners established group identity that developed a sense of belonging; they learned how to function as a group through specific roles and responsibilities and also established group agreements that helped them to develop better behavior, interactions, and the ability to work better as they reflected upon their individual and group work. Thus, students realized that they needed each other and that each member and their contributions were necessary for group success. With responsibilities shared, team members were heard, taken into account, and respected.

This leads to one of the most striking findings which relate to students' empowerment. Through the implementation of a dialogical perspective to language education, personal development in the students was observed. Qualities such as autonomy, self-control, and leadership were fostered thus encouraging learners to be more responsible for themselves and their group work. It was also identified that students built social awareness and a sense of citizenship was ignited. Students were engaged in activities that promoted reflection,

analysis, and dialogue upon their reality enabling them to become aware of their capacity to transform that reality. It led students to develop a sense of responsibility to the community or toward citizenship because they became active members not only in the classroom but in the different contexts where they interacted. It made students reflect on their future lives and prepared them to be active citizens who could take part in society.

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