Trabajo Fin de Máster

MY CLASSROOM, MY UNIVERSE! HOW TO IMPROVE LEARNERS’ AUTONOMY THROUGH DEVELOPING PROJECT WORK

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1. Introduction

Trying to find real autonomy in our students for them to learn a language is always difficult. We, as teachers deal every day with different personalities, ways of learning and thinking and classroom contexts that make this task really difficult or in some occasions something almost impossible to reach.

By way of introduction this paper will include a thorough study of those learning strategies that can enhance the way students face their English learning process. The main and most important of the theoretical framework is devoted to learning strategies and CLIL which is presented as the main tool used in the development of such strategies when learning a specific topic of aspect of language which is not necessary related with the English syllabus but that is addressed in this way in order to have a wide extension of learning approaching it to different subjects of study.

The current paper can be defined as a Research Project on Action research specifically addressed to the subject of the learning strategies to develop autonomy in the English classroom. Our main aim is to analyze the different learning strategies that are most preferred by the students when they develop project work in order to improve their autonomy when learning.

Taking this into consideration, this project has been structured as follows: in section 2 (Topic description), we will describe the different motivations to carry out this project; in section 3 (objectives) we will describe the objectives regarding the development of the project; in section 4 (theoretical background) a careful study of different literature and concepts that support the main theories and approaches related to the subject of this project is presented in this section; in sections 5 and 6 (methodology and study) we will approach to the different concepts which give the foundations to develop Action Research; in section 7 (Analysis and results) we will show the practical part of this Project, which is the analysis of the information data collected in the form of surveys, and at the same time we will analyze and interpret such information; and finally in section 8 (Conclusions), we will show the main findings of this study.

2. Topic description:

The idea of language teaching changes from one teacher to another. Some teachers teach language in the way they have been taught without taking into account the context
their students are immersed in; others, on the other hand, prefer to look for innovative methodologies which can help them in the development of students’ productive skills. But there are others who look for methodologies and different tools that can enable students on their own in the development of strategies that can best fit to their learning type of process. It is to this last group of teachers this final project is directed to; for those who want to help the students in their processes, not only at the language proficiency level; but also to the way students interact with other subjects of knowledge.

It is expected that with this project readers recognize some aspects that are important in the development of the autonomy in students when they are developing project work. Important studies, for example those carried out by Rubin (1975) or Naiman (1978) have been dedicated to the recognition of different strategies which encourage students to improve their learning strategies in order to have more independence from the teacher facing their own autonomy. According to them, “effective learners” are able to organize information, try to look for solutions about any kind of problems, are creative, and create at the same time their own opportunities to learn. At the same time, Rubin (1975) talked about strategies such as clarification, monitoring, memorization, among others that allow students to process information in an effective way. Through the development of different activities aimed to the development of students’ autonomy in the form of a project work, they will be able to explore different strategies which can help them in the development of their autonomy when they are learning. At the same time, we will be able to analyze the specific activities and strategies that might led to a real autonomy in the learning process. The development of the project work and its results will reflect some of these findings and they will be reflected on the final project conclusions.

In this sense, the development of this research will led us to the critical thinking about our role as teachers in the learning context, and to think critically about the teaching practice. The methodology will be carried out taking into account all aspects involved in the development of learning strategies when students perform tasks in pair or in group. The teacher will present to the students different activities directed to different types of learning, in order to establish which of those ones preferred by them.

The idea by finishing this project is to have the opportunity to help our students in the development of their autonomy when learning, that they can see results with the development of the project work, and the most important thing, that they can have strong
foundations to continue improving their learning processes in English through the high school.

3. OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this Research Project is to recognize strategies that help students in the improvement of their learning autonomy using a project work.

General Objective:

- “To recognize strategies that help students in the improvement of their learning autonomy using project work”.

Specific objectives:

- To analyze the results of the project work carried out by the students of 7th grade assessing the learning autonomy factor.

- To establish the learning strategies that are best preferred by 7th grade students in a Colombian public school.

- To recognize learning strategies that help the students in their language learning process.

- To establish which learning strategies are the most common among students of 7th grade.

4. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To develop learning strategies in the classroom is not usually a task a teacher does in it. The lack of time to develop all the processes involved in the teaching-learning process and because this topic is not often into the syllabus of the field to be taught, are some causes for not doing it. However this topic becomes really important when it comes to the consideration about the success in a student’s learning process. If we want to join the cognitive theory with the reality in the classroom we have to start by pointing out the idea that “learners do not merely acquire knowledge, but rather that they construct it by using their previous experience to understand and shape new information” (Hockly et al: 22). This means they do not just “absorb” what teacher explains but they are able to associate
what they learn with all that happens in their daily contexts in order to create new meanings and realities.

Many researchers have supported the idea that learning involves not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the activation of mental activities to fulfill such knowledge. The Key Competences paradigm (2007) refers to learning in similar terms: “learning to learn” is related to learning, the ability to pursue and organize one’s own learning, either individually or in groups, in accordance with one’s own needs, and awareness of methods and opportunities; (Europa: Summaries of EU legislation, 2007)"

Thus, the student’s learning ability is given by the organization of the knowledge, the mental processes involved and the own students’ needs; all these in accordance with the methods used by teachers in the teaching process.

4.1 Learning Strategies
The term “learning strategies” has attempted to be defined by so many authors. Hockly et al (nd) give a brief summary about the different definitions proposed over the time by different authors. However we will take into account for this matter, the definition given by Oxford (1990) in terms that it is the most suitable for the issue of our Research Project. According to him “learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations” (Oxford:1990). In this way the learning strategies point out to the development of actions in order to learn in an easy and enjoyable way.

Oxford establishes at the same time twelve general features of Learning Strategies as follows:

- they all achieve the goal of communicative competence
- Student are trained to be able to work by themselves with high degree of confidence
- Teachers are seen as facilitators nor as authority figures
- Learning strategies are used to solve problems
- Learning Strategies are behaviours or actions done by students to achieve learning
- They involve not only the cognitive level of the student but also another type of functions (metacognitive, emotional, affective functions)
- Learning Strategies support learning in a direct and indirect way
• They can not always been observable
• Learning Strategies are conscious most of the times
• They can be taught
• Learning strategies can be followed in any way, according to each individual
• They can be influenced by so many factors, such as sex motivation, students' personality; among others.

Oxford herself, divided the learning strategies in two: Direct Strategies: which involve memory strategies (grouping, associating, placing new word into context); cognitive strategies (such as repeating, analyzing or creating structure for input and output) and compensation strategies (such as guessing and the overcoming of limitations in speaking and writing.

Indirect strategies: which involve metacognitive strategies (centring, planning and evaluation of the learning); affective strategies (such as the handling of anxiety and the encouraging of the student by himself) and social strategies (asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing with others.

With all these features it is possible to establish the characteristics that learning strategies should have in order to give an overall framework on the way we should teach them in the classroom.

4.2 CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)
With the emergence of globalization since the mid 1990s, English language has become in the dominant language around the globe, in the words of David Graddol (2006) English has changed from being an object to study to a “core skill”. This means that it has become itself not in the subject of study but in the vehicle to gather new knowledge in different subjects.

According to Ball (nd: 5):

The acronym CLIL was originally defined in 1994, and launched in 1996 by UNICOM, University of Jyvaskyla (in Finland) and the European Platform for Dutch Education. It was meant to describe educational methods where, “… subjects are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language”
To this term the main emphasis turns to methodology, because it is through these tools that teachers have the opportunity to join not only the learning of the foreign language but also the learning of different content based on the curriculum of the school they are teaching in. We can say that CLIL has an authenticity in the sense teachers do not have to invent the content of it, because it already exists in the structure of the curriculum of the school. In a country as Colombia, for example, the implementation of CLIL has very different connotations as much as for public schools and for private ones, because the structures of different curriculums in both scenes vary according to the socio cultural context they are immersed in.

4.2.1 Defining CLIL
In order to CLIL can take place, there is the necessity of real content is really addressed. This means that it needs to have a continuity in which they can be carried out through a specific amount of time; and at the same time the concepts presented need to have a sequence as well. This consideration is essential because it is the starting point of a proper organization of a CLIL curriculum.

4.2.2.1 Tasks in CLIL –Product or Process:
Thus, the identification of the different tasks to be preformed by the students should be directed not only to the product of the task itself (as it is usually the case in a grammatical syllabus) but rather in the process that a student carries out when he/she performs the task (as in the case of a task based syllabus). If the attention is focused on the process when developing a task, we are focusing at the same time not only in the development of the content but at the same time in the development of the language communication of a student, having the dual-focused educational context Marsh (2002) talked about. Here it arises the importance of CLIL when it comes to its relevance in the educational field: it is the matter of the words “meaningful” and “real”. Even when the definition of “meaningful” may vary into the different stages of life (for both adults and adolescents or for young learners) what people really find important to communicate (their needs and interests) can be used for the developments of tasks in which these needs and interests are expressed.

4.2.2 CLIL considerations
It seems to be that to talk about an ideal age is to start with a CLIL syllabus we need to talk as well people’s cognitive stages, learning stages as well as subjects that are more easily given to the development of this specific type of syllabus. Most of theorists agree
that, regarding on the cognitive stages, the best option is to start in the late Pre-operational stage (in Piaget’s terms) maybe between 5 and 7 years due to the fact that at this stage children are learning to write and read and when they recognize the power of language and its ability to articulate it with their thoughts. From six/seven years or in primary school the knowledge is presented in sets of categories or in different subjects such as Mathematics, Languages, Arts, Natural science; it is common that each of these subjects can be taught in blocks of two hours, but with the CLIL this time can be easily expanded by learning parts of different subjects in the foreign language or the whole programmes.

Concerning the subjects that lend themselves more easily to CLIL, according to different surveys say that Social Sciences are more “language rich” and that subjects such as Geography and History offer more opportunities for communicative activities in which more different complex operations such as analysis and understanding can take place. It is said that Science-based subjects such as Biology and Chemistry usually have more “specific and technical language" which is often much more difficult for students; however and as it is the purpose of this project, Science can be used as well for CLIL purposes.

Regarding the basic purpose for CLIL practice is the distinguishing between the two broad languages that a schoolchild is exposed to. This represented by the distinction between social (BICS) and academic (CALP) language acquisition. According to Cummings (1979); BICS means “Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills”, the language that we need to interact socially with other people… On the other hand, CALP means “Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency”. It refers to formal academic learning using subject area content material, and it is required by all the four traditional skills-reading, writing, speaking and listening. (Quoted by Ball, nd; p 35). To do this, it is required time and support to become proficient in academic areas, in a process which may take between five to seven years.

There are different types of CLIL practice; in terms of quantity we can talk about a range from weak to strong versions of CLIL, we can name some form the weakest to the strongest:

- topic-based language classes: where the language teacher plans her teaching around different topics
- theme blocks or embedding: studying part of a subject in a part of the academic year, in the target language
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- didactic units
- studying an entire for an academic year in the target language
- plurilingual degree course: where students can choose in which language they want to study the subject
- a bilingual syllabus: students study half subjects in their mother tongue and the other half in the foreign language
- Immersion school: where students study the most part of the subjects in the foreign language, even when they have another different mother tongue.
- Immersion school: where the medium of the school is a foreign language embedded in a native setting. (Ball, nd p 37)

The most common idea about who teaches in CLIL syllabus is that of subject teachers teach CLIL. In different countries around the world most of teachers are required besides of the subject training a foreign language certification (for example C1, European Framework) to be able to teach in any school; however in countries where English is not so strong, for example in Colombia, language teachers are usually used as subject teachers to fulfill the needs, and for the case of primary teachers, the standard profile is that teacher is a person trained in all subjects, and form this it can be assumed that CLIL can be easily practiced in these terms.

However, it is clear that for CLIL to be succeed there must be an adequate competence in the target language, as well as the subject knowledge competence; there must be also suitable material in the target language and approval not only institutional but parental fro CLIL practice, and a policy which include bilingualism across the curriculum.

The topic of the CLIL materials is a problematic one; one of the reasons is that it is really difficult to find materials that can be adapted to different contexts at the same time. Most of textbooks are written for specific countries, and if they are tried to be adapted for any others; the core issue of CLIL which is the meaningful content, would be useless.

One of the last things to consider, regarding the nature of CLIL is the importance it has in the development of different important aspects in the education field. According to Coyle quoted by Ball (nd, p 45) there are four elements that are always present in CLIL syllabuses:

- content: in the way of the increasing of knowledge, skills and understanding
- communication: using the foreign language to learn to use language
cognition: thinking skills which link concept formation

culture: which involves different perspectives and understandings about a culture implies

As ambitions it may seem these four elements constitute the basics of CLIL to succeed, and if they are followed carefully may led us to a successful approach to teach not only a foreign language but a subject in a successful way.

4.2.3 Language in Cognition

It has been said that teachers who are supposed to be CLIL teachers are the subject ones. However different studies have proved that in many cases, when students failed a particular subject, for example Biology or Mathematics, this often happened not only but the misunderstanding of the subject itself but also because there was a failure in understanding the language of that specific subject. One of the main reasons is that in most of countries and curriculums students are not taught about in what Bloom’s taxonomy is called “levels of cognition”; students are not often taught about summarizing, and all these level implies; to perform these operations implies as well different language frames in the different subjects of study. It is important teachers are provided with tools that let them explain how language works inside of their subjects, because it is necessary to lead in the understanding of their students and hence in the performance of them in the subjects.

The implications for classroom management and for the teacher herself are many: the use of the foreign language to explain other subject not only the foreign language one, imply that the use of the foreign language needs to become more accessible and easy to understand for the students; classes need to be ore student-centered, because the main issue here is to help the students in the performance of the tasks. At the same time, the materials to carry out these tasks need to be adapted or modified in terms of the difficulty of them and the language they are required to use. At this stage the pair and group work are essential to perform the tasks; they allow students to share with their peers their advances or their problems when facing the performance of the tasks.

It seems to be that CLIL may threaten the jobs of language teachers in the way that it is supposed subject teachers develop CLIL practice, but the truth is that CLIL offers the possibility to language teachers to use language as a vehicle to learn and apprehend real issues; by using other subjects language teachers can use a lot of meaningful content to
be used in classes in activities with students, having the opportunity at the same time to learn in other subject and language fields.

In CLIL there appear to be four basic types of activities, which can be applied at any stage at school (primary, secondary, etc)

1. Peer communication activities in which students can assimilate conceptual content and at the same time practice communicative competence with their classmates.
2. Reading strategies activities where students can practice content and linguistically structures.
3. Student production activities in both written and oral ways
4. Cognitive skills activities where students can employ different types of operations.

Besides these kind of activities that a teacher may perform when developing CLIL, it is also important to underline that in addition to the mastery of language and the content of the subject to be studied; there are another type of what Graddol talks are the soft skills that are those which are seen as qualities such as personal qualities and interpersonal skills which, at the same time, can occur at the same time when developing within an approach that makes emphasis in thinking skills and communication.

Finally CLIL can be seen as a vehicle for learning, and at the same time it makes us to reflect about the nature of learning itself, and its dynamics and complexities; if there is a good CLIL, there is a good teaching practice.

### 4.3 PAIR WORK AND GROUP WORK

In order to develop a real and successful implementation of CLIL practice and having as one of the premises that of enabling students for real communication and interaction with their peers; it is necessary for teachers to create environments in which students can use what they learn in real situations; in this way the pair and the group work (which are studied at this stage at the same time with no difference in their characteristics) emerge as very important strategies which derive at the same time in other classroom management factors that need to be consider into the evaluation of the learning and teaching process.

To understand this, we take into account the Swain’s Output hypothesis (quoted by Hockly et Ball, nd, p17) in which it is stated:

One function of output is that it provides the opportunity for meaningful use of one’s linguistic resources. (It has been argued) that one learns to read by reading, and to write by writing. Similarly, it can be argued that one learns to speak by speaking.
This implies, that it is necessary that the practice (output) of speaking is performed by students speaking not only with the teacher but also with her/his classmates; this interaction makes possible the notion of group and pair work, because for this it is possible negotiation of meaning can take place encouraging at the same time the small group work.

Hockly et Ball (nd, p 38) summarize in five aspects the advantages to group and pair work:

1. Students are able to use the foreign language in class interactions, having in this way more opportunities to practice.
2. Group work encourages learner responsibility and independence.
3. Group work encourages students to feel more motivation towards L2 practice, and cooperation with their peers at the same time.
4. Group work can contribute to learners’ L2 acquisition; when students negotiate meaning in groups, learners usually use more language functions than in any other circumstance.
5. Teacher can monitor and observe students using language in groups.

Group work also enables teachers to assess the students’ abilities to fulfill operational and functional skills. They use the target language as the vehicle to perform different skills such as suggesting, negotiating, etc.

However there are disadvantages to group work that need to be taken into account besides of the advantages this type of the strategies provide. These disadvantages include discipline aspects, as well as noise problems when performing the task, and the possibility that stronger students dominate the whole tasks while weaker ones just wait and do nothing.

In order to minimize these problems it is necessary that teacher can be able to establish and consider some guidelines when using group work in the classroom. These guidelines rely mostly in the role of the teacher when leading the group work. It is very important that in the first place teacher explains very clearly the instructions to perform the tasks, in order to avoid misunderstandings or confusion between students. Second, the role of the teacher during the process of developing the tasks needs to be that of the monitoring and
sometimes contribute to the students' performance of the task; sometimes it is just necessary to support and help students who might have difficulties. In third place, it is important to set a limit time for the development of the task, to keep students interested and avoiding long periods of time when it is not necessary. The last step, is one of the most important ones, because it involves the feedback of the tasks after its ending; at this stage classroom interaction is crucial; students should have the opportunity to listen and evaluate suggestions, not only from the teacher but also from their peers, the most important thing here is to show students that teacher values the effort of everyone involved in the performing task.

4.4 COLLABORATIVE/COOPERATIVE LEARNING

When we consider the different dynamics of group work, we need to identify the guidelines that make possible group work to occur in an effective way; these guidelines are often guided by classroom goal structures which “are the different ways in which learning is set up or organized in the classroom” (Hockly et Ball; nd, p 41). In these goal structures we can find three main kinds of these:

1. Individual work: in which students can work at their own pace
2. Competitive goal structure: where students compete with their work one against each other to succeed. It is collaborative in the way a student is assessed according to the work that is produce by the whole class.
3. Collaborative goal structure where students work in small groups with one objective on purpose and in order to perform a common task, in this case all students need to have an active role in the development of the task.

In order to collaborative learning to be successful Hockly and Ball mention five important factors which are:

1. Positive interdependence: every student need to contribute in some way to the performance of the task.
2. Individual accountability; the type of contribution a student makes needs to be active, in order to avoid possible lazy students.
3. Verbal interaction: the verbal interaction is crucial and it needs to be meaningful; there must to be exchange of information.
4. Sufficient social skills: collaborative learning encourages different social skills in order to the group can work properly; even sometimes the teacher may need to teach them in an explicit way.

5. Team reflection: with a lot of practice, students will be able to see if their effort to perform the tasks is being effective, and to reflect about what they can do better the next time.

Finally, different considerations need to be addressed when it comes to the organization of group work. Firstly, it is said that the optimal number to collaborative learning groups is to consider between two to four students, in order they all have the same opportunity of participating and because of the discipline management inside the classroom. Secondly, the ideal is that the collaborative groups should be heterogeneous; they should be mixed-ability groups, in the way that stronger students may help weaker students in the development of the task. Thirdly, there is no time limit for collaborative learning groups to work in, as long as they work they can be set up for short or long periods of time, and according to the tasks’ needs.

4.5 LEARNER’S AUTONOMY

When students are to play an active role in their own learning process, we can talk about autonomous learning. According to Holec (quoted by Nunan; nd, p 193) autonomy is “the ability to take charge of one’s learning”; taking this definition literally, students need to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses in order to recognize the best strategies to learn successfully, and according to Benson (1990: 290)

Autonomy is perhaps best described as a capacity… because various kinds of abilities can be involved in control over learning. Researchers generally agree that the most important abilities are those that allow learners to plan their own learning activities, monitor their progress and evaluate their outcomes.

This is the reason why teachers need to be aware of students’ skills just to be able to strengthen them. Learners’ autonomy improves the quality of learning and at the same time prepares students for life-long learning.

In order to achieve learners’ autonomy Nunan suggests that in order to be autonomous a student must be dependent first. They exist in a continuum from total dependence on the teacher to autonomy; for this continuum to be true he specifies a series of steps to be incorporated into the learning process. These steps are:
1. Make instruction goals clear to learners: it is always a good idea to introduce the instructional goals to students at the beginning of a lesson; the most important thing to do here is that students feel they are involved by these goals in order to them being able later of selecting their own goals and content.

2. Allow learners to create their own goals: when students are encouraged to create their own goals and content they have the opportunity to negotiate meaning and interact with authentic content with their peers.

3. Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom: the idea is that students feel comfortable by using and activating the foreign language to talk about daily and meaningful things.

4. Raise awareness of learning processes: Even it is important students have the opportunity to choose what to learn, it is important at the same time they know about how they learn; one way to achieve this is raising awareness of the strategies underlying the classroom tasks.

5. Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies: with a suitable training on learning strategies, students can be able to identify the type of strategies which best fit for them.

6. Encourage learner choice: the decision-making process is very important for learners’ autonomy because it engages the ability of choosing based on preferences or willingness to do certain type of tasks.

7. Allow learners to generate their own tasks: from the decision-making process step, it is now possible to encourage students to modify and adapt the classroom tasks.

8. Encourage learners to become teachers: when students are asked to explain something for their peers, they find it challenging and they find a space to increase their self-esteem, gaining confidence when speaking to others.

9. Encourage learners to become researchers: as difficult as it seems, when students have the chance to investigate based on their interests, they have access to an amount of knowledge that can be used not only for language learning purposes, but also for their general knowledge, expanding their boundaries and creating meaningful experiences.

5. METHODOLOGY
This action research study is framed inside the qualitative approach to research. It is qualitative because the data to be collected do not result in numerical information, and provides facts can not be measured with numbers. For this reason the information in
qualitative research turns out to be subjective because it is a record of opinions and perceptions.

The type of Final Project presented on this paper is Action Research. It is research on the smallest scale. Parrot (quoted by Hockly et Madrid; nd, p 49), gives a definition on what Action research is:

Action research is not so much something that we do in addition to our teaching as something that we integrate into it. In many ways it is a state of mind- it is a scepticism about assumptions and willingness to put everything to the test. It is something which should take very little time and which does not necessarily need to be made public. It is a way of ensuring that we continue to learn even as we teach. It helps stave off staleness and routine.

According to this, it can be said that action research can help teachers on their teaching practice by asking about different issues on it. Action Research needs to be reflexive in the way teacher can raise awareness on what she is doing in the classroom.

The main characteristics of action research according to Elliot (quoted by Hockly et Madrid; nd, p 50) are the following:

- It analyses the human actions and different situations that students and teachers face every day in the classroom.
- It uses an exploratory approach
- It tries to explain what happens in the classroom in relation to different contents.
- The situations happening in the classroom are interpreted by the people who are directly involved in them.
- It uses direct and simple language to describe the above situations.

There are four classic developmental phases of action research:

- PHASE 1: in which the plan of action is delimited in order to examine problem area in the teaching field
- PHASE 2: Act to implement the plan; according to the different provided tools
- PHASE 3: Observe the effects of such actions in the context they occur
- PHASE 4: Reflect on these effects.

We can talk about three different reasons to use action research:

- it is a way of learning about our learners: we can evaluate our practice by asking about students' attitudes and preferences.
it is a way of reflecting and analyzing our teaching: action research gives immediate outcome which can be related into the teachers’ practice

• it is a way of monitoring and evaluating innovation: through action research teachers can see what strategies are they implementing in order to have better learning processes and results;

The research tools to be used in this final project are related to the development of own-materials to develop learning strategies, mainly the ones related to the autonomy; all this inside a CLIL teaching practice.

6. STUDY

6.1 Rationale: The qualitative approach

Taking into consideration the main objective of this project (i.e. to recognize strategies that help students in the improvement of their learning autonomy using a project work) the kind of research methodology used is mainly qualitative, even when the results regarding learning strategies will be presented using graphics and certain figures and focused into the development of instruments divided according to the two main stages of the project: the development of the project work itself (which is the corpus of the qualitative information of this project); and the application of two different surveys regarding the recognition of different strategies during and after the project work done.

Chamot, Barnhardt et Dirstine (1998) highlights the definition of what action research for foreign language classrooms means:

Action research is classroom-based research conducted by teachers in order to reflect upon and evolve their teaching. It is a systematic, documented inquiry into one aspect of teaching and learning in a specific classroom. The purpose of teacher research is to gain understanding of teaching and learning within one’s classroom and to use that knowledge to increase teaching efficacy/student learning.

In this way, the results derived from the project work developed by the students are the supplies by which the teacher has the opportunity to reflect upon her practice and to understand the different learning strategies the students prefer when learning English.

The development of the project work was performed during the month of October, 2014.
We designed and adapted four different activities and worksheets according to the different stages of project work and the topic of the Universe:
The first activity which is a word search about relating words to the planets and the universe that was used as a warm up activity.

The second activity that was a worksheet in which students have to match different verbs or adjectives to their definitions (those words and definitions related to the topic of the project work)

The third activity which was a fill in the gaps reading activity, where students read about the Solar System and tried to fill in some missing word from the reading

Finally in the writing and productive part of the project students invented and created a planet for our Solar System, with different characteristics based on the previous developed worksheets.

All these worksheets were developed by the students in groups of three that were previously formed by themselves according to their similarities and interests. The different worksheets are attached as appendices by the end of this work.

At the same time, and in order to identify learning strategies used and preferred by the students, two different surveys were performed: one at the beginning of the project work in which students were asked about their preferences and styles for learning and their autonomy when learning; and other one done by the end of the project work in which students were asked by the improvement (if any) in their autonomy in learning processes and the importance of group work and cooperative learning.

We chose the production of these surveys because and according to Creswell (2009: 145) "a survey design provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. From sample results, the researcher generalizes or makes claims about the population". For this final project it was really important that besides the development of activities inside the project work that are considered of qualitative type; we could have the possibility of analyzing attitudes and opinions inside a sample of some population with some quantitative values and parameters.

The type of survey design is cross-sectional because it was specially designed for this final project and the both were passed out to the students in order to them to answer in an anonymous way.
For this matter our questionnaires can be classed as structured questionnaires due to the fact they require to choose from different given options and they are restricted to a specific subject or field. Even questionnaires are mainly used into quantitative research, for the purpose of this final project they are used to approach to different perception and preference in learning strategies.

6.2 The context
As it has been stated above, our research will focus on the different learning strategies in order to improve autonomy when learning. Being the learning strategies a key factor in the way a person learn a language, and with the main aim of identifying those that are the most used and preferred by students; four different tasks inside the development of a project work and two different surveys were given to 30 Spanish students of English in seventh grade of Secondary education. As indicated above and beside the project work developed by them, the purpose of the questionnaires was to identify which learning strategies were used by these students when developing project work. In this way we will identify which strategies were more useful for them.

The fact this study involves this reduced number of students can be explained in terms of validity; due to the fact that with larger groups the researcher is forced to overlook many characteristics that can be essential when analyzing the findings in the research.

According to this, we will refer to the physical and institutional context, and at the same time the level of students analyzed in this study.

This school is located in a zone called Kennedy of the capital city of Colombia that is called Bogotá. This city has around 11 million inhabitants and for this specific area of the city its economy is mainly based on commerce. These students belong to a low social stratum. Families in this context have most of the times single parented families and three or four children per family.

These students are located in a classroom that is according to their size but which presents weather conditions that are not always suitable for studying. As they are afternoon students, which means they study between 12:30 m and 6:30 a.m; on summer days it is very difficult to maintain students focused and concentrated due to high temperatures. They are usually located into five lines, each one of them with six students, except when they have group work and the lines disappear.
As to the students, they are between ages 12 and 13 years who are in seventh year of compulsory secondary education. All of them are Spanish speakers and they have a positive attitude towards the learning of English, even sometimes the resources available are not the best (computers, tape-recorders, books, etc.).

6.3 Students’ strategies preferences questionnaires: Learning Strategies
Questionnaires were mainly designed for the purpose of researching about their preferences when learning. Both questionnaires are based on prompts according to different learning strategies. The first questionnaire consists on fifteen different statements about different strategies when learning and their willingness to group work and cooperative learning; the second questionnaire deals with a self-evaluation of their performance during the project work done through fourteen different statements.

Besides the questionnaires through this final project were used, as it has been said before four different worksheets that were designed and/or adapted for the project work.

6.3.1 Learning types
The learning types that were included into the questionnaires were some of the ones mentioned in the *Learning Strategies*’ book from Funiber. These strategies were used because they are the compilation of several authors and are the most useful ones in the context of this study.

As mentioned in the theoretical background section some strategies are more focused to the group work, collaborative learning and autonomous learning specifically.

6.3.2 The questionnaires
Below are the questionnaires on preferred learning strategies and self-evaluation of the project work performed. They were written in Spanish in order to give the students more freedom when asking them and also to answer them more spontaneously:

**LEARNING STRATEGIES SURVEY**

Querido estudiante:

- Lee y analiza las siguientes preguntas; luego respóndelas con total sinceridad
### Cuando realizo una actividad en clase de inglés, yo:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>SI</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Trabajo solo</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Trabajo con un compañero</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Trabajo en grupo con más de tres personas</td>
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<td>4. Cuando no entiendo una palabra la busco en el diccionario inmediatamente</td>
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<td>5. Cuando no entiendo una palabra trato de deducir su significado del contexto</td>
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<td>6. Trato de extraer todas las palabras desconocidas en una lista para recordarlas después</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Trato de revisar periódicamente las palabras que voy aprendiendo en diferentes actividades</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Uso las diferentes palabras que aprendo en otras actividades para ampliar mi vocabulario en Inglés</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Cuando leo la actividad a realizar analizo primero antes de preguntar a la profesora por lo que hay que hacer</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Leo varias veces la actividad para poderla entender</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Uso el diccionario para entender mejor y realizar con facilidad una actividad</td>
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<td>12. Presto atención a la manera cómo se escriben las palabras para ampliar mi vocabulario</td>
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<td>13. Le pongo atención a la profesora por diferentes ejemplos para usar diversas palabras o expresiones</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Ayudo a mis compañeros con la pronunciación de las palabras</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Comparo palabras que conozco en Español con las palabras del Inglés que desconozco</td>
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### AUTOEVALUACIÓN

Querido estudiante:

A continuación encontrarás unas preguntas que te ayudarán con la evaluación del trabajo realizado. Por favor respóndelas con sinceridad.

#### Durante el desarrollo de las actividades yo:

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<th>SIEMPRE</th>
<th>A VEces</th>
<th>NUNCA</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Realicé todas las actividades en grupo</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Ayudé a mis compañeros cuando yo entendía primero y ellos no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Traté de participar activamente en todas las actividades</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Utilicé las fuentes de información disponibles para el desarrollo de las</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
activities

5. Intenté producir y/o entender las instrucciones y actividades en Inglés

6. Utilicé mi vocabulario previo para desarrollar más fácilmente las actividades

7. Opiné sobre las diferentes actividades a realizar

8. Pude realizar un resumen de la información presentada en las diferentes actividades

9. Traduje algunas instrucciones y/o actividades para facilitar una actividad

10. Usé información adquirida previamente para realizar las actividades

11. Ofrecí mis ideas para el desarrollo de las actividades

12. Participé activamente en el desarrollo de las actividades

13. Aunque algunas tareas eran difíciles de realizar para mí; intenté realizarlas con la mejor disposición

14. Mi disposición frente a las actividades fue siempre positiva

7. Analysis and results

After the project work and the questionnaires have been described and justified, the next step to be taken is to analyze the results of each one of the statements in both questionnaires; the survey and the self-evaluation. To a better representation of the results, we will use different graphs.

Afterwards, data analysis will lead us to the conclusions of the learning strategies preferred by students when they develop project work.

7.1 Learning strategies survey

The first graph shows the most relevant data regarding the statement: *I like working by my own*
As can be observed most students do not find interesting to work alone (90%). On the other hand very few students (10%) like working by their own.

This second graph shows the collected data for the statement: *I like working with a partner*

The results on this statement clearly show that students do prefer working with a partner (90%) while only a little percentage said it was not of their preference to work with a partner (10%).

The third graph shows the results for the statement: *I like working in groups of more than three people*
For the statement number three we can see a division when talking about in groups of more than three people; while the 50% of the students like to work in big groups, the other 50% of the students do not find this fact as relevant or important.

The fourth graph shows the results for the statement: *When I don't understand a word, I look it up in the dictionary immediately*

The analysis of the graph shows us that a great part of the students (60%) strongly feels safer or more comfortable when they understand word by word a sentence rather than when they do not understand a word in a specific context (40% of the students).

The fifth chart shows the results for the statement: *When I don't understand a word I try to guess its meaning from the context*

This graph shows us that 60% of the students prefer checking first the whole context in which a word is, before looking it up in a dictionary; the other 40% of the students surely prefers looking the word up in a dictionary to make sure about the meaning of a word.

The sixth graph shows the results for the statement: *I try to extract all the unknown words in a list to remember them*
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The use of the learning strategy in which you put unknown word in a list in order to review and remember them later, was used by the 60% of the students not only for the development of the project work, but in other activities developed in the classroom; whereas the 40% of the students do not use it as an strategy to learn.

The seventh graph show the results for the statement: *I try to review from time to time the new words I am learning*

Most of the students (70%) do not review new words the find when developing an activity; only the 30% of them does that from time to time.

The eighth chart shows the data results for the statement: *I use the new words I learn in other activities to wide my English vocabulary*
In order to widen their English vocabulary, only a little percentage of them use new words in different activities (30%); while the other part of them (70%) do not do this.

The ninth graph shows the results for the statement: “When I read the activity to do, I analyze first before asking the teacher what to do”

The analysis of this graph clearly shows that students do prefer asking the teacher for any clarification in order to do any specific activity, all of them answered NO to the question if they analyze first what they read in order to do something in an activity before asking to the teacher.

The tenth figure shows the results for the statement: I read the activity several times in order to understand it

Most of the students (90%) prefer reading the instructions several times in an activity to understand it; which shows they like to fully understand how to develop an activity.

The eleventh graph shows the data for the statement: I use the dictionary to understand better and do an activity in an easier way
This graph shows us the relevance and the importance for them to have a dictionary as a support in the development of an activity. The 90% of the students use it, to develop the activities to do in an easier way.

The twelfth graph shows the results for the statement: *I pay attention to the way the words are written in order to widen my vocabulary*

For the 60% of the students is very important to identify the right spelling of a word when they are learning it; the other 40% of them do not find really important this aspect when learning a word.

The thirteenth graph highlights the results for the statement: *I ask the teacher for different examples to use different words and expressions*
For this statement we can find an opinion’s division between the students; for the 50% of them is important to find examples of words in different contexts, but for the other half of them (50%) this aspect is not important.

The fourteenth graph shows the data results for the statement: *I help my partners with the pronunciation of the words*

The results for this statement vary in this way: whereas the 70% of the students do not seem comfortable helping or correcting pronunciation in their partners, the other 30% of the students help their partners in different ways.

The fifteenth graph shows the results for the statement: *I compare words that I know in Spanish with English words I do not know*

While the major of the students do not usually associate Spanish words with English ones; only a little percentage of them (30%) does this as a way to know new meaning of new words in English.

### 7.2 Self-evaluation survey:

The results for this self-evaluation are as they follow:
The first graph shows the results for the statement: *I did all the activities in group*

Most of the students (60%) could be able to perform the activities in the project work as they were suggested, which is in groups; the other 40% of them had some problems with the development of the tasks in groups.

The second graph shows the data for the statement: *I helped my partners when I understood first and they did not*

Even when the chart shows the negative answer to the question of helping other to understand instructions; these results were based on the students’ perception of letting their partners to analyze first and then ask for specific information they did not understand. They answered NO mainly because the teacher asked them previously to give all the students enough time to understand by themselves the instructions for the different tasks.

The third graph analyses the results for the statement: *I tried to participate in all the activities*
The higher percentage of a negative answer (60%) in students when they were asked about their participation in the activities was the result of the students’ assumption about everyone should equally participate in all the activities, and not only one or two students taking the control for the development of all the tasks.

The fourth graph shows the results for the statement: *I used all the available information sources for the development of the activities*

These results show that sometimes students were not capable to handle all the information available in the different tasks performed in the project work, sometimes they asked about further clarification or even more information about the tasks.

The fifth graph shows the data for the statement: *I tried to produce and/or understand the instructions and the activities in English*
This graph shows one of the most challenging activities for students when they developed the project work: trying to understand all the instructions in English. Even when some percentage of the students (47%) tried to do so; not everyone was in the disposition to do, since then they answered mostly SOMETIMES, frustration was one of the consequences of this action but in the end every single student was open to at least hearing the instruction for the very first time in English.

The sixth graph shows the results for the statement: *I used my prior vocabulary to an easier development of the activities*

One of the biggest obstacles when developing the project work was related to this statement. As the chart shows, students not always tried to use their “older vocabulary” to develop the activities; that was the reason why some activities were a little delayed, because students had to look the words up again in the dictionary even when they had already checked their meaning on it.

The seventh graph shows the results for the statement: *I gave my opinion about the different activities to do*
For the students it was very important to give their opinions during the development of the activities, but for this specific statement they answered based on the fact that the activities had been already stablished so they answered taking this into account; they gave their opinions inside the development of the activities not about the activities themselves.

The eighth chart shows us the data for the statement: *I could perform an information summary in the different activities*

Due to the fact that not all the students work to the same pace; some of them (23% of the students) could do a summary based on the different activities, the other students (43% of them) could not do it because sometimes the time was not enough to do it; and for the rest (34%) who answered NEVER, they never tried to do it given this variable: the time.

The ninth graph shows the data result for the statement: *I translated some instructions and/or activities to facilitate an activity*

The answers for this chart are strongly linked with the ones in statement five; for these students is kind of difficult not to depend on the dictionary to fully understand an activity,
that is the reason why the 53% of them answered in a positive way when they were asked about the use of the dictionary to perform an activity.

The tenth chart shows the results for the statement: *I used previously acquired information to do the activities*

![Chart 7.2.10](image)

The students were able to use acquired information in specific moments of the project work (73% of the times), which shows the inclination for them to use their vocabulary actively.

The eleventh chart shows the results for the statement: *I gave my ideas for the development of the activities*

![Chart 7.2.11](image)

This chart shows that for students is very important to express themselves when they develop different activities; even when they answered they did it sometimes, the truth is that the most part of them were always ready to give their ideas.

The twelfth graph shows the data for the statement: *I actively participated in the development of the activities*
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For these group of students is very important the teacher can see them participating into the different tasks; hence the results of this graph, the major part of them (67%) actively participated in the development of the project work.

The thirteenth chart shows us the results for the statement: *Even there were some difficult tasks for me, I tried to do them with the best disposition*

Directly associated with the previous statement is the result of this chart: in it we can observe that for most of the students (70%) not matter the difficulty level on the activities; they always tried to develop them in a positive way.

The fourteenth graph highlights the results for the statement: *My willingness to do the activities was always positive*
This very last statement summarizes the findings for the last three statements of this survey: the students’ disposition to develop the project work activities in the best possible way. Most of them (77%) show the positivism as an important feature to develop the different proposed activities.

All in all we could end up by reasserting that students can develop different learning strategies when developing group and collaborative work inside a topic or project that they really like and enjoy.

8. Conclusions

At the beginning of this study we could state that if we as teachers could encourage our students in the development of their own strategies we could probably give them better tools not only for the English language proficiency but for the development of themselves in different fields of language. Based on the findings of this final project we can now confirm that even these strategies are not sometimes fully developed in the language classroom, with more time and dedication they can be successfully addressed for the sake of our students.

On the one hand, the first conclusion that can be drawn from our study is that our students do have a preference regarding the way they like to work in. They like to work with a partner or in groups because this action promotes the collaborative work; when they work in this way they are able to learn from the others and at the same time they promote collaboration between them; it is in the way that collaborative work occurs that a student can be feel himself or herself as an important part of a group, with the possibility of expressing and share his/her knowledge for a common goal.

On the other hand, it must be pointed out that the learning strategies that were intended to promote in these students’ learning processes were directly focused into the lowering of the teacher’s role in the classroom and the idea of a more active student inside of it. In this way the development of “My classroom, my universe” project work led to the opportunity for students to feel themselves an active actor of their learning processes and at the same time this project gave them the opportunity to unconsciously work on their own autonomous learning strategies that were identified in the discussion of the two surveys asked by them.
Those strategies are suitable with the ones described by O’Malley and Chamot’s Learning Strategies taxonomy: the way students were able to use cognitive strategies such as resourcing, deduction/induction, elaboration, translation, transfer and inferencing; and others inside the Social and affective strategies in which we can mention those of questioning for clarification, the cooperation and the self-talk.

Given these data we can have further progress in our teaching work by designing an action plan that continues with the findings of this final project; as it has been said before, even when the time variable is sometimes against us; an organized and well-designed plan can help us to reach our ultimate goal as teachers: to influence in a positive way in the lives of our students so we can give them tools for their development as persons. Taking this into account different assumptions will be addressed and linked with the finding of this study. Finally some guidelines will be presented to have in consideration when talking about learning strategies and autonomy development.

The first questions that arise from this study and its results have to do with the recognition of the kind of activities for students to increase their autonomy when learning, this autonomy understood as the decreasing authoritarian role of the teacher in the classroom. What do I have to do as a teacher to get my students a more active role inside the classroom? What kind of activities do my students really prefer doing? How do they approach to the knowledge I pretend they acquire inside the classroom?

First of all we need to understand that whatever the topic to work in the classroom is, we need to find the way it would be attractive and interesting for them; we have to try to link our field contents (i.e. grammar or syntax) with other contents in other different fields. That was the intention when we proposed the topic of the universe (with a science content) to develop learning strategies in the English class. The kind of activities that students prefer doing in the classroom are directly connected with the activities they can develop with their peers, encouraging the collaborative and the group work, as it has been said above.

The second question is related to the learning strategies that we as teachers would like to encourage in our students in order they can develop an autonomy in their learning processes. What strategies do I must encourage in the students for they to be autonomous? How can I approach these strategies inside the classroom?
What can be stated based on the finding of this study is that you as a teacher can develop several learning strategies with one and only task. This is because according to type of activity you want to develop with your students, it can give you the chance to develop more than one learning strategy at the same time. For example, one of our project work tasks was about vocabulary in which they had to link different words and their meanings; in this very simple task, students are encouraged to use cognitive strategies such as deduction/induction; translation and inferencing among others; that have been previously explained in the theoretical background section of this study. These strategies encourage and promote autonomy in the way we are giving students the tools to break with the teacher-dependence even if they do not consciously know that they are doing it.

As a conclusion, here we can find a summary with some guidelines to be taken into account to encourage learning strategies and autonomy in our classrooms:

- When thinking about an activity for students, it should be linked with any topic that be attractive and meaningful for them.

- The use of project work encourages collaborative and group work through the effective interaction of students.

- To encourage different learning strategies in our students gives them the possibility to become themselves in autonomous people.

- Learning strategies help students not only in the proficiency of English language, but also in different knowledge fields.
9. Bibliography

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