

Peer Interaction: A Social Perspective towards the Development of Foreign Language Learning

Interacción entre pares: una perspectiva social hacia el desarrollo del aprendizaje en una lengua extranjera

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This pedagogical innovation aims at discovering new ways of interaction that go beyond the unidirectional relationship that is presented in the classrooms most of the times. The innovation considers peers to be active agents in the construction of knowledge and proposes new ways to arrange groups in the classroom so that the arrangement can certainly contribute in the development of students' language learning process in a context in which English is not a priority. This study, which is being carried out with undergraduate students at a private university in Bogotá, considers the importance of new dynamics of interaction among students that might be the product of a process of meaning negotiation upon the language that is being learned in class, and what the product is of the interactions with other students that are supposed to deal with the same language level.

Key words: Group arrangement, knowledge construction, peer interaction students' needs.

Esta innovación pedagógica tiene por objetivo descubrir nuevas formas de interacción que van más allá de la relación unidireccional que, la mayoría de las veces, se evidencia en el salón de clase. Se considera a los compañeros como agentes activos en la construcción de conocimiento y se proponen nuevas formas de conformación de grupos en el salón de clase para contribuir al desarrollo del proceso de aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera, en un contexto donde el inglés no es la prioridad para los estudiantes. Este estudio, que tiene lugar en una universidad privada de Bogotá, considera la importancia de las nuevas dinámicas de interacción entre los estudiantes, que podrían ser el producto de un proceso de negociación de significado de la lengua que se está aprendiendo. También se contempla cuál es el producto de las interacciones con otros estudiantes que deberían tener el mismo nivel de lengua.

Palabras clave: interacción entre pares, formación de grupos, construcción de conocimientos, necesidades de los estudiantes.

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Introduction

When it comes to peer interaction, which is understood as the relationships and roles developed by students in the classroom environment when undertaking any kind of task or activity, teachers are the ones with the “power” to control the way students can organize themselves in order to develop a specific activity. Teachers tend to create some sets of grouping arrangements (whole class, individual, pair and group work) for students to share and construct knowledge about language. Nevertheless, in contexts in which English is not seen as a priority, this grouping issue is naturally generated by the dynamics of classroom interaction that do not necessarily have to do with the academic interests of students: they usually join their close friends, partners they like to talk with, etc.

Furthermore, a teacher can take advantage of the results by developing alternatives in which students profit from the interaction with their peers not only as way of identifying each other’s mistakes or understanding what the teacher wants to say, but also in order to construct knowledge and language learning from the community towards the individual. It means how the product of the interactions with other students that are supposed to deal with the same knowledge might actually contribute to each one of the students’ learning process as they will have the opportunity to listen to and use what others have to say in order to compare and contrast with concepts and opinions they already have.

This paper is the result of an innovative project that was aimed at helping both teachers and students restate the processes of interaction undertaken in EFL settings. According to Richards and Lockhart (1994), “teachers can influence the kind of interaction that occurs in their own classrooms” (p. 138). According to the experience I have gotten throughout the years, I think this interaction is

sometimes limited to receiving information with no further result. It is just a matter of receiving input with little possibility of producing an outcome. Considering the importance that the negotiation of meaning has in the development of the second language learning process, this project could become a starting point for an understanding of meaning negotiation which would not only benefit the language learning process itself, but other processes of interaction of students with different people and in different social contexts.

I considered this project worth doing in my teaching context since it would potentially change students’ perceptions of English as an important subject for the present and future. In fact, students found the opinions, ideas and points of view of their peers highly valuable, and also found out how to take advantage of those new dynamics of interaction to enhance their own learning process, all the while having respect for others as human beings and subjects of knowledge.

Needs Analysis

The stage of the needs analysis was completed after a three month period of permanent observation. I could identify some initial concerns thanks to the use of field diaries and surveys. I confirmed and analysed lack of relation between the contents of the subject and the accounting major itself, and low level motivation. Additionally, I found a very particular situation concerning peer interaction that has to do with how the dynamics of interaction are somehow “coercing” individual performances of students, which is also the ultimate objective of this innovative project.

To get to this point, I followed a rigorous process that started by selecting the group that was going to be described in the section related to setting and participants. I decided to choose this population due to the significant difficulties they have when learning

English, as well as all the different issues that underlie this situation and that were identified, observed, and registered during the stage of needs analysis.

Secondly, I started the observation process using two instruments: one observational represented by field diaries and the other non observational that consisted of an interview (Burns, 1999). The objective with the field notes was to start an observation process in which I could systematize the phenomena presented in the classroom and thus identify possible problems that might conduct the research innovation.

On the other hand, the intention behind the interview was to get additional information from the students in order to complement what the observations had shown so far, figuring out the learner interactional style (Richards, 2004) in each one of the students, taking into account that each interactional style is defined by the way students approach their peers and the possible relationships they establish.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1993), any course should be based on an analysis of learner needs. Thanks to this needs analysis previously carried out, I had the opportunity to have a broader perspective of what the situation

was in my classroom and thus understand what the first steps would be in order to undertake my innovative project. In Table 1, the *needs*, *lacks* and *wants* of my students are expressed.

With the information contained in Table 1 it was possible to answer Hutchinson and Waters' questions as to the *why* and *what* of my research project. The *who*, *how* and *where* will be developed throughout the next sections of this paper.

After this process of needs analysis, I discovered a problematic situation that I consider makes my innovation worth doing: In classroom practices, learning can be understood as the product of interaction. According to Mackey (1999), conversational interaction facilitates second language development. Regarding the needs analysis carried out in this research project, these interactions are, to some extent, having an effect on the way students develop their individual learning process. When developing any kind of activity in the classroom, students have created a kind of "interdependence" that fosters relying on their peers all the time, using either Spanish or English. However, this situation promotes an environment in which students' interaction coerces individual performance; it means, students think they

Table 1. Needs analysis results

Needs	Lacks	Wants
<p>Implementation of strategies by which they can develop their speaking abilities.</p> <p>To use the foreign language to talk about topics related to their major.</p> <p>To try new ways of interaction that allow students to appreciate different ways of thinking and working in activities related to English.</p>	<p>Awareness of the importance of English as a useful resource for their professional and personal lives.</p> <p>Due to this situation, motivation towards English is not fully existent, and students see English as a "requirement" in order to finish their major.</p>	<p>To relate English to their career. They really want to talk about topics they know about and exchange information. They also want to express opinions about the topics they read and learn.</p>

understand as long as they have a partner next to them in order to clarify or correct what they have already got from the topics that are supposed to be learned in class. Thus, when it comes to expressing ideas in an individual way, most of them are not able to do so, and the output of this negotiation process is reflected in a few words that do not express any clear idea about what the student probably wants to say. How would this social approach to knowledge be modified in such a way that students can construct knowledge about the language instead of waiting for others to do so for them? That is exactly what I was looking for with this innovative project: showing the benefits of social interaction for the development of foreign language learning.

Besides, in order to support this situation presented in the classroom, I posed some questions that definitely guided my pedagogical intervention, to wit:

- Are these kinds of interactions actually contributing to students' process of language learning?
- What would happen if these grouping arrangements were considered under a perspective in which interaction and negotiation of meaning are mediated by peers with similar interactional and learning characteristics?
- How might these new dynamics of interaction contribute to a student's individual learning process?

Setting and Participants

The context in which this research project is taking place is Universidad Central. It is a private institution that offers students a wide variety of majors from economics to arts. The University is divided into two campuses: On the northern campus, for instance, most of the majors are related to the arts: social communication, advertising, and music, among others. On the downtown campus,

on the other hand, students can find majors such as accounting and engineering.

The conception of English as an official and mandatory subject within the Universidad Central curricula is the reflection of the permanent concern the University has about broadening students' perspectives towards international issues as well as knowing the foreign scenarios in which their profession might take place (Mision Universidad Central). Taking this reflection into consideration, a new entity of the University was conceived and created ten years ago: the Languages Department. Since 1998 this department has been in charge of the creation, implementation, and development of processes in English as a foreign language as well as other languages such as French, German and Italian for people who do not pursue careers at the university (extension courses). The department has adopted the communicative approach, understood as the use of language for real-life situations and integrating the four skills (speaking, writing, listening and speaking) as the body of the courses in all the levels. For undergraduate students, English is a mandatory subject which has to be undertaken throughout the career in four different levels: Basic I, Basic II, Basic III, and Pre intermediate I, taking as a reference the book *World Link* by Thompson Ed. The schedule, which is basically the same for all the majors (16 hours per month), can be freely chosen according to the student's needs and availability.

This specific innovative project is being carried out on the north campus with social communication majors. There is a population of 18 students (7 men and 11 women) whose ages range between 18 and 23 years old. Currently, they are taking Basic III level English course, four hours per week: Wednesdays and Fridays from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00p.m.

The environment in the course is nice and the relationship among the students and the teacher

as well as among the alumni group is kind and respectful; nevertheless, there are some concerns related to those relations in the English class (specifically the ones related to their interaction and the development of their speaking skills), that puzzled me to start this innovative project as described on previous pages.

What Theory Says

The following theoretical framework is mainly aimed at presenting the perspective of some theoreticians regarding the topic of peer interaction and its influence in students' learning process, as well as analysing some pieces of research that have been conducted in this same field. For this purpose, and dealing with a conception of language learning as a social process developed by interaction, I am going to focus on three theoretical perspectives whose insights are helping me broaden the horizon on the complex but enriching process of second language learning. They are the following: input, output and learner interactional patterns, all of them related to peer interaction in classroom settings. Additionally, my view of language as well as language teaching will be developed in this section.

First of all, I would like to start by stating my position on language and language teaching and the kind of learning that guides my innovative project. Based on Kumaravadivelu (2006), my teaching practices would be closely related to a learner-centered method (p. 91), by which I seek to provide opportunities for my students to use the language in specific communicative situations through meaningful focused situations. That being the case, my interest would be based on both form and function of the language. Nevertheless, my main interest through the implementation of this innovative project was not pushing students to express themselves in a "perfect way", considering the use of accurate grammar structures as well as

exact pronunciation and syntax in the things they express, but rather to encourage them to express their ideas about specific topics with the notions of language they already have and the ones they are getting in the classroom.

I would also like to highlight the importance of two key aspects in peer interaction, understood as a socio cultural perspective in which learning is socially constructed by means of face-to-face contact among students and the context around them (Apple & Lantolf, 1994) as well as how these aspects are highly supported, argued and even complemented by different authors through the decades. These concepts are Input and Output.

What do we understand by input? In the dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2002), its meaning is expressed in simple words: It is "the language a learner hears or receives and from which he or she can learn" (p. 261). However, this conception entails a great number of processes that contribute to a student's second language learning process. One of the first ideas of the function of input in second language acquisition was coined by Krashen and Terrell (1983), in which they state that "we acquire (not learn) language by understanding input that is a little beyond our current level of acquired competence" (p. 32). In other words, in order for acquirers to progress to the next stages in the acquisition of the target language, they need to understand input language that includes a structure that is part of the next step in the acquisition process.

Even though this theory is respected and considered in the guidelines for the creation of language learning programs around the world, it has certainly been questioned, as well as enriched and complemented by some authors like Susan Gass and Alison Mackey (1999).

According to Gass (2002), by the early 1970's the nature of Input started to be acknowledged in

second language acquisition research, and with it, some other concepts came into existence: the notion of modified speech as an alternative that enables the learner able to understand and, therefore, get through what is essentially a social interaction. This modified speech is also considered by Krashen in that, according to his theory, we acquire the language only by comprehensible input.

However, in several studies, Gass as well as Mackey go a step forward recognizing the importance of interaction and meaning negotiation as a contribution to the learning process, something that was not considered in Krashen's theory. In relation to this, the study undertaken by Mackey (1999) is an attempt to support the interactionist hypothesis by understanding the relationship between some types of conversational interaction and second language acquisition. Mackey's qualitative and quantitative research aims to prove that conversational interaction facilitates second language development. To prove her hypothesis, Mackey analyzed the extent to which developmental outcomes are related to the nature of the conversational interaction and the level of learner involvement.

Her study presents an extensive theoretical background (including authors such as Ellis, Swain & Lapkin, Gass & Varonis, and Long). The conclusions of some studies are different although they aimed to prove the influence of interaction in the development in SLA. Hence, Mackey points out that the result of the studies cannot be generalized because there are different factors that affected them. She mentions aspects like the tasks to be used, the nature of the input, the nature of the interaction, the nature of the setting and the role of the learner.

According to Mackey (1999), the more you interact the more successful your second language development is. Then I recall again Krashen's

input hypothesis in which the silent period of the acquirer is important in order to get all the necessary input he/she is supposed to. From this perspective, it seems to have a balancing direction to what Mackey states in terms of the complement between the interactional and the individual nature of learning.

Then, a reflection related to this research project arises from this comparison of perspectives. To what extent could we take into account both theories in order to analyse input in our EFL settings? We all know about the advantages of interaction in terms of negotiation of meaning towards the development of the learning process. Mackey's study is a proof of that; however, what about those students who, due to different factors, are not participating (not having any oral interventions in the class that give account of their oral production in L2) in the interaction process. Should we take for granted the fact that his/her process is not going to be successful since they are not participating in the negotiation processes that are taking place in the classroom? Should we take into account the Silent period Krashen states as a way of intake in which the student is processing the input he/she is being given in order to transform it into comprehensible output?

Output, the second construct of this research that represents a complement of the language provided by the input represented by "what the learner produces" (Dictionary of Language teaching and Applied linguistics, 2002), is widely developed by Merrill Swain. This author certainly places the role of output way beyond the mere result of learners' language production. In an attempt to help students go beyond their current interlanguage stage and noticing great weaknesses in Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, Merrill Swain (2000) proposes a broader understanding of second language learning from a perspective where

interaction (*particularly output*) is the basis for language knowledge construction. She presents new ways to conceive of output considering its use as a socially-constructed language-learning mediator. Taking this into consideration, Swain shows the implications that this model may bring to second language learning.

Under this conception, interactions provide us with opportunities to negotiate meaning, to focus on form, to receive feedback and to use the target language: for output. Output pushes students to process language more deeply and with more effort, to follow cognitive steps in understanding, creating linguistic meaning and for negotiating, monitoring and evaluating.

One suitable example for this “pushed output” is described by Mackey, Philp, Egi, Fujii, and Tatsumi (2002, p. 195) in their study of interactional feedback in second language development.

NNS: And in hand have a bigger glass to see.

NS: It's err. You mean, something in this hand?

NNS: Like spectacle. For older person.

NS: Mmm, sorry I don't follow, it's what?

NNS: In hand have...he have...has a glass for looking through for make the print bigger, to see the print, for magnify.

NS: He has some glasses?

NNS: Magnify glasses...he has magnifying glass.

NS: Oh aha I see, a magnifying glass, right that's a good one, ok.

In order to enhance this function of output, Susan Gass (2002) complements it by stating that it “forces learners to focus on the syntax of an utterance and, consequently, on formulating hypotheses about how the target language works” (p. 180). Furthermore, Swain attempts to expand the scope of second language learning to a more comprehensive concept. Interaction can be more than ‘information provided’ and take the role of a mediator to language learning. Interaction is a ‘dialogue’ that constructs language learning. In the

process of bridging the gap between what we want to mean and what is actually said (e.g. accurate form), collaborative dialogue can be a facilitator and lead to the understanding of new concepts or to the consolidation of previous ones.

Regarding Swain's theory, it would be important to consider that, in our teaching context, the processes of interaction in order to construct language through communication when learning a second language might be affected by certain variables, and one of them is related to the role of L1 in the negotiation process.

If the purpose of both input and output hypotheses is getting to the learning of a second language, how do students negotiate meaning in a classroom when student-student interaction is mostly influenced by the use of L1? Although it is stated, according to Swain, that the negotiation process could be carried out in both L1 and L2 (interlanguage), would the use of L1 –in which students get to a stage of understanding the language but not being able to interact with it– be convenient for the learning process?

At this point, it is suitable to mention the research study carried out by Julia Posada (2006), aimed mainly at identifying what students focus on when giving feedback to their peers at the time of undertaking speaking activities, taking into account that most study plans pay special attention to the processes of interaction in which teachers are permanent providers of feedback. Posada's main findings showed the great importance of grammar forms and accuracy when peers are giving feedback to one another, and the significance of feedback and the interaction phenomena among students.

Nevertheless, given the importance she gives to interaction, there is a main concern regarding a “noticing stage” in which grammar becomes the focus of the interaction process. According to this, it is important also to take into consideration

Larsen-Freeman's conception about Grammar (1991), in which she remarks on the importance of grammar as a tool to do something, not simply as storing knowledge about the language or its use (p. 13). The possible effects of that kind of interaction that might be evidenced in several EFL classroom settings and, indeed, evidenced in the classroom that I undertook the needs analysis in make up one of my concerns for this innovation project.

Related to this, and according to Richards (1994), it is suitable to talk about some interactional patterns that have to do with students' personalities and learning styles that I consider of great importance when generating new dynamics of interaction among students. According to this author, there are different patterns of interaction that stand out in the classroom: Task-oriented students, Phantom students, Social students, Dependent students and Isolated students. For this innovation project, and after the process of observation and interviewing carried out in the needs analysis, I am going to consider the first two patterns that rely on the following characteristics:

Task-oriented students are generally highly competent and successful in completing academic tasks. They enter into learning tasks actively and generally complete tasks with a high degree of accuracy. They seldom need a teacher's help, but if they need it, they do not hesitate to ask for it. They are cooperative students, although they mostly work on their own.

Dependent students need the teachers' and partners' support and guidance to complete class tasks and tend not to maintain their engagement on tasks without frequent reinforcement and support. They need structure and guidance and do not usually work in large groups. They often depend on the teacher or other students to tell them if their learning has been successful.

Finally, Bygate (1987), as cited in Forero (2005), states: "Learners need to develop skills in the management of interaction and negotiation of meaning" (p.76). If we talk about a social construction of language we have to start thinking how the social environment itself is being carried out in the classroom e.g. take a look at what is behind the process of learning in order to examine if, as teachers, we are helping in the process of building a development of language learning in which students feel confident enough to interact among themselves establishing a relation between the things they have learnt and they things they haven't. That relation, of course, is mediated by interesting and complex processes of interaction and negotiation of meaning in our EFL contexts.

Phases of the Innovation

Now and Then: The Development of Mass Media in Colombia

In this section the *what* and *how* of this innovation project will be described in depth as to each one of the objectives I wanted to pursue.

This innovation project was conceived with the main purpose of engaging students in new dynamics of interaction when undertaking group activities that would help them in the development of their speaking skill. Thus, this project has three objectives:

1. To generate a new form of grouping arrangement, taking into consideration the possible similarities among students' learning styles and interactional patterns.
2. To focus on peer interaction while undertaking group activities.
3. To check what the effect of those new interactions is in students' development of the speaking ability.

Implementation

This phase of the innovation is divided into different steps that will account for the process of the project.

Identification of Learner's Interactional Patterns

In order to achieve this goal, the two instruments used in the needs analysis were certainly very useful: through the observation process reflected in the field notes, I could realize the way students worked and how they approached the tasks undertaken in class both individually or in groups. There was an initial inference about the possible pattern each one of the students might follow, and in order to confirm this information, I designed the interview that matched the results of my observation (Appendix 1).

Most of the students actually belong to the dependent pattern, which indicates a speaking ability that is nearly limited to words and gestures and the speaker's asking support from the teacher or partners. Some others turned out to be task-oriented, with the desire of working individually most of the time. A few students were social or phantom ones. Hence, due to the fact that dependent students show poor results on their FL performance (especially in speaking) and task-oriented ones do not seem to consider the value of interaction, I have decided to work with these two specific kinds of learners and see if the results actually contribute to their learning process.

Nonetheless, it is important to clarify that all the students in the group were going to be involved in the activities, but the follow-up of the innovation considered just the two types mentioned above.

How to Do It?

Since students are majoring in social communication and after an informal talk in which they expressed their preference towards mass

media, I designed a set of activities based on four of these types of media: television, Internet, radio and movies and the changes they have been through in the last decades.

All of the activities were created and designed to focus on the development of the speaking skill (when interacting in order to do the activity as well as when presenting the product of each one of them). Moreover, for each one of the activities, the grouping arrangement varied in such a way that students who are dependent (d) or task-oriented (t-o) would interact in different forms: Pair grouping: (d-d), (d/t-o), (t-o/t-o), or in larger groups: all (d), all (t-o); one d students within a group of t-o's or vice versa. In table 2, the activities carried out by students are described.

Table 2. Activities for the Implementation of the Project

1. Television in Colombia: present and past. Oral presentation
2. Are you addicted to the internet? Debate on a reading based on this topic
3. Creating TV commercials: Black & White and Color TV
4. Narrating a "radio story". Discussion and taped recorded narration
5. What is real, what is fiction? Movie: "The Truman Show"
6. Realities and their impact on society: Opinions and reaction on the movie presented in the previous class
7. EVALUATION. Roundtable discussion with students about their impressions, experiences and insight of the project

Conclusions

Throughout this process of innovation, I realized that everything you do in behalf of your

students has an effect on their perceptions and beliefs regarding their process of language learning. In this specific case, the conclusions I came up with have to do with the two areas my project was expected to cover, and fulfilled all my objectives in spite of the short period of time I had to undertake all the activities. These results are expressed from two different perspectives: the language and the social one.

In regard to the language perspective, I could see progress in different aspects. First of all, students engaged in a process of language learning in which they were no longer afraid of expressing their ideas either in L1 or L2. The idea of speaking about topics they felt familiar with triggered a process of meaning negotiation in which they used both languages in order to communicate their ideas successfully. I consider this a huge step, since they usually considered the act of speaking in English something difficult, boring and even worthless.

Secondly, they found meaningful and useful insights about the relationship between the topics they learned in class and the topics they discuss in their majors. This factor encouraged them to go deeper into issues like vocabulary and pronunciation that, especially in the dependent students, was a very difficult task at the beginning, but later one that was very satisfying and rewarding not only for them, but for me as the teacher.

Thirdly, the desire for talking about the things they knew made them construct sentences and ideas, using some grammar forms that were supposed to be explained later on. In order to illustrate this fact, I present one excerpt taken from one of my field diaries:

We form a semi-circle in order to start the presentations. I ask for volunteers but nobody seems to go first. Finally, one of the students (who likes to participate a lot), raises her hand. They all make their interventions (reading what they have in their notebooks) and I complement their information by asking

them what the differences are between television in the past and nowadays. Then one of the students who is usually very quiet says: "Teacher, television today is more violence, in the past, not is". Very good! I say, you are comparing!

Examples like this evidence how effective task-based teaching (TBT) can be in order to encourage, enrich and improve student's learning process, without having the grammar aspect as a priority: the act of having students thinking and expressing their ideas implies a process that does not guarantee the accuracy of students in terms of structures. Nevertheless, according to what I saw after this innovation project, students' need for speaking about what they know cause them to predict or try to organize sentences that fulfil the communicative intentions of the student. In the case of task-oriented students, this was a little easier to accomplish; in the case of dependent students, it was a reason to increase their motivation and willingness to learn.

As a fourth element, the different arrangements that took place in the classroom made students go through a process of "comparison" of what they know and what the others know and complement their information. An implicit process of meaning negotiation started to take place among T.O. and dependent students, and the interdependence phenomena started to take a different path than the one we were used to: asking all the time for everything students were asked to do, waiting for other people to do so and then just copying their work.

On the other hand, I noticed the changes as regards the social levels, which were even more meaningful and enriching for our teaching-learning process. In the first place, the environment in the classroom actually improved: at the beginning it was very difficult to "break the ice" among dependent and non dependent students. There

was a kind of social barrier which did not allow any process of negotiation or understanding. After the implementation of this project, students were more aware of the importance of sharing ideas and opinions in order to improve their learning process. I dare say the concept of “otherness” changed, since dependent students started to see their peers as helpful hands in order to reach their goals rather than “very smart” people who could do everything for them. Related to this situation, the different arrangements of people in the classroom raised “dependent” students aware of the implications and the commitment of working as a group.

Students also opened themselves up and felt heard by others: the environment of trust increased since students felt more encouraged to talk about things they are familiar with, expressing valuable insight and opinions, rather than talking or receiving grammar structures they do not deal with on a daily basis. They understood the importance of the language and its use in the present and future of their majors.

On the other hand, I consider it suitable to also present the conclusions from my standpoint as a teacher. In other words, what I had the opportunity to reflect on after having implemented this project Tudor (2001) as well as some other authors’ perspectives, led me to think about what my position is regarding language, teaching and learning, taking into account what I “live” and what I do in my daily practice.

In relation to language, I could give to my vision of it a bidirectional perspective that fulfils both the administrative requirements of the institution I work for and the vision of language I have been constructing from my experience as a foreign language teacher. Thus, the type of activities I chose gave account of the great importance of *learning as a social interaction*. I definitely agree with Mackey’s conception of learning in which

conversational interaction facilitates second language development (1999). Hence, group and pair activities were essential parts of most of my classes, and the practices that took place in the classroom showed me how they were feeling the language and thus how they were learning it.

Bearing in mind Tudor’s views on language then, my vision of language is the one guided towards the functional perspective since my students, as social actors, would be able to use the language in specific contexts, and for specific purposes, given the context above described. Nevertheless, and beyond this use of language from a methodological perspective that actually relates to the needs and wants of my students, there is a complementary vision of language that has been shaped through my beliefs and experience as an EFL teacher. There is a vision of language that bears in mind its importance as a mediator of social relationships by which the individual constructs his/her self as part of a specific community, and how that language actually shapes the way this same individual constructs his/her identity from his/her own beliefs and experiences, or from the power others give to that language in order to define the identity of the individual.

What Does This Project Imply in The Pedagogical Practice?

The pedagogical value of this innovation project will be reflected on in different aspects: the first one, the permanent reflection of teachers on their work bearing in mind that they would have to analyze the context they are working in, means they would be able to identify the different ways and processes students use to develop a task when learning a second language, and how this new information would help them to have a better performance. In addition, this project could be, without a doubt, a starting point of reflection for teachers regarding

the use of different methodologies in the classroom: how to approach grammar aspects creating an environment in which the communicative and social issues have great importance, or, taking into consideration new perspectives of foreign language teaching that considers students to be part of the educational process of co-construction rather than the ultimate step in the process of reaching “language structured goals”.

Finally, this project can encourage teachers (myself included) to think about new definitions for the dynamics of interaction among students in a context where, according to my experience as a teacher, the relationship between teacher-students is the only one that validates the results of the language learning processes. Students, as interactional beings, need to be in contact with other people’s opinions, ideas and strategies that might enrich their own process in the EFL classrooms, specially the speaking skill: students need to be heard and valued by others! If that is so, their ideas and points of view are going to be expressed in a more confident way. Thus, a deeper understanding of the social perspective in EFL teaching will definitely contribute to the development of the individual language learning process.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide for Students*

Universidad Central
Social Communication Program

Dear student,

The following interview aims at learning about your vision, opinion and perspectives on the way you work and interact with your peers in English class. Your contributions will be vital in order to enrich our class- work as well as to enhance our learning process.

1. Which way do you prefer working when undertaking activities in your English class?
In small groups ____ Individually ____ In an open discussion ____ Other ____
Why?

2. When undertaking an activity in the classroom, do you find you need help or guidance from your teacher all the time?
Yes _____ No _____
Why?

3. When you have questions about something you cannot understand, do you find it hard to ask the teacher for help?
Yes _____ No _____
Why?

4. Are you willing to help your peers when they experience trouble regarding activities in the English class?

* This interview was conducted in Spanish. It was translated into English for publication purposes.

5. When undertaking group activities, who do you feel more comfortable working with?

Closest friends _____ New classmates _____ The way the teacher indicates _____ Other _____
Why?

6. Reflect upon the different ways in which you undertake activities within the English class (e.g. individually, in groups). Which advantages or disadvantages do you find about them? Mention some in the following chart.

Advantages	Disadvantages