

Classroom community and its benefits: working towards the optimization of student learning processes

La comunidad de aula y sus beneficios: trabajando para la optimización del proceso de aprendizaje del alumnado

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Abstract

Student performance is often affected by a number of factors such as engagement and classroom atmosphere. In order to optimise student learning processes, a teacher might need to consider all the variables which determine the performance of a specific group of students according to their context. This means taking into account not only their level and previous knowledge, but also their specific needs and emotions. For this purpose, it is essential to create an atmosphere of work based on trust; a safe environment in which students share a common purpose and feel comfortable and confident enough to develop their full potential. In other words, building what could be called an optimal “classroom community”. In the present research, several methods to maintain a favourable learning atmosphere through the creation of a classroom community will be explored, resulting in an educational proposal in which students’ performance can be optimised while also trying to procure their wellbeing.

Key words: classroom community, cooperative learning, English as a Foreign Language.

Resumen

El rendimiento de los alumnos suele verse afectado por un número de factores tales como el nivel de implicación y la atmósfera de aula. Con el propósito de optimizar el proceso de aprendizaje del alumnado, deberían considerarse todas las variables que determinan el

rendimiento de un grupo específico de alumnos en función de su contexto. Esto implica tomar en cuenta no sólo su nivel de conocimientos previos, sino también sus emociones y necesidades específicas. Con tal fin, es esencial crear una atmósfera de trabajo y confianza en la cual los aprendientes compartan un propósito común y se sientan lo suficientemente cómodos como para desarrollar su potencial, algo denominado “comunidad de aula”. En el presente artículo, se explorarán varios métodos para mantener una atmósfera de aprendizaje favorable a través de la creación de una comunidad de aula, intentando proponer una forma de optimizar el rendimiento del alumnado, así como su bienestar.

Palabras clave: comunidad de aula, aprendizaje cooperativo, Inglés como Lengua Extranjera.

1. INTRODUCTION

For many years, researchers and educators have been concerned with the optimisation of the learning process, trying to identify the different factors which help students develop their skills and abilities, and finding new methods to adapt to student needs. The motivation behind such research might be due to the responsibility teachers feel to take care of the aspects which they can control inside the classroom. This, in turn, results in their intent to do everything they can to make sure all students have the same learning opportunities, enabling them to develop their full potential even if that does not mean achieving a perfect score.

For this reason, the first aim of this paper is to analyse the concepts of classroom community and cooperative learning, examining their possible benefits by exploring what other authors have concluded in previous works. Thus, different aspects will be exposed, including the relevance of emotions in second language learning, the conditions which promote student engagement, the benefits of cooperative work and of creating a sense of community in the classroom, and ways of implementing said practices in the English classroom.

The close revision of relevant literature will then lead to the proposal of a series of activities and lesson plans, which are intended to help both teachers and students build a classroom culture and therefore boost student performance. Moreover, this paper also features a case study which serves as a simple example of how some of the proposed methods and ideas can be applied in real life. The circumstances and observations of said case study will appear together with the results obtained from an anonymous questionnaire presented to students, so that the results include not only assessment

results and the teacher's perspective, but also the students' opinion on the change in classroom dynamics and atmosphere.

The relevance of this topic lies in its possible benefits, since ideally students will be provided with tools to acquire and use knowledge (both academically and in real life), which will increase their motivation, optimise their learning process, ensure an adequate development, and improve the classroom atmosphere.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

2.1. Looking for a way to enhance learning: the relevance of emotions

Many variables affect the teaching and learning of a second or foreign language, including the students' attitudes and beliefs, the anxiety they might feel while learning and using the language, and their degree of motivation (Arnold, 2010). However, and most importantly, the student's personal circumstances and background will also affect their performance in a significant manner.

For example, those students with serious personal concerns might see their education as worthless and useless in real life, since they perceive the future as a menace for which they are not offered an explanation (Cardús, 2005: 344). Moreover, certain aspects of a student's lack of motivation and engagement, such as the boredom that many secondary school students feel during most of their academic life, seem to be partly caused by a biological factor, since the teenage brain tends to feel interested only in those tasks which feature a strong emotional impact (Loste, 2011). Therefore, it seems clear that the students' personal background plays an important role in their learning process.

However, there are other factors to take into account, such as the one mentioned by Shernoff in his work *Optimal Learning Environments to Promote Student Engagement* (2013), where it is noted that "features of the immediate learning environment, especially if conceived as a nexus of historical, cultural, social, and more proximal influences, may be an even greater factor in the propensity to engage in learning than characteristics of the individual." (Shernoff, 2013: 128). For all these reasons, the objective of many educators should be to look for alternative ways to overcome some of the aforementioned circumstances, and although previous research focuses mainly on other fields (e.g. students of ICT, primary education, or higher education), most studies examine exactly the same factors and propose similar solutions across areas.

For instance, some scholars think that it is relevant to find out what the good qualities of a teacher are, while others believe that, rather than looking up to the perfect role model, one should examine oneself and strive for perpetual improvement (Williams et al., 1999: 56-

57). Alternatively, some authors describe a number of methodologies and approaches which can be used to teach a second or foreign language (Brown 2001; Johnson 2001). Nevertheless, while some people commonly believe that it is up to the lecturer to choose a certain classroom methodology according to his or her own teaching style, in order to promote effective and significant learning, it will be the students who will indirectly choose the necessary methodology according to their own learning needs and personal background (Viveros Guzmán, 2016).

For instance, Viveros Guzmán points out that students from certain parts of the world prefer a traditional grammar approach, even if the teacher attempts to use the communicative approach (2016). This idea reinforces the importance of perceiving pupils as individuals, a belief endorsed by Gómez Candiani, who defends that teaching also involves listening to students and paying close attention to their needs, opinions and experiences, providing an environment of trust and respect, and being able to listen “not only with our ears but also with our eyes and heart” (2010).

In relation to this point, the work “Emotion circuits in the brain” (2000) by Ledoux explains the effect of emotions on the creation of memories, with the author stating that emotions are more powerful than reason. Thus, success does not depend on methods alone, but on whatever happens inside the classroom and between people, revolving around the experiences which occur there (Foncubierta Muriel, 2016). What is more, Shernoff (2013) notes that students feel “positively” engaged in classroom activities when the teacher supports them “emotionally [and] interpersonally” (130), and when they feel the lecturer “care[s] and provide[s] active learning opportunities for them as individuals” (133).

Hence, emotions seem to play an important part in the ESL classroom, and teachers who wish to make the contents of their lessons memorable do well to consider designing lesson plans which feature activities with an emotional impact or relevance in students’ lives. For this reason, the notion of classroom community becomes particularly relevant while trying to enhance student performance, since as Shernoff points out, there is impracticality in “daily preparation in comparison with how to set up a learning environment that has the best chance to meet the learning and developmental needs of all of their students” (2013: 129). In the next section, the concept of classroom community will be explored in an attempt to find a way of creating such learning environment.

2.2. Classroom community and its benefits

The term “community” has been defined as “the feeling that members belong to one another, matter to the group, and that the group will meet member needs” (McMillan and Chavis as paraphrased in Glantz, 2014: 56), with some authors adding that, in the case of classroom communities, “members’ educational needs will be met through their commitment to shared goals” and that “[t]he primary purpose is learning” (Rovai, 2001). Thus, the key factor of engaging students to be part of a classroom community is to create a series of “shared values, beliefs and attitudes about learning”, which constitute the classroom culture (Brown-Wessling, 2012).

In their work, *Classroom Management and Culture* (2011), the educational organisation Teach For America offers some advice on how to build and manage a classroom community, mentioning respect, tolerance, and engagement as key elements of the community (60, 67-68), and reminding teachers that “your own behavior should model appropriate speech and actions to your students” (60). Moreover, they emphasise the importance of interpersonal relationships (61, 63), prompting teachers “to learn about your students’ personal lives, interests, and goals, [since] seeking this information will show students that you value, respect, and care about them” (61). In particular, it is essential that teachers “establish positive channels”, particularly with students “who do not tend to receive any positivity from others, or who rub you the wrong way” (63). Gruwell (2007) also mentions some of these points, highlighting the importance of believing in students while also empowering them (5, 12).

Finally, some authors observe that working as part of a classroom community “offers a positive outcome if one accepts that ‘all of us’ are smarter than ‘any of us.’” (Glantz, 2014: 53), which helps build an atmosphere of cooperation. Hence, it becomes evident that a combination of elements and conditions is needed for the community to work effectively, the main focus being placed on cooperative learning. The following section will deal with the aforementioned concept and its impact on classroom community.

2.3. Cooperative learning and gamification

Cooperative learning has been implemented for many years in language classrooms, since it increases student engagement and motivation (Crandall, 1999: 234; Shernoff, 2013: 129), creates more opportunities for a student to participate in an environment with less stress and anxiety (Crandall, 1999: 233, 235; Brown, 2001: 178-179), and is believed to “improve the quality of the processes of learning and instruction” (Johnson et al., 2004: 5). For instance, Dörnyei and Malderez (1999) point out that a “cohesive group means established acceptive relationships between all members, which allows for

unselfconscious, tolerant and 'safe' L2 practice" (108), and that group work "acknowledges the resources each member brings" (109), which is a central idea in the concept of classroom community.

Furthermore, cooperative work also promotes the development of social skills and relationships (Crandall, 1999: 228; Dörnyei and Malderez, 1999: 167), which creates a chance for "learners to develop cross-cultural understanding, respect and friendships as well as positive social skills for respecting alternative opinions and achieving consensus" (Crandall, 1999: 237). For this reason, some authors even believe that conflicts should be welcomed "as a sign of group development" (Dörnyei and Malderez, 1999: 168).

However, there are certain requirements needed for cooperative learning to function properly. For instance, it is relevant to discuss norms and goals explicitly (Dörnyei and Malderez, 1999: 167), and to create tasks which are "genuinely interesting" and "meaningful" (Crandall, 1999: 243), which will also have a positive impact on classroom community.

Some authors have even pointed out the effectiveness of group work while developing certain reasoning skills, since "collaborative activities teach students how to make disciplinary arguments" (Bean, 2011: 183). Moreover, authors such as Shernoff (2013) and Summers and Svinicki (as paraphrased in Glantz, 2014) noted a "higher mastery of goals in collaborative learning environments, as opposed to traditional lectures". Therefore, due to the aforementioned benefits and impact on student engagement, cooperative work seems to be a key element in classroom community, and thus it should be considered as its main group dynamics whenever possible.

Another way to help students get involved in their own learning process by means of a classroom community is through gamification, a type of group work which "is used to create a classroom community wherein students are encouraged to contribute to, and benefit from, peer learning" (Glantz, 2014: 53). Hence, it is not surprising that some researchers believe that small-group games and competitions "promote group cohesiveness" (Dörnyei and Malderez, 1999: 167).

Taking these aspects into account, if we designed a competition in which all students participated in groups in order to achieve a common goal, all students would be able to enjoy being part of the competition independently of their final results and overall performance. As Shernoff (2013) explains, "[s]eeing others rewarded not for their success, but by their success, reinforces and intensifies the competitive chase for success as the primary goal on which one would spend his or her freedom. [...]. Now one may be satisfied only by higher and higher levels of success." (110). However, he also notes that "[a]n

emphasis on competition can also lead to a relative lack of connectedness” (Shernoff, 2013: 110), so competitions should be carefully designed and implemented when trying to build a sense of classroom community.

In the following section, a proposal featuring cooperative work and gamification will be presented with the objective of attempting to optimise student learning processes.

3. PROPOSAL

As mentioned above, classroom community, together with cooperative work, seems to have a positive impact on student learning processes. For this reason, and taking into account the information presented above, a total of three lesson plans have been designed with the objective of motivating and engaging students in their own learning process, as well as trying to establish a sense of classroom community. Each lesson plan adapts popular games or activities from previous authors and adds ideas for in-class implementation, as well as the main features of the lesson (e.g. context, aim, materials, group dynamics), which will be individually listed and described below.

3.1. Sample lesson plan 1

Table 1. Sample lesson plan 1

Context and target audience: this activity could be used in any level once students already know each other quite well.				
Objectives: describing people’s appearance and personality; discussing issues of gender, background (race, nationality, culture) and stereotypes (physical and psychological).				
Activity	Time	Skill	Materials	Interaction (group dynamics) and development
The perfect human being	25 minutes	Writing, Speaking, Listening	Pen and paper	1-2-4 technique (individual work, pairwork, small group)
The peanut game (adapted from Gruwell 2007)	30 minutes	Writing, Speaking, Listening	Peanuts, pen and paper	Individual work and big group

In this sample lesson, each student would write some adjectives which describe the appearance and personality of how they think the perfect human being should be. Afterwards, students would work in pairs and discuss possible differences between their ideas, after which students would work in groups of four to reach agreement on the most

important qualities the perfect human should have. Finally, they would describe their vision of the perfect human being in a short paragraph.

Once all groups have written their description, they would share it with the rest of the class and discuss their differences. The teacher would then ask them to reflect on how different their ideal is from people they know in real life, including themselves.

Subsequently, each student would be given a peanut (or shown a picture of a peanut) and be asked to describe both the inside and the outside of a peanut in one short paragraph. The whole group would then discuss the differences they found between both descriptions and think about the meaning of the activity in connection with the issue of appearances and personality traits. The teacher would lead the discussion so that students are able to realise the importance of accepting differences, giving importance to one's inner qualities, and rejecting social expectations regarding beauty standards.

3.2. Sample lesson plan 2

Table 2. Sample lesson plan 2

Context and target audience: this activity could be used for any level once students already know each other quite well.				
Objectives: using modal verbs; building classroom community; developing writing skills.				
Activity	Time	Skill	Materials	Interaction (group dynamics) and development
Brainstorming: modal verbs review	10 minutes	Use of English, Listening, Speaking	Whiteboard or blackboard	Big group
The mailbox (adapted from ESL Kids 2016)	25 minutes	Writing and Speaking	Envelopes and pieces of paper	Individual work
I would like to receive a letter saying...	20 minutes	Speaking	None	Big group

This sample lesson would start with a brainstorming through which students would remember and review modal verbs and their use. After that, the teacher would explain that they will have to write a short letter to one of their classmates, which should start with the sentence "You may not know, but..." and feature some sentences enumerating things they admire from the other person (e.g. You're a great friend or You're the best student in this classroom).

The teacher would then hand out one envelope to each of the students, which would contain the name of the person to whom they have to write the letter. While the teacher

monitorises the students, they would write the letters individually (it is important that they do not write their name so that the letter is anonymous).

Subsequently, students would hand their letter to the teacher, after which they would sit in a circle. The teacher would then give each envelope to its recipient, and once they have all received their letter, they would read it out loud to the rest of the group.

Finally, each of them would be asked to imagine they were able to receive a letter saying anything they wanted to read, and they would have to explain what they would like that letter to say using the expression I would like to receive a letter saying... (e.g. I would like to receive a letter saying I have won the lottery, I would like to receive a letter saying I am immortal).

3.3. Sample lesson plan 3

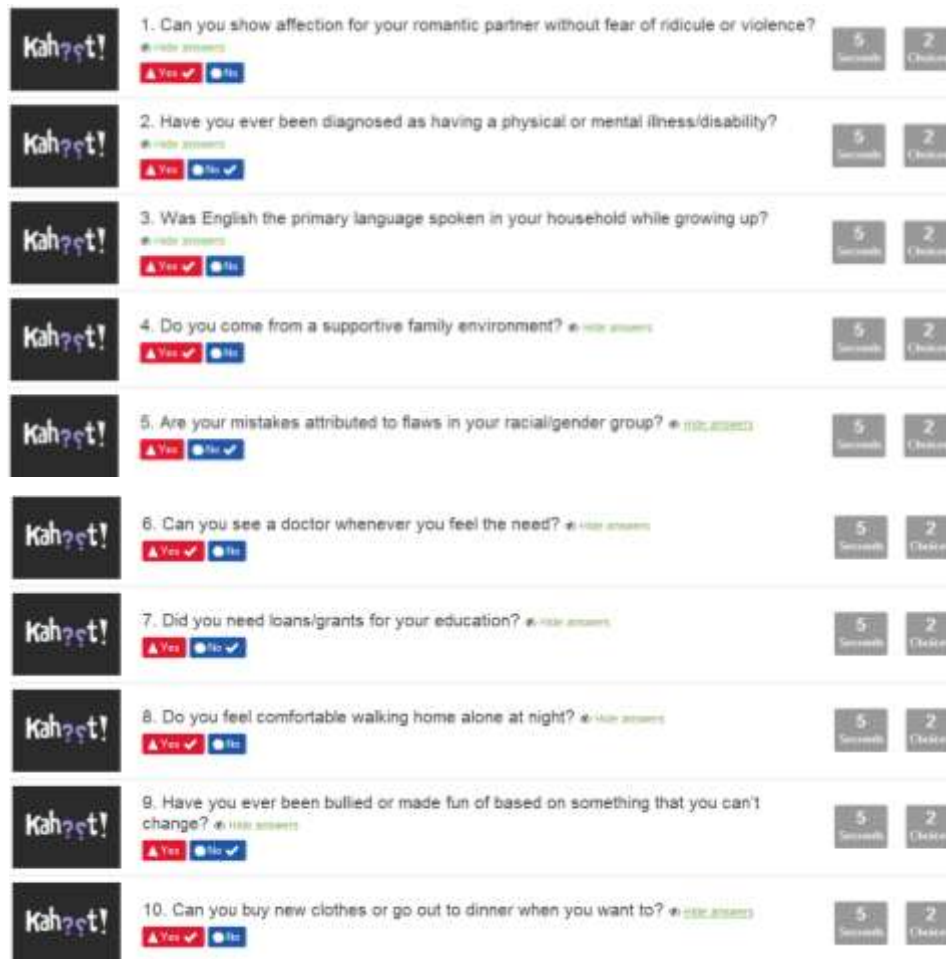
Table 3. Sample lesson plan 3

Context and target audience: this activity could be used for intermediate and advanced levels once students already know each other.				
Objectives: introducing new vocabulary; developing the students' ability to reason and to express opinions, agreement and disagreement.				
Activity	Timing	Skill	Materials	Interaction (group dynamics) and development
The privilege test (Adapted from BuzzFeedYellow 2015)	10 minutes	Reading	Kahoot! Test (see figure 1)	Individual work
Discussion of basic terms	10 minutes	Vocabulary, Speaking	Blackboard or whiteboard	1-2-4 technique (individual work, pairwork, small group), whole group
Hangman	15 minutes	Use of English	Whiteboard or blackboard	Group work, big group
Debate	20 minutes	Listening, Speaking	None	Big group

In this lesson, students would first interact with ICT materials by completing a test on the online platform Kahoot! (Brand et al., 2016) with a series of yes/no questions. In the absence of ICT materials, desks could be moved to the side of the room and students could form a line; then, they would take one step forward for 'yes' and one step back for 'no' (BuzzFeedYellow, 2015). The purpose of the test is to find out which students (if any)

benefit from the social concept of privilege, which is to be explored and discussed later in the lesson.

Figure 1. Kahoot! quiz (Brand et al., 2016) to test privilege (adapted from BuzzFeedYellow, 2015)



Afterwards, the class would be divided into five groups, and the five most privileged students (the ones with the highest scores) would be the captains (alternatively, students can work individually). The whole class would then discuss basic terms related to social equality, such as “privilege” and “equity”. Afterwards, they would play a short game such as Hangman to review key vocabulary items, with each group winning one point for each right answer.

After a group has been proclaimed winner, the teacher would unexpectedly add the points from the *Kahoot!* test to the group scores, even if that implies that students who did worse in the game will now be the new winners.

The teacher would then explain that, since some of them were more privileged than others from the very beginning, not all of them had equal chances of success, so some of them

would have to work much harder than those born in more favourable environments. Subsequently, the lesson would conclude with students discussing how they felt and what they think about the concept of privilege (e.g. *Do you think it really exists? If it exists, does it promote fair situations?*). Hopefully, students would realise the importance of equity and of taking care of all members of the community, both inside and outside the classroom.

4. CASE STUDY

As a way of providing real-life examples for the proposal presented above, two textbook units were adapted and taught in two different groups of the secondary school IES Arxiduc Lluís Salvador in Palma (Balearic Islands): first year of *ESO B* (students were aged 12 or over) and second year of *Bachillerato A* (students were 17 years old or over).

The objective of this action was to test the extent to which student engagement and performance are actually improved by means of cooperative learning and the creation of a classroom community, even with only a few subtle adjustments and modifications in activities and classroom dynamics. Moreover, at the end of both units, an anonymous questionnaire was handed out to students to find out if they felt that their involvement in their own learning process had been enhanced thanks to the aforementioned classroom dynamics.

In the following sections, the approach followed in each of the groups will be described, after which the questionnaire results will be commented on and compared. Subsequently, a series of improvements will be suggested based on knowledge acquired in the experience.

4.1. First year of ESO B

The first adapted textbook unit was “Appearances” (Pelteret, 2014), taught in first year of *ESO B*, a European Sections¹ group with twenty-eight students. In the first session, students completed certain activities of group cohesion (e.g. introducing a classmate), and with the help of the group’s tutor and permanent English teacher, pupils were divided into heterogeneous groups of four, who were then able to choose a name for themselves. It should be noted that one of the students was originally part of a low-performance group and that the permanent English teacher had prepared special materials for her, but she joined one of the groups and completed the same activities as her classmates during the length of this unit (with slight modifications in certain activities).

¹ “European Sections” is the name given to an initiative implemented in some Spanish schools with the objective of improving student proficiency in foreign languages. For this purpose, content subjects such as Music or Physical Education are taught in English or French, depending on the school and level (Cid Manzano, 2004: 9).

The students were told that the completion of several tasks throughout the unit would enable them to win points (e.g. doing homework, working cooperatively and finishing an activity before other groups), while certain behaviour would subtract points (e.g. talking while other students are participating, drawing on desks). As a way of rewarding their performance, at the end of the unit the group with the highest number of points would be able to choose a film to watch and discuss in class out of a list provided by the teacher, and each week the group with the highest number of points would be announced. The idea was welcomed by all students, and although some pupils tended to work on their own and had to make an effort to work with their group, most students were happy to work together and they often prompted other members to behave properly and complete the activities so that they could win more points.

Regarding the development of the lessons, certain activities were specifically designed so as to involve students in their own learning process; for instance, since in the unit students learned how to describe appearances, some activities included the description of a classmate as well as of some of their favourite singers or actors (e.g. Michael Jackson, Keira Knightley, Justin Bieber, Nicky Jam, Shannon Williams). Moreover, a visit to the museum Fundación Joan March was designed so that students would be able to choose a work and write a description of the person or people in it, thus applying their knowledge in a real-life situation. The worksheet designed for the museum visit also included questions about their feelings and impressions, which enabled them to discuss how differently they perceived and interpreted certain abstract works (see figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Worksheet designed for the museum visit

There is a portrait man...
There are people...
The film is exciting...
He has long short brown black blond hair
The colours are dark/bright

Name: _____

MUSEUM VISIT: FUNDACIÓN JOAN MARCH

1. Choose ONE of the following words and describe them. Use the vocabulary you learned to write 7 sentences in e.g. physical build, height, tall, short, long, hair, dress, hairstyle, shoes, etc., hair, etc. - I used the expressions below to help you:

a. La colita, fupper's crown

 b. Compositio, behavio del

 c. Red y closed, Amos's hair


d. Figuren en one crea, Amos's hair

 e. Heavily old hair, tall, light, Amos's hair

 f. Pensive, Daring, Amos's hair


2. Find the paintings below and answer the questions with a word or short phrase.

a. Colours are dark, Jose Manuel Berto
 i. How does the painting make you feel?
 ii. What does the painting look like to you?
 iii. How does it make you feel?
 iv. How do you think the artist felt while painting it?

b. Amos's hair, Amos's hair
 i. What does the painting look like to you?
 ii. How does it make you feel?
 iii. Why do you think the artist made it like this?

c. Amos's hair, Amos's hair
 i. What does the painting look like to you?
 ii. How does it make you feel?
 iii. Why do you think the artist made it like this?

d. Amos's hair, Amos's hair
 i. What does the painting look like to you?
 ii. How does it make you feel?
 iii. Why do you think the artist made it like this?

3. Look at the paintings and name the artists.



Another example of a way in which certain activities were adapted to students was a lesson where students had to complete some reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises about the Solar System (Pelteret, 2014: 129). Since the text for the reading exercise included a description of stars, the exercises were introduced with a clip from the film *The Lion King* (Allers and Minkoff, 1994), which most students recognised and remembered as their favourite childhood film. In the scene shown to students, three main characters hypothesise about what stars are and how they work. After watching the clip, students were asked to summarise or paraphrase what each of the characters had said and to vote for what they thought was the right answer.

Furthermore, a varied set of activities was used for particular purposes in certain lessons. For instance, in order to review vocabulary items, students were given the chance to review key terms with popular games such as Hangman or The Longest Word. Moreover, the aforementioned activity The Mailbox (adapted from ESL Kids 2016) was also introduced with the intention of strengthening bonds between students and to lessen the effects of competitiveness.

Following the indications provided by the permanent English teacher of the group, students were assessed following very traditional methods (i.e. written exam, short oral exam with questions), and the general performance was very satisfactory, with only two students failing. One of those pupils was the student who had recently been moved to the group, who had covered the same contents as the rest of students during the unit and had had an assessment slightly adapted to her level. Although she did not pass the exam, her results and degree of engagement improved considerably in comparison to previous units.

4.2. Second year of Bachillerato A

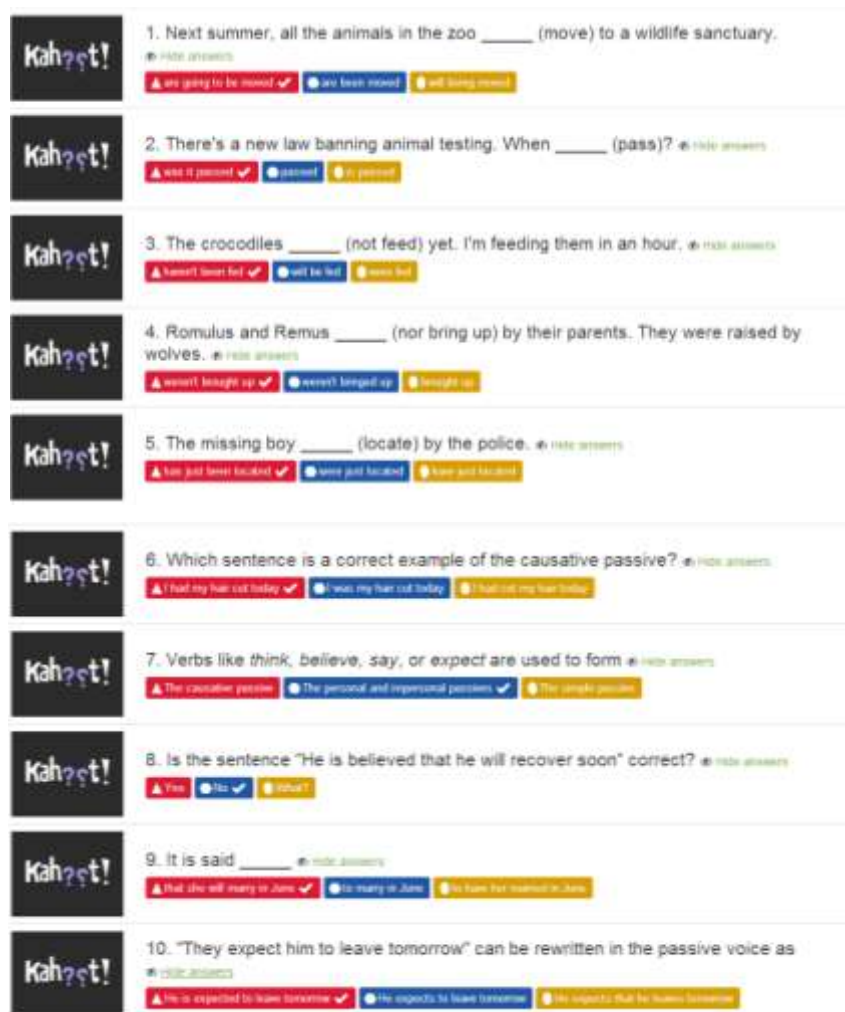
The second teaching unit was taught in second year of bachillerato A (scientific itinerary), with twenty-one students. The unit was part of the textbook Trends 2 (Baines and Rodwell, 2014), entitled “Animalia”.

Despite featuring some complementary activities and alternative assessment methods, these lessons followed a more traditional approach, since group work was often implemented but there was no monthly competition. However, some of the activities carried out did feature a certain degree of competitiveness, such as the two Kahoot! quizzes completed to review grammar and vocabulary items (see figures 3 and 4 below), which were highly appreciated by pupils.

Figure 3. Kahoot! Test (Brand et al., 2016) with vocabulary items

Kahoot!	1. A scorpion _____	hide answers
	☒ bites ☒ stings ☐ scratches	
Kahoot!	2. The chameleon is a master of _____	hide answers
	☒ disguise ☒ adapting ☐ behaviour	
Kahoot!	3. Animals have offspring with their _____	hide answers
	☒ mother ☒ mothers ☐ sons	
Kahoot!	4. Unless we make a global effort, the lynx will soon _____	hide answers
	☒ die out ☒ tag ☐ reach	
Kahoot!	5. Unfortunately, it's unlikely that cockroaches will ever be _____	hide answers
	☒ wiped out ☒ wildlife sanctuaries ☐ household pets	
Kahoot!	6. Some animals are _____ because they have lost their habitat	hide answers
	☒ threaten ☒ endangered ☐ described	
Kahoot!	7. I think people who hunt animals for fun have some kind of mental _____	hide answers
	☒ disease ☒ behaviour ☐ illness	
Kahoot!	8. You are responsible _____ this situation!	hide answers
	☒ for ☒ of ☐ about	
Kahoot!	9. I'm not going to hate you just because you're different _____ me	hide answers
	☒ from ☒ of ☐ to	
Kahoot!	10. The man was declared guilty _____	hide answers
	☒ of all crimes ☒ as fact ☐ for all crimes	
Kahoot!	11. I'm really _____ to my mum	hide answers
	☒ concerned ☒ devoted ☐ surprised	
Kahoot!	12. He's not the sharpest tool in the box, but we're _____ him	hide answers
	☒ pleased with ☒ pleased for ☐ loved him	
Kahoot!	13. I'm very _____ sports!	hide answers
	☒ good at ☒ good for ☐ good about	
Kahoot!	14. The act of copying nature to create human designs is known as	hide answers
	☒ biomimicry ☒ biomimics ☐ mimic	
Kahoot!	15. Sadly I can't own a pet permanently, but I'm a _____ parent	hide answers
	☒ foster ☒ can ☐ have	

Figure 4. Kahoot! test (Brand et al., 2016) used to review grammar points



With the objective of using meaningful materials in order to increase student engagement, certain tasks, such as a sample reading exercise and the final exam, were designed following the exam model used in the university entrance exams of the University of the Balearic Islands. This allowed students to work with the knowledge they had acquired throughout the unit, as well as to have real practice for the university entrance examinations (see figure 5 below).

Figure 5. Reading exercise designed to resemble official university entrance exams

READING COMPREHENSION EXERCISE

Read the passage carefully and answer the questions in English. USE YOUR OWN WORDS AS FAR AS POSSIBLE.

Wild lynx plan 'threatens sheep farmers'

Plans to reintroduce wild lynx to parts of Northumberland and Cumbria would mean "completely unjustifiable" losses for sheep farmers, a report claims.

The Lynx UK Trust wants to place up to six lynx per site as part of efforts to regenerate the species, which has been extinct in Britain for 1,300 years. But the National Sheep Association (NSA) fears the move could damage the livelihoods of sheep farmers.

The trust says that if successful the trial will boost regional economies. The trust is looking to lodge a formal application with Natural England to go ahead with the trial later this year. Its chief scientific specialist Dr Paul O'Donoghue, said: "The UK can support a population of up to 400 lynx, that is based on habitat suitability studies. We think conservatively that the reintroduction of lynx would be worth £80m to £70m a year to the UK economy. They will play a vital role in both promoting rural regeneration and forest regeneration. The experience in other parts of Europe where lynx have been reintroduced is that it results in a massive boost for the environment as well as to the economy."

But the NSA report calls for more research before the trial is approved. It says: "The impacts that lynx would have on sheep are completely unjustifiable when farmers already work tirelessly for the welfare and performance of their livestock, and also to maintain their own livelihood. Sheep play an important part of maintaining the biodiversity of the current, perfectly functioning ecosystem, which would be disrupted by the introduction of an unnecessary predator." The association's chief executive Paul Stocker added: "We think the UK is too small an island and too heavily populated for this and the way the countryside is managed at the moment is already good for tourism. Also, these animals are going to be nocturnal and extremely shy and it is going to be very unlikely that anyone ever actually gets to see one."

Adapted from BBC News, 30 April 2016

Vocabulary:
 - Livelihood (N): occupation or employment.
 - Lodge (V): To place.

1. Say whether the following statements are TRUE or FALSE. Explain WHY using your own words OR finding evidence in the text. NO marks are given for only TRUE or FALSE. (1 point)

a) The reintroduction of the lynx in Great Britain is a threat to the environment. (0.5)

b) The Lynx UK trust believes nobody will ever see a lynx because they are shy. (0.5)

2. In your own words and based on the ideas from the text, answer the following question. NO marks are given for responses copied directly from the text. (1 point)

Why are some people against the reintroduction of lynx in Britain?

3. Find in the text words or phrases which mean the same as the ones below. In the case of verbs, ONLY infinitive forms will be accepted (1 point)

1) To indicate imminent harm, danger, or pain. (0.25)
 2) Having no living representation; having died out. (0.25)
 3) To impress, help, or increase. (0.25)
 4) Health, happiness, prosperity. (0.25)

Regarding the oral production skill, instead of carrying out interviews to assess Speaking, students were encouraged to investigate and present a particular topic. With the objective of stimulating them to develop their research skills and autonomy, each student chose an animal out of a list provided by the teacher. The list, which attempted to include animals which do not typically appear in secondary school textbooks, featured the sugar glider, the katydid, the platypus, and the pygmy marmoset, among others. Moreover, in order to help students organise and prepare their presentations, a whole lesson was devoted to explaining how to plan and structure an oral presentation. In said lesson, pupils were shown two sample oral presentations (a "good" and a "bad" oral presentation) and were encouraged to point out the strengths and weakness in order to detect issues to be avoided, as well as desirable features (see figure 6 below).

Figure 6. Slide from the "bad" oral presentation

The Angler Fish

- Classification (type of animal): fish
- Physical appearance: ugly
- Environment: water
- Diet: carnivores
- Reproduction and offspring: sexual parasitism, eggs
- Life span and threats: they are eaten in some parts of the world
- Behaviour: lethargic (ambush predator)
- What can we learn from it? They use bacteria as light
- Video: [True Facts About the Angler Fish](#)

Concerning final results, only three students failed the oral presentation (sometimes due to lack of rehearsal, but mostly due to poor use of English), and only one student failed the final exam.

4.3. Questionnaire and results

At the end of each unit, students from both groups were handed out a questionnaire which they would answer and submit anonymously, in order to find out their opinion on the methods used during the unit. With the objective of achieving reliable results, the questionnaire was conducted in Spanish, and it included multiple-choice questions to find out student perception about working in groups, the lecturer and her teaching, the classroom atmosphere, the complementary activities, and the assessment methods, while also giving them the chance to assess their own degree of involvement and engagement.

Although the versions of the questionnaire featured slight variations (e.g. the one for Bachillerato did not include questions about a competition), the options for all questions and measurable aspects present in both surveys remained the same. Therefore, although the questions were arranged so that there would be a thematic link between them, the results of questions answered only by one group will be commented on separately, which will imply the question number might not follow a strict numerical order.

Table 7. Results of the questionnaire (questions answered by both groups: 49 students)

	Option A	Option B	Option C	N/A
Question 1	87.75%	8.16%	4.08%	0%
Question 3	59.18%	38.77%	2.04%	0%
Question 6	89.79%	10.20%	0%	0%
Question 7	24.48%	75.51%	0%	0%
Question 9	77.55%	22.44%	0%	0%
Question 10	46.93%	44.89%	2.04%	6.12%
Question 11	85.71%	12.24%	0%	2.04%
Question 12	42.85%	40.81%	16.32%	0%
Question 13	73.46%	26.53%	0%	0%
Question 14	57.14%	42.85%	0%	0%

As mentioned above, the first aspect measured was the extent to which students believed working in groups was preferable or beneficial (questions 1 and 3), which showed that most students preferred working in groups (about an 87.75%) and thought of it as a more effective learning method (a 59.18% highlighted cooperation whilst a 38.77% believed it heightened memorisation).

Concerning their perception about the teacher (questions 6, 7 and 14), most of them thought she was helpful and tried to make sure that all students understood the contents (89.79%), that she spoke English frequently but not to the point where information was

lost (75.51%), and that they had been generally happy with the lessons (a 42.85% said they were “happy”, whilst the remaining 57.14% said they were “very happy”).

Regarding classroom atmosphere (question 13) an 85.71% thought that it had promoted learning, with 77.55% of students appreciating the inclusion of alternative activities and the remaining 22.44% pupils wishing there had been more adapted activities (question 9). Furthermore, in relation to the assessments methods (question 11), most students believed that there had been a correlation between the contents covered in class and the exercises which appeared in the final exams (85.71%). Overall, students felt that their involvement in the lessons had been moderate (40.81%) or high (42.85%), with only a 16.32% of students feeling their level of engagement had been low (question 12).

Hence, as it can be observed, most students were happy with the new classroom dynamics and the introduction of cooperative work, as well as the teacher’s work and performance during the lessons, even if some of them did not feel a significant increase in overall engagement and degree of implication.

Moreover, first year of *ESO* students also answered questions in relation to the competition, gamification, and activities such as the museum visit as ways of optimising their learning process.

Table 8. Results of the questionnaire (questions answered by first year of *ESO*: 28 students)

	Option A	Option B	Option C	N/A
Question 2	14.28%	32.14%	53.57%	0%
Question 4	82.14%	10.71%	7.14%	0%
Question 5	89.28%	0%	10.71%	0%
Question 8	67.85%	32.14%	0%	0%
Question 15	89.28%	7.14%	0%	3.57%

Concerning the creation of a permanent group to work with throughout the unit (question 2), some students felt happy with their assigned partners, but most students would have preferred to work with different people each day (53.57%). Students also thought that having the common goal of watching a film and talking about it together (question 4) had increased their motivation (82.14%), and that the disciplinary methods used in the preceding competition (e.g. subtracting points for uncooperative behaviour) were effective as they promoted that all members worked to maintain the well-being of the group (67.85%); however, a 32.13% did not feel that the results had been that positive, but maintained that the mechanism was good enough since they thought some students would display disruptive behaviour regardless of the type of punishment. Finally, an

89.28% of the pupils thought that the museum visit as a learning tool to practise descriptions was an original and effective activity, which enhanced learning.

Moreover, in relation to the separate results for both groups, it should be noted that first year of *ESO* students, who participated in the competition, seemed to feel an overall degree of engagement higher than that of second year of *Bachillerato* students, who also appreciated teamwork and complementary activities but did not feel that their personal degree of engagement had been remarkably high. Hence, first-year students were generally much more involved in the completion of activities and perceived a better classroom atmosphere, while also appreciating the token economy used throughout the unit.

Table 9. Results first year of *ESO* (28 students)

	Option A	Option B	Option C	N/A
Question 1	89.28%	7.14%	3.57%	0%
Question 3	53.57%	46.42%	0%	0%
Question 6	89.28%	10.71%	0%	0%
Question 7	28.57%	71.42%	0%	0%
Question 9	64.28%	35.71%	0%	0%
Question 10	64.28%	28.57%	3.57%	3.57%
Question 11	89.28%	7.14%	0%	3.57%
Question 12	53.57%	35.71%	10.71%	0%
Question 13	57.14%	42.85%	0%	0%
Question 14	60.71%	39.28%	0%	0%

Table 10. Results second year of *Bachillerato* (21 students)

	Option A	Option B	Option C	N/A
Question 1	85.71%	9.52%	4.76%	0%
Question 3	66.66%	28.57%	4.76%	0%
Question 6	90.47%	9.52%	0%	0%
Question 7	8.16%	80.95%	0%	0%
Question 9	95.23%	4.76%	0%	0%
Question 10	23.80%	66.66%	0%	9.52%
Question 11	80.95%	19.04%	0%	0%
Question 12	28.57%	47.61%	23.80%	0%
Question 13	95.23%	4.76%	0%	0%
Question 14	52.38%	47.61%	0%	0%

5. FUTURE RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENTS

Based on the proposal and the case study described above, there are some aspects which could be improved in the event of attempting to create a classroom community and use cooperative work for a whole academic year. For instance, regarding the questionnaire presented in the previous section, the percentages seen above have been obtained by means of a rule of three, so it would be appropriate to make the research more

scientifically accurate by including features such as the standard deviation in the final statistics.

Moreover, in relation to the lesson plans proposed above, it should be noted that, although they do attempt to develop all four main skills (Writing, Reading, Speaking, Listening), activities depart from the traditional approach when it comes to practising said skills, since the main objective of the lessons is to develop a sense of community. For this reason, these lesson plans should be complemented with further plans which include different types of exercises (e.g. tasks designed to enhance listening comprehension). Furthermore, it is relevant to highlight that there is no universal system and that, while a certain activity or methodology might work well with a particular group, it might not work with a different one, so the use of diverse methodologies and strategies (which adapt to students' learning needs and particular classroom atmospheres) becomes essential.

Finally, concerning the competition carried out with first-year students, after some lessons it became apparent that their sense of competitiveness had an impact on the sense of community, which was not the main objective of the activities. For this reason, it would be interesting to measure the performance, engagement and satisfaction of students working in a similar competition but who work in a different group each lesson or every few lessons (as mentioned above, this idea was also suggested by some students in the questionnaire). Moreover, in order to further engage students during the lessons, classroom activities should feature real-life materials or examples, giving students the chance to relate to the information presented in class in order to transform their time in the classroom into a learning experience which offers the potential of applying that knowledge beyond the school walls.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined some of the main variables which affect student performance and engagement in second or foreign language learning, and it has attempted to establish the importance of the classroom as a micro community with its own culture, which conceives students and teachers as members who work together for a shared goal: the development of student potential and abilities.

As stated in section 2.1, factors such as engagement and personal background play an important role in the learner's degree of implication, which is why lecturers should try to adapt the contents of their subjects to students, so that their lessons have an emotional impact and relevance in real life. Moreover, by means of techniques such as gamification and cooperative work, together with the use of different tools, group dynamics and the

development of different activities, it will be possible to optimise the classroom atmosphere and learning process, which will promote students' progress and development.

The case study and questionnaire results presented above are a simple example of how appreciative pupils are whenever teachers try to improve and transform their lessons, no matter how small the change, how sizeable the group, or how repetitive the content is. The key to success in innovation is perpetual improvement; there is no universal formula, but the knowledge that comes from the experience of trial and error.

Thus, educators need to make sure students feel comfortable enough to involve themselves in the learning process, especially if they are not in the classroom by choice; they should feel positive that the hours they spend there are worth it, which naturally implies emotional involvement on the teacher's part. Hence, teachers can only make students believe in themselves by believing in them first.

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