Inclusivity, Participation and Collaboration: Learning in Interactive Groups

Harkaitz Zubiri-Esnaola[a]* A. Vidu[b]*, O. Rios-Gonzalez[c], and T. Morla-Folch[c]

[a]*Department of Language and Literature Didactics, University of the Basque Country, Leioa, Spain;* [b]*University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain;* [c]*University of Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Spain*

Ana Vidu *corresponding author

Address: Avda. Universidades, 24, 48007 Bilbao, Bizkaia, Spain
Telephone: +34 944 139 003
E-mail: ana.vidu@deusto.es

Abstract

Background. Interaction, participation and collaboration are thought to be important factors for supporting successful second or foreign language learning. The use of Interactive Groups (IGs) is regarded as helpful in creating the conditions in which interaction, participation and collaboration are increased to create effective dialogic learning. However, there is limited understanding of the role of IGs in supporting second or foreign language learning.

Purpose. The aim of the present study was to explore the opportunities that IGs generated for supporting interaction, participation and collaboration in a situation where students were learning English as a foreign language.

Method. A communicative methodology was used to collect and analyse observational and interview data from three classrooms where teaching and learning was organised through IGs, each in a different school in Spain involved in Schools as Learning Communities: Successful Educational Actions (SEAs). Across the three classrooms, there were 58 students, three teachers and 14 volunteers, whose role was to support and encourage communication. The schools served low SES communities. We conducted eight classroom observations and 17 semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed qualitatively.

Findings. The thematic analysis suggested that, in the classrooms that were studied, there was evidence that participants and observers felt that IGs promoted effective conditions for the inclusive participation of all learners, created a favourable climate for collaborative interactions regarding the target language and raised learning expectations for all students. In addition, the contribution of the volunteers was identified as crucial to the successful functioning of the IGs.

Conclusion. This small scale, qualitative study highlights the potential for IGs to create favourable conditions for the learning of English and other languages as a foreign language. More extensive studies are needed to determine the best way to use IGs for the teaching and learning of foreign languages in other contexts.

Keywords: foreign language learning; participation; inclusion; successful educational actions (SEAs); interactive groups (IGs); collaborative learning

Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language is believed to be of paramount importance for academic and professional trajectories in the Spanish context (Lasagabaster and Doiz 2015). Historically,

families have demanded better quality instruction to overcome the fairly widespread low levels of proficiency (Cenoz 2013). However, although most students start learning English in school at 4 years of age, general concern about levels of proficiency in English remains (Lasagabaster 2017). With this background in mind, our study explores the use of interactive groups (IGs) for learning English as a foreign language in the Spanish context. There is evidence to indicate that IGs can contribute to improvements in the general academic results of children in different socio-educational contexts (Valls and Kyriakides 2013). Indeed, there are indications that IGs can function as agents of deep transformation in the case of students within schools in deprived neighbourhoods, as well as those in more privileged contexts (Flecha 2015). Some research has demonstrated how IGs can contribute to the acceleration of learning in areas such as mathematics and literacy, whilst also improving interpersonal relationships and increasing a sense of solidarity (García-Carrión and Díez-Palomar 2015; Flecha 2015). Conceptually, IGs are based on interactionist and dialogic learning approaches. They are intended to help to offer equal opportunities for all learners, not only in terms of access to learning but also in terms of results (Flecha 2015). IGs are one of the so-called 'successful educational actions' (SEAs) that were identified in the INCLUD-ED research project (an Integrated Project of the 6th Framework Programme of the European Commission, 2006-2011). SEAs have been implemented in a wide range of countries, including Spain.

IGs require a specific method of classroom organisation. They involve dividing a class into small and heterogeneous groups of 4 to 7 students. These groups are monitored by one adult volunteer, while the teacher organises the tasks and monitors the entire session. Each group works for approximately 20 minutes with a different adult on a different task designed in advance by the teacher. After that period of time, either the students or the volunteers move to the next table, to allow the students to complete all the tasks in several rounds. IGs are designed to accelerate interactions and boost collaboration between all the people involved, as interaction and collaboration are qualities that are considered essential to making IGs a successful experience (Valls and Kyriakides 2013).

Background

Interaction and collaboration

Research on second language (L2) learning emphasises that interaction is crucial to learning (Mackey and Gass 2015). Put simply, those learners who are more involved in interaction in

the target language are more likely to achieve greater fluency in the target language than those learners who are not. As this is widely held (Loewen and Sato 2018), research has turned to the complex question of the most effective ways in which learning can be enhanced through interaction. As far back as 1977, Long (1977) came to the conclusion that teacher-fronted L2 classes are likely to be monopolised by teachers or very proficient learners, whereas pair work and group work are potentially more beneficial for L2 acquisition. Likewise, the benefits of both pair and group work in L2 learning have also been noted in sociocultural-based research. This is particularly the case as the strengthening of social and affective elements is supported (Firth and Wagner 1997);learning is considered to be related to social interaction and sociocultural and sociopolitical processes, based on mediational support provided by others (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). Language learning is not seen as the product of an individual's efforts but, rather, as deeply connected to the context in which learning takes place (Swain 2000). Vygotsky (1980, 1986) stated that learning happens first in social interaction via the resolution of problems by collaborating with more capable peers and that it is later internalised; Bakhtin (2010a, 2010b) did not consider learning as transfer but as appropriation in the context of a dialogic relationship.

By using a socially informed perspective, Donato (1994), Ohta (2001), Storch (2002) and Storch and Aldosari (2013) indicated how interaction between learners can promote foreign language learning through collaboration and mutual scaffolding. Socially informed research has also suggested that there is a relationship between language learning in progress through collaborative dialogue and later language gains (Kim 2008; Watanabe and Swain 2008; Williams 2001). Thus, language learning can be triggered when students increase their participation in collaborative work. This, in turn, increases language accuracy and coherence (Swain 2000; Watanabe and Swain 2007) and promotes languaging (Swain 2010), which is defined as the use of speaking and writing to mediate cognitively complex activities. This is considered key for learning, because it facilitates cognitive and affective development. Furthermore, from the student perspective, several studies have confirmed that students perceive the benefits of collaboration in pairs and groups (Dobao 2014; Shehadeh 2011). Watanabe and Swain (2008) found that students tended to have positive attitudes towards collaboration when they had collaborative experiences, and vice versa. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Storch (2002) drew attention to the fact that peer and group work do not, in themselves, automatically lead to collaboration in foreign language learning. This is a key issue, because a lack of engagement obstructs learning (Storch 2002). In the same vein, several studies have concluded that pairing or grouping alone is not sufficient for facilitating learning,

because it is actually the *nature* of the interaction in pairs and groups that influences the learning process. Thus, genuine collaboration is the fundamental condition for promoting learning: through collaboration, students work together in sharing knowledge and responsibility in order to achieve a common goal (Dobao 2012; Kim and McDonough 2008; Swain 2000).

Types of groupings

Some research suggests that groups were preferable to pairs in encouraging interaction in the second language (Dobao 2012, 2014). In terms of learning in general, the type of group is of importance. Specifically, heterogeneous groups tend to be regarded as a better option than homogeneous groups: it is thought that heterogeneous groups - when they are truly collaborative and inclusive - are more efficient than homogeneous groups in increasing learning interaction, self-esteem, mutual respect, solidarity and acceptance of diversity (Flecha 2015). Research on second language learning has studied this complex and multi-faceted issue in pair interactions; it is clear from the research that many different factors and variables come into play and must be considered. Kowal and Swain (1994) reported that, in the conditions of their research on mixed pairs, the more highly proficient learner tended to dominate the interaction, and the less proficient participant was, thus, likely to be disadvantaged. Leeser (2004) found that 'high-high' pairs produced more language-related episodes (LRE) than 'high-low' pairs, who produced more LREs than 'low-low' pairs. Interestingly, Watanabe and Swain (2007) discovered that learners produced more LREs when interacting with a higher-level learner. However, the study also suggested that the interaction pattern depended upon more than the foreign language proficiency of the learners involved. Kim and McDonough (2008) observed that interacting with an advanced peer was more effective than interacting with an intermediate peer, although the result also depended on the pattern. It is noteworthy that Storch and Aldosari (2013) suggest that heterogeneous pairs were more efficient only when they collaborated, which highlights the crucial role that collaboration plays in language learning.

Participation

When learning a second language, active participation is thought to be of paramount importance (Morita, 2004; Kayi-Aydar 2014). Although theoretical exploration lies outside of the scope of the current paper, it is important to note broadly that some research has led to a profound shift in the way that language learning is conceptualised in this regard (see further,

Sfard 1998; Rogoff 2008, Lave and Wenger 1991). From a sociocultural perspective, Donato (2000) observed that, learning, including L2 learning, means participating in socially mediated activities in which individual failure may be related to problems such as marginalisation from a community of practice, experts' inadequate mediation, or difficulties in accessing a learning community. On the other hand, from the point of view of acquisition, individual failure may be related to individuals' low levels of competence, lack of motivation and inadequate learning strategies. Attention must be drawn to the role and significance of context: for example, Gardner (2010) attests that motivation for learning a second language is a dynamic construction that continuously changes depending on the context; elsewhere, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000, 156) claim that by using participation as the dominant metaphor, the focus changes from language structure to contextualised use and engagement with others (Johnson 2017). Likewise, Hall, Vitanova and Marchenkova (2005) interpret second and foreign language learning as participating in communication spaces in which learners can appropriate new knowledge.

Interactive Groups

The significance of IGs is that they aim to address the challenges of second language learning by creating heterogeneous groups monitored by an adult volunteer who promotes dialogic learning (Flecha and Soler 2013). This approach contrasts widely with segregationist approaches that separate learners by their levels, such as tracking or special education units. By contrast, in IGs, heterogeneity is essential. This is because, under the appropriate circumstances, heterogeneity can promote the interactions that can improve learning in an environment of solidarity in which everyone learns (Racionero and Valls 2007). In accordance with dialogic learning, when teachers and other adults promote dialogue and cooperation in class, it is possible for students to reach higher levels of learning (Valls and Kyriakides 2013). The role of the adult volunteer in IGs is key to enable heterogeneity to transform into opportunity. Thus, classrooms organised into IGs should not be spaces that neglect the process of de-monopolisation of expert knowledge; on the contrary, they take advantage of it. Specifically, the role of the adult volunteer is to generate questions, ensure that everyone is actively involved, and promote mutual support among learners (Elboj and Niemelä 2010). Thus, students' engagement and motivation regarding the task should be increased (Flecha and Soler 2013; Valls and Kyriakides 2013).

However, it is evident that having volunteers 'in the classroom is not enough to promote dialogic interactions in IGS. Teachers and volunteers need to seek a common ground and

understanding for their participation to be effective' (García-Carrión and Díez-Palomar 2015, 163). Furthermore, it is the case that adult volunteers need to galvanise the communicative interaction among students, ensuring that they create knowledge jointly through dialogue and that all the students learn, because in dialogic learning, learning emerges from interaction and egalitarian dialogue (Flecha 2000). Thus, in IGs, volunteers (family and community members) work with small, heterogeneous groups of students (Elboj and Niemelä 2010). This connects back to the dialogic perspective of education (Freire 1970), in contending that one of the keys to learning is the inclusion of the community (family, volunteers, teachers and students) (Flecha & Soler 2013), and including the idea of family training (see Morris et al. 2019).

Purpose

There is limited understanding of whether IGs manage to improve the effective participation of all students in the dialogical interactions that make foreign language learning possible. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the role of teachers, volunteers and students in the dialogical context of learning English as a foreign language in IGs. Specifically, the research questions that they sought to provide insights into were:

1. Do IGs increase opportunities for interaction in the foreign language?
2. Do IGs promote the participation of all students without exception in an effective way?

Methods

Study setting and methodological background

The analysis reported in the paper is from data collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. As explained below, the schools involved were purposefully selected as schools that were implementing Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) as part of the Schools as Learning Communities project (STEP4SEAS 2019, SALEACOM 2017, INCLUD-ED Consortium 2009). We had the aim of exploring one particular educational action of the school, IGs in English. Data were collected over the course of nine months.

In areas characterised by social exclusion, improving quality and equity in their schools is key (Kyriakides et al. 2019) to transforming the difficulties that these children may have into possibilities. The three schools that were selected for this study met the following criteria: 1) students had a low SES (socio-economic status) background; 2) they had good results on

regular standardised tests, and the improvement in performance occurred since the introduction of the IGs; 3) they were Schools as Learning Communities, implementing Successful Educational Actions (SEAs); 4) they had consolidated IGs; and 5) they had a high percentage of immigrant students.

The research is underpinned by the use of communicative methodology (CM) (Gómez, Puigvert, and Flecha 2011), which analyses social reality by focusing on the subjects and their world instead of on structures (Habermas 1987). CM collects all the voices of the educational agents because analysing the studied object by establishing a dialogue with these agents makes potential transformations more likely. It was therefore essential to include the voices of all the agents involved (teachers, students and volunteers), as it follows that the more diverse the contributions collected, the richer the analysis and the greater the possibilities for improvement.

Ethical considerations

The Community of Researchers on Excellence for All's (CREA) Ethics Committee reviewed the current research and approved it. The Ethics Committee considered that the present study complied with the European Commission's Ethics Review Procedure (2013) and the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000/C 364/01) (European Union 2000). Families, teachers and children were informed of the nature of the research. The tutors of the children agreed that the children should participate in this research. All parents and teachers gave their written informed consent in accordance with the Ethics Review Procedure established by the European Commission (2013). In line with this, the informed consent outlined the goals of the research. It also specified that participants could leave the research process at any time. Likewise, the informed consent indicated that participation was anonymous and voluntary. In accordance with this, pseudonyms are used and details are omitted in the reporting so that the participants cannot be recognised. The consent form also included the researchers' contact details, so that participants could get in touch with the researcher at any time during the research process. Communicative research, through egalitarian dialogue, is aligned with the efforts to increase rigour in ethical issues. In addition, the consent form specified that the collected data would be treated confidentially and would only be used for research purposes.

Sample

The classroom observations and interviews took place in three classrooms in three different schools in Spain. In total, there were 58 students (35 from Primary 4th grade (8-9 years old

when they start the academic year) and 23 from 5th grade (9-10 years old when they start the academic year), 3 teachers and 14 volunteers. In Spain, pre-primary education is arranged in three academic years that begin when children are 2-3 years old and end when they are 5-6 years old, while primary education is arranged in six academic years that begin when children are 5-6 years old and end when they are 11-12 years old. Each school had a low ISEC (socio-economic and cultural index), due to the purposeful sampling explained above. In terms of nationality, in two of the schools, approximately 50% of the students or their parents were born abroad. In addition, in the third school, approximately 60% of the students were of Gypsy ethnicity, and 40% were children of immigrants (35% from Morocco). Interviewees were selected to include the greatest possible diversity of voices. Among the students interviewed, 4 were born in Spain and 3 in another country; there were 4 girls and 3 boys; there were students who had facility to study and students who have difficulties. Of the 6 volunteers interviewed, one was a teacher and the rest were parents who did not belong to this profession but had a medium or high knowledge of English; 3 were born in Spain and 3 in another country.

Research design

With the exception of one researcher, who volunteered in IGs in two schools, the researchers were not involved in the design, choice or development of the tasks studied. Thus, led by the teachers and following the criteria established for the realisation of the educational actions (SEAs4All, 2016), teachers, students and volunteers implemented IGs autonomously. Teachers received week-long, full-time initial training, and in-service dialogic training while implementing the groups. Initially, volunteers received a short course outlining their work, and they shared feedback with teachers and students before and after doing each IG session. Each IG had an adult who monitored the activity. Occasionally, more than one teacher was assigned to a classroom. However, typically, most of the adults monitoring IGs were volunteers who were willing to participate in the educational process; i.e.: teachers, university students, families, community members, among other people. Although this may not be common practice in many schools, it is familiar and essential in the context of Schools as Learning Communities. Indeed, the mobilisation of the community is remarkable and necessary in these projects. For example, one of the schools in our sample had 9 student groups (around 200 students) and, at the time of the study, there were 72 adult volunteers regularly participating in IGs, which generally meant that these people participated for one hour a week in IGs, whilst there were also those who participated for longer.

The heterogeneous groups were organized by the teachers, who based their grouping decisions on regular school test results and also their own knowledge of each student's characteristics. The teachers chose all the tasks from classroom textbooks (sometimes adapting them) and from other sources, including the internet. The IG tasks were intended to cover the same objectives as the regular lessons. Optionally, the tasks could be distributed among the volunteers to prepare them. However, this is not essential, and some schools preferred the volunteer to focus on the non-lead monitoring of the group and the promotion of collaborative interactions rather than the management of the task.

Data Collection

During the nine month data collection period, we conducted eight classroom observations of IGs, following an observation schedule. Two observations were conducted in 5th-grade English classes and six in 4th-grade classrooms; three in one school and the remaining three in a different school. For most of the observations, the researchers discussed their observations with volunteers and teachers, with the aim of including their perspectives, impressions and details. To collect the information, the researchers used a common observation template with 21 questions. The observation schedule was divided into sections entitled *Class structure*, *Dynamics* and *Other comments*. Observers were asked to note aspects of structure such as how the activities were organised in the IGs and the strategies used by teachers to divide the students into groups. In addition, they were asked to note the role of the volunteers and how they were involved. We also conducted seventeen semi-structured interviews, using a common interview schedule that contained a set of questions (30 for teachers, 28 for students and 18 for volunteers) that could be used, depending on the development of the interview (see Appendix for details of the interview schedules). The observation and interview schedules were designed in a particular way, in order to collect the data to respond to five topics. Specifically, these topics were: 1) organisation of IGs, 2) situation before starting with IGs, 3) perceived improvements, 4) role of families and volunteers, and 5) motivation and solidarity. After the data collection, audio recordings were transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed qualitatively and discrepancies among researchers in terms of data coding were resolved by creating categorisations based on consensus. The data obtained in the interviews were compared with the classroom observations. As noted in the section above, the data collection schedules had been organised according to five topics. However, as a

consequence of the process, it was necessary to reclassify the data into four topics: (1) the effectiveness of IGs in ensuring participation, (2) the relationship between heterogeneous groups, solidarity and collaborative interactions regarding the target language in IGs, (3) the role of teachers and volunteers in IGs, and (4) the influence of IGs on raising learning expectations.

Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses our findings, according to the results of our thematic analysis. Where relevant, anonymised and translated quotations from the transcriptions are included.

Inclusive participation

The observations made in the classrooms showed that, in the IGs that we studied, all the students were distributed into small, heterogeneous groups monitored by an adult volunteer. The volunteer ensured that all students were involved in the interactions within the group, followed the task actively, and encouraged collaboration and mutual support amongst the members of the group. In carrying out the classroom observations, it was apparent that the students' level of English was very diverse. We were able to compare our perception as observers with the IG volunteers, as well as with the teachers who had daily contact with the students. Furthermore, we were also able to observe that students with a range of levels of English proficiency were participating actively in these IGs in English. Amongst the students, we did not encounter any pronounced disruptive attitudes. When a pupil lost attention, the adult encouraged him/her very effectively to continue. When a student had difficulties, the group's peers usually helped him/her, and, if they did not, the adult promoted collaboration among peers. For example, in one of the IGs, the students played a board game in which they had to answer questions. The participation was very balanced. The volunteer participated little, only to launch the game, order the participations and clarify any queries that no student has been able to clear up. It was evident that the students supported each other constantly.

As a consequence of all this, even though there were groups in which some students were known by the teachers to have had behavioural, attention or ability-related challenges in the usual teacher-fronted lessons, we observed that all the students, without exception, participated actively in the IG tasks.

The observations made in the classrooms by the researchers about participation were consistent with the perceptions expressed by the interviewees. Two quotations from interviewees give an illustration of this:

> "Everyone participates. Some of them find it more difficult. Some of them have more problems to focus on. But all of them participate. It is impossible to participate more than that. They participate all the time (...) Everyone has their space." (Elena, volunteer)

> "It is a difficult class. There are very different levels of English proficiency in the class. So [interactive groups] help them to concentrate and work. (...) They are more focused in class, and they know it. And they see themselves as more capable of answering things, of speaking. (...) I think they are happy and relaxed. (...) They are always looking forward to doing the interactive groups." (Maria, teacher)

Heterogeneous groups, solidarity and collaborative interactions

As explained above, the IGs were deliberately heterogeneous in terms of English proficiency and attitude. We observed that diversity was instrumental as a resource used in the IGs to promote dialogic interactions. For example, we observed an IG where the task was to rewrite sentences; one boy had great difficulty in doing so. Encouraged by the volunteer, the rest of the group, but in particular one student, explained carefully how the task had to be done, and, while they were developing the task the volunteer asked this particular boy to explain what he was doing. The classmates gave him constant feedback, so the boy was able to deal with the task, thanks to the intense scaffolding that the group offered him. Therefore, it was the case that heterogeneity facilitated learning. These dynamics were a constant feature of the IGs that we observed in the classrooms. Having the most proficient students working together in a group with the medium and least proficient students gave students the opportunity to create mutual scaffolding. The most proficient students were encouraged to explain language issues related to the tasks; this helped them in their learning process. The perceptions expressed in the interviews corroborated the observations made by the researchers in the classroom observations. For example, in the interview, Daniela, a student, explained an opinion shared by many students: "sometimes you know something, but you don't know how to explain it, and when you explain it to someone else, it helps you too". Meanwhile, in the observations, it was evident that we could see that those students who had learning difficulties appeared to benefit from the other participants' support in such a way that they could continue following the pace of the task. All the interviews suggested this; for instance, one student, Aroa, expressed

the opinion that all the interviewees shared: “Having more people teaching, [those who know less English] learn more than before, and that encourages them to keep on learning”. Even though, according to our observations, some students inevitably continued to experience difficulties with learning, each IG produced conditions conducive to supporting their learning to a greater extent than that would probably have been possible under other circumstances. The interviews suggest that solidarity among students seemed to increase greatly in the context of the IGs. It appeared to be a decisive factor in making the groups work collaboratively, as these quotations indicate:

> “[We help each other more in the interactive groups] because we are in a group, and in the normal class, we sit at separated tables. (...) [When somebody doesn’t understand something], the volunteer asks those who understand better to help explain in order for others to learn from what we are saying. (...) When I explain it my own way, I understand it better than when they explain it to me. (...) [When classmates explain it to me], I understand it much better, because children understand better each other, because teachers sometimes, since they are older, don’t know how we can understand it.” (Manuel, student)

> “It impresses me that they participate at such a young age, that they know the moment in which they have to be quiet, when they have to let the others continue ... This emotional regulation catches my eye. (...) They defend their boundaries but also let others speak. (...) For example, a girl who speaks fluent English and participates, she also shuts up for others to take part. That balance.” (Elena, volunteer)

> “I think I have seen [an improvement] in their relationship because in interactive groups, students in a particular group seem to have a kind of unity among themselves. They walk together. They look out for each other. When one child is having problems and another child knows the answer, he probably steps into his shoes. (...) No one is left behind. They all are involved in the walk. They all are learning, because we make sure that everyone participates.” (Sarabi, volunteer)

It was noteworthy that mutual support was based on students explaining to other students rather than simply giving them the answer to a question. Ainhoa, a student, voiced the difference clearly: “I learn a lot with the other children, but not copying. I can’t tell them the answer. I explain it so they can understand it well. For example, Miguel always wants me to tell him the answer, but I tell him that I can’t, but I can explain well how to do it.” It was also interesting to note that, occasionally, students used Spanish in the IGs rather than English. However, according to the interviewees, this use was considerably less than it usually was in the teacher-fronted foreign language lessons in the schools.

Teachers’ and Volunteers’ Roles

During the classroom observations, we found that the role of the teacher was very important in making the IGs work well. The teacher had the responsibility of designing the heterogeneous groups, preparing the tasks, and providing them in advance, so that the volunteers had time to prepare for them. Also, the volunteers tended to choose the task they wanted to carry out by assessing their strengths and weaknesses with the teacher. The teacher selected the tasks with the objective of maximising the results regarding language learning, and the tasks were related to the lessons in the students' regular classes. During the IGs, the teacher monitored the entire session, helped when required, assessed continuously and, above all, guaranteed that the IGs were being conducted in an appropriate manner.

Nevertheless, the IGs could not work without the adults who volunteered. The volunteers were essential for the IGs to be a successful experience. The volunteers were, in this sense, "moderators", as Arantxa, a mother who volunteered for the IGs, described her role. The observations we made in the classroom support this notion. For example, we observed one task in which a student described one of several pictures and the others had to guess what it was. The volunteer was in charge of giving the game instructions, modelling how to play the game, managing the turns, providing the language resources when no student was able to do so, and asking the students who were not entirely focused sometimes to get back on task. In this case, it was not necessary for the volunteer to explicitly provide mutual support, because the group was doing it without the volunteer asking for it. However, the substantive point is that the volunteer had facilitated the conditions in the group to make this possible. We also observed an IG in which the students read a text and answered questions about it. The volunteer decided to scaffold the task by asking questions and giving some hints from time to time, but without creating a volunteer-centred dynamic. Although some groups developed in a collaborative environment, with the groups that were not so collaborative, the volunteer aimed to encourage mutual help. This approach was essential, especially for students who tended to get lost and needed the support of others. However, the dynamism of the volunteer also facilitated the work of the other students. Interviews corroborated the data collected in the classroom observations.

To contextualise the role of the volunteers, it is important to emphasise that some of the volunteers were fluent in English (one of the volunteers was a first language English speaker), whereas other volunteers had a basic level of English proficiency. In fact, a certain level of English was not a requirement to participate in the groups, because serving as a language model was not the volunteers' primary role. Although some of the volunteers stated in the interviews that the lack of proficiency was a disadvantage, the observations and the interviews suggested that it was not a determinant aspect. In this context, Aroa, a 5th grade student, exemplified

what all the students interviewed said about the volunteers: ”[What I like best about Interactive Groups in English are] the monitors. They're very nice, and they spend their time helping us, because it's very nice.” Alicia's opinion is also relevant here:

“Last week, something positive happened: in several groups, at least in two of them, they asked me how I learned English, what I did to learn English. (...) If they see an adult they know who knows English... that’s the thing about the interactive groups... seeing families participating in things that normally they don’t value... this kid’s mum speaks English... that kid’s dad knows a lot of math... it is very motivating for them.”

(Alicia, volunteer)

The interviews highlighted not only how the volunteers became exemplars who were admired by the students but also how the volunteers became increasingly engaged. For example, Elena, who had been volunteering for the past two years, summarised how the volunteers interviewed viewed the schools and the place that families had in the project being developed in the schools:

”One of the reasons we chose [this school] was because of the education project, because it was a School as a Learning Community. (...) This project is so participatory that it doesn't make much sense not to participate either. (...) [When choosing the school] we liked the diversity, we liked that the border between teachers and families was not so rigid... (...). We liked how involved people are. I see a sense of a common project on the part of teachers, families and students alike."

(Elena, volunteer)

Learning expectations

The interview data suggested that students, volunteers and teachers all had raised expectations for student learning, even for students who were not exhibiting improvement previously. For example, Keita, a 5th grade student who had previously been disruptive in teacher-fronted lessons, reflected as follows: “[I think we learn more] in the interactive groups [because] we do more things than in normal classes.” Likewise, Ainhoa, a 4th grade student, agreed: “With Interactive Groups, I am learning more [than in a common class], in my opinion. I’m learning a lot of English this way.” Sara, who defined herself as a student who had learning difficulties, also highlighted the improvement in learning, attributed it to having more help now, and pointed out the attitudes generated by the IGs: “since we have more people helping us, [those who have more difficulties] learn a lot more, and so they are more motivated to continue

studying.” Zahid, a student who was good at English, also agreed about the motivational aspect of the IGs: “Before we said: what a bore! And now we say: cool, we have English!”

The volunteers and teachers who were interviewed shared the same point of view regarding learning expectations. Arantxa, a volunteer who was born in Spain, told us the following: “I have seen visible changes. Their vocabulary is richer, and they feel like talking all the time.” Amidou, a volunteer who immigrated from an African country, agreed: “I think [that they learn faster in interactive groups]. (…) I think it is better this way, with interactive groups.” Maria, one of the teachers interviewed, also raised her expectations for the students: "[In the Interactive Groups] they learn more because they're more focused." Furthermore, the IGs appeared to affect the students’ English-speaking self-confidence and self-efficacy. For example, Sara, who defined herself as a student who had learning difficulties, stated the following: “[I like working in interactive groups] because this way it is much easier for me. [Before that, I used to feel lost]. (...) [Since we started the interactive groups,] I can follow English, and I know I will improve.” Both the volunteers and the teachers told us about similar cases. For example, Alicia, a mother who had been volunteering at the school for five years, related the following: “Today, I realised that one kid felt more self-confident, he participated, he even stood up to look for things, I think that kid [had never done something like that]”. Kath, a teacher who had been volunteering for a year, expressed similar ideas:

“[Since they started with the IGs,] they definitely speak more. (...) They have come out from their shells. They are more confident about speaking, without the fear of being wrong. (...) I would say they are improving their capability. But, I think that the most important thing is that they are less afraid to try, and I think that is the only way they will improve eventually, that is, to speak without the fear of being wrong.”

And so, in the context of IGs, Kath overcame previous low expectations regarding some students’ capabilities:

“I assumed he couldn’t understand [English]. He normally sits with another boy, and he misbehaves quite often... not dramatically, just, you know, be quiet, be quiet. I assumed he couldn’t understand. (...) But now, I see that he really absorbs it. At first [in the interactive groups], he didn’t contribute. Now he contributes to the answer.”

Limitations

This paper presents an in-depth, small scale qualitative analysis of data collected in three schools serving low SES communities which achieved good results on regular standardised tests. Generalisation is therefore not intended. Further research would be needed to analyse

whether the results of this study are transferable to other contexts where foreign languages are studied.

Conclusion

The present study was carried out to investigate the opportunities that IGs generate for learning English as a foreign language. Our analysis suggests that IGs create conditions that are conducive for foreign language learning. The analysis of classroom observations and interviews in the three schools indicated that the IGs 1) promoted the effective participation of all learners, 2) were able to boost solidarity and collaborative interactions regarding the target language based on heterogeneous groups, and 3) could contribute to raising learning expectations for all students. It was particularly noteworthy that the volunteers' contribution was a key element to ensuring that the IG sessions were a successful experience in terms of effective equal opportunities. These findings are in line with previous research (INCLUD-ED Consortium 2009).

This type of community participation may seem as if it is a distant reality for schools where the school culture is not focused on fostering community participation in the learning process. However, like many other schools that have moved from a non-participatory to a participatory culture (INCLUD-ED Consortium 2009), these three schools have shown in practice that community mobilisation to contribute directly to the educational process is possible, realistic and desirable. Our small scale study has offered insights into how language learning can be promoted more effectively through interaction, using IGs. Although our study was carried out in one particular educational setting, our analysis and findings may be of interest to educators in other settings internationally, where teachers seek to progress foreign language teaching and learning.

Declaration of interest statement

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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Appendix

Translated interview schedule (teachers)

Context

1. When did you start with IGs in English in your class?
2. How did you make the decision to do IGs in the English subject?
3. How do you organise IGs in the subject of English? Which changes do you notice in the students compared to the time before doing IGs?

Comparison with the situation before IGs

4. How was learning English as a second language before IGs? How is it now? How would you describe the change?
5. Did the children interact with each other before IGs? Did they help each other with learning English?
6. Do they do more IGs in the subject of English at this school? What other subjects are doing IGs?
7. When do you think you should start doing IGs with children (according to age, level, etc.)?
8. Were students segregated before IGs in English?

Perceptions

9. Do you think that IGs encourage the acceleration of second language learning, such as English, in comparison with other ways of learning, such as level groups or teacher-fronted lessons? In which way?
10. How do children and families perceive it? Do you talk to children about the importance of knowing more English?
11. How do you organise the activities to be carried out in a session?

Families

12. How do families participate? Do they know the criteria or strategies used by teachers to teach English in this school?
13. Do families feel that children learn more in IGs? And more English?
14. Do you notice any changes in the families or in their relationship with the school since they see their children having better English results?

Volunteers

15. What role do the volunteers play? Do family members participate? How many family members come? Do you like them to come?

Interactions

16. How are interactions between children encouraged?
17. Are there any children who are fluent in English or who may have lived in an English-speaking country or who have had some kind of interaction with the language?
18. What are the characteristics of the students? Are there any students with immigrant backgrounds in the school? And in the classroom? How are the characteristics influenced and supported?

Motivation, solidarity

19. Does learning English have an effect on other aspects as well? Do you notice that the students are more motivated to learn since they are attending IGs?
20. Which impact have English language IGs had on children's development? (Cognitive, academic, emotional and social development)
21. Which impact has it had on coexistence and motivation (group awareness, helping each other, solidarity...)? Do you think this has a positive impact on the solidarity generated between them?
22. Have they developed skills such as security, fluency, etc. in English that they did not have before?

How have they improved?

23. Can you give us any concrete examples to show the improvement in English skills? For example, if they did not speak English before and now they do.
24. Have they improved their vocabulary? Do they know more words? Do they use them? Could you give us some examples?
25. Are they able to speak in English? Which kind of things do they say? Did they say them before making IGs?

26. Do you do readings in English? What kind of readings?
27. Where do they go when they do not know something? Dictionary? Questions?
28. Do you think all children are learning equally?
29. How do you notice whether IG children are more successful in learning English?

Translated interview schedule (students)

Context

1. When did you start implementing IGs in English in class?
2. Do you like working in IGs? Why?
3. What do you learn in IGs? What do you like best?
4. Which changes do you notice in comparison to the period before doing IGs?

Comparison with the situation before IGs

5. How do you do IGs in English?
6. Would you have liked to have started IGs earlier, when you were younger?
7. How did you learn English before IGs? How do you learn it now?
8. Which changes do you notice compared to before IGs?
9. How many subjects do you do with IGs? Would you like to do more?

Perceptions

10. What do you think is helping you learn English the most?
11. Do you think you are learning more English in the IGs? Why?
12. Do you think you know more English since you have been doing IGs?
13. Has performing IGs changed your perception of English?

Interactions

14. Do kids help each other in class? Before IGs too?
15. Do you help other children? How do you do it? Who do you help most? Do they help you?
16. Before IGs were you separated into small groups to learn English? How did you separate? According to which criteria?
17. How many activities do you do in each session? How are the activities organised in each session? Which order do you follow?
18. Are there any children who are more able to speak it? Could it be that they have lived in an English-speaking country or have had some kind of interaction with the language?

Families

19. Do you explain to your family how you are learning English at school?
20. Do families come to class? Do any member/s of your family participate in IGs?

Volunteer

21. What do volunteers do? Do you like them to come?

Motivation, solidarity

22. Have you developed other skills in English that you did not have before, such as confidence, fluency, etc.

23. Do you feel more inclined to learn other things as well? Are you more motivated? Do you think IGs make you help others more? Does it help you be more supportive of your peers?

How have they improved?

24. Do you think that IGs make you learn English faster? Why does it happen? Can you give us any concrete examples of improvement in English skills? For example, if you did not speak English before and now you do.
25. Have you improved your vocabulary? Do you know more words? Do you use them? Could you give us some examples?
26. Can you link sentences in English? Which sort of things do you say? Did you say them before you did IGs? Do you do readings in English? Which kind of readings?
27. What do you do when you do not know something? Do you use the dictionary? Do you ask someone? Who do you ask?
28. Do you think all children in the class are learning the same?

Translated interview schedule (volunteers)

Context

1. How long have you been volunteering at the school?
2. Do you participate in other English language IGs at this school? What do you do in the IGs? Why did you decide to participate in IGs? How long have you been participating?
3. How are the activities organised in IGs?

Comparison

4. Which changes do you see in this group now in relation to the beginning of the year, last year or when they did not do IGs in English?
5. What does the school do to make students learn more English? Which strategies does the school use?

Families

6. What is the role of the volunteers/families? Do you notice any changes in the families or in their relationship with the school since they see their children are having better English results?

Interactions

7. Are there any children who are fluent in English? Could they have lived in an English-speaking country or had some kind of interaction with the language?
8. Are there any students with immigrant backgrounds in the school? Does it have any influence? How are they supported?

Motivation, solidarity

9. Do you think the children in your group learn a lot of English?
10. What impact have the IGs had on their motivation and learning?
11. Does everyone participate? Does everyone finish the activity?
12. Have the students' expectations of themselves changed?

How they learn

13. Do you think that IGs make them learn English faster? Why do you think it happens? Can you give us any concrete examples you have observed of improvement in English skills? For example, if they did not speak English before and now they do.
14. Do you think they have improved their vocabulary? Do they know more words? Do they use them? Could you give us some examples?
15. Can they speak in English? What sort of things do they say? Do you know if they speak that way before making IGs?
16. Do they do readings in English? Which kind of readings?
17. Where do they go when they do not know something? Dictionary? Questions? If so, whom do they ask?
18. Do you think all children are learning the same?