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EXPLORING THE USE OF COOPERATIVE ACTIVITIES IN A LANGUAGE SUBJECT TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' SOCIAL COMPETENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY

ANÁLISIS DEL USO DE ACTIVIDADES COOPERATIVAS EN UNA ASIGNATURA DE LENGUA PARA DESARROLLAR LAS COMPETENCIAS SOCIALES DEL ALUMNADO UNIVERSITARIO

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Abstract:

Cooperative learning has been successfully implemented in the last 60 years for teaching at different educational levels including the Higher Studies due to its solid theoretical foundation, the principles it proposes and its practical applications. The purpose of this article is to offer a proposal for some cooperative activities that allow students to work in small groups in a language subject in order to learn not only contents but also putting into practice what they learn, i.e., they learn by being active. This article discusses how the said activities make it possible for students to work with the main principles of cooperative learning, i.e.: positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and small-group skills and group processing. Moreover, this research will also point out that the proposed activities allow students to acquire some of the social competences required in the labour market such as leadership, conflict solving and cooperation.

Key words: Cooperative learning, social competences, oral presentation, debate, English Studies.

Resumen:

El aprendizaje cooperativo se ha estado implementando de manera satisfactoria en los últimos 60 años en todos los niveles educativos incluida la Universidad debido a su sólida fundamentación teórica, los principios que propone y sus aplicaciones prácticas. El propósito de este artículo es ofrecer una propuesta de algunas actividades cooperativas que permiten al alumnado trabajar en pequeños grupos en una asignatura de lengua con el fin de aprender no

solo conocimientos sino también poner en práctica lo que se aprende, es decir, aprender haciendo. Este artículo argumenta cómo dichas actividades hacen posible que el alumnado trabaje con los principios del aprendizaje cooperativo, es decir: interdependencia positiva, interacción cara a cara, responsabilidad individual y grupal, habilidades interpersonales y de grupo pequeño y evaluación de los resultados y el proceso. Además, esta investigación destacará que las actividades propuestas permiten al alumnado adquirir algunas competencias sociales.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje cooperativo, competencias sociales, presentación oral, debate, Estudios Ingleses.

Introduction

Promoting the use of active methodologies has been one of the main changes proposed by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in the last decade due to the needs of the labour market in having competent professionals who are able to apply theory to practice, and to be competent to solve problems as well as to adapt to different situations. The creation of the EHEA has involved substantial changes at tertiary education that affect the main elements of the teaching-learning process, i.e. objectives, contents, methodology and evaluation (Barkeley et al., 2008; López Noguero, 2005; Martínez Lirola & Llorens, 2011, 2012; Rué, 2007).

In this sense, the EHEA requests that students become the protagonists of the degrees for which they are studying by assuming an active role in the said process (Martínez Lirola, 2007; Morales Vallejo, 2008; Prieto Navarro, 2007; Tsui, 2001). Consequently, there are also changes in the roles that teachers play in tertiary education because they are now seen as tutors or mentors, supervisors or coaches, leaving aside the traditional role of being the source of knowledge that has characterised traditional higher education. The fact that teachers and students share the responsibility in the classroom facilitates the use of active methodologies; these are very useful so that students can put into practice what they learn and acquire social and emotional competences apart from mastering contents. One of the most frequently demanded competences in the labour market is the capacity to work in groups (Cavazotte et al., 2012; Farh et al., 2012).

Choosing active methodologies such as cooperative or collaborative learning offers students the possibility of working in groups, which involves being active, responsible and committed to their learning because they are required to cooperate or collaborate with other group members in order to accomplish a stated goal, following Barkeley et al. (2005, p. 4): “[...] co-laborating is an important feature of collaborative learning. The meaning of the Latin-based term *collaborate* shines through as clearly today as in antiquity: to co-labour. All participants in the group must engage actively in working together toward the stated objectives”. In this article we will concentrate on cooperative learning (hereafter CL), as the main activities described in section three will show. Following Johnson and Johnson (2009a: 374): “*Informal cooperative learning* consists of having students work together to achieve a joint learning goal in temporary, ad hoc groups that last from a few minutes to one class period”.

The changes that have taken place at tertiary level also affect the main competences that are taught because, in general, universities have concentrated on teaching academic competence, i.e., mainly contents. Emotional intelligence and emotional competence have only been accorded importance in recent decades thanks to the work of certain authors (Bisquerra

Alzina & Pérez Escoda, 2007; Brackett et al., 2006; Goleman et al., 2002; Goleman, 1998, 2006; Hay Group, 2002; Martínez Lirola, 2013; Mikolajczak et al., 2014, among others).

In line with Barblett and Maloney (2010, p. 13) and MacCann et al. (2012, p. 315), emotional competence is understood as the ability that every human being possesses to regulate her/his own emotions, while social competence makes reference to integrating feelings, thoughts and behaviours in order to achieve social and interpersonal outcomes. Armstrong (2006) points out that there are five domains of emotional intelligence covering personal and social competences: personal competencies: self-awareness, self-regulation and self-motivation and social competencies: social awareness and social skills.

Similarly, Tallón and Sikora (2011, p. 40-41) also categorise emotional competences as personal and social. On the one hand, the main personal competences they consider in human beings are: self-knowledge, security, self-control, adaptability, sincerity, optimism, initiative, motivation to achieve a goal and resistance. On the other hand, the main social competences the authors refer to are the following: understanding others, political consciousness (which alludes to who has the power in a group), communication, cooperation, leadership, influence and management of conflicts.

The main objective of this paper is to observe how some cooperative activities make students acquire the main principles of cooperative learning (see section two) at the same time that they contribute to the development of social competences in a language classroom. Out of the different social competences proposed by the authors mentioned in the previous paragraph, this article will concentrate on the importance of the following social competences for cooperative learning: leadership, conflict management and cooperation; they are contained within the category of social skills proposed by Armstrong (2006) and coincide with the last four in the model proposed by Tallón and Sikora (2011). These competences are essential in order to construct relationships with other human beings, as the activities presented in section four will show.

This article is organised into the following sections: after this introduction, section two offers the theoretical background employed. Section three describes the participants, the context and the research design. The fourth section offers examples of cooperative activities that promote the social competences under study. Section five consists of the main results and discusses them by analysing the main principles of cooperative learning that appear in the cooperative activities and the results of a survey designed to establish students' opinions. Finally, the article offers a number of conclusions.

Theoretical background

Cooperative learning is a clear example of active pedagogy because it promotes that students learn by doing and by working together in groups in order to accomplish a common goal (Adams & Hamm, 1994; Johnson, et al., 2007; Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010). Designing cooperative activities offers students the opportunity of changing their learning style: for example, instead of memorizing contents it allows them to understand, to work with others and to discuss what happens while they learn.

This type of learning proposes the design of meaningful activities, that allow students to put into practice what they have learned theoretically, to be aware of the acquisition of competences and skills that are useful for everyday life and, therefore, to be aware of the progress they make by being active and dynamic in the teaching-learning process; as Wilhelm puts this (2006, p. 154): "Cooperative learning activities provide meaningful, realistic practice

combined with useful developmental feedback. Students are encouraged to view learning as a dynamic process over which they have individual responsibility and group control. The skills developed in using cooperative learning are also important for life-long learning”.

Although CL is a well-known methodology, often students and teachers confuse cooperative learning with traditional group work. We agree with Ahmar and Mahmood (2010, p. 152) in the two main differences between cooperative learning and the traditional group work: “(a) positive interdependence i.e. the feelings that they cannot achieve their group goal without the joint efforts of team members (b) individual accountability i.e. each member of the group feels accountable for their performance (Slavin, 1990)”.

Johnson and Johnson (1989, 1994, 1997, 2007, among other studies) are the authors who have worked the most on cooperative learning in the last decades. They (1994) established the main principles that need to be taken into consideration when designing these types of activities: positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and small-group skills and group processing. These principles are essential for the development of interpersonal skills and social competences (Johnson, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 1997, 1999, 2007, 2009b and 2009c; Johnson et al., 1998, 2007; Ahmar & Mahmood, 2010; Divaharan & Atputhasamy, 2002; Pujolàs Maset, Lago and Naranjo, 2013; among others) that can be applied to many jobs and therefore assist students to apply what they learn in the classroom to numerous situations in life.

CL also contributes to students’ socialization through the communication that takes place in each group to accomplish the stated objectives. In this sense, students develop skills necessary in the labour market, as Barkeley et al. (2005, p. 10) observe: “It prepares students for careers by providing them with opportunities to learn the team-work skills valued by employers. It helps students appreciate multiple perspectives and develop skills to collaboratively address the common problems facing a diverse society”.

Asking students to work in cooperative groups obliges them to take decisions and keep in mind that the final work depends on the effort put in by each group member. Consequently, cooperative learning involves the development of interpersonal competences (including emotional competences), such as teamwork skills, which are essential for the labour market, as Johnson and Johnson (2004, p. 9) put it: “Developing teamwork skills (such as communication, division of labor, generosity in giving credit, constructive criticism, caring, sharing, support of others, and team spirit) can be at least as important to future career success as the development of individual academic skills”. This type of learning can be used in any discipline because it is necessary to promote the use of the said competences in all subjects (Martínez Lirola & Llorens, 2013; Millis, 2010a, 2010b; Rue, 2007; Simkins & Maier, 2010). As Millis (2010b, p. 5) remarks: “In a nutshell, cooperative learning is a highly structured form of group work that focuses on the problem solving that - when directed by an effective teacher - can lead to deep learning, critical thinking, and genuine paradigm shifts in students’ thinking”.

Contextualising the study. Method

Participants

The data for the present study comes from a group of university students that were registered in the subject called *English Language V* at the University of Alicante (Spain). Most of the students are 21 years old. The majority of them want to work as high school teachers but there are also students who would like to work in international companies as interpreters or

translators. All these students have studied English in the previous 2 years of the degree (the level they achieve in the first year is B1 while B2 is the level they reach in the second year).

During the academic year 2013-2014, there were 90 students registered in the said subject. 65 were female and 25 were male. Out of the 90 students, there were 79 that came to class on a regular basis. The other 11 were Erasmus students who were studying at a different European University; therefore, they had the subject convalidated.

Context: subject and university. Classroom setting

English Language V is a core subject in the degree English Studies (*Grado en Estudios Ingleses*) at the University of Alicante. It is a six-credit subject, which implies that students spend 60 hours in the classroom and are also required to work 90 hours more, i.e., students needed to work individually and in groups inside and outside the classroom in order to acquire the competences established in the subject (see sections 3.3 and 4).

The main objectives of this subject are that students develop the five skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and interaction) for advanced students of English. This subject and English Language VI and VII, taught after this one, will allow students to achieve level C1 in English. Since most of the students wanted to be high school teachers, the lecturer made students think about the methodology and the different pedagogic techniques used in the classroom so that they could apply them in their future career as teachers.

This subject was taught 4 hours per week, one theoretical and three practical. In the theoretical class students were introduced to the main aspects of academic writing: cohesive devices, the structure of the academic essay and the main characteristics of different text types and their relationships with the context in which they are used. In the second hour, students were asked to prepare an oral presentation on a topic of their choice.

Then, the next hour was used to revise grammar. Every lecture started with a brief theoretical explanation of the grammatical topic under study (i.e. the use of articles, reported speech, the passive voice, adverbs, etc.); thereafter some exercises were corrected so that students could put their grammatical knowledge into practice. The teacher always asked students how the grammatical point under analysis could be explained at the high school level so that students could benefit from as many opportunities as possible to act as teachers in the classroom. Finally, the last hour of the week consisted of a debate organised by the group who had presented the oral presentation in the previous class. The topic of the debate was the same as that of the oral presentation.

Research design

Observing the large number of students registered in the subject made the teacher think about the most appropriate methodology. It was decided to use cooperative learning as a way of organising the whole classroom into groups, which implied that students would need to develop social competences as well as academic competences.

The teacher asked students to arrange themselves in groups of five people; they were also requested to choose a group coordinator. This person would be responsible for coordinating the different cooperative activities that had to be carried out during the semester: participate in two group tutorials, an oral presentation and a debate (see section four). Moreover, the group coordinator had to hand in an outline of the oral presentation prepared by the group; it was also necessary for the group members to complete a table related to the main social competences with which they had worked in the oral presentations (see appendix one). It is very important to be very explicit about the tasks students have to do and with the responsibilities they are to carry out with each of them. In this way we propose that students

are the active protagonists of their learning process whereas teachers are just facilitators or guides.

Finally, in order to determine students' opinions about the cooperative methodology used in the subject and the acquisition of social competences, a survey was designed so that students could complete it anonymously (see appendix two). It was explained to them that the survey was going to be used for this research and that their participation would be appreciated. Therefore, all agreed to participate; a summary of the main results appears in section five.

Examples of cooperative activities that promote social competences

Working cooperatively was not the most common way of working in English Studies (*Grado en Estudios Ingleses*) at the University of Alicante (Martínez Lirola & Llorens, 2011). The choice of different cooperative activities makes it possible for the weak points of some students to be balanced by the strong points of others because students are different and they learn in varied ways. In this sense, the fact that the final goal is the responsibility of the whole group causes students to develop different social and emotional competences that will be essential in the labour market. The following activities show that the different group members need each other in order to accomplish the proposed activities (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

The cooperative oral presentation

During the first three classes, the teacher explained the main characteristics of an effective oral presentation using PowerPoint and Prezi presentations; she provided some examples using videos and DVDs in the classroom. Students began to present their oral presentations on a topic of their choice from the start of the four weeks of the semester so that they could have some time to be organised and could apply what they had learned in the previous weeks. The teacher emphasised that it was necessary to prepare a cooperative oral presentation, i.e., it should not consist of different disconnected sections prepared by each student but of sections that were clearly connected and organised in a logical manner so that the final product was coherent and compact.

Students organised themselves in groups of five people. Each student had to talk for seven minutes. In this way, their capacity to summarise and to manage time was also observed. The main aspects taken into consideration to evaluate students' oral skills were the following: fluency (seven marks), grammar and syntax (seven marks), organization and research done (five marks), body language and interaction with the audience (three marks) and visual devices and multimodality used in the presentation (three marks). Giving attention to visual devices made students aware of the importance of using videos, DVDs, music, pictures, etc. in order to communicate certain messages. In this sense they could observe a pedagogical application of technology in teaching.

On the day of the oral presentation students were required to give the teacher an outline with the following information: the names of the different group members, an index with the main sections of the oral presentation, a section devoted to vocabulary with at least ten words they had learnt preparing the topic, and the main bibliographical references used to prepare the oral presentation; finally it was necessary for them to include a section with some questions to be used in the cooperative debate that would take place in the next practical section.

The cooperative debate

The cooperative debate was based on the topic of the oral presentation. This activity contrasts with the previous one because the intention of the presentation is that students use

formal English whereas the debate has as its main purpose that students promote interaction with all students in the classroom. In this way, everybody will have the opportunity of expressing their opinion about the topic presented in the debate.

One of the main objectives of the debate was to give students the opportunity of working as teachers, paying attention to aspects such as classroom management, promoting interaction, making sure that all students participated, dividing students into groups, asking students to express their opinions in front of everybody, disagreeing in a respectful way, learning from the opinions of others, etc.

Moreover, the cooperative debate was chosen as a didactic technique due to the fact that it is very useful in promoting creativity. The teacher explained to students that debates should not consist only of asking questions about the topic that was discussed that week; the purpose of the debate was that all students could interact and develop critical thinking. For this reason, at the beginning of the semester the teacher explained certain cooperative techniques that could be used in order to stage successful debates in the classroom.

For example, half of the class would support the topic under discussion and the other half oppose it; some games could be prepared so that students could practice their English and have fun in the classroom. Moreover, the classroom could be divided into small groups (about five or six people each) so that they could think and discuss their answers to various questions; each small group should have a group leader to share the answer with the rest of the classroom, the said leader should be changed as each question came up so that more students had the opportunity of experiencing leadership, etc.

The different activities described in this section offer students the opportunity of working on social competences such as leadership, conflict solving and cooperation, which are essential skills in the labour market. The activities already mentioned allow students to internalise the main contents of the subject working in cooperative groups. The cooperative activities proposed oblige students to work with the main principles of CL and encourage them to use certain emotional abilities in order to acquire a number of social competences that can be used in social situations inside and outside the classroom (Brackett et al., 2006) as will be explained in the next section.

Results and discussion

The cooperative oral presentation and the cooperative debate require that students apply the main principles of cooperative learning already mentioned. All the activities had the purpose of promoting positive interdependence so that students would interact with each group member in order to discuss their ideas on each of the activities proposed, to make decisions together, and to help each other with possible difficulties during the teaching-learning process. This type of interdependence contributes to the development of social competences and results in understanding the proposed activities as the responsibility of each group member because the final product depends on each member's contribution during the process of preparing for each activity. In this sense, positive interdependence is the opposite of negative interdependence which "[...] results in oppositional interaction (such as obstruction of each other's goal achievement efforts and distrust), and no interdependence results in the absence of interaction" (Johnson & Johnson, 2003, p. 41).

When students are aware of the importance of positive interdependence they observe that they gain from each other's efforts because the success of each group member benefits the rest of the group. Consequently, students recognize that all group members share a common fate.

In this sense, the cooperative activities described in section four help students develop social competences such as the following:

a) Leadership: each group needs to catch students' attention in the oral presentation so that they engage with the topic and persuade their classmates to participate in the debate. Moreover, students need to share their progress during the learning process with the teacher, which promotes leadership. At the beginning of the semester the teacher asked each group to have a leader, i.e., a student who would coordinate the different cooperative activities each group had to prepare, manage the time and propose some rules so that the group could succeed. In this sense, team leaders are responsible for the success of the teams they lead. As such, they are not only responsible for their own emotions, but also for the emotions of the team they lead and the clients of the team (Rafaeli & Worline, 2001). Consequently, the leader's personality affects the way she/he helps the team develop its norms (Dickson et al., 2001, p. 201). For this reason, the team leader's emotional intelligence is linked to the main norms related to emotional intelligence established in the group, which will have an effect on the success of the group and on their performance.

Leadership is a competence that will be useful in the labour market because students will be able to listen to different points of view and to make decisions that will benefit the majority of the people involved in a determined task or project. A good leader is socially responsible, celebrates diversity, and consequently, she/he takes into consideration other people's opinions and considers the pros and cons of every possible option before making a decision. Moreover, a good leader promotes inclusiveness, tolerance, empathy and establishes positive relationships among the different people working together. This is essential in the labour market so that people feel comfortable while they are working; moreover, in this way workers will consider themselves as part of a team because their opinions count. Consequently, a good leader will be able to move people in the direction of accomplishing the company's goals.

b) Conflict management: the teacher emphasized that conflicts were opportunities to learn and that they needed to be solved in the group. The main example of conflict observed in English Language V had to do with deciding the topic of the oral presentation because there were some students who wanted to impose a topic of their choice. Something as simple as choosing a topic to prepare a subsequent oral presentation obliges students to work on the competence of making decisions and conflict management. In these cases, the role of the group leader is very important because she/he had to listen to the different opinions and to be empathetic and patient in order to solve the conflict. In this sense, there is no doubt that emotionally intelligent team leaders have an effect on the group's performance (Stubbs et al., 2008) and in conflict solving.

There was only one case in which it was not possible to agree on the topic and the teacher had to talk to the group and propose different topics so that a new one was chosen. In fact, group leaders play an essential role in the development of positive interdependence and of a positive climate in the group, as Johnson and Johnson (2009a, p. 367-368) point out:

"The positive interdependence that binds group members together is posited to result in feelings of responsibility for (a) completing one's share of the work and (b) facilitating the work of other group members. Furthermore, when a person's performance affects the outcomes of collaborators, the person feels responsible for the collaborators' welfare as well as for his or her own (Matsui et al., 1987)".

Conflict management is a very valuable skill for employers because the promotion of peaceful interaction makes students contribute to and engage with the establishment of a peaceful context in the labour market. The different cooperative activities presented in this article add dimensions of social consciousness to the curriculum because they involve working

with social competences. In this sense, these activities provide students with the necessary skills to address everyday problems peacefully and to contribute positively to both local and global society by using nonviolent means to solve conflicts. Every time there was a conflict in any of the groups, the teacher highlighted the importance of negotiation and of peaceful interaction as the main ways to solve them. These skills can then be transferred to the labour market so that students can solve problems in the same way when they get a job.

c) Cooperation: all the activities described in section four are cooperative. They accomplish the principles of CL individual and group accountability and group processing because when students were evaluated, their grades were discussed with the teacher in the two group tutorials. Moreover, the cooperative activities described in the previous section acknowledge individual differences at the same time that they promote interpersonal development by actively involving students in learning.

Cooperation is another essential social competence in the labour market because it involves that students are able to work in cooperative groups in order to accomplish a common goal. Cooperative learning highlights the importance of project-based work in the classroom and this method and the skills it involves can be used in the labour market in order to accomplish group projects effectively. Working cooperatively involves sharing responsibilities, the promotion of peer support, the emphasis on group skills and the opposite to competition. Applying these to the labour market implies that students will give more importance to the common goal than to their own interests, which will contribute to the creation of a positive environment.

It is significant that the activities proposed offer opportunities for personal feedback because the teacher asked students to analyze their individual responsibility in the group results while, finally, special attention was paid to the group's development and how its members had learned using the cooperative methodology proposed. In addition, the teacher asked students what grade they thought they deserved, which gave students the opportunity of taking part in their evaluation, to make decisions about a fair grade and discuss with the teacher some aspects of the oral presentation.

Furthermore, the different social competences already enumerated and the different principles of CL were promoted in the activities presented in section four because at the same time that the teacher evaluated the oral presentation and the debate there was one group of students chosen by the teacher in order to evaluate their mates; students were just requested to highlight the main positive aspects they found in the oral presentation and the debate; they were also asked to mention any aspects that could be improved in the oral presentation. The purpose of peer evaluation is that students become used to being critical of their own work and the work of others and that they are able to criticize in a respectful way. However, they were not required to give a grade to their classmates.

Conclusions

Cooperative learning is a pedagogical technique that promotes student learning and academic achievement. The different cooperative activities proposed in section four involve students' emotions; therefore, it is essential that they use their emotional intelligence in order to acquire social competences to accomplish the interpersonal and social goals of each activity. Moreover, the said activities increase student retention because students learn by doing, which causes students to increase their satisfaction along with their learning experience. In this sense, CL helps students develop skills in oral communication in order to develop their social skills. Consequently, cooperative activities can promote students' self-esteem and are useful to promote positive social relations between group members.

The different activities presented in this paper offered students the possibility to act as teachers and to be critical thinkers about the topic under study. In addition, the promotion of cooperative activities implies that students learn by doing as they work with their classmates in concrete tasks that make explicit the acquisition of certain social competences necessary in the labour market. Selecting cooperative activities involves a revision of the methodology, the evaluation and the objectives of the subject to be taught. Furthermore, it involves a revision of the roles of students and teachers in the teaching-learning process and requests that both share the responsibility and are active inside and outside the classroom. CL differs from traditional teaching approaches because students work together rather than compete with each other individually.

Some of the main difficulties of this type of learning are the different levels of students; some students are not used to working in this way and it is necessary that they assume leadership. In addition, one of the main problems that teachers and students face with cooperative learning comprises the different conflicts among group members. Moreover, cooperative learning requires time and effort for students and teachers inside and outside the classroom but its advantages outweigh its disadvantages for several reasons: learning is progressive, teachers and students share the responsibility and it highlights the acquisition of competences.

The different cooperative activities selected and the social competences they promote contribute to the introduction of social consciousness in the curriculum so that students are equipped with different skills that will allow them to be active citizens. In this sense, this active pedagogy highlights the importance of peaceful and respectful relationships that gives them power to contribute to the creation of a better world.

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Appendix 1: Table used to evaluate some social competences in the group.

<p>PLEASE, COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING TABLE ONCE THE PRESENTATION IS DONE. EVERY GROUP MEMBER MUST PARTICIPATE SOCIAL SKILLS IN THE GROUPS</p>	<p>Group number: Group members:</p> <p>TOPIC OF THE ORAL PRESENTATION:</p>
<p>How was the leader chosen?</p>	
<p>Strategies used by the leader to control the group</p>	
<p>Were there conflicts in the group? If the answer is yes, specify them. If the answer is no, why do you think the group had no conflict?</p>	
<p>Strategies used to solve conflicts</p>	
<p>How has the work been divided in the group?</p>	
<p>Strategies used to cooperate</p>	