

**THE INFLUENCE OF STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION ON THE ENGLISH  
LEARNING PROCESS**

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SAN JUAN DE PASTO**

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**San Juan de Pasto, Agosto 2002.**

## **DEDICATORY**

**To our parents, family  
and friends who always  
encouraged and helped us  
to make this possible.**

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“Las ideas y conclusiones aportadas  
en el Trabajo de Grado, son de  
responsabilidad exclusiva  
de sus autores”

Artículo 1º. Del Acuerdo No. 324  
del 11 de octubre de 1966, emanado  
del Honorable Consejo Directivo de  
la Universidad de Nariño.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Taking into account the new teaching methodologies we can realize the way in which the EFL educational process has improved, however by means of classroom observations we found that some gaps exist as far as the students' participation is concerned. An aim of our research is to describe the influence of students' participation on the English learning process. The participants were observed and they answered some interviews. Results in our study indicated that the students did not have enough time to participate because of the reduced number of hours per week and the large groups in each classroom, and because teachers just let participate those students who are more easily remembered. Finally, to facilitate the English learning process, students' participation should be increased and it should be considered by teachers.

## RESUMEN

Teniendo en cuenta las nuevas metodologías de enseñanza, nos podemos dar cuenta como el proceso educativo del Inglés como lengua extranjera ha mejorado, sin embargo mediante observación de clase encontramos la existencia de algunas brechas en cuanto a la participación de los estudiantes. Un objetivo de nuestra investigación es describir la influencia de la participación estudiantil en el proceso de aprendizaje del inglés. Los participantes fueron observados y respondieron algunas entrevistas. Los resultados de nuestro estudio mostraron que los estudiantes no tienen el tiempo suficiente para participar, debido a un reducido número de horas a la semana y a grandes grupos por cada salón, y porque los profesores sólo dejan participar a aquellos estudiantes cuyos nombres son fáciles de recordar. Finalmente para facilitar el proceso de aprendizaje del Inglés la participación de los estudiantes debe ser mayor y debe ser considerada por los profesores.

## **1. THE PROBLEM**

This first chapter gives the reader some important information for a better understanding of this research study; that is, to tell the reader the origin of the problem, the purpose of the problem, the reasons why this problem is important, the delimitations of the problem and the situations that limited our study.

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM**

Taking into account the research study proposed by Professor Jesús Alirio Bastidas, we decided to work on the influence of students' participation in the learning process of English as a foreign language, because when we were doing the class observations we realized that participation is not so important for teachers, that it is not taken into account, and in some cases it does not exist at all. It is also important to take into account that the students need to participate to

improve their English knowledge and to have more security at the moment of using or talking in a different language in real situations.

For us, this topic is interesting because it is not well developed in books or methodologies, they usually seem to be interested or to take into account the teachers' preparation, methods, and the students' motivation, but the participation seems not to be really important for them and they only devote a few lines of this topic in their contents. That is why we wanted to read more, and to work on this topic.

## **1.2 DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEMATIC SITUATION**

In the experience that we have had as observers in a high school of our city, we realized that the results in the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language in high schools are not the expected ones according to the plans that teachers make at the beginning of the year. We found a big problem as far as students' participation is concerned, since it is not taken into account by teachers, or in other cases it does not take place in English classrooms, so the students feel that they and their thoughts are not really important for teachers, and they take the English class as a game preferring to cause indiscipline problems to participate actively in the English learning process. If this situation continues the problem

could increase, the gap between the planned results and the real results would be bigger, and, the students would have less opportunities of pursuing higher studies.

### **1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

How is the students' participation during English classes in a public high school, and how important is it for students?

### **1.4 DELIMITATIONS**

**1.4.1 Definition Of Terms.** The words mentioned in this work do not have a special meaning, but that found in any dictionary; here we have three of the most commonly used terms in this paper:

- \* **Participation:** The act of taking part in an activity or event (Longman, N.D.).
- \* **Level:** The amount of a quality that someone has or that exists in a situation (Longman, N.D.).

- \* **Role:** The way in which someone or something is involved in an activity or situation, and how much influence they have on it (Longman, N.D.).

**1.4.2 Population.** English classes, composed of 40 students, both male and female between twelve and seventeen years old, that belong to a middle-low socio-economic status.

**1.4.3 Geographical Delimitation.** This study was carried out in a public high school located in the South West part of Pasto, even though it is a well known high school it is surrounded by two places a little dangerous, Pasto is a city located in the department of Nariño in the South East part of Colombia (South America).

**1.4.4 Time Delimitation.** We developed this study from August 2001 to June 2002.

## **1.5 PURPOSE**

### **GENERAL OBJECTIVE**

The main objective of this research is to describe and analyze the students' participation during a delimited time to determine if it is a possible cause in the problem of the low English level at high school.

### **SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES**

- To identify the importance of the students' participation in the learning process of English as a foreign language.
- To identify if the participation is really important for the students.
- To describe both individual and group participation.

## **1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The justification of this work is based on the interest of knowing how students participate. The authors think that participation is important because if it is carried out in a practical way, it could facilitate the students' learning process.



The authors consider that this research is important because with this description the teacher could realize the success or failure of the students' participation as a means of English learning in order to correct their mistakes, otherwise problems such as fossilization may occur. On the other hand, more participation could lead to a greater fluency. Finally, this study can establish some basis for a new research problem.

## **1.7 LIMITATIONS**

This research was limited first of all for a reduced number of hours per week, three in our case, second there are large groups in each classroom, so with few hours and large groups, students do not have enough time to participate in the way that they have to do it. On the other hand, sometimes interviews do not get true information, and we are conditioned to accept this information as true. Finally, the teachers' negative answer to our interviews limited the results of our research work.

Last of all, the researchers remind the reader that this chapter contains important information for understanding this research study, the origin of the problem, the purpose of the problem, the reasons why this problem is important, the delimitations of the problem, and the limitations of this study. The authors also

hope that this chapter is an interesting opening to this research and catches the attention of the reader in order to pass to the next step, to know what some authors have found as far as this problem is concerned

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this chapter the researchers take up the question of students' participation in the foreign language learning process, which was raised in chapter I. First, the authors present to the reader some important factors that influence the students' learning process; afterwards, the authors take into account some contexts where the focus is participation, next the researchers assume some important aspects for the students' participation study such as forced participation, sexism and turn distribution and turn taking, and they revise some psychological ideas that are important to take into account for developing this study in a better way. Finally, the researchers study some opportunities that students have to participate in English classes. These contents are based on some important authors and researchers' studies of second language learning and teaching (e.g. Littlewood, Gardner & Lambert, etc.).

In the Second Language Learning Process some researchers have found important aspects in the foreign language learning and teaching, Strevens (1976) for example considers necessary to disprove the idea of looking at language teaching as an inferior occupation, because it takes time, it is not accidental, it is a task that requires intelligence, imagination, training, etc. There are other factors

which reflect or contribute to a better or a worse learning, depending on their use. One of these factors is motivation. According to Littlewood (1984) motivation is “the force which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all, how much energy he devotes to it, and how long he perseveres”. Gardner and Lambert (cited in Bastidas, 1991) established two basic kinds of motivation: “integrative” and “instrumental”. Bastidas (1991) states that for Colombian high school teachers, the second major problem is the low students’ motivation for learning English. Another factor is the role of the teacher, which may influence positively or negatively in the students’ learning process and motivation. Bastidas (1991) affirms that “Pupils will like language classes if they take a liking to the teacher himself”.

Other two factors to take into account in the foreign language process are, first, the aptitude, about which Oviedo (1980) states, that all students are able to learn a language, and as for teachers, he says that they need a scientific training to be able to teach; and second the attitude, for him it changes from group to group, and depends on the motivation.

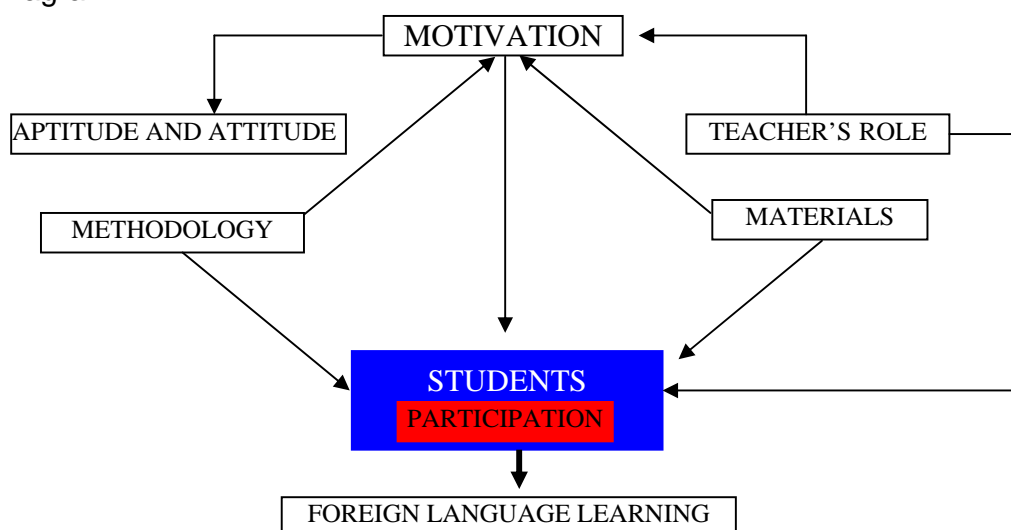
Obviously the two factors mentioned above are not the only ones to be taken into account in the foreign language process, for instance the methodology, is a factor that according to Bastidas (1991) has been considered as the most central element of the language learning and teaching event.

One of the last factors is the material. Bastidas (1991) affirms that materials constitute useful aids for the success of any methodology. According to high school

teachers, the lack of instructional materials is the major problem in their teaching setting.

Finally, in order to talk about student's participation the literature review has demonstrated that this aspect has been studied based on teachers' research, studies, experiences and observations in which they establish statements such as the students' participation is more frequent in the first row seats of the classroom, or that the socio-cultural context and the students' beliefs play an important role in the classroom participation. They also say that whenever a student is introduced to a new language, he experiments feelings of fatigue and frustration, because in EFL classrooms there are few opportunities to participate.

Diagram 1.



There are several factors which influence the students' participation, such as the motivation, which depends on the teachers' role, attitude, etc. The materials as well

as the methodology are also important. But it does not mean that all students who have a high level of participation should necessarily have a high English level.

Diagram 1 presents a summary of the factors that influence students' participation in foreign language learning.

## **2.1 SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT AND STUDENTS' BELIEFS**

As it was said before, the social context influences the students' hopes and beliefs of an English class, and of course it influences the students' participation needs, for example according to different teachers' observations in different countries, there are students who will not participate unless the teacher calls on or asks them to do it. There are also cases in which students think that it is not polite to ask the teacher a question during class time, or they prefer to ask another student's help instead of asking the teacher. In other words it is almost impossible to write about students' participation without mentioning the context in which it is done.

## **2.2 ACTION ZONE**

Addams and Biddle (cited in Richards and Lockhart, 1994) state that the action zone is the zone limited by those students who enter into eye contact with the teacher and who are nominated to take an active part or are likely to participate in a lesson.

On the contrary according to Schinke-Llano (cited in Bailey and Nunan, 1996) teachers often have their own action zones, which depend on teacher's preferences (e.g. call on girls more often than boys, call on students whose names are easy to remember, etc.).

In general, we think that students that are in the front zone (action zone) have more opportunities to participate and are more motivated to do it, because they can see the board and can hear the teacher more clearly than the others that are in the back part of the classroom, in which the environment is more distracting. It is important to mention this aspect in this study because it establishes one of the most common sources of students' participation.

## 2.3 INTERACTION

It refers to the dynamic interplay between learner and teacher and learner and learner during the learning event. That is they are mutually acting on each other, affecting each other to evoke an experience, a meaning, or a relationship (Arnold, 1999).

Any teacher, who seeks to find an appropriate balance in activities in his/her classroom, needs to ask himself: is the interaction a “good thing”?

In research that has utilized observable data to document turn taking in classrooms, the terms “high input generators” and “low input generators” are sometimes used. Selinger (cited in Allwright and Bailey, 1991) documented these participation patterns. He describes high input generators (HIGs) as learners who, by initiating and sustaining conversations through taking turns, caused other people to use language with them, to provide them with language samples. In other words, their communication strategies generated high levels of input. In contrast, another type of learner seemed to participate minimally - to speak only when called upon and to be generally passive in classroom interaction. Selinger called these persons low input generators (LIGs), because they did not actively use language to get more exposure to the target language.



Later Selinger (cited in Allwright and Bailey, 1991) conducted another study in which he investigated the relationship between errors and participation. He found that HIGs produce more language and more frequent errors, than did LIGs. Selinger also concluded that more errors do not mean that the learner is learning less.

## 2.4 LEARNER INTERACTIONAL PATTERNS

It refers to the rules that students are expected to follow in order to participate appropriately in lessons and it is called interactional competence.

In Richards and Lockhart (1994) we found that Good and Power (1976) established six different interactional patterns in which students can be classified according to their motivation and participation, and these patterns are:

- **Task-oriented students:** Competent and successful students, who enjoy classes. They seldom need the teacher's help and if they need it they ask for it immediately without hesitating.
- **Phantom students:** They are generally good students, but they are not well known in classroom because of their silence, and non-participation.

- **Social students:** They talk too much, and they are more popular with their classmates than with their teachers, but they do not hesitate to ask for help, either from the teacher or classmates.
- **Dependent students:** These students need the teacher's support almost all the time.
- **Isolated students:** They set themselves apart and they avoid interaction or group work.
- **Alienated students:** They are hostile and aggressive and create difficulties in the classroom interaction.

This classification will be a useful tool in this descriptive research, because with it the authors can set the students' role in the participation in class in Colombian context. However, there are other aspects that influence on these patterns. The authors present these aspects in the next paragraphs.

**2.4.1 Wait – Time.** It is known as the length of time that teachers wait after asking the question before calling on a student to answer it. (Rowe, 1974 cited in Richards and Lockhart, 1994). This aspect is important as far as participation is concerned because in large classes the wait time is not enough to enable students to get the answer. In this case the problem is not the lack of participation, but the lack of time.

**2.4.2 Teacher talk.** Talk is one of the major ways that teachers use to convey information to learners, and it is also one of the primary means of controlling learner's behavior (Allwright and Bailey, 1991).

Recently some classroom research language learning and teaching has focused on what actions learners take to try to master the target language. Their efforts in this direction are called "learning strategies". This topic is related to classroom interaction in the sense that some types of turns learners take in classroom may be direct evidence of their own private efforts to learn.

Even though teacher's talk is important, it is also important that it does not take long, because when there exists too much teacher's talk, there exist less opportunities for students to participate.

**2.4.3 Opportunities for learning.** It refers to the opportunities that learners have to improve the learning process. In the case of the second language learning, these opportunities are given by many "teachers" (any interlocutor that learner can found). On the contrary, in the case of foreign language learning, these opportunities are limited to one person, the classroom teacher who becomes the only provider (Oviedo, 1980).

The opportunities for learning have become a demotivating factor to learn a foreign language, that is, students do not feel the necessity to study another language, because they are conscious that there are no foreigners in their context.

If we assume now, that a learner is well motivated to learn a foreign language, another important influence on the proficiency he achieves will be the quality of the learning opportunities, which the environment offers. This aspect is related to this study because the students require an environment that offers them good learning opportunities that motivate them to increase their participation needs.

**2.4.4 Opportunities to use the foreign language.** Many aspects of second language acquisition occur through natural learning mechanisms, which are activated when the learner is involved in a communicative activity. If this is so, it is important that the learner has access to situations where the language is used as a natural means of communication (Littlewood, 1984).

Littlewood (1984) also states, that in some situations, this factor is inseparable from communicative needs. In a bilingual community, for example, the proximity of another language group may create simultaneously the communicative need for the second language and the opportunities for learning it through use. In other situations, however, the two factors are separate.

For learners to simply visit, or even reside in another country, it is important both for learning and for the development of positive attitudes that they could interact with native speakers at a personal level. This is more likely to occur when the initial attitudes towards contact are favorable and the learner feels confident in the strange environment.

Unfortunately, the two situations where second language learning takes place most often, the classroom and the second language community, can easily generate situations where learners feel overanxious. In the typical language classroom (Littlewood, 1984), learners are often asked to perform in a state of ignorance and dependence, which may engender feelings of helplessness. They have not produced unfamiliar sounds in front of an audience, and when they do not perform adequately, they are subjected to comment and correction, sometimes for reasons that are not clear to them. Most of them do not possess the linguistic tools to express their own individuality. In any case, there are usually little opportunities for this, since the interaction is dominated by the teacher. The opportunities depend largely on what the external environment provides. In an environment where learners feel anxious or insecure, they are likely to have psychological barriers to communication.

**2.4.5 Development through practice.** Once the opportunities have been provided in classroom, it is important that the learners take advantage of these opportunities

to put into practice the knowledge learned by means of participation and communicative and interactive activities.

“It has been shown in the studies of everyday cognition (Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1995) that learning comes about through participation in practice, although all types of participation are not necessarily empowering.

In the author's understanding the characteristics of empowering participation are: (1) novices are recognized as legitimate members of a relevant community of practice who share or are supposed to share the community's values, beliefs, customs and so forth, as well as knowledge and skills directly related to the practice, (2) novices work with expert practitioners, more experienced apprentices and their peers and carry out a role, secondary as it may be, in the process of the practice with a view to become a full practitioner in the future and (3) support to accomplish tasks assigned to novices is provided by making observation of others' work possible, by providing easily manageable tools, and by sharing experiences.” (Arnold, 1999: 145).

Now taking into account what was mentioned above, it is important to establish that this practice should be done, in most cases, in a voluntary way, because the learner will sooner or later take over all decision-making responsibilities, otherwise this practice could affect the learner's needs of participation, as it is established in the next aspect of the literature review of this study.

## 2.5 FORCED PARTICIPATION

“One thing for teachers to keep in mind is that pupils’ learning strategies may not always parallel teachers’ teaching strategies, and sometimes they may even be at odds with each other. Some learners, for example, may wish to be quiet and listen in order to learn, while their teachers believe they will learn by speaking” (Allwright and Bailey, 1991: 144). That is, students sometimes are forced to produce sentences or utterances even if they are not sure to answer. In Allwright and Bailey (1991) it is found something called the powerful classroom interaction rule, that states, “Thou shalt answer thy teacher’s questions”. It forces students who are called upon to answer sometimes before they are ready, and the responses generated by them, are sometimes non-sensical and incoherent.

According to Spender (N.D.) it exists a huge difficulty for female students to talk in mixed-sex classrooms, because they do not behave as teachers expect to. At the same time, Spender states that it is also difficult for teachers to provide them with the opportunities to participate. It is only one example of the problems that our sexist society can produce in our students. Another example is provided by Angela Parker (cited in Spender N.D.) who found that not only do males talk more in class, but that both sexes believe that intellectual argumentation in the classroom is a

masculine activity. Now, taking into account this short idea the authors present a deeper aspect that is found in the literature review, called sexism.

## **2.6 SEXISM**

In Bailey and Nunan (1996) we found an important aspect about students' participation that was established by Leo Van Lier, who realized that teachers tend to ask male students instead of female ones.

Van Lier (cited in Bailey and Nunan, 1996), states that both male and female participate in the same way at the beginning of the year, unfortunately the days keep on passing, and the female students tend to move toward the back of the room, and it is because teachers think that boys are more participative, and more awake, they are extrovert and tend to be leaders. And these teachers' preferences make girls feel inferior students and make them lose the motivation to participate. In the aforesaid idea we can realize that the teachers not always treat their students in the same way as they say.

Due to what was mentioned above, the researchers can add another factor to state again, that the students' participation is limited by teachers' conditions and



preferences (e.g. action zone, boys are better than girls, etc.). And the authors also can say and show that the teachers' points of view are different from those of students and observers. According to this, the authors can conclude that it might be the teacher who can help female students to be less willing to be silent in mixed-sex classrooms.

## **2.7 TURN DISTRIBUTION AND TURN TAKING**

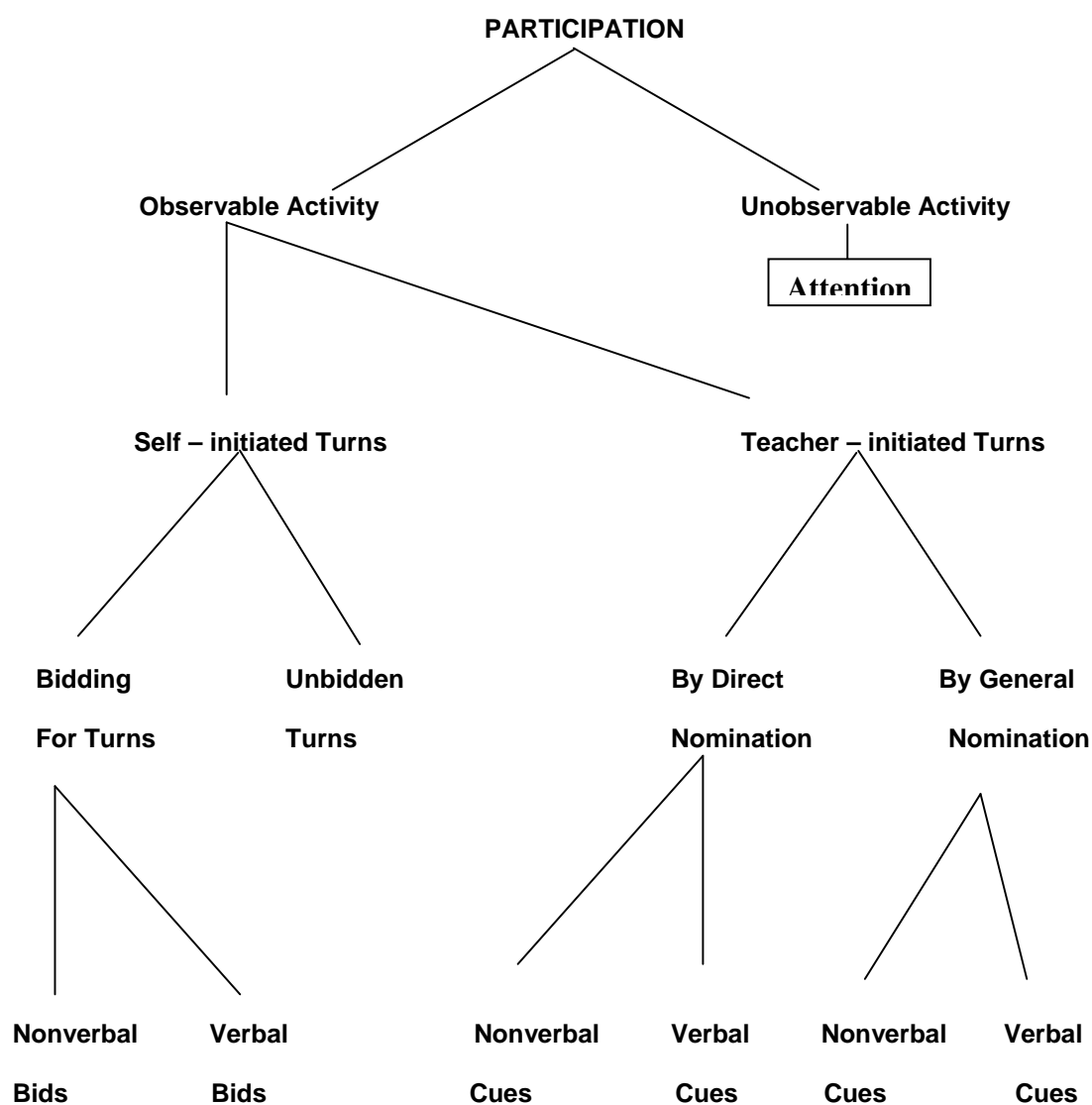
To talk about students' participation it is important to establish how the teacher can ask for it, and referring to it the authors can mention the next two common ways extracted from Allwright and Bailey (1991):

Direct nomination or personal solicit. It is referred to the action when the teachers call upon a particular learner to talk.

General solicit. It is when teachers throw the turn open to the whole class.

Teachers may, of course, call upon some learners more frequently than they do on others, and some learners may choose to respond more frequently to general solicits, or even to speak without waiting for a solicit of any kind. And also some learners will steal a turn intended for someone else (Allwright and Bailey, 1991).

Allwright and Bailey (1991) support these two concepts with the following tree diagram referring to some observable aspects of classroom participation patterns, in order to explain in a better way how participation is done inside the classroom.



## **2.8 PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGES.**

The authors considered important to include in this chapter the changes that students pass through their adolescence, because the students course the high school stage during the adolescence period; these changes are both physical and psychological. According to Elkind (cited in Zapata & Aquino, 1982) the changes in the teenagers' mind make emerge feelings of depression and inconformity from them making them rebel persons (in their homes, at the school, etc). So the researchers can conclude that these changes could affect their needs of participation at school.

To go deep in these aspects, Grinder (1982) suggests taking into account the external environments, in which the teenagers are involved, such as the neighborhood, the family, the sexual changes and role, because they are great influences on the aspirations that teenagers have as high school students.

Finally, it would be important to take into account Zapata & Aquino's words (1982) "Para los educadores, conocer el desarrollo del pensamiento permite definir los procesos de aprendizaje de los alumnos y sus posibilidades intelectuales, ayudando a formular una estrategia pedagógica adecuada a la enseñanza media". This aspect should be considered in this study because these teenagers' changes

are huge influences on the students' role at high school; therefore they affect the students' participation wants.

As it was pointed out at the beginning of this chapter the students' participation is influenced by factors, which form part of the second language learning process. Factors that contribute to better or worsen language learning, depending on the different conditions and circumstances of the teaching learning process, in which the students' participation plays an important role, role that in our educational context has been forgotten, that is why we took the question of "How is the students' participation during English classes in a public high school, and how important is it for students?".

This chapter contributed to focus the research problem, to go deeper into the related information and it encouraged the authors to be critical and creative researchers.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

Right after the literature review the authors present to the reader the methodology that was applied to develop this study. The researchers also talk about the participants, the setting, the sample, and the instruments applied to collect data. The authors say besides how the data was analyzed and the ethical aspects that were taken into account to do this research.

#### **3.1 DESIGN**

This research was carried out, by describing how the learners participate and how the participation can be useful or can be a problem according to the use given by the teacher in the learning process of English as a foreign language. Taking this into account, the descriptive design was the most appropriate one for this research work because the authors were not looking for answers, causes, consequences,

and solutions. The researchers' main goal was to describe the real situation in the classroom as far as students' participation is concerned.

The authors applied the qualitative research method that consists on noting the importance of the research context, that is to be closer to the participants' perspectives and behavior to interpret them and in this way to produce descriptions, interpretations and clarifications from a more humanist point of view.

### **3.2 PARTICIPANTS, SETTING AND SAMPLE**

This research took place in a public High School, located in the South West part of Pasto that belongs to a middle-low socio-economic status, with the students of all the levels. Taking into account that the average of students per classroom is 35 to 40 students, this research was developed with a similar number of learners for each classroom in which we worked, both male and female. They belong to a middle-low socio-economic status too, and they are between twelve and seventeen years old.

### **3.3 MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS**

In this descriptive research work, the authors applied techniques such as interviews, field notes, and direct observation as our main instruments for collecting data, for controlling and registering the students' participation during a specific lapse of time (a class).

### **3.4 PROCEDURE**

In this research, first of all the authors asked for permission in a high school institution, in order to observe the development of some English classes, and by means of these observations the authors described the students' participation. Then the authors designed and applied some interviews in order to get more related information to describe in a better way the students' participation progress, taking into account the main objective of this research. It is also important to mention that the literature review allowed to the researchers to confront the theory with the practical study.

### **3.5 PILOT STUDY**

During the pilot study some interviews were applied to a small learners' group. In these instruments, personal opinions, points of view, etc, were asked about students' participation in class, in order to find out whether the questions included in the questionnaire were correct to do a better work at the moment of developing the interviews to the whole group. Here, it is important to mention that the researchers talked with teachers in order to apply the interviews to them, unfortunately, they did not want to participate.

### **3.6 DATA ANALYSIS**

To analyze the data collected during the class observation process and by means of interviews, it was important to take into account some aspects for the analysis of qualitative research.

To make a good analysis there are some steps that all researchers have to do (Bastidas, 2001). These steps are data organization, then identification of main



ideas to classify them, and next to continue with the analysis, it is important to find categories and subcategories to make a final interpretation. It is important to highlight that this is a descriptive research.

### **3.7 ETHICAL ISSUES**

In this aspect, the necessary permission was asked, then the authors reported that this research will not have negative consequences, the researchers also reported the progress to the participants, who participated voluntarily in this study, and the authors also asked for permission to apply the pilot study and interviews; obviously we maintained our principles and the necessary confidentiality of our research. Finally, we collaborated in the high school activities in the institution in which the research took place.

In this chapter the authors showed some relevant aspects that are important to know about the method, and they hope that this chapter is a good continuance of the two first ones and that provides a good basis for the next chapter.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Right after the methodology applied to carry out this study, in this chapter two of the most important aspects of this research are examined and presented to the reader: the results and the discussion. These results are presented taking into account the objectives of the study. These results are supported with evidence extracted from class observations and interviews. After each result the authors show their own voice by means of commenting it. At the end of the chapter the reader can find the limitations that were found in the research results, as well as the recommendations for pedagogical and research purposes. It is important to highlight that these results are only based on students' answers because the teachers did not want to participate in the study.

### **4.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION**

Taking into account that the main objective of this study was to describe and analyze the students' participation during a delimited time to determine if it is a

possible cause in the problem of the low English level at high school, the following results were obtained. First of all a negative and remarkable relationship between the students' participation level, the importance of participation for the students, and the grade that the students are coursing was observed. To be exact, while the students pass from lower to higher levels, the students' participation level and its importance decrease in a parallel way. In this aspect we can take as evidence some class observations and some students' answers to support the idea mentioned above. In classroom observation at first levels (sixth and seventh grades, November 12<sup>th</sup> 2001), for instance, we found:

**Example 1**

**“At 7:55 A.M. the teacher throws a question about the topic studied in the last class, and most of the students raise their hands to answer, then the teacher keeps on getting information by throwing questions, and many students keep on raising their hands looking for an opportunity to participate”.**

**Example 2**

**“At the beginning of the class the students start to participate answering the teacher's questions”**

In this case, it is important to consider that students do not feel nervous of making mistakes.

On the contrary, we can notice that at higher levels (ninth grades, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2001) the class observations results change:

**Example 3**

**“Now the teacher calls students of each row in a direct way, because there are no volunteers”**

**Example 4**

**“At 11:15 A.M. the teacher asks for volunteers, and after a while just 3 out of 47 students raised their hands to participate in a voluntary way. Right after that the teacher is forced to call upon the students by direct nomination”.**

At this level we found a notable gap between the level of students' participation. This gap could be identified by means of the raised hands, that is, from first levels to middle levels, the number of raised hands passes from 30/25 raised hands to two or none. The students seem to need a kind of solicited participation, or even worse they have to be forced to participate by means of grades. Now, if we compare these few examples of change extracted from classroom observations with the answers that students gave in the interview in order to know the importance of the participation for them, we could conclude that the relationship mentioned before is really present in classrooms.

To support this participation level change let us revise what a student of first level said:

**“sí, la participación es importante porque uno aprende y ayuda a los compañeros a aprender”**

Now, compare it with the next answer of a student of a higher level (eighth grade) that was:

**“Pues, para mí la participación en las clases de Inglés es algo que nos sirve simplemente para ganar una nota, porque, porque pues realmente no entiendo mucho de, no sé mucho de ese tema y en la clase la verdad son pocos los que participan”.**

Finally we can compare those answers with some of the common answers found at the higher levels (tenth and eleventh grades):

**“Para mí no es nada porque simplemente el profesor explica y con eso uno se puede basar”; “para mí no tiene ninguna importancia porque las participaciones son nulas, uno de todas formas entiende lo que explica el profesor, no hay necesidad de las participaciones”; “La participación no lo ayuda a uno a nada, solo a ponerte más nervioso”.**

A tentative interpretation of it might be that there are some internal and external factors that could influence on the students behavior during the high school time, for example familiar problems, teacher – student rivalry, hormonal and psychological changes due to the age, etc., factors that in many cases are not taken into account by teachers. These findings are supported by Zapata & Aquino (1982) who say: “Para los educadores, conocer el desarrollo del pensamiento permite definir los procesos de aprendizaje de los alumnos y sus posibilidades intelectuales, ayudando a formular una estrategia pedagógica adecuada a la enseñanza media”.

Now, let us revise some results that can extend this description of the students' participation, and establish some causes of the lack of participation and low English level in high school.

In this description of the students' participation we want to add the categories and subcategories into which we divided the classroom observations, because they will be useful to develop the main objective of this research in a clearer way.

**4.1.1 Categories.** The following categories were extracted from the authors' classroom observations.

- ✓ **Controlled participation:** It refers to how a teacher controls the students' participation.

Examples:

"The teacher starts the class at 10:13. She greets the students in Spanish, and then she makes them pray in English. Next she makes a review about the last topic studied, the verb "to be". The students answer questions such as, how is your father? What is it? Etc."

"At the beginning of the class the students start to participate answering the teacher's questions so that they review the exercise given by the teacher the last class. The teacher makes her students participate by using the roll."

In this beginning part, the teacher talks, and tries to keep her students participating actively, but they participate in a very passive way. When students participate they do it in a low voice and raise their hands orderly.

- ✓ **Solicited participation:** It is the participation that the teacher asks to a specific student by direct nomination.

Examples:

“Now the teacher asks the students to read a short story written on the board.”

“At this moment the teacher makes a review of the students’ exercise book, the teacher asks to one student to write the first exercise on the board”

The students’ participation is continuously guided by the teacher. It seems that the teacher is seen as an authority figure in the classroom.

- ✓ **Voluntary participation:** It is the participation that students do in a free way by raising their hands.

Example:

“Once the teacher has explained the topic, she asks the students to do the exercise of the workbook in an oral form, so they begin to participate in a free way, and produce some coherent utterances”

It is difficult to comment on the voluntary participation, because it is present in the first levels only.

**Topic practice:** it refers to the moment when the students put into practice a topic already known.

Example:

“The teacher introduces some new uses of the topic studied, and she makes sure students understand by questioning them by personal solicit.”

On this aspect we can comment that it is useful to make students participate, but unfortunately the students' participation takes a reduced lapse of time in the classroom.

✓ **Absent participation:** It is when the students participate neither in a solicited nor in a voluntary way.

Examples:

“There are three students in the back part of the classroom, who prefer to do other things instead of paying attention to the teacher, they do not participate.”

“There are two students who did not participate, during the last class observed, and who refused to participate during this class”

We support this with two examples because the amount of results found in this category is too large, and all of them are similar.

**4.1.2 Sub-category.** Extracted from the authors' classroom observations. It goes inside of the categories.



- ✓ **Corrected participation:** It is the students' participation that is controlled and corrected by the teacher right after it is produced (it can be inside of the voluntary or the solicited participation).

Examples:

"The students produce some coherent utterances with some pronunciation and grammatical mistakes. They are corrected by the teacher at the end of each participation, corrections are done during the last part of the class."

"While the students do their presentations the teacher makes the pronunciation and grammatical corrections. This activity goes on to the end of the class."

Although the students had much time to prepare themselves to present their work in an oral form, they continue participating in a low voice and in a very slow way, maybe because they do not want to make mistakes, and in this way avoid the teacher's correction.

## **4.2 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION**

To make this chapter easier to understand, the next results were classified as factors that could be positive or negative influences on the students' participation.

**4.2.1 Mood And Role.** Referring to this aspect as a possible cause of the lack of participation, one of the results was that the teachers' mood and the teachers' role are huge influences on the students' participation need, that is, it could be a positive influence or a negative one. And specifically, in this case, the results indicated that the way how teachers have managed their English classes during the last years have influenced more negatively rather than positively on the students' motivation for participating. This was possible to observe when the students answered the interview questions in a timid way. They do not participate in English classes, because the teacher scolds them when they make a mistake or in the worst cases the students think that teachers could insult them. Let us support this with the following students' comments:

**“Bueno, por el miedo digamos que una profesora es mala, amargada no, digamos que uno dice algo mal y uno ya tiene la impresión que lo va a gritar, que lo va insultar”.**

**“Me gusta participar poquito porque la profesora es muy brava”.**

It is also important to stand out the students' answers about teachers' explanations in which they establish that English is a difficult subject for them, because the teacher does not explain the topics in a clear way. The next students' answers show it in a clear way:

**“El nivel de Inglés, aquí los profesores, en sexto, séptimo, octavo y noveno que nos enseñó la misma profesora, no le entendía muy bien”**

**“El nivel de Inglés para mí es malo porque no me parece que la profesora pueda explicar bien”**

**“Mi nivel es aceptable porque a veces la profesora con ese genio que tiene ella no sabe explicar bien”.**

Here we can infer that the decreasing level of participation or the lack of it is likely due to the unpleasant and boring image that teachers produce themselves on their students. This generates a silent classroom in which to participate is to be exposed to a violent response, for example:

**“Cuando uno a veces quiere participar, la profesora le dice que no, que usted no sabe, y no más les hace participar a los que son excelentes”**

**“Porque la profesora a algunos niños que no saben les hace dar miedo, no mejor no opino, me quedo callado para que no me regañen, así algunos niños dicen”**

Another result was found in the students' mood and students' role, that is, first the way in which they react when they are participating and second the way in which they respond when they are listening to their classmates during their participation. In the first case the students answered to our questions by saying that one of the causes of their fear of participating is their classmates' laugh. The next answers could clarify it in a better way:

- **“Es difícil participar talvez vergüenza o los compañeros”**
- **“La burla de los compañeros y la del profesor”**
- **“Pues, siento temor a la burla y al rechazo de mis compañeros”**

Looking at these answers it is possible to deduce that this behavior creates an awful image of the classmates, that is, the students are supposed to think that their classmates are expecting a mistake in order to express amusement. Obviously, these results were found in higher levels in which the students are conscious of it, an aspect that we can exemplify with this student's answer:

**"Los aspectos que han influenciado negativamente, mis compañeros, no son una buena ayuda".**

In the second case there are two results, the first in the lower levels in which participation is important and the classmates are seen as an aid, for example in this answer:

**"Es muy importante porque compartimos las ideas y si alguien está mal entre todos las corregimos".**

The second is in higher levels in which the participation is just lost and fun time, it can be reflected with these parts extracted from our class observation:

#### **Example 5**

**"8:05 A.M. Since the teacher stays in the same place, there are students in the back part of the classroom, who prefer to do other things instead of paying attention to the teacher, they do not participate" (sixth grade, November 12<sup>th</sup> 2001).**

#### **Example 6**

**“9:20 A.M. The teacher stops the class for a moment to ask the students to pay attention and keep discipline, they obey for a while, but then they continue with their restless activities”(ninth grade, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2001)**

#### **Example 7**

**“11: 35 A.M. The class continues with the students’ participation while the teacher listens carefully to grade them, the students of the back part of the classroom take advantage of it in order to do other things”. (ninth grade, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2001).**

Here we can note that students participate according to their needs or when they want to do it. Here the level of participation noted in the previous observations had a low level of importance, and the teacher’s authority is looked as a cause of indiscipline, that is, when the teacher is totally authoritarian the students are totally restless, but when he/she lets them be free (but not absolutely free), they pay attention to the class a little more.

At this level the classmates are seen as a worry or as a factor that causes lack of participation:

**“Uno de los factores externos es la burla y el rechazo de mis compañeros”.**

It appears that classmates in higher levels become a problem when it is time to participate; that is, they listen to their classmates’ participation just to be there, when their classmates produce a wrong answer in order to bother them.

**4.2.2 External Resources For Participating.** Here we found that for participating, the students of first levels consider that the methodology and the materials are important factors that could make them participate more successfully:

**“De pronto en algún tema que estemos viendo nos presenten un video como, como se pronuncia, o sea no basta con la explicación de la profesora sino más ayudas”; “Eh, si eso lo mejora porque muchas veces uno le pone más atención a un video que a la profesora”.**

These findings are supported by Bastidas (1991) who says that materials constitute useful aids for the success of any methodology.

On the other hand, students of higher levels do not consider the materials or the audio-visual aids as resources that could help them to participate better. However, according to the students' answers it is, first because they are not used to work with materials, as it is inferred from the following answers:

**“No, el profesor solo usa un texto, el texto”**

**“Aquí, los profesores solo usan el texto o fotocopias”**

That is why they do not consider them as an aid. And second, it is because the level of motivation at these levels is so low that for students to participate is an idea that has moved out from their heads as we can notice in the evidence or examples given in the first part of this chapter.

**4.2.3 Action Zone.** As it was stated in the literature review, the action zone refers to the students who are in eye contact with the teacher.

This is a factor that was present in the students' answers. According to those answers, the teacher from first levels to last ones begins to establish his/her own action zone. It was clear to us when we obtained this answer from a student of the first level:

**“Es que la profesora solo hace participar a los que sacan E”** and when another one of a superior level (seventh grade) tells us:

**“Yo no participo porque es que la profesora siempre hace participar a los mismos”.**

In similar cases, teachers show a remarkable preference that we have already noted in our classroom observations:

#### **Example 8**

**“8:45 A.M. The teacher starts the class greeting the students in English, and they answer her in English, too. Then she calls them to do an English class presentation about a written work, she begins to call those students whose names are familiar to her (maybe because these students participate frequently)” (ninth grade, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2001).**

From these findings we can deduce that the teachers prefer a group of students who do not cause them problems and that always behave well in order to develop their classes in a quicker way. Up to this point, these results are consistent with those of Schinke-Llano (cited in Bailey and Nunan, 1996). In the sense that

teachers have preferences to create their own action zone, and that these preferences could depend on their needs.

**4.2.4 Class Time.** When the students were exposed to the question about the time that their teachers wait after asking a question, the results showed that it depends on the class time.

In other words, they answered that this time is not enough for them to get an answer; however, they do not blame the teacher, because he/she tries to give an opportunity to everybody, but the class time is too short and the classes are too large:

**“Pues el profesor, si por el profesor fuera, pues si tendríamos todo el tiempo, pero las clases son solo de 45 minutos y hay que dar oportunidad a todos”.**

It is likely that the situation described above happens due to the problematic situation that the education is going through in our country, in which the number of students is bigger than the educational institutions capacities, forcing them to saturate the classrooms with a lot of students.



### **4.3 DESIRE TO PARTICIPATE**

Results indicated that students of first levels need and want to participate in English classes because for them learning comes about through participation in practice as we can see in these answers:

**“La participación en las clases de Inglés, eh, tiene mucha importancia ya que con la participación uno aprende muchas cosas”; “Si, porque pues al principio no entendía nada de Inglés y con la participación voy entendiendo más”**

These findings are in accordance with Lave and Wenger (1991), who say that learning comes about through participation in practice.

Another result related to it came into view when we asked the students (beginners) how the absence of participation could affect them and they gave the following answers:

**“Yo creo que al no hacerme participar esta contribuyendo a que, a que que... pues a que no desarrolle bien los conocimientos en la materia”.**

**“Uno se sentiría como desalojado, como que la profesora no le tiene confianza”.**

Here we can notice that students of first levels are aware of the importance of participation in the learning process, and we can relate these results with one of our specific objectives that was to identify the importance of the students' participation in the learning process of English as a foreign language.

Results also indicated that the students need opportunities to use the foreign language, that is, they need to be involved in the communicative activity, they do not like a class in which the white board and the markers are the only resources that they possess, and they want to put into practice their English knowledge in real situations. However, that is not always possible and the students feel, or to put it in their words, they “realize”, that they do not need too much spoken English in our context and they lose the motivation to participate, and they begin to see English classes as a subject created to fill a period of time. Anyhow, it seems that the lack of opportunities for using the new learned language makes it appear as an unnecessary subject, or if students believe that English is important they think that they do not need to speak it up. With these data we fulfill another specific objective that was to identify if the participation was really important for the students.

#### **4.4 FORCED PARTICIPATION**

In the results obtained, forced participation, as was indicated by Allwright and Bailey (1991), has been shown as an important factor for students' participation level. To be precise students said that they like to participate when they are sure or when they know the answers; otherwise, when they are pressured to answer the participation changes from a good thing to a bad one. It is because they produce non-sensical and incoherent responses that make them wish not to participate again as these answers reveal it:

**“Porque digamos, una niña hace las cosas mal, entonces no, no, no váyase al puesto, usted no sabe, cálese; usa formas que en otras palabras está afectando a los compañeros para que ya no les guste esa materia y les aburra”**

**“Era muy estricta y obligaba a hacer las cosas, y uno hacía las cosas más por miedo que por aprender”.**

It is possible that students prefer to remain silent, but participation is necessary. In any case, the results suggest that teachers should look for ways of teaching that create a self-confident atmosphere in which students are able to perform well.

#### **4.5 INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP PARTICIPATION**

Our third specific objective was to describe both individual and group participation. Our classroom observations did not explain or show group participation maybe because teachers do not like it or they prefer the individual work.

### **Example 9**

**“9:25 A.M. The teacher keeps on calling students, when she calls the next row all of them stand up, go to the board and participate one by one till the class is finished” (ninth grade, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2001).**

However, the students' answers demonstrated that they prefer group participation, because when they participate in an individual way, they feel nervous and anxious, increasing the possibilities of producing mistakes. To illustrate this here we have some of their answers:

- 1. “Pues si no sé yo, me ayuda el grupo, o si sé yo, les ayudo al grupo” (Sixth grade)**
- 2. “Cuando participo en grupo, como más seguridad, cuando estoy sola es como más difícil” (Eighth grade).**
- 3. “Individual feo, porque uno está solo ahí, y por ejemplo entre el grupo nos ayudamos, se sabe que nos ayudamos, pues en grupo bien” (ninth grade).**
- 4. “También prefiero que sea en grupo porque así entre todos nos apoyamos y nos ayudamos” (ninth grade)**

**5. “Individualmente es más difícil porque en grupo uno tiene la opinión de los demás y en eso se puede basar” (tenth grade)**

**6. “Al participar individualmente uno siente más timidez que en grupo, porque en grupo uno ya conoce a los compañeros y ya sabe con quien está” (tenth grade).**

Here we have two tendencies, first the individual participation is preferred by teachers, and the group one is preferred by students. In the first case, a tentative interpretation might be that the teachers' experiences have created a bad or restless image of group participation; and, in the second case, the results showed that the group participation offers more security to students of all levels.

On the other hand, the results obtained in the interviews designed for teachers were null, that is, it was a limitation to this work. In this case, the researchers could not get information, because some of the teachers did not accept in any way to answer our interviews and the others wanted to make a previous evaluation of the interview questions during a considerable lapse of time in order to answer if they took or did not take the interview. It is possible that in the first case, the teachers felt afraid of the answer that we could get, that is they did not want to be seen as a cause of the low English level as far as students' participation is concerned or maybe they thought that we wanted to blame them directly. On the other hand, in the second case, the need of evaluating the interview is likely due to the need of teachers' preparation, in order not to answer truthfully, but to be seen as the best

prepared English teachers of the city, and in this case, we preferred to get null results rather than giving the reader deceptive statements.

The low students' level of participation in English classes in the high schools of the city of Pasto led us to look for an analytical description of what is really happening in classrooms, and if this could be a cause of the low English level in general.

The findings were crucial when we were looking for a general and analytical description, because they agreed with the intention of knowing one of the causes of the low English level in our context. These findings showed that the lack of students' participation generates a lack of motivation for learning a foreign language and that lack of participation is influenced by many factors. Between the factors that influence the students' participation, the authors found, primarily, the teachers' temperament, and the students' mood, secondly, the resources that the students have for participating and the teachers' preferences. Besides, it is important to mention the class time, and the students desire to participate. One possible explanation is that the students' participation is in fact a factor that can be an aid or a problem in the production of high English level students, depending on the use that teachers give to it.

## **4.6 LIMITATIONS**

When results were analyzed we realized that some of the information gotten was not true, or in other cases it did not agree with our purposes. On the other hand, the reader has to take into account that it was not possible to get significant information about English teachers' beliefs, because they did not answer the interviews.

## **4.7 CONCLUSIONS**

With the development of this work, and taking into account its limitations, the authors get the following conclusions, first, the students' participation is an enormous aspect, that has not been studied enough, second, the teachers are not prepared to face the responsibility of the low English level of the students. The authors also conclude that the class time is one of the most affecting aspects in the students' participation, as well as the number of students per classroom. Finally, it is important to mention the inclinations that teachers have when they call their students to participate and the lack of opportunities to use the foreign language, in order to conclude that participation is not given the importance that it really has, neither for teachers nor for students.

Now taking into account these general conclusions, the authors want to make some suggestions or recommendations.

## **4.8 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Taking into account that this study was developed in one high school and that it was not possible to get relevant information about English teachers' thoughts, we make the next recommendations:

**4.8.1 For Pedagogical Purposes.** From our results we recommend, first, that teachers should make a psychological study in order to understand their students in a better way. Second, teachers should not scold students, but encourage them when they are wrong, in order to keep the participation active. Third, it would be important that teachers change or broaden their action zones, that is, they should



take into account all the students' opinions and participations, and not only those of good and excellent students. Fourth we suggest that teachers should create more familiar and pleasant spaces in classrooms, in order to better the students' participation desire. Another suggestion could be that teachers try to keep their personal problems out of the classrooms, in order to treat their students in a better way and change the image that students have of them. It would be also important that the educational system, first increases the amount of hours per week, and second reduces the amount of students per classroom, so as students' participation really takes place in English classes. We also recommend a change in the teachers' methodology, that is, they should include more group activities and more audio-visual resources in their methodology, because these activities and resources improve the students' participation desire. Another recommendation that we make is that teachers create extra class spaces in which they can talk with the students with the purpose of looking for solutions to the lack of motivation and participation. Teachers should also stimulate the students in order to make them feel more secure at the moment of participating. To be more precise, they should look for ways of teaching and motivating in which students are able to perform well without feelings of shame or fear. Finally, we recommend that teachers should have in mind those students that are less participative, or who have more learning difficulties so as to make of them better students.

**4.8.2 For Research Purposes.** As this study was carried out in one high school, it would be beneficial to replicate this study in different high school populations. It

would be also important to get relevant information about teachers' beliefs, and compare them with those of the students' in order to better this study and establish other points of view. It is possible of course that other high schools with a different organization and methodology may produce completely different results.

As a conclusion of this chapter we want to remind the reader the importance of the results, results that were described taking into account the objectives of our study and that were supported with evidence extracted from class observations and interviews. We also want to say again that this study was carried out just in one high school of the city and that the interviews were applied to students only. Finally, we hope that this study be an important aid for future studies.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS**

#### **TEACHERS' INTERVIEW**

¿Cree usted que la participación de los estudiantes es importante en el proceso de aprendizaje del Inglés? ¿Por qué?

¿Por qué cree usted que el nivel de participación es mayor en los primeros grados que en los últimos?

¿Cómo motiva usted a sus estudiantes para que participen en las clases de Inglés?

¿Qué factores internos y externos cree usted que afecten el nivel de participación de los estudiantes?

¿Cree usted que la participación individual y la participación en grupo hacen que el estudiante aprenda de igual manera? ¿Por qué?

¿Por qué cree usted que los estudiantes esperan y prefieren que el profesor (a) les pregunte, a participar de manera voluntaria?

¿Qué métodos utiliza usted para que los estudiantes participen más activamente?

¿Cree usted que el material didáctico y las ayudas audiovisuales mejoran el nivel de participación en las clases de Inglés? ¿Por qué?

¿Cómo describiría usted los cambios de participación de un grado a otro?

¿Qué sugeriría usted para hacer que los estudiantes participen más y con mayor frecuencia?

## **STUDENTS' INTERVIEW**

¿Cuál considera usted es su nivel de Inglés: Alto, aceptable o bajo y por qué?

¿Le gusta participar en las clases de Inglés? ¿Por qué?

¿Qué es para usted la participación en las clases de Inglés?

¿Qué importancia tiene para usted la participación en las clases de Inglés? ¿Por qué?

¿De qué modo cree usted que afectaría su nivel de aprendizaje el que su profesor (a) de Inglés no le hiciera participar?

¿Qué siente o qué piensa usted cuando su profesor (a) de Inglés le pide que participe? ¿Por qué?

¿Qué lo motiva a usted a que participe o no en las clases de Inglés?

¿Qué factores externos e internos hacen que usted sienta miedo o se sienta seguro de participar en las clases de Inglés?

¿Cómo se siente usted cuando participa individualmente y cómo cuando participa en grupo?

¿Cree usted que el material didáctico y las ayudas audiovisuales mejoran el nivel de participación en las clases de Inglés? ¿Por qué?

¿Qué métodos o maneras le gustaría que su profesor (a) empleara para hacerlo (a) participar?

¿Podría decir usted si su participación en las clases de Inglés ha cambiado con el tiempo? ¿De qué manera?