

Referencia para citar este artículo: Forero-Rocha, Y. & Gómez-Rodríguez, L. F. (2016). The Influence of Power Relations on Teenagers' Learning Process in an EFL Class. *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud*, 14 (2), pp. 1493-1506.

The Influence of Power Relations on Teenagers' Learning Process in an EFL Class*

YOLIMA FORERO-ROCHA**

Teacher-researcher, Isabela II School, Colombia.

LUIS FERNANDO GÓMEZ-RODRÍGUEZ***

Teacher-researcher, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia.

Artículo recibido en septiembre 4 de 2015; artículo aceptado en febrero 23 de 2016 (Eds.)

• **Abstract (Descriptive):** *This research article reports on a descriptive case study that explored the power relations among teenagers in an English class at a public school in Bogotá, Colombia. Data collected from field notes and students' opinions shared in journals and a questionnaire showed that these young learners were divided into dominant, passive, and marginalized groups. Findings indicated that the dominant groups' rude interruptions in class activities and bullying practices, such as gossiping and ridiculing, affected dominated students in a negative way. Submissive teenagers reduced their participation in class and were poorly engaged with the learning process. The research concludes that EFL education should not only be concerned about teaching language content, but should also consider students' social conflicts to improve academic performance.*

Key words: Interpersonal relations, teenagers, student participation, bullying, oppression, academic performance (Unesco Social Sciences Thesaurus).

Authors' key words: power relations, EFL education.

La influencia de las relaciones de poder en el proceso de aprendizaje de adolescentes en una clase de inglés

• **Resumen:** *Este artículo de investigación presenta un estudio de caso descriptivo sobre las relaciones de poder entre adolescentes en una clase de inglés en un colegio público de Bogotá, Colombia. Los datos obtenidos por medio de notas de campo y de las opiniones de los estudiantes en diarios y un cuestionario, mostraron que estos jóvenes estaban divididos en grupos dominantes, pasivos, y marginados. Los hallazgos indicaron que las interrupciones en clase y prácticas de acoso escolar basadas en chismes y la ridiculización afectaron negativamente a los estudiantes dominados, quienes redujeron su participación en clase y su compromiso en el proceso de enseñanza. La investigación concluye que la educación en EFL no debería limitarse únicamente a enseñar contenidos de lengua, sino considerar los conflictos sociales y necesidades académicas de los estudiantes.*

* This research article reports a descriptive **case study** named "Power Relations in an English Class at a Public School and their Influence on Eleventh Graders' Learning Process." It was part of the thesis submitted as a requirement to obtain the degree of M.A. in Foreign Language Teachings (developed from January 30th 2013 to June 30, 2015), and sponsored by the Master Program in the Teaching of Foreign Languages at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional de Colombia under the code 412407. Knowledge area: Languages and literature; subarea: specific languages.

** She holds a M.A. Degree in the Teaching of Foreign Languages from Universidad Pedagógica Nacional de Colombia and a degree in Philology and Languages from Universidad Nacional de Colombia. She is a teacher at Elizabeth II School. E-mail: dforero3@hotmail.com

*** He holds a Ph.D. in English Studies from Illinois State University, USA, a M. A. in education from Carthage College, USA, and a B. A. degree in English and Spanish from Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN). He is an associate teacher at UPN. E-mail: lfgomez@pedagogica.edu.co



Palabras clave: relaciones interpersonales, adolescentes, participación de estudiantes, acoso escolar, opresión, rendimiento académico (Tesouro de Ciências Sociais de la Unesco).

Palabras clave autores: relaciones de poder, educación en EFL.

A influência das relações de poder no processo de aprendizado de adolescentes em uma aula de inglês

• **Resumo:** Este trabalho de pesquisa apresenta um estudo de caso descritivo sobre as relações de poder entre adolescentes em uma aula de inglês em uma escola pública de Bogotá, Colômbia. Os dados obtidos por meio de notas de campo e de opiniões dos estudantes em diários e um questionário mostraram que estes jovens estavam divididos em grupos dominantes, passivos e marginalizados. Os resultados indicam que as interrupções de aula e práticas de bullying, tais como fofocas e ridicularização, afetaram negativamente os estudantes dominados, os quais reduziram a sua participação em sala de aula e o seu compromisso no processo de aprendizado. A pesquisa conclui que a educação em EFL não deveria se limitar unicamente a ensinar conteúdos de língua, mas considerar os conflitos sociais e as necessidades acadêmicas dos estudantes.

Palavras-chave: Relações interpessoais, adolescentes, participação de estudantes, bullying escolar, opressão, rendimento académico (Thesaurus de Ciências Sociais da Unesco).

Palavras-chave dos autores: Relações de poder, educação em EFL.

-1. Introduction. -2. Statement of the problem. -3. Theoretical Framework. -4. Research methodology. -5. Findings. -6. Conclusions. -References.

1. Introduction

This research study did not approach any teaching methodology in EFL¹ to enhance learners' language competence. It rather focused on the power interpersonal relations among a group of EFL learners and their effects on learning and social interaction. In general, English teachers are more concerned about teaching language contents than paying attention to power relations established in the classroom. This situation happens because they have to deal with many duties such as planning and teaching classes, grading students, and completing a syllabus as requested by schools. However, teachers should consider that unfair power relations are always created in the social dynamics of the classroom, preventing students from learning in a safe and pleasant way (Toohey, 2001).

In EFL settings, young learners should not only develop language competencies, but social skills because learning a foreign language is naturally an active process involving solid social strategies and communicative

interaction. When there are negative relations of power in language classrooms, including marginalization, oppression, and abuse, authentic communicative interaction is impossible. Toohey (2001) mentions that teachers need to look into issues of power by addressing students' positions of domination and subordination to foster better desirable social relationships among learners during the learning experience. Therefore, this article reports a descriptive case study that observed in-depth how unequal power was established by a group of young English learners at a public school in Bogotá in 2013.

2. Statement of the problem

Unbalanced power relations were observed in a group of 36 EFL eleventh graders as some dominant teenagers controlled and subordinated their classmates. This situation had started back in 2011 when they were in ninth grade. These learners created small groups of three or four people who argued and attacked continuously or never spoke to each other.

In a needs analysis phase, supported by a questionnaire administered at the beginning of

¹ EFL: English as a Foreign Language.

this study, January 30, 2013, it was detected that students' academic performance in the English class was seriously affected by three main problems dealing with school coexistence: First, 25 students (72%) perceived intolerance because they did not value others' opinions and were aggressive with their classmates; second, students were not able to listen to others, a fact informed by 20 students (55%) who witnessed lack of mutual acceptance and understanding; and third, there was little respect, a problem sensed by 18 students (50%). The needs analysis indicated that several teenagers were victims of their classmates' oppression, exclusion, and malicious comments, these being possible traits of bullying that they had never reported before.

Based on the needs analysis, the teacher-researchers concluded that further systematic research needed to be conducted in order to identify what power relationships were established among these young learners and how they affected the learning process in the English class. To do so, students' voices and opinions about the interpersonal relations in the classroom constituted the core of this research study.

3. Theoretical framework

The notion of power

Yulk (2002) defines power as the capacity one person has to influence on others' behaviors and attitudes. It consists of three perspectives: *Commitment* occurs when the dominated person obeys the orders of the leader without any objection. *Compliance* happens when the subjected person accepts commands, but follows them apathetically in order to avoid possible recriminations from the leader. *Resistance* takes place when a subjugated person disagrees with and struggles against an authoritarian leader by making excuses, delaying, or refusing to complete orders.

Habermas (1977) proposes two definitions of power taken from the works of Weber (1974) and Arendt (1977). The first one is defined as "the possibility to force our will on the behavior of others," while the second one looks at power as "the ability to agree upon a common course of

action in unconstrained communication" (p. 3). The second one takes place when one gives an instruction and the others follow it, based on the influential position of the one who pronounces it. It could be seen in many situations of society. For example, some teenagers are influenced by leaders who tell them how to behave, think, and even get dressed. These teenagers faithfully follow those norms to become members of a group or a gang. Yulk (2002) calls this kind of power authority, and it is executed when each individual is assigned duties determined by his/her position in social organizations.

The concept of power becomes more complex when it overlaps domination and subordination (Fairclough, 1989), that is, when a person leads another/others with physical force or coercive authority. This power affects individuals, causing oppression, injustice, and even death. Sometimes, an unfair powerful person can easily control others because the subordinated people think that such control is the natural order of a social system. Some other times, submissive people may fight against the leader's despotic actions when they realize they are subjected to oppression. That is why power is seen as a diffuse form of social control.

Power and Language

Language is a communication means through which people establish interpersonal relationships and social interaction. Nonetheless, language is sometimes used for dominating or subordinating others. Fairclough (1989) mentions that "power in discourse is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants" (p. 46). Such verbal power can be effective with persuasion, warning, and threat. In this sense, discourse determines the individuals' roles, relations, ideologies, and hidden agendas to exert power. In fact, the theory of discourse analysis has shown that, through language, individuals have the power to protect, to lead, and to do good to their fellowmen, but also to control, to dominate, and even to hurt others. Therefore, the use of language and discourse can be dangerous and negatively persuasive. Verbal power can

be destructive since it is a means with which human beings are capable of requesting people to do something that is not beneficial for them or for the society. For example, the religious discourse used by Islamic fundamentalist leaders in Eastern countries might lead young generations to harm others and themselves in the name of God and their faith.

The most common form of language power is persuasion which is used for convincing others of any matter that is not always true, and for changing individuals' attitudes and actions. Persuasion does not involve physical force, but leads persuaded people to accept an idea and to act in agreement or disagreement with what the persuasive person wants them to do (Perloff, 2003). A person can use persuasion in a negative way to legitimize power by means of aggressive verbal forms of wit such as irony, teasing, threatening, and ridiculing. With these kinds of verbal abuse a person can attack those who disagree with him/her or to convince others that a person, object, or situation should deserve their sympathy or disdain. For example, when a person wants to insult others, he/she can use words that mean the opposite of what he/she says (irony). Moreover, exclusion and humiliation are relational strategies to exercise power through language when a person tries to "harm another by damaging his/her social relationships" and reputation (Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann & Jugert, 2006, p. 262). Therefore, language is an ideal vehicle for building harmonious social relationships, but it is also a hazardous means that can create unequal relations of power. These views about the relationship between language and power associated with mockery, sarcasm, teasing, and ridiculing became a useful material for this research study, since it attempted to determine whether or not a group of EFL teenagers used such abusive language against their targets in the classroom.

Bullying: an instance of coercive power in the classroom

Coercive power is the kind of manipulation that occurs when a person achieves his/her goals or will through physical, psychological,

or social control (Kohut, 2007). Coercive power is practiced among students from different scholarly levels: kindergarten, primary, high school, and even the University, and it is inflicted with a strategy called bullying. Kohut (2007) states that bullying is a "harmful, humiliating, and victimizing behavior that causes emotional, social, and physical pain for another person" (p. 19). Also, Olweus, (1996) explains that "a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (p. 16).

Bullying involves four elements: a repetitive aggression (physical or verbal), a victim (mostly a weak person, or a person that is supposed to be "different" from the norm or from the others), undesirable effects (the victim's pain, shame, and even the wish of dying), and unequal relations (the bully controls the others with the power he/she has set while the victims obey and suffer). Sometimes, the bully, who is usually a strong and cruel person, determines social roles and is the focus of the struggle. He/she takes advantage of powerless people who do not know how to stop the constant aggressions, and suffer from this intensive and continuous oppression (Kohut, 2007).

Similarly, there are three different kinds of bullying:

- Physical aggression such as pushing, hitting, kicking, slapping, spitting someone's face, and/or hurting the victim with objects, among others.
- Verbal abuse containing offensive, pejorative, or obscene words/sentences to mob others. It includes threatening, name-calling, humiliating, and spreading rumors about someone. Verbal bullying might enable the aggressor to convince others (the power of persuasion) that his/her target victim is weak, different, or is worthy of being treated violently. Therefore, the bully might not only attack, but intend to involve others in the victimization of the subjected student through language (Olweus, 1996).
- Relational is a type of aggression in which harm is caused by damaging someone's relationships or social status. It happens

when the victim is excluded or is not taken into account by a person or a group of people (Magendzo & Toledo, 2011), causing alienation.

Olweus (1996) indicates that "bullies have a strong need for power and dominance" (p. 19) which they satisfy by spreading false rumors, encouraging a peer group to isolate others, making obscene gestures, ridiculing, and annoying the victims. By contrast, the victims suffer from this defamatory power and want to escape from it. Nonetheless, there are instances when the victims seem to become abnegated by accepting that they are being oppressed and end up surrendering, instead of resisting abuse. In this sense, verbal bullying can be used to exert power relations and determine the roles of individuals in the classroom.

4. Research methodology

Research type

This is a descriptive case study defined as "one that is focused and detailed in which proportions and questions about a phenomenon are carefully scrutinized and articulated at the outset" (Tobin, 2010, p. 288). With this approach researchers observe, describe, and analyze in depth relevant details of a conflicting situation. The phenomenon under observation is neither intervened nor manipulated. The researcher rather observes to collect and interpret data by virtue of a conscientious and rigorous evaluation process of the phenomenon present in a real-life situation.

In this sense, this is a descriptive case study because it observed and examined in detail the establishment of power among adolescent students and its impact on language learning. The participants were important individuals who acted in their natural setting and were neither asked to do anything different from the normal nor to change their behavior. Data were also collected from participants' direct comments and opinions about their social interactions in the English classroom. Data helped to provide an in-depth description of the situation not only from the researchers' point of view, but from the participants' perspectives. The analysis and

the findings aimed at improving students' social life and interpersonal relations in the classroom.

Research questions

- How do power relations impact on the language learning process in an English class?
- How are power relations established among eleventh graders in an EFL classroom?

Setting

This research study was developed at a public school located in "Supermanzana Doce," a neighborhood in Kennedy, southeast of Bogotá, categorized into a low socio-economic stratification (level 2). In Colombia, this level mainly refers to the working class who live on low financial means. The school offers grades from kindergarten to eleventh. There are two sites, one located across the other, and two shifts, with a total of 2,370 students. The English classes implement the communicative approach and task-based learning as their salient methodologies. For that reason, English teachers encourage students to use the language skills via tasks development.

Participants

36 participants belonging to the morning shift took part in this study. They were 15 to 19 years-old students, 23 females and 13 males, who were in eleventh grade, group 01. In their evaluative reports, teachers mentioned that students were undisciplined, laughed at others, and were not totally attentive to the study of contents in other subjects. According to the results of the different tests presented in the English class, most of the students' proficiency level was basic; they understood short readings and were able to write letters, short stories, or reviews. However, as mentioned in the statement of the problem, class development was difficult because of unbalanced relations shaped by dominance, exclusion, intolerance, and possible bullying.

Data Collection Instruments

The data collection procedure was carried out from February 27 to June 3, 2013, including thirteen (13) weeks and 21 sessions. This procedure implemented three data collection instruments:

Field notes: Burns (2003) identifies field notes as “descriptions and accounts of events in the research context which are written in a relatively factual and objective style” (p. 87). The purpose of this instrument is to describe in detail what is happening with the situation observed. For this study, field notes were supported by video-recordings which captured students’ attitudes, behaviors, and interaction during the classes. Burns (2003) defines video recordings as “a technique for capturing in detail naturalistic interactions and verbatim utterances” (p. 94). 21 classes were recorded during the observation phase. By having the research questions in mind, extended notes were taken when watching the videos several times. All the field notes were saved in a computer assisted program “Word file” to be analyzed afterwards.

A questionnaire: this instrument consists of a set of questions used to assess the opinions and beliefs of the participants. Wallace (2006) classifies questionnaires as “introspective” techniques since “they involve respondents reporting on themselves, their views, their beliefs, their interactions, and so on” (p. 124). A questionnaire was administered on April 11, 2013, and participants took 60 minutes to answer it. It was applied in the middle of the observation stage and not at the end, this being a strategy to compare participants’ answers to the information they were saying in the journals as they wrote journal entries every week. The questionnaire inquired about the participants’ perceptions of how they were victims or victimizers of the power relations they had already established. The answers were transcribed and saved in a computer assisted program “Word file” for confidentiality.

Journals: Wallace (2006) states that this instrument keeps records of participants’

thoughts, points of view, and experiences in the classroom. Students wrote short paragraphs in the journals once a week (from February 28 to June 5) guided by key questions, namely: Who encouraged or impeded the English learning process this week? Why? Journals were kept in a folder for data analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis embraces the steps to organize and “transform data into knowledge” (Patton, 2002, p. 432). For the analysis, the grounded approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was used. With the research questions in mind, the data in the journals were read several times to mark patterns with a color coding strategy. For example, participants’ repetitive phrases or words related to attitudes towards disrespect were colored in green while comments on lack of tolerance were colored in red. For the triangulation process, the color coding analysis was equally done in the questionnaire and the field notes. With this triangulation process, initial patterns emerged, ensuring reliable and dependable findings of the data collected (Merriam, 1998). Then, the colored patterns were labeled with short names. For instance, *poor participation* was given to patterns colored in fuchsia while *interruptions* was assigned to patterns colored in yellow. In regards to *poor student participation* in class, the data revealed that only some teenagers participated while others kept in silence because they were afraid of being object of their classmates’ mockery. This fact gave hints about the power relations.

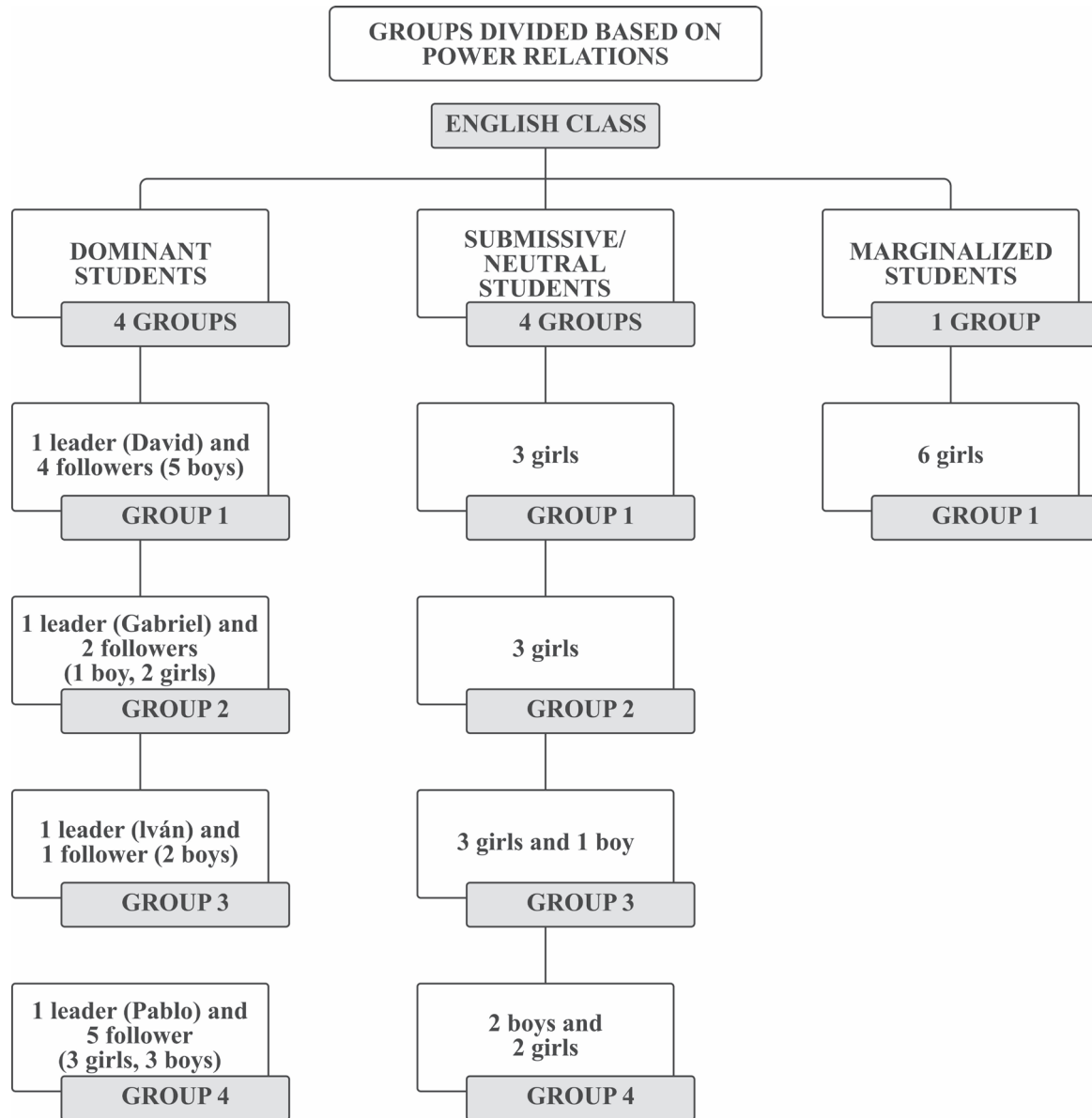
Next, patterns were reassembled and grouped to establish relationships among the concepts found; in this way categories emerged. To exemplify, one pattern indicated that the students were victims of “gossip,” “laughter,” and “offense.” So, these words were put together under a heading called *bullying* and were analyzed according to the context they appeared in the data. The pattern *bullying* was finally stated as a category named: *Power relations were built through verbal abuse*. These categories will appear later as findings.

5. Findings

As part of the findings and a full contextualization, Graph 1 presents how the 36

eleventh graders were divided according to the relations of power and the smaller groups they created. This graph was designed based on the observation phase.

Graph 1. Relations of power based on dominance and group division in an English class.



Graph 1 shows there were four dominant groups with a total of 16 members, each group having a man as the leader. The followers created a hard environment in the classroom to please the decisions of the leaders. Four submissive/neutral groups were identified, with a total of 14 members. They accepted the dominant groups' decisions, were impartial,

indifferent, and silent as a way to avoid having problems with any member of the dominant groups. The graph also shows one marginalized group of six girls. It was ignored and excluded by the rest of the students, including the neutral ones. This group was located at the right back of the classroom which was isolated from the rest of students.



Three main findings below explain how power and submission were established in this class:

First finding: Power relations affected students' participation and concentration in the learning process:

Data revealed that power inequity was caused by the impolite interruptions of four male leaders, David, Gabriel, Iván, and Pablo², and their partners, which all together formed a strong coalition (see graph 1). At first sight, interruptions could be considered just a matter of indiscipline. However, dominant learners used to interrupt those students who were answering the teacher's questions by abruptly giving the correct answer before the dominated learners had time to do it. Similarly, dominant learners corrected submissive learners' pronunciation with mockery and hostility in reading and speaking activities. With these interruptions, they wanted to be the center of attention and show active participation, reducing, in this way, their classmates' opportunities to practice the foreign language orally. This is a clear example found in the data:

Students were reading a passage about one of the character's vacation in the English textbook. The teacher asked Stella (one marginalized girl) to answer one question about that character's trip. Stella was silent for a few seconds while she was figuring out how to give the correct answer. However, when she was about to speak, David (a dominant learner), interrupted her in a loud voice and gave the answer. Then he laughed and looked at her with an arrogant attitude. Because of this, Stella was reluctant to participate in classes. (Field notes, February 27, 2013).

These kinds of interruptions obviously caused social deteriorations and students' lack of concentration in the learning process. Impolite interruptions from the dominant leaders implied that they lacked respect for classmates' turns to participate in the English class. The fact that David not only interrupted, but had an egotistical attitude led to observe that

he, as many of the dominant groups, wanted to show they were superior because they knew the correct information or contents, and presumably believed that they spoke better English than the others. This fact can be related to students' comments in the journals where they said that they did not like to participate because, for example, "*la clase es muy interrumpida por los sabiondos*"³ (Students' journals, March 14). Thus, constant interruptions were a negative factor in achieving concentration and fair participation in class.

Frequent interruptions as a mechanism of power among learners made it difficult to understand the contents because the dominant students overlooked those who were not part of their elite. The teacher often had to interrupt the class to make the dominant students aware that they needed to be respectful and allow others to take part in the speaking and reading activities. Immediately, the dominant students showed faces of disagreement, and although they let others participate for a while, they started to interrupt their classmates again because they thought they were superior and better students than the others (Field note, March 22).

Lack of concentration and poor participation in class resulted from dominant groups' sense of superiority who liked to show off, were self-confident, and believed that they were more intelligent and better students than their peers. Moreover, they called themselves "cool" and "popular," and thought that they had the right to interrupt their partners when they wanted. Such conceited attitude intimidated the other groups (see Graph 1), pushing them towards passivity and silence (Field notes, March 6). Students referred to these factors that diminished their concentration and participation in class:

"David y Pablo afectan mi autoestima porque no me dejan participar"

(David and Pablo affect my self-esteem because they do not let me participate) (Journal, May 19)

"No tienen en cuenta mi opinión, siempre se escuchan las opiniones de las personas populares"

² Fictitious names are used for protecting participants' identity.

³ Data are in Spanish as students were asked to use the native language to express their worries and experiences. Here the translation is "The class is interrupted by the smarty."

(They do not care about my opinions, we always listen to the opinions of the popular students) (Journal, May 19)

“Al interrumpir, no permiten hablar y lo que hacen es fastidiar y no dejan concentrar a nadie” (When they interrupt, we can't speak in class. They annoy us and don't let anybody focus) (Questionnaire, April 11)

In the previous excerpts, students complained about the negative powerful influence of the dominant learners, especially David and Pablo, the most influential students who mostly caused lack of concentration and disruption in the learning process. It is essential to point out here that submissive students reported this issue of leaders' sense of superiority in the questionnaires and the journals, but they had never dared to complain to teachers about it openly because they were afraid of having retaliations from the four dominant groups. This kind of power is defined by Yulk (2002) as “Coercive Power: The target person complies in order to avoid punishments controlled by the agent” (p. 201). In this sense, social tension among these adolescents due to the lack of concentration, poor participation, and a sense of superiority was always there. Submissive participants tolerated in silence the behavior of powerful teenagers even though they did not follow them enthusiastically and knew that their learning process was affected.

Second finding: Power relations caused low investment in the learning process

Motivation plays a key role in the classroom because it determines success in doing the best to accomplish learning goals. Brown (1994) states that if teachers give students a relaxing environment to work with language for their own personal reasons of achieving competence and autonomy they might succeed. In the same way, Norton (1995) redefines the concept of motivation by proposing the term *investment* which “presupposes that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (p. 18). As a consequence,

learners invest productively on learning when they find ways to practice and get immersed in social relations.

Unfortunately, investment was not present in this English course because of social inequality among learners. On the one hand, submissive students reported that they liked the English class:

“Me parece una materia interesante e importante”

(I think it is a very interesting and important class) (Questionnaire, April 11)

“entiendo los temas, me gusta el inglés” (I understand the topics, I like English) (Questionnaire, April 11)

On the other hand, dominated learners did not invest and did not improve their learning because it was not easy for them to be comfortable and participative in a class where dominant students' imposed attitudes of self-importance, arrogance, and even superiority:

“No dejan participar y realizan comentarios odiosos sobre todo” (They do not let anybody participate and make hateful remarks about everything) (Journal, March 14)

“No, aquí casi todos se burlan de los demás compañeros, da miedo equivocarse, por eso no hablo” (Almost all make fun of the others, I'm afraid of making mistakes, that's why I don't speak) (Questionnaire, April 11)

“No me siento bien con algunas personas que son arrogantes” (I do not feel good with some arrogant people in class) (Journal, May 15)

Data suggested that submissive students did poorly in the English class because of the established positions of dominance and submission. Therefore, deprived of the opportunity to work collaboratively and of a safe environment, they were discouraged to work up to their full potential. They confessed that they were unwilling to speak and to do the language tasks because they felt demotivated and marginalized by the influential power of the dominant students and their sense of superiority. Also, submissive learners felt intimidated by dominant people because the few times when

they decided to participate, they were likely to become the spot of bother and rude comments. As a consequence, they did not invest much in academic duty.

In this respect, field notes along the observation phase indicated that the powerful students created a hard environment based on their interest in being regarded as impressive, successful, and popular. They also enjoyed laughing at others' pronunciation mistakes and lack of knowledge of vocabulary and grammar use in the foreign language. This power caused poor class investment on the part of the submissive and marginalized learners.

In fact, during the initial class observations, the teacher-researchers' first impression of the oppressed learners was that they apparently did not like the English class because they made unhappy and frowny faces and showed expressions of boredom, stress, and apathy (Field notes, February 28). However, when field notes were triangulated with students' comments in the journals, it was discovered that students' discontent and poor investment on the English class were caused by the oppressive and unequal control inflicted by the dominant and conceited attitudes of some classmates. In consequence, subjugated participants' voices and opinions about their low investment was a salient finding in this research because they would have never informed teachers about the oppressive power relations imposed in the classroom, if they had not been given the opportunity to write freely and confidentially in the journals about their experiences of repression and fear. This finding led the researchers to conclude that many times we, English teachers, think that our students do poorly in the class because of lack of responsibility, low English level, or poor interest. However, we almost never realize that the unfair and unequal relationships established among teenagers themselves can impact negatively on their disposition to learn. In fact, Lightbrown and Spada (2006) assure that power relations "can affect motivation, attitudes, and language learning success" (p. 65).

Third finding: Power relations were mainly built through verbal abuse:

This was one of the most revealing findings in this research which answered the second

research question: to detect and find out the kinds of power relations that were built among eleventh graders. These teenagers provided confidential information that they had neither reported to the English teachers nor to other instances such as other teachers, parents, or the principal of the school. This finding embraced the types of relations that were established through bullying, and how they worsened the social relations and the environment of the class. The data analyzed suggested that the dominated learners were not only objects of unfair and unequal relationships in the classroom, but coercive power that was mainly exercised through two kinds of verbal bullying: gossiping and ridiculing. These bullying practices were done secretly in the classroom when the teachers were busy working with other students and outside the classroom:

Relations based on mean gossiping about others

Gossiping or spreading rumors is a type of verbal bullying presented by Olweus (1996) which he calls relational because it could damage one's relationship or social status. Sometimes, gossiping is used for making individuals create feelings, attitudes, or behaviors against others. Olweus (1995) mentions that gossiping is a technique used by bullies to isolate others so that the gossipier may become the center of the group.

The information that dealt with gossiping was seen in the questionnaire. Some participants reported that, mainly David, Gabriel, Ivan, and Pablo used to talk about their classmates' personal lives. Students commented on this aspect, but did not report the exact words that the bullies said to spread nasty rumors:

"Las personas del curso se interesan por las vidas de los demás y no por el estudio" (Some people in the class are more concerned about others' business than their study) (Questionnaire, April 11)

"David, Gabriel, son unas personas envidiosas, no saben medir sus palabras al hablar de sus compañeros" (David and Gabriel are selfish people, they do not mince their words when they talk

about their classmates) (Questionnaire, April 11)

“Recibimos malos tratos y chismes de parte de Gabriel y su grupito de amigos” (We are victims of maltreatment and gossip on part of Gabriel and his friends) (Questionnaire, April 11)

Participants remarked that the four male leaders and their followers used mean gossiping against their peers. Gossiping can be a very offensive way to bully because it involves the harm of the social and personal reputation of victims who, as consequence, generate a sense of despair, anxiety, and lack of academic performance (Kohut, 2007). Malicious rumors became a mean and cruel bullying practice with the purpose of damaging classmates' reputation and integrity, causing extreme pain to some of the learners. Gossiping clearly chimes with the theory of Scheithauer et al. (2006) who state that humiliating and ridiculing is a technique in which a person tries to “harm another by damaging his/her social relationships” (p. 262). Hence, it seems to be that in order to keep their powerful sense of superiority and popular status, the four dominant learners used gossiping among their accomplices to exclude others, as it happened with one submissive student whose life was tarnished:

“David, Gabriel, Pablo, and Roger me acosan. Extendieron el chisme de mi sexualidad y empezaron a sacarme a un lado por mi condición. Hacen comentarios y chismes feos con los demás” (David, Gabriel, Pablo, and Roger like to harrass me. They spread the rumor about my sexual orientation and started to reject me. They call me names and gossip badly about me) (Questionnaire, April 11)

This comment evidenced how this youth was bullied by the four male leaders' cruel gossiping, nasty jokes, and exclusion because of his homosexuality. Similarly, other pupils started to reject him. With this example, it can be seen how gossiping works as a negative persuasion technique, an issue addressed in the theoretical framework. Language has the power to discredit and damage others. As Yulk (2002) assures, the bully might use a piece of information to be persuasive and decide to cause harm or pain to those who are not part

of his closed circle. According to Scaglione and Scaglione (2006) sometimes bullies hurt others just because they think it is funny, and not because they really mean it. But in doing mean jokes, they end up teasing and destroying people's life.

Relations based on ridiculing partners:

Another kind of power relations is the one based on ridiculing, a very common verbal bullying practice at schools, and that also was presented in the data gathered. Ridiculing, as Perloff (2003) claim, is performed through the negative and destructive power of language. It was detected that dominant teenagers enjoyed teasing and humiliating their peers in front of the group to demonstrate that they were more popular than others. Ridiculing worsened, for instance, the situation of the marginalized girls (see graph 1), who were shy and were compelled to be placed in the worst corner of the classroom, and bullies had the chance to be crueller and meaner when an authority figure was not there to control the situation. Such was the case when the marginalized girls reported that ridiculing was used to offend women, mainly because the bullies were a group of men who liked to bother defenseless classmates, and apparently had sexist attitudes against these girls as it was detected in these opinions:

“David tiene una actitud de líder, pero aun así es muy guache con todas las niñas, nos habla muy fuerte y sus palabras hieren.” (David is a leader, but he is rude with all the girls, he speak hatefully and his words hurt us) (Questionnaire, April 11)

“Gabriel y David ofenden a las mujeres con comentarios de mal gusto y a todos en general que no estén de su lado, irrespetan a los compañeros y se creen superiores.” (Gabriel and David offend the girls with nasty commentaries and with those who are not with them, they disrespect their classmates and think they are superior) (Questionnaire, April 11)

“Roger, Gabriel. Sus comentarios hieren a las mujeres” (Roger, Gabriel. Their

comments hurt women) (Questionnaire, April 11)

These comments suggest that bullies ridiculed the six marginalized girls, by being mean and rude with them because apparently these boys just wanted to have fun and entertain their friends at the expense of the girls' dignity. Also, the data showed that the bullies were used to make their peers believe that women or people they offended should not be accepted in their groups. In this regard, it is important to outline that the six marginalized girls were never taken into account by the other closed groups, and as they were female and shy, they were a vulnerable target for ridicule their physical appearance and shyness, and were a target for exclusion. They were called "las del maletero" (The ones in the trunk), which was a derogatory expression used by the rest of the class to imply that these six girls were excluded and unworthy of being seen or heard. This bullying was inflicted at moments when there was not an authority figure to control the situation, a fact reported in three journals.

Another girl of the neutral group reported in the questionnaire that Pablo had ridiculed her in front of his followers because she lived in a very far and impoverished neighborhood. The leader started to laugh at the girl, so his friends continued doing the same. In this way, the leader controlled and involved his allies to ridicule the girl based on personal views of socioeconomic class. Although it was not possible to know during the observation phase why the followers supported the four bullies so devotedly when hurting and ridiculing others, it is likely to conclude, based on the social dynamics in this classroom, that it was convenient for the followers to obey the bullies because they preferred to bully others than being bullied, despite they did not like this violent practice. Likewise, followers/allies did not want to be excluded from what they thought was a popular, privileged, and VIP group (Dominant groups in Graph 1). The following explanations from participants indicate that dominant leaders influenced on the allied friends, by telling them what to do.

"Uno a veces piensa diferente a los líderes, pero para que no se burlen de

uno, uno prefiere burlarse de los demás como lo hacen ellos" (One sometimes think different from the leaders' thoughts, but one prefers to ridicule others like they do it, so that I am not the one being ridiculed) (Journal, April 26)
"Las actitudes que ellos [los líderes] toman nos hacen cambiar las nuestra" (The attitudes that leaders assume, force us to change ours) (Journal, April 26)

The previous excerpts highlight the complicity between the leaders and the followers of the dominant groups. Students who supported the leaders had to do certain actions, accept certain attitudes, and support the leaders' decisions even though they knew those decisions were cruel and unfair. The followers/allies supported leaders because of several reasons: to become part of the popular students at school, to celebrate graduation with popular friends since they were in the last academic year, and to avoid being bullied. This is a clear expression of social pressure and power, since the leaders forced subjects to create alliances to oppress and ridicule the targeted students based on ideals of superiority, popularity, and social class.

6. Conclusions

In regards to the first research question, data showed that inequitable power relations produced negative effects in the English learning process. Continuous and impolite interruptions in the class generated lack of concentration and understanding of contents. Moreover, learners' academic investment was limited due to an unpleasant and hard environment to learn the foreign language. Also, power relations affected class participation, since the few students who mostly participated belonged to the group that exerted power. Although the neutral and the marginalized groups thought that participation was important to improve their competence in the English language, they did not talk in class because they felt intimidated by their classmates' rude attitudes.

In regards to the second research question, it was found that those teenagers established power relations through the use of verbal

bullying, gossiping, and ridiculing, which caused distress and harm to the integrity and lives of the passive and marginalized learners.

This case study provided important findings because negative interpersonal relations of power had never been informed before to the school administrators, and teachers had not noticed them directly. This study allowed students to express anonymously their worries and experiences of being affected by abusive power and exclusion. In fact, teachers' awareness of the presence of abusive power and bullying among students is sometimes disregarded as an important factor in the learning process.

Power relations created attitudes of discrimination, exclusion, intolerance, and verbal violence because the dominant students formed closed groups based on popularity, academic development, and social status, rather than on values such as respect, equality, solidarity, and authentic friendship.

Teachers are called to reflect about their own practices while facing problematic interpersonal relations in their classrooms (Cárdenas, González & Aldemar, 2010). English educators should not only teach grammar, pronunciation, communicative functions, and language skills. It is also their responsibility for coping with the social relationships among learners and promoting a safe environment because, as Toohey (2001) states, "understanding good language learning requires attention to social practices in the contexts in which individuals learn L2" (p. 318). In this way, the English classroom can be a site for equal, respectful, and collaborative learning.

This case study constituted a preliminary action that detected the problematic situation in detail. However, more research needs to be done at the public school where this study was conducted in order to encourage students to develop positive social skills, work on conflict resolution, and eliminate abusive power around democratic principles. Indeed, this investigation will be presented to the academic and discipline authorities of the school for the purpose of creating awareness and setting a plan with the teachers to eradicate bullying and power relations among students. Teachers do not often see directly how power affects the classroom.

Nevertheless, students' conflicts should be considered in the syllabi, aiming at helping them to understand their social needs. Learning a foreign language is completely senseless if we do not prepare students to be more human, fair, and respectful, which after all, are some of the main condition for real communication and the abolition of power relationships in educational settings.

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