UNIVERSITY OF LLEIDA

Faculty of Arts

"I did not learn English at school"

An exploration of English language learners' beliefs and emotions

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"I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn"

Albert Einstein

ABSTRACT

The growing international presence of the English language gives rise to an increasing need for English learning, which accounts for its ubiquity in many school curriculums, including the Catalan. This dissertation aims (1) to explore the discourses of dissatisfaction of first-year students at the University of Lleida regarding the education they have received during their years of English instruction and (2) to subsequently unveil and reflect upon their beliefs and emotions with respect to language learning, for which a sociocultural and affective approach to SLA is adopted. Data were collected from five focus groups with a total of 31 participants and were analysed by means of Thematic Analysis, which revealed general beliefs and emotions about language learning, and with Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA), which disclosed beliefs related to English teachers. Results show the urgent need for a change in English teaching methodology in Catalonia and the importance of learners' beliefs and emotions in language learning. The study concludes with some pedagogical implications for teachers and researchers.

Keywords: English learning; sociocultural theory; learner beliefs; learner emotions;

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1   INTRODUCTION

The role of English in international communication has progressively gained force and its impact upon many societies (including the Spanish and the Catalan) is much more powerful in the present than a few years ago, involving different and growing areas of language use and a wider social spectrum of speakers. The need for English learning is therefore evident and comprehensible, and English is *de facto* one of the central subjects in the Catalan curriculum of both primary and secondary education. Precisely due to its relevance, there has been an ongoing debate regarding methodologies, content and the main purpose of English teaching and learning, so the education system has had –and still has– to face controversies about required standards of the students and teachers, the weight of grammar, the assessment of English and the best ways of preparing and training teachers, among other aspects. It seems thus that English teaching in Catalonia is still a challenge and despite the continuous research and the attempts of improving the situation, the results obtained by Catalan students in international EFL tests are, on average, low (Arnau & Vila, 2013).

In this line, the present dissertation aims to explore the discourses of dissatisfaction of first-year university students about the English education received during their years of instruction. This issue is addressed from a sociocultural perspective of second language acquisition (SLA), which takes into consideration factors such as learners' beliefs and emotions so as to better understand their performance in class and the development of their language learning process. In order to analyse and to fully comprehend the participants' discourses, the literature review section provides an introduction of the sociocultural approach to SLA, focusing on the importance of beliefs and emotions in foreign language learning. In addition, an overview of English education in Catalonia is enclosed, which encompasses a description of the Catalan curriculum and a contextualization of the participants' educative trajectory (1990s-2000s). The data collection consists of five focus groups –with a total of 31 participants– which will be analysed through Thematic Analysis (both from a quantitative and a qualitative approach) and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), two useful methods to uncover the genuine beliefs and ideas which operate in discourses. In the discussion section, connections will be established between the literature and the research findings, and conclusions will be drawn by considering work limitations, future research lines

and, above all, teaching implications to improve the situation of English teaching in Catalonia.

It is noteworthy to mention that this study places an utmost importance to the participants' voices given that their beliefs, emotions, ideas and opinions are the central axis of this research. As a matter of fact, the teaching and classroom pedagogical implications will be to a great extent based on the participants' recommendations and solutions, which involve, for instance, the best teaching methods to be employed, the most suitable activities to be performed and the teacher's role in the classroom. The reason for that is that if we consider that learner beliefs and emotions are crucial in foreign language learning, we have to bear in mind that getting to know what they believe and what they feel in the classroom is primordial in order to ensure a fruitful and pleasant experience for both the student and the teacher.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern research on second language acquisition (SLA henceforth) has its foundations in the texts published in the 1940s and 1950s, which weaved a coherent theory of language (structural linguistics) and a theory of learning (behaviourist psychology), as Mohammed Al-Anisi & Karunakaran (2013) explain. Behaviourism follows the principle that a child learns a language through other role models in a process which involves imitations of the language, rewards and practice. Yet, in 1959, Chomsky responded against behaviourism and exposed his own theory of language, which claimed that human beings have an innate universal grammar due to the fact that all languages have a common structural basis or set of rules. The theory suggested thus that linguistic ability is possible without being taught, as the individual does not need to be exposed to linguistic input (Larsen-Freeman, 2007).

This contribution and further developments in the field of linguistics and psychology led to the detachment from behaviourism, and language learners were regarded as cognitive beings much more actively involved in the process of language acquisition. As Zungler and Miller (2006) point out, attention was focused on the learner's morphosyntactic system and the SLA process was considered to be an internalized, cognitive process, rather than unconscious and automatic. The cognitive perspective regards acquiring a new language as basically acquiring its structure (grammar), and second (or foreign) language learners' main aim is to add this other grammar to their

mind. Their final goal is therefore to mirror the perfect native speaker by producing grammatically-correct sentences, eventually achieving a native-like proficiency, as Martin-Rubio (2011) highlights. This cognitivist view has been dominant in the field for much time and, as Larsen-Freeman (2007) points out, it was after 30 years of the birth of such approach that Firth and Wagner presented a paper in 1996 exposing the needs for an enlargement in the SLA field in order to incorporate the social and contextual factors to language learning. Although this work caused a great stirring around the topic, these authors were not the first to advocate a paradigm shift, since other researchers like Frawley & Lantolf (1985), following Vygotsky's work, and other socially-oriented scholars such as van Lier (2004), Norton (1995) and Block (1996) had also in favour of a social view of SLA (Larsen-Freeman, 2007).

Firth and Wagner (1997) criticized the excessive cognitive orientation in researching language learning, for such perspective stresses the individual, the development of grammatical competence and the internalization of mental processes. They argued, on the contrary, that meaning is a social and negotiable product of interaction beyond the individual. They also claimed that "language is not a cognitive phenomenon, the product of the individual's brain; it is also fundamentally a social phenomenon, acquired and used interactively, in a variety of contexts for myriad practical purposes" (Firth and Wagner, 1997: 296). In their 2007 work, these authors exposed the problems of the traditional approach to SLA, which are mainly that (i) learners have the native speaker as a target; (ii) the learning is viewed as a cognitive process devoid of context; (iii) competence equals grammatical competence; (iv) 'etic' (i.e. external/researcher description) predominates over 'emic' (i.e. subject's perspective); and that (v) data collection mostly occurs in the classroom (Martin-Rubio, 2011).

As John-Steiner and Mahn (1996: 191) explain, "sociocultural approaches emphasize the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge". Such more recent approaches consider the social and cultural contexts of learning, and regard language use in real-world situations as essential to learning, not as secondary. Furthermore, language is not viewed merely as input, but as a resource employed when participating in everyday life activities, for participation in these activities is both the product and the process of learning (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). One of the best-known and influent approaches to SLA is Vygotskian sociocultural theory, which argues that individuals advance much more in their linguistic learning in

collaboration with others. Apart from the sociocultural theory derived from Vygotsky and headed by Lantolf (2006), there are other important strands within this social approach to SLA such as Conversation Analysis for Second Language Acquisition (Kasper, 2004; Markee, 2004; 2008), language ecology (van Lier, 2004), language emergence theory (Ellis and Larsen-Freeman, 2006) and language socialization (Watson-Gegeo, 2004).

At this point it is noteworthy to briefly expose the ecological approach to SLA due to the key concept of 'affordance', which plays an important role in fuelling learning. This perspective is very much intertwined with the sociocultural perspective and understands language as a system of interactions between people and their environment, so the relationship of language learners with the surrounding environment is essential and prioritized (Peng, 2011). Such relations or interactions are known as 'affordances'. Van Lier (2000: 252) defines 'affordance' as: "a particular property of the environment that is relevant to an active, perceiving organism in that environment". In other words, affordances in language learning are those aspects, characteristics or conditions of the environment/context which facilitate learning. In second or foreign language learning, for instance, it is crucial that affordances occur so as to stimulate perception and activity and to produce meanings in the students. Therefore, the environment (in this case the classroom) must provide the conditions to trigger learning by making the things in said environment match with the learners, and, as a consequence, it is essential to get to know and to consider their concerns, attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, emotions and opinions they display (or not) in the class. Familiar topics, meaning-focused activities, support from the teacher and peers, group cohesiveness, teaching methods and lesson goals have been found to be classroom affordances (Peng, 2011).

The stance adopted in this study explores the learners' beliefs and emotions, and thus tackles an important aspect of this social and affective aspect of learning. Language learning is considered as a highly complex process which cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration students' learning contexts. Such contexts embrace for instance the students' social and cultural backgrounds, identities, ideologies, beliefs and emotions which they bring to the class and which they construct, reconstruct and update continuously as human beings inside and outside the classroom. Learners' emotions and beliefs about the language and about themselves have an utmost importance in this research because they tend to shape students' (and also teachers') perceptions and to

influence their actions and behaviour in the classroom (Barcelos, 2000). Therefore, the study of emotions and beliefs is necessary to comprehend the participants' experiences regarding English education and their progress in the language.

According to Aragao (2011), in SLA, the interest in learners' language beliefs started in the 1980s with a research movement centered on students' individual processes and strategies; yet, this interest has thrived in the last 15 years. This author (2011: 302) explains that "in languaging, or linguistic activity, students construct realities and articulate how they feel and think about learning a new language". Learner beliefs are a multifaceted and complex concept (Peng, 2011) and were originally explored as relatively stable mental representations, thus focusing on their cognitive dimension. Nonetheless, the author points out that language learning "does not happen in a culture-vacuum context and learner beliefs are born out of particular sociocultural contexts" (Peng, 2011: 315). He understands beliefs from a sociocultural perspective, which regards them as emergent, dynamic, socially constructed and dependent on the context. As a matter of fact, several studies show that beliefs change throughout students' interactions with their peers, teachers and other contextual circumstances (Peng, 2011). In line with it, Barcelos (2000) maintains that a belief is a way of viewing the world which provides the confidence to act in a certain way towards matters accepted as true, but which might be questioned in the future.

In western tradition, emotion has been given much less importance and attention than cognition, for it has always been regarded as a threat to reason. This conception "has restrained the understanding of the interplay between emotions and cognition, in which beliefs are at stake" (Aragao, 2011: 303). When studied, emotion has been referred to as 'affect', which is defined as "broadly aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which can condition behaviour and influence language learning" (Arnold & Brown, 1999: 1). According to Aragao (2011: 302), emotions are "bodily dispositions for situated action [or context conditions] and change as physiology changes". Emotions, like beliefs, are dynamic processes and are connected to beliefs and actions which can be perceived in the context of the classroom. This means that emotions such as embarrassment, shyness or self-esteem can be related to beliefs students have about themselves and the environment; for instance, the feeling of being embarrassed of speaking in front of the class might be originated by the belief that a classmate will laugh at one's performance (Aragao, 2011). Emotions like embarrassment or fear are

hence influenced by beliefs and core beliefs the students have. The difference between beliefs and core beliefs is that, whereas beliefs are articulated in discourse, core beliefs are related to a person's emotion, actions, identity and self-concept (i.e. learners' ideas about themselves as language learners) and are harder to change (Aragao, 2011).

For instance, inhibition, embarrassment and fear are emotions closely related to a learner's self-concept and are frequently *situated*, which means that are restricted to the classroom environment. Pellegrino Aveni (2005) claims that learners' ability to control their self-image in a second or foreign language environment is diminished and explains that learners usually use two strategies to reduce their anxiety: either they continue using the SL and try to remove threatening elements (fight) or they avoid speaking in order to protect themselves (flight). Moreover, she identifies two types of factors which affect learners' self-concepts: (i) social-environmental cues (personal characteristics like age, gender, behaviour and physical appearance) and (ii) learner-integrated cued (attitudes and beliefs about themselves, others and the FL; their own and foreign cultures and the language-learning process). The author highlights that learners are more likely to speak in the foreign language and take risks if they maintain a sense of security based on internal cues rather than on socio-environmental cues.

Similarly, Miccoli (2001) reported how students avoid speaking because of fear of criticism and envisage the classroom as a judgmental environment which hinders learners' oral participation. These emotions are thus linked to beliefs such as "other people know more than I do", that is, a belief that the rest of the classmates are superior, while the learner views him/herself as inferior. Yoshida's (2011) study shows that learners' self-concepts are influenced by their past experiences in learning a foreign language and that affective factors such as anxiety and embarrassment contribute to construing their self-concepts of 'shy' and 'perfectionist'. Other factors which influence learners' self-concepts are the importance they place to language accuracy, for the fear of making mistakes impedes them to speak, and their perceived experiences of success or failure. Aragao's (2011) study demonstrates the importance of being immersed in a learning context where learners feel willing to speak English without being afraid of judgement, neither by their peers nor by the teacher, and without subscribing to idealized models which make them misinterpret their own performance. Likewise, Yoshida (2011) expresses that learners and their contributions need to feel validated, accepted and appreciated by others so that they can have a social and psychological

security using the language; without these conditions, students might feel anxious that their self is menaced.

Beliefs and emotions influence each other and are intimately linked with learning contexts and the ever-changing nature of learners as human beings. Reflection about oneself thus plays a crucial role in comprehending one's learning emotions, beliefs and actions, and, as Aragao (2011: 311) emphasizes, "it is through this process that reflection in [linguistic activity] plays an important role in empowering learners as leading figures in their own language learning trajectories". Ultimately, and in order to help learners in their learning process, Aragao (2011) lists several classroom implications and expresses that teaching practice may improve with: (i) activities that encourage students to learn the names of their classmates and to talk to them in order to question idealized models; (ii) students' reflections on their learning process, experiences and beliefs; (iii) language learning narratives to be read by classmates in order to share their learning experiences; (iv) promoting debates about language learning beliefs, styles and strategies; (v) activities in which students can hear their voice in English so that they can feel potential English speakers; (vi) use of visual representation of emotions and beliefs followed by discussions that could lead them to devise plans of action to reach their learning goals; (vii) oral presentations as means to overcome inhibition; and (viii) praising small efforts and experiences of success.

3   ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CATALONIA

3.1   The curriculum

Catalonia is a bilingual autonomous community of Spain. Spanish is official across the state, and both Catalan and Spanish are official in Catalonia. Catalan is commonly used as a vehicular language and is the language of instruction in the educational institutions. The Catalan curriculum of the Compulsory Secondary Education (DOGC, 2015) emphasizes the need to achieve a mastering of both Catalan and Spanish, as well as of a foreign language, which in most cases is English, and it constantly refers to the importance of being communicative in several languages so that interculturality is at the same time promoted. Language education, hence, occupies an important position in the curriculum, and the total of hours per week devoted to the foreign language is three both during the four years of Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE henceforth) and the two years of *Batxillerat*.

The curriculum, which encourages teachers to adopt a communication approach towards language teaching, is competence-based. A competence is the ability and capacity to develop in a suitable and effective way tasks and activities, and it is based on the integration and activation of knowledge, abilities, attitudes and values (Vila Sanchez & Poblete Ruiz, 2008). Being competent, thus, means knowing and regulating one's own learning processes, both from a cognitive and emotional viewpoint, and being able to use knowledge strategically in order to carry out certain learning tasks. A competence-based approach does not simply involve transmitting knowledge, but also teaching the student how, when and why to apply such knowledge and abilities, and emphasizing the importance and practicality of using ICT and digital media key tools (DOGC, 2015). According to Coll (2013), a competence-based curriculum gives priority to the acquisition of competences which make an individual a competent learner, that is, the ones which enable learning throughout one's life and that make an autonomous learning possible. Furthermore, this type of curriculum focuses on the language as a medium of communication and on an effective performance of a real-world task or activity so that students are prepared for the demands outside class. In addition, the assessment is continued and is based on the student's performance, and the instruction is individualized and student-centred. It is significant to highlight the relevant role of emotions, values and attitudes in the competency-based approach, because all of them come into play when performing a school task, as they do in the real world. As a matter of fact, Jaeger (2003) found out that emotional intelligence is positively related to academic performance, and that competency-based education fosters emotional intelligence among students.

The area of foreign language in the Catalan curriculum is constituted by a total of eleven competences classified into five dimensions: oral communication; reading comprehension; written expression; literary; and attitudinal and plurilingual (DOGC, 2015). The competences associated to each of the dimensions are shown in Figure 1 (see below).

Figure 1 *Basic competences of the language field (CSE)*

		Competence 1. To obtain information and to interpret oral texts of everyday life, the media and the academic world

The diagram shows:

Dimensions branches into five categories:

Oral communication
- **Competence 1.** To obtain information and to interpret oral texts of everyday life, the media and the academic world
- **Competence 2.** To plan and produce oral texts of different typologies adequate to the communicative situation
- **Competence 3.** To use oral interaction strategies according to the communicative situation in order to start, maintain and end a discourse

Reading comprehension
- **Competence 4.** To apply comprehension strategies to obtain information and interpret the content of texts of everyday life, the media and the academic world
- **Competence 5.** To use oral interaction strategies according to the communicative situation in order to start, maintain and end a discourse
- **Competence 6.** To select and use query tools in order to access reading comprehension and to acquire knowledge

Written expression
- **Competence 7.** To plan texts using different kinds of elements of the communicative situation
- **Competence 8.** To produce written texts of different typologies and formats using strategies of textualization
- **Competence 9.** To revise the text in order to improve it according to the communicative intention with some reinforcement

Literary
- **Competence 10.** To reproduce, recite and dramatize literary texts adapted or authentic
- **Competence 11.** To understand and value literary texts adapted or authentic

Attitudinal and plurilingual

Source: Generalitat de Catalunya (2015) [my translation]

The contents proposed in the curriculum, which are only illustrative, are structured according to the aforementioned dimensions, except for the attitudinal and plurilingual due to its transversal nature. The oral communication, reading comprehension and

written expression dimensions embrace the communicative process and establish the concepts, procedures and strategies needed to comprehend several texts, originals or adapted and in different formats. The contents from the literary dimensions encompass traditional and current texts, written and oral, original or adapted to the students' level. There is also a transversal block which contains the contents of the knowledge of the language. It is divided into four levels of study: pragmatics; phonetics and phonology; lexicon and semantics; and morphology and syntax. In the curriculum, it is explained that it is necessary to know and reflect on the grammar to understand, write and speak in specific contexts of social academic and professional media, as well as to understand, appreciate and write literary texts. These linguistic contents are thus at the end of the dimensions as the language basis which has to be kept in mind when communicating at all levels and contexts.

For instance, the oral communication dimension is approached in the four courses of the CSE through the following contents: in the first course, students are expected to identify the topic and the main idea of an oral text, to have some strategies of oral comprehension like identification of keywords and expressions, anticipation and formulation of hypotheses, and some strategies of oral production such as compensation, start-up, maintenance and finalization formulas of informal and planned texts. In oral interaction, learners should master formulas of politeness, agreement and disagreement, offering and requiring clarifications, confirmation of the information, mutual and self-correction and collaboration. In the second course, the strategies required are the same, but in oral comprehension the students are expected to locate secondary ideas apart from the main topic and idea. In the third course, the demand increases and the learners are asked to identify more specific information from authentic sources not only in the literal sense but also in the figurative one. Planning strategies are introduced at this level (sources, selection of information, schemes and drafts) and the texts are not only informal but also semiformal, planned and unplanned. In the last course, apart from all that, students need to learn to classify and compare information and also to reach conclusions, as well as to reformulate messages depending on the interlocutor in various multilingual contexts.

The assessment of the four courses of the CSE is also classified into these dimensions. The educational institutions are strongly encouraged to evaluate the competences from a global perspective and to consider the relation between all of them. They are also urged

to abandon the penalising vision of evaluation and to mainly conceive it as a communicative activity which regulates the learning process and the language use. Educational effectiveness is ensured by employing several types of assessment such as individual and collective assessment, self-assessment, co-assessment and hetero-assessment, and diverse instruments like questionnaires, portfolios, dossiers and evaluation guidelines (DOGC, 2015). The objectives of the curriculum include achieving the competences previously exposed, as well as developing critical thinking and autonomy and understanding the multicultural and multilingual reality which surrounds us. On the whole, the Catalan curriculum of foreign languages offers some guidelines of the contents, some sample activities and some ways in which they can be assessed. However, it also provides the teacher with the freedom of choosing the methodology, the materials and the activities to be used in class. In the end, the main goal is that students know how to communicate in various languages and in several contexts with different speakers, and that they know how to face real-life situations in an autonomous and critical way.

Notwithstanding the guidelines and recommendations from the Catalan curriculum, a communicative approach does not seem to be the rule. Some years ago, Aguilar (2003) published a paper regarding the state of English education in Catalonia from the perspective of an English Inspector for the Catalan Education Department. On it, she stressed that the teaching of English as a foreign language had improved in comparison to a few decades before. Such betterment was a result of (i) a higher teacher training, as teachers had improved a lot their linguistic competence; (ii) the availability of teaching materials and instruction; (iii) the introduction of English in the curriculum and in the society; and (iv) the internal and external evaluation of schools, like the university entrance exams and the tests of basic competences.

In spite of the advancement, the author strongly emphasized the need for further improvement because "most adolescent and adult learning of foreign languages does not progress fast enough, even when motivation, intelligence and opportunity are not an issue" (Aguilar, 2003). The major flaw that she identified was that structural syllabuses were still used in the vast majority of classrooms and, subsequently, the limelight was on teaching grammar. She also highlighted that learners were exposed to a limited sample of language, and that the pedagogical materials and classroom procedures were designed to focus on the form of the language. She strongly criticised, thus, that even

though some grammar clarifications might be useful at some point, such traditional approaches rely heavily on (i) linguistically simplified teaching materials; (ii) explicit grammar explanations; and (iii) error correction. One of the problems the author identifies is that, as she puts it, "many schoolteachers TENOR (Teach English for No Obvious Reason)". Abbott (1981: 12) originally coined the concept with the learners in mind ("I created the label TENOR: the Teaching of English for No Obvious Reason – that is, for no reason obvious to the learner"), but it can also be applied, as Aguilar does, to the teacher. In any case, and as Lambert (2010: 99) points out, TENOR results in "unfocused instruction, lower than normal learner motivation, and graduates who have no clear idea of what they have learned or who do not have the ability to use it for any functional purpose." Hence, many teachers think that the students automatically learn what they teach in class, so the students are asked for immediate production of the units previously taught: "having practised the *present perfect tense followed by for and since*, the teacher administers a test to check acquisition of the structure" (Aguilar, 2003).

The alternatives proposed by the author include, firstly, using more analytic curricula rather than structural ones, with focus on meaning and more effective teaching practise, using the task as the unit of instruction; language should be regarded as a medium of communication rather than as an object of study, and communication and meaning should be the main focal point. Secondly, prompting an effective teaching practise is also highlighted, so the author enumerates the main characteristics that effective teachers of foreign languages have, and stresses that even though there are quite a few in Catalonia, they are not the ones on the spotlight. On the one hand, the personal features of "effective teachers", as she labels them, are: (i) showing confidence in that all and every learner can achieve certain progress; (ii) making learners responsible for their performance by setting clear expectations and parameters; (iii) giving each learner the opportunity to succeed; and (iv) anticipating possible disruptive behaviour in the classroom before it breaks out. On the other hand, in the foreign language classroom of such teachers (i) all learners are involved; (ii) the questioning techniques imply a constant attention for no learner knows who is going to be asked to perform; and (iii) the input is rich and the demand on learners is achievable. All in all, effective teachers truly care for their students and yet maintain their authority, making the classroom a space where learning occurs.

Aguilar's paper, however, was written thirteen years ago, so one might expect that the situation had changed in recent years and the methods employed by a vast majority of institutions were more communicative in nature. Tragant et al. (2014) published a study regarding how English was taught in the six Catalan high schools with the most outstanding results in the university entrance exam. Nevertheless, the singularity of said high schools was not found in their method, but it dwelt in classroom management issues, the high level of exigency, time management and the lack of discipline problems: "the studied centres outstand for their level requirements and the good class management of the teacher. By contrast, the teaching methodology does not seem to differ from the one employed in the majority of the public Catalan centres" [my translation] (Tragant et al., 2014: 79-80). As a matter of fact, there are quite a lot of aspects in common with the methodology employed by a large number of teachers of Catalonia such as the modality (the individual work of the student or the class group paying attention to the teacher), the materials (the textbook is the central axis of the classes), and the activities (most of them written and very few speaking activities).

The authors highlight that some methodological aspects employed in these high schools do not coincide with the recommendations found in the literature on good practice like: (i) an emphasis on grammar; (ii) work material restricted to adapted reading books and the textbook; (iii) the fact that it is not compulsory for the student to speak in English to the teacher; and (iv) the insufficient learning contexts in which the learner has an active role. Moreover, it should be pointed out that in the centres under analysis there is a low or very low level of immigrant students, and a high percentage of parents with university studies, factors which probably have had an impact in the students' good performance. On the whole, there is no evidence that the methodological aspects constitute a determining success factor in the high schools analysed, and results show that they do better than other centres because of the high level of discipline and the teachers' skills of classroom and time management.

3.2 The English classroom in the mid-1990s and 2000s

The participants in the study were born in the first half of the 1990s, most of them in 1995. The period during which they were educated was characterized by a significant change in the education sector due to the attempt to adapt the foreign language curriculum to the multicultural and multilingual reality of Europe, Spain and Catalonia.

As a matter of fact, in the 1990s and the 2000s, English language teaching was reconsidered through several laws which provided innovative measures and emphasized three dimensions: the social (English as a global demand), the educative (English as a vehicle of multicultural knowledge) and the linguistic (English as a functional and structural reality) (Barbero Andrés, 2012).

This period witnessed the consolidation of the learning of at least one foreign language, English in the majority of cases, but also the progressive introduction of a second one. The Catalan authorities, thus, promoted and implemented several projects –ORATOR (1999-2006) and PELEs (2005-2013) – with strategies aimed at furnishing the students with a reasonable command of one or more international languages. Among the range of strategies, three are to be remarked: (i) the implementation of a listening part besides the writing and reading sections in the language exam that provided access to tertiary education; (ii) the change of the starting point for foreign language learning from sixth grade to the third (in 1990) and from the third to the first grade (2004); and (iii) the opportunity of financial support and teacher training courses to schools which implement innovative methodologies in foreign language teaching (Escobar & Unamuno, 2008). Another priority of the Department of Education was teacher training, given that there was a bigger demand for foreign (especially English) language teachers and a higher proficiency on the language was required. In order to guarantee sufficient teaching staff with the required language mastery in primary and secondary education, two actions were implemented and progressively consolidated: (i) cooperation with official language schools to offer language training to teachers and (ii) annual scholarships for foreign language teachers. Thanks to this, the number of teachers instructed increased considerably and English could be introduced into kindergarten and work projects in different areas (Generalitat de Catalunya. Departament d'Ensenyament, 2015).

The first years of the 2000s, there was also a desire to create a network of plurilingual state-run schools which offered Content and Language Integrated Courses (CLIL), following the European Commission recommendation. Escobar & Unamuno (2008) highlight that although CLIL courses had attracted the attention of some middle class families, the reforms were not sufficient and the students' general standards were still lower than desirable. This situation caused many middle and upper class families to turn to language schools or private tuition, and "primary and secondary schools [were] also

aware that offering special foreign language programmes in their curricula [was] a very effective means to recruit students, at a time when very low birth rates [were] emptying schools" (Escobar & Unamuno, 2008: 238). This strategy is particularly perceptible in the private sector, which recruits students mostly among the middle and upper classes.

One should also bear in mind as well that the period between 2000 and 2009 was characterized by a massive wave of immigration to Catalonia. The participants, like many other students of that time, had to face and adapt to a Catalan society which had to invest many resources in the welcoming of thousands of foreign students, who filled the classrooms with different languages and cultures, probably influencing the normal pace of the lessons. This huge migratory process modified social structures, especially the educational system. Catalan schools had to adapt to the new reality in which students from more than 170 different countries coexisted, which supposed a major human and material effort, so as to facilitate their linguistic, emotional and academic integration into the host country. According to Masabeu Tierno (2010), the public sector holds 65% of the total number of students, whereas the private sector –which includes a network of privately-ruled schools financed by the state and a network of costly private schools– the remaining 35%. The public sector, moreover, is the one which receives the vast majority of foreign students, approximately 84%. Between 2000 and 2006 foreign population quadrupled in Spain –it went from 1 to 4.1 million people–, and in 2006 Catalonia was registered as the autonomous community with the highest rate of immigrant population (Lamela Viera et al., 2006).

In sum, during the educational trajectory of the informants' of this study there were important changes in the Catalan (and Spanish) society and especially in the educative sector which conditioned to a greater or lesser extent their progress and development in English education. On the one hand, the urgent need for a plurilingual country (not only bilingual) from the European Commission created a completely new educative panorama in which English (or other foreign languages) had to be taught from younger ages and English teachers had to be further instructed and trained. On the other hand, the participants, like many other students of that time, had to face and adapt to a Catalan society which had to invest resources in the welcoming of thousands of foreign students. On the whole, these factors may have conditioned to some extent the participants' experiences with English learning, so it might be of interest to take them into account.

4   METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to explore the students' discourses, their beliefs and emotions regarding English language teaching, a qualitative approach has been taken both for the data collection and the data analysis. The data were collected through focus groups discussions conducted in December 2013 to students of the first year of Journalism and Audiovisual Communication at University of Lleida. Originally, there were a total of ten focus groups and the duration of the conversations was approximately one hour. The study focuses on five of these groups and it centres on the topic of the students' experiences regarding English learning. The main reasons to choose this subject over the others were that (i) it was the topic with which they felt more at ease; (ii) it was the topic on which they talked the most; and (iii) it made evident the feeling of dissatisfaction was indeed generalised across students and focus groups. The data were analysed through a combination of two analytical methods: Thematic Analysis and Membership Categorisation Analysis (henceforth MCA). Thematic analysis is a methodology especially suited for revealing and analysing participants' beliefs and emotional experiences (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), whereas MCA is an analytical tool which allows the researcher to carry out micro-analysis that offers inferences of possible macro-level discourses. A micro-analysis using MCA was deemed necessary so as to grasp in greater depth the participants' discourses regarding the category of 'teacher', one of the four domains examined throughout the study. This domain was considered worthy of attention because the participants placed particular emphasis on the role, characteristics and activities of the teacher.

The conversations from the five focus groups were transcribed subsequently codified. The frequency of the researcher-generated codes was calculated in order to view which topics were given more attention and which ones were rather overlooked by the participants. Afterwards, the codes were adapted and reorganised through Domain and Taxonomic coding (Saldaña, 2011), and finally a table with the problems and solutions which the participants had identified in English teaching/learning was created. Such table includes four domains and several associated topics (or Taxonomies), and it is based on Harmer's (2007) and Ur's (2012) teaching models. It is important to remark that the elements classified in the table are not codes themselves (although some indeed are), but elements or topics extracted from the codes. Both tables were particularly valuable for the subsequent thematic analysis: the frequency table helped to distinguish

the main themes and subthemes according to the importance the informants placed to each topic –represented by a code–, whereas the problems/solutions table aided to determine which were the aspects that needed to be improved and how. In the thematic analysis, three main themes and a total of five subthemes were identified and labelled, and in the MCA a total of ten categories of the domain of 'teacher' were spotted and described. These 10 categories were eventually reduced to two.

4.1   Data collection

For the purpose of the study a qualitative research methodology was considered appropriate. The data were gathered during December 2013 by means of five focus groups involving a total of 31 participants, distributed in groups of five to seven people. Focus groups are particularly suited to explore participants' knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, feelings and experiences because they are more likely to be revealed in the social gathering and interaction which focus groups involve (Kitzinger, 1995). The participants were students of the first course of the degree in Journalism and Audiovisual Communication, from the University of Lleida, and it is important to highlight that the group discussion was actually an oral exam which they had to take as part of their final mark in the subject 'English applied to scientific communication'. This is the only subject in English in this degree and, therefore, the discussion was conducted in English in order to assess their competence in the language.

The discussions were held at the professor's office, and the duration of the whole exam was approximately one hour; however, for the present study, only between 20 and 35 minutes of each conversation were taken into consideration, which correspond approximately to the time the moderator decided to devote to the students' experience of English language education. Besides this subject, the other topics which were addressed were the following: English as a Lingua Franca, the importance of accent, native English-speaking teachers and European identity. The group discussions were moderated by the professor's assistant, who used a structured script to ensure consistency in the questioning route across the groups and to help participants think about the different topics. The conversations from the focus groups were video-taped and subsequently transcribed and codified.

In order to preserve the informants' anonymity, all the names used in the present study are pseudonyms, strictly following the principles of confidentiality and research ethics.

Students authorised the use of the recorded material for research and dissemination activities, provided their names were anonymised.

4.2   Analytical tools

4.2.1   *Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method of analysis which is suited for virtually all qualitative studies, especially those which explore the participants' world of constructs, beliefs, identity and emotional experiences (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), as it is the case of the present dissertation. Notwithstanding the fact that thematic analysis is mostly used from a qualitative approach, it is also a valuable source of quantitative information. By way of illustration, the researcher can count the number of times a theme appears in the data in order to describe the frequency of said theme. Guest et al. (2012) point out that probably the most usual method of quantifying thematic data is calculating the code frequency, i.e. adding up the number of times a particular code was assigned to a particular unit of analysis. This quantitative approach is also employed in the study as complementary data for the main qualitative analysis.

Thematic analysis begins with the perception of a pattern through a process of meticulous reading and re-reading, followed by the codification of such pattern and, ultimately, its interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). Boyatzis (1998) divides this process into four stages: (1) sensing themes – recognizing the codable moment; (2) doing it reliably – recognizing the codable moment and encoding it consistently; (3) developing codes; and (4) interpreting the information and themes in the context of a theory or conceptual framework. In order to develop the last stage, it is essential to extract from the data those quotes which encapsulate significant statements so as to formulate meanings about them. Such meanings, extracted from the researcher's interpretations, are to be grouped into a set of themes which, eventually, need to be elaborated through exhaustive description (Saldaña, 2011).

Encoding information helps to organize the data in order to identify and to subsequently develop themes; codes are applied to raw data as markers for later analysis, and, by connecting them, themes and patterns tend to appear (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A code is "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual

data" (Saldaña, 2011: 3). The transcriptions from the five focus groups were codified with Atlas.ti, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). This software efficiently stores, manages and organizes data to facilitate analytic reflection, and it also mitigates some of the repetitiveness of coding similar excerpts manually. Code frequency was calculated through researcher-generated codes so as to observe the emphasis which the participants place to certain topics over some others. This was particularly helpful in order to notice the most salient and recurrent ones and to grasp the gist of the conversations. On the whole, the code frequency table aided to identify the main themes and subthemes taking into consideration the importance the informants attach to each topic, which is condensed in a code.

The researcher-generated codes were afterwards re-coded employing the Domain and Taxonomic coding method (Saldaña, 2011). Domain Coding is used as a way to interpret and analyse the participants' viewpoints and experiences and, although Domain and Taxonomic analysis are separate steps, they are combined in one single process. Firstly, 'domains' are categories which categorize other categories (i.e. areas or fields of interest); secondly, a taxonomy is a hierarchical list of elements which are classified together under a domain (Saldaña, 2011). For instance, the domain TEACHER includes the following taxonomy: 'L1 use', 'Rapport', 'Motivation', 'Knowledge' and 'Skills'. Thus, at this stage codes were renamed and adapted to Harmer's (2007) and Ur's (2012) taxonomy in order to follow a model of teaching organization according to which codes could be distributed and classified. These two teaching guidelines were chosen because of the clarity of the pattern they use to deal with the different aspects of teaching. The final codes were employed to create a table which gathers the main elements mentioned by the participants regarding the problems of the English teaching education and the solutions they propose. Such table was helpful as it reveals the students' beliefs regarding what works and what does not work in English teaching/learning, and the ways it could be improved.

The codification process is followed by the identification of themes in the data. Although Saldaña (2011) remarks that there is not a single definition of *theme*, he understands it as a sentence or phrase which identifies or explains what a unit of data means. Boyatzis (1998: 161) describes a theme as a pattern found in the data that "at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon", and adds that it can be identified at a manifest or at a latent

level. DeSantis & Ugarriza (2000: 362) provide a more solid definition: "a theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent [patterned] experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole." For instance, themes can consist of ideas expressed by the participants in the form of descriptions of cultural/social behaviour, or explanations for why something occurs (Saldaña, 2011).

4.2.2 Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA)

Membership categorization analysis (MCA) was developed by Harvey Sacks in the 1960s and early 1970s in order to analyse and explicate the way in which people are categorized –although it is not necessarily restricted to the categorization of persons– by members in order to make sense of their everyday life. A category can be defined as a classification which could be used to describe people (or other elements of their social world) (McHoul and Watson, 1984). In Sacks' (1972: 330) famous example "the baby cried, the mommy picked it up", he wondered why it is that we understand that it is the mommy of the baby who picked it up. He thus suggested that categorization is fundamental to understand the statement and proposed an apparatus which allowed a comprehension of 'what was going on'. Said apparatus is composed of some basic properties, like membership categorization devices, i.e. collections of categories, such as 'family', which includes the categories of 'mommy' and 'baby', and the notion of category-boundedness, that is, activities bound to certain categories (for instance, 'crying' is a category-bound activity of the category 'baby'). Thus, Sacks question can be answered by understanding that it is the fact that the mother and the baby come from the same device ('family') which permits members to connect the categories and therefore comprehend that it is the mother of the baby who picked it up.

The concept of category-boundedness was extended by Watson in 1978 when he proposed the notion of category-bound predicates. He considered that categories not only have correlated activities, but also rights, obligations, features, knowledge, attributes, etc. (Roca-Cuberes, 2008). When members categorize and *commonsensically* attribute some activities and predicates to certain membership categories, they presume a shared common knowledge of the world which is constructed through category-boundedness and the categories themselves (*ibid*, 2008). Such associations, as Deppermann (2013) claims, are the most powerful mechanism by which categorizations

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and descriptions become top resources of explaining and appraising actions, ascribing properties, ascribing responsibility and creating expectations.

All in all, MCA is regarded by ethnomethodologists as a device to uncover people's knowledge about both culture and society as expressed in language. The MCA apparatus is therefore a member's, not an analyst's, apparatus, for it is a set of interpretive practices used by a member (or members) to understand and construct social realities within a specific interactional framework (Roca-Cuberes, 2008).

5 FINDINGS

5.1 Pre-thematic analysis: codification

The quantitative data are based on code frequency and are expressed in Table 1 (see below). This table shows the number of times a specific code was assigned to a unit of text (i.e. the absolute frequency) and the proportion of the number of times a code appears to the number of occasions on which it might appear (i.e. relative frequency), expressed as a percentage. The results are sorted from highest to lowest frequency, 'SPEAKING' being the code with the highest frequency. Interestingly enough, there are only a few codes which appear many times, such as 'SPEAKING', 'GRAMMAR', 'WATCHING FILMS/TV/VIDEOS', 'METHODOLOGY', 'LANGUAGE SCHOOLS', 'DESTINATION', 'LEVEL (LEARNER)' and 'VARIETY', whereas most of the codes emerge very few times, like 'WRITING' or 'PENFRIENDS'. The frequency of the codes indicates numerically which topics were discussed the most by the five focus groups, and, thence, which are the most relevant or worthy of attention according to the participants. As shown in the thematic analysis itself, these quantitative findings were useful because the codes with a higher frequency (the aforementioned ones) constitute or are a crucial part of the themes and subthemes identified. Nevertheless, some of the codes which were less frequent were also an important component of the themes, such as emotions ('(IN)SECURITY', 'BOREDOM', 'PRESSURE', '(DE)MOTIVATION', 'FEAR' and 'EMBARRASSMENT'), 'L1 USE' or 'NATIVE TEACHERS'.

Table 1   *Absolute and relative frequency of the codes*

Name of the code	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency (%)
Speaking	55	15.94
Grammar	52	15.07
Watching films/TV/videos	24	6.98
Methodology	20	5.78
Language schools	16	4.64
Destination	14	4.06
Level (learner)	11	3.19
Variety	11	3.19
Knowledge	10	2.90
Since childhood	10	2.90
Vocabulary	10	2.90
Native teachers	10	2.90
Amusing activities	8	2.32
Classroom exams	8	2.32
Pronunciation	8	2.32
Travelling/Exchanges (students)	8	2.32
Listening to music	6	1.74
L1 use	6	1.74
Too many students	6	1.74
Listening	5	1.45
Reading books/news	5	1.45
(In)security	4	1.16
Outside the classroom	4	1.16
Selectivitat exams	4	1.16
At home	3	0.87
Boredom	3	0.87
(De)motivation (learner)	3	0.87
Pressure	3	0.87
Rapport	3	0.87
Travelling/Exchanges (teachers)	3	0.87
CLIL	2	0.58
Fear	2	0.58
Writing	2	0.58
Embarrassment	1	0.29
(De)motivation (teacher)	1	0.29
Penfriends	1	0.29
Reading	1	0.29
Skills	1	0.29
Working with computers	1	0.29

The codes shown in Table 1 already provided some interesting hints about which direction the analysis should take, but there was a need to organize the codes according

to an English teaching scheme. Therefore, elements from Harmer's (2007) and Ur's models were taken for the Domain and Taxonomic coding. It is important to stress that Table 2 (see below) contains ideas which the participants mentioned, but not codes as such. The reason for that is that whereas some ideas could be easily translated into codes (like 'CLIL' or 'native teachers'), some others were general notions rather than concrete ideas to be transformed into codes.

The elements of the table have been classified under two main headings: 'Problems' and 'Solutions'. This division is a simple and suitable way of presenting the results considering that all the focus-group discussions started with the topic of shortcomings of the English language learning and teaching in Catalonia and continued with several proposals for improvement. Harmer's model was selected for the resemblance of my codes to the elements of his scheme, and it helped to distribute the table into the domains of 'LEARNER' and 'TEACHER', with their corresponding taxonomy: 'level and motivation' for the former, and 'L1 use', 'rapport', 'motivation', and 'knowledge & skills' for the latter. Harmer's model also includes 'teaching the language system' (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation), 'teaching speaking', 'teaching listening', 'teaching writing' and 'teaching reading', as well as the characteristics of 'activities' (variety and destination) and 'testing'. Ur's (2012) proposal includes a component which is not present in Harmer's: 'CURRICULUM', which represents the third domain and which includes the above-mentioned elements in relation to teaching, activities and testing. The remaining items do not belong to any model, for they are extracted directly from the discussions. Such items include 'emotions' (fear, (in)security, boredom (de)motivation, embarrassment and pressure), 'methodology' as a sub-element of 'CURRICULUM', and 'classroom exams' and 'Selectivitat exams' within 'testing'. Moreover, the last domain, 'CLASSROOM STRUCTURE', and its component 'too many students' are also data-based. The final taxonomy is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 *Domain and Taxonomic scheme of English learners' beliefs about English education*

Problems	Solutions
Learner	**Learner**

- Level
- Motivation and Emotions
  * (De)motivation
  * Fear
  * Embarrassment
  * Boredom
  * (In)security
  * Pressure
	- Level
	  * Exposure to English
	   : CLIL
	   : Since childhood
	   : Outside the classroom
	   : At home
	  * Travelling/Exchanges
	  * Language schools
	  * Penfriends
	- Motivation and Emotions
	  * More speaking
	  * More dynamic lessons

Teacher	**Teacher**

- L1 use
- Rapport
- Motivation
- Knowledge
- Skills
	- Rapport
	  * More caring teachers
	- Knowledge and L1 use
	  * Native teachers
	  * Travelling/Exchanges

Syllabus	**Syllabus**

- Methodology
  * Teaching the language system
   : Grammar
   : Vocabulary
   : Pronunciation
  * Teaching speaking
  * Teaching listening
  * Teaching writing
  * Teaching reading
- Activities
  * Variety
  * Destination
- Testing
  * Classroom exams
  * Selectivitat exams
	- Methodology
	  * Teaching the language system
	   : Less focus on grammar
	   : More varied vocabulary
	  * More practise on speaking and the other skills
	- Amusing activities
	  * Watching films/TV/videos
	  * Listening to music
	  * Reading books/news
	  * Working with computers
	- Testing
	  * Classroom exams
	   : More demanding exams
	   : More speaking assessment
	   : Less grammar assessment
	  * Selectivitat exams
	   : Speaking assessment

Classroom structure	**Classroom structure**
- Too many students	- Smaller classrooms or class division

As it can be observed from Table 2, from the point of view of the learner there are two directions: the level, which according to the participants is generally low, and the classroom atmosphere, since the most common emotions in the classroom are demotivation, fear, embarrassment, boredom, insecurity and pressure. From the point of view of the teacher, there is a general complaint regarding their L1 use, for many of the informants point out that their teacher spoke in Catalan or Spanish rather than in English in class. Another remarkable problem is the lack of rapport between the teacher and the student. The students feel that their teachers do not care about them, and that they are not really interested in them as 'persons', so they just give the class rather sloppily and when time is up they leave. The informants also highlighted the teachers' demotivation, because, according to them, they are bored of always doing the same and are not passionate about their job anymore. The last problem in this domain is the teachers' knowledge and skills, for the participants stated that sometimes their teachers fail to reach the standards required. With respect to the domain of curriculum, the informants underlined a problem in the methodology because the way in which the language system (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) and the four skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) are taught is not the appropriate one. Moreover, they emphasised that the activities were not varied, since they were mostly based on grammar or vocabulary, and they lacked a clear destination, i.e. they were not useful for the real world beyond the classroom. Ultimately, the participants also showed discontentment with the way they were assessed, both in class and in the English *Selectivitat* exam. The problem of the last domain, classroom structure, is that participants feel that there are too many students in the class, which obstructs between them and the teacher or between themselves, and does not allow speaking activities.

Let us move now to the solutions provided by the informants to palliate the aforementioned faults. To begin with, they consider that a good way of raising their own level as learners would be to be more exposed to the English language since childhood, at home (with their parents), and outside the classroom; inside the classroom, they maintain that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an appropriate option. Other solutions to increase their level would be to travel and to participate in exchange programmes, to attend language schools and to have penfriends. In order to be more motivated in class, they propose to promote speaking and to make the lessons more dynamic. Regarding the teacher, they only offer alternatives to overcome their

lack of rapport, with teachers who really care about the students, their limited knowledge and L1 use; the solutions for the last two include native teachers, or the alternation between native and non-native teachers, that the teachers enrol in exchange programmes and, finally, that they spend some time in an English-Speaking country. With regard to the curriculum, they suggest improving the methodology by doing less grammar in class, more and varied vocabulary, and, especially, by devoting more time to practising the four skills, particularly speaking. Furthermore, they advocate for communicative activities which include watching films, series, videos or the TV, listening to music, working with computers and reading books or any type of information in English. As for the testing, they support that the classroom exams should be more demanding as well as more focused on speaking, rather than on grammar. Concerning the *Selectivitat* exam, they strongly believe that there should be an assessment on speaking, for the other three skills are indeed evaluated. Eventually, the solutions they propose to overcome the structural problem of the classroom (too many students) are either having fewer students in the class or creating work groups in order to facilitate certain activities, especially the oral ones.

5.2   Thematic analysis

Encoding the information was an essential step in the identification of themes. Both the codes and the corresponding units of text they were ascribed to were examined and perused in order to visualise links and relationships between them, which would lead to the subsequent labelling of themes. Initially, various themes emerged, but it was fundamental to ensure that each and every one of them was representative of the data in the largest possible degree. The refinement process involved assuring that themes constituted a coherent pattern and that such coherent pattern embraced the data set as a whole. The selected themes and subthemes were considered as valid because (i) they encompass the main problems in English education in Catalonia expressed by the participants; (ii) they appear in all the focus group discussions and work as their unifying thread; and (iii) they are expressed freely by the informants without being the response to a specific question posed by the interviewer.

The process of thematic analysis evoked key themes or ideas which were perceptible in the data and which are regarded as crucial in determining the understandings and beliefs of all the participants. Such main themes and subthemes have been labelled as follows:

- ➢ Dissatisfaction with the English teaching/learning methodology
  - • Speaking vs. Grammar
  - • Artificial English in an artificial context
  - • Demotivation and discomfort in class
- ➢ English learning outside the classroom
  - • English learning on their own
  - • Language schools as a pseudo-solution
- ➢ Fault: who is to blame?

It is important to note that some of the aspects which constitute the themes and subthemes overlap; yet, this should be contemplated as a proper interpretation of beliefs and attitudes in general, for they do not consist of isolated concepts but are all dependent on and related to one another. Similarly, contradictory data also reflect the richness and complexity of human beliefs, understandings and opinions, and need to be taken into consideration to address the subject meticulously (Guest et al., 2012).

Dissatisfaction with the English teaching/learning methodology

There was a general agreement amongst the participants that the methodology for teaching English employed in Catalonia is neither adequate nor effective. This could be viewed as a striking result considering that none of the 31 students took a stance in favour of the current English teaching/learning method. As a matter of fact, the initial question "Do you think that English education works in Catalonia?" provoked laughter on many occasions. Furthermore, the vast majority of participants declared that the level of English which they had achieved during more than ten years of studying the language at school was clearly below the required standards. Interestingly enough, there were only two girls who overtly stated that their experience with English at school had been positive because their teachers were very good. Here there is a participant's statement which manifests the need for a change in the methodology:

Excerpt 1 (V1, 41m 10s)

Daniel: I think that the question is +e+ change the way to to teach English (.) I do:n't I don't know how but I think this is the the problem: the most important problem\

This widespread discontentment is caused by the feeling that they do not advance in their learning. They acknowledge that they have been studying English for many years and yet they feel unable to communicate if, for instance, they travel to an English-speaking country:

Excerpt 2 (V2, 17m 42s)

Cristina: what what you learnt in school it it doesn't work when you go to (.) someplace when the the English is spoken because for example I went to +e:+ (.) England and then I felt like I'd never done English\

This problem is due two three main reasons, which constitute the three sub subthemes which are encompassed under the umbrella of this first main theme and which will be discussed hereafter. They attribute the dissatisfaction with the teaching/learning methodology to the fact that they never (or almost never) practise speaking in class, and that every course they do the same kind of activities, which are mostly grammar-based. Moreover, they are aware that the English they learn is not useful for real-life purposes of communication beyond the confines of the classroom, which is rather an artificial place where English is taught. All this, in turn, generates a global feeling of boredom in class when doing the same grammar or vocabulary activities with monotonous regularity, which inevitably leads to demotivation and, in consequence, decreases the learning pace.

Speaking vs. Grammar

As shown in Table 1, 'SPEAKING' and 'GRAMMAR' are the two codes with the highest frequency, which clearly indicates that both of them are of utmost importance for the study to construct their beliefs about English language education. After the participants' consensus regarding the inefficiency of English teaching/learning methodology, the conductor asks them to give reasons for their statements. In the five focus groups, such reasons always point in the same direction: too much grammar, too little speaking. Indeed, their statements seem to support the idea that the methodology employed nowadays in English teaching is far from being communicative, for a grammar-based approach appears to be still very much alive. Moreover, they do not underline any difference between primary and secondary school in terms of methodology –although some do claim that secondary school teachers are better prepared– or between secondary school and *Batxillerat*. The method, thus, is apparently the same in the

different high schools where the participants studied, and it was not until they entered university that they came into contact with a more communicative approach.

The informants expressed their discontentment with the lack of speaking practice on countless occasions and felt very frustrated when they realized how challenging it was for them to utter a meaningful sentence after so many years of studying English. They insisted on the idea that a language must be learnt to communicate, and yet they felt unable to do so given that the only opportunities they had to speak in class were oral presentations (in which they used to read rather than to actually speak). They completely ignore how to apply the grammatical knowledge they have acquired to the real world –the same happens with vocabulary, although to a lesser extent– and they realize that what they have learnt is of little help when speaking, as they do not think, for instance, which verbal tense to use while talking.

Hence, it is not surprising that many of them pointed out that the focus group discussion was their first conversation ever or one of the few they had had in English. This feeling of being unprepared spreads as well across the rest of the skills (listening, reading and writing), though with a lower insistence. This is probably because they consider that speaking is the most important skill –followed by listening–, as they sometimes claim, and this is why they give to it an outstanding relevance. Here there is a statement which reflects their perception of being undertrained in the language skills:

Excerpt 3 (V3, 35m 39s)

Álvaro: if they put a big text in English you try to read and you think oh my God
            it's impossible it's too long I understand nothing and if you try to to: (.)
            write it it's difficult too\ (.) I think that we we only:_ now we only know
            a little part of something but n-nothing specific about it\

The generalized idea amongst the participants is that they do not practice speaking in the classroom because of the excessive focus on grammar, which leaves no room for the oral part. The students' positions towards grammar use are complex and blurred considering that they present several opinions about it and even sometimes they display ambiguous and rather contradictory beliefs. In the first place, there is the idea that grammar is a problem or, more specifically, that the overabundance of grammar is a problem. This is an opinion which all the informants share without hesitation because they have become wearied of grammar, specially taking into account that after many years of studying it they are incapable of remembering it once the exams are over.

Apart from this widespread posture, other ideas regarding grammar sprouted during the conversations. One of these ideas –and fairly extended by the way– is that grammar is the basis of the language and has to be mastered in order to speak properly, which, according to the participants, is the ultimate goal of learning a language. They maintain that grammar is the basis for speaking because it helps to have a solid foundation which provides the necessary security to start speaking. The problem they perceive is that the time to actually speak never arrives, and they keep performing the same grammar activities course after course. Another less common view is that grammar is important *per se*, not necessarily as a base for speaking, and that it has the same value as vocabulary and the other skills –in general, they are not very concerned about pronunciation–. In short, one of the participants, Clàudia (V1, 30m 18s), claims that "some lessons are essential for every course". The last perspective, and the least frequent, is that grammar is not truly important when learning a language. The main reasons they provide are that, on the one hand, they do not think about grammar when they are in a real English-speaking context; for instance, they claim that if they go shopping, grammar is not needed. On the other hand, they also support their stance by pointing out that native speakers (of any language) do not bear grammar in mind when communicating.

Note that at no time do the informants mention that grammar should not be studied. They attach to it a greater or lesser importance and usefulness, but they do not overtly position against studying it in the classroom. Their main complaint, thus, is the grammar-centered approach adopted apparently by all the teachers they had during their secondary school trajectory. On the whole, it is the methodology employed with which they disagree, as grammar is taught in a theoretical way rather than from a practical perspective.

Artificial English in an artificial context

Another key point, intimately related to the previous one, is that the English practised and studied in class is not the "real" English the students encounter outside it. The vast majority of exercises the participants did in class were decontextualized grammar activities which they carried out without understanding their purpose. In Harmer's (2007) terminology, they spotted a grave problem regarding the variety and the destination of the activities. Apart from a lack of variety in the activities, which has

already been commented, there is a more serious issue, which is the absence of destination or purpose in them. The participants felt that they did the activities because they had to, but they could not find the point in doing them because they were not communicative whatsoever. In most of the cases, the informants state that they could not apply the knowledge in another context which was not the classroom, and they noticed that they studied and worked exclusively to pass the exam, for a real learning was never achieved:

Excerpt 4 (V1, 26m 32s)

Mercè: you have +e+ a lot of work but you don't understand <u>why</u> (0.5) and in the the: type of education I think that is very bad because if you study hard but you don't understand you: (.) will never know\

In order to overcome this hurdle, they propose taking part in activities which are closer to what a native speaker would do in their daily life. Those activities are much more communicative than the ones which they carry out in class, and their final objective is always entertainment. Thus, they do not support a methodology which involves learning something just because, but prefer to learn English without being aware of it. They provide three clear examples of this type of amusing activities which they highlight so as to improve their level: (i) watching videos, television, films and series, (ii) reading books or texts which interest them, and (iii) listening to music. In any case, these types of activities will be more deeply analysed in the next main theme "English learning outside the classroom".

Demotivation and discomfort in class

Emotions and mood play a significant role in this research because the way the students feel in class may affect their learning process either in a negative or in a positive way (Pekrun et al., 2002). The six emotions that are mentioned in the discussions are, in descending order of frequency, the following: (in)security, boredom, (de)motivation, pressure, fear and embarrassment. Attention should be drawn to the fact that the participants do not mention any positive "academic emotion" (Pekrun et al., 2002), which leads us to believe that they do not associate any agreeable feeling with their English lessons. To start with, the participants highlight that there was a generalized feeling of demotivation and boredom in the classroom, and some even mention that they used to talk with their classmates during the teacher's explanations. This negative atmosphere can be clearly linked to the previous two subthemes, for it is the

consequence of an abuse of grammar exercises and explanations and the perception that the English studied in class is not useful to communicate in the real world:

Excerpt 5 (V5, 23m 41s)

Ainhoa: I think when teachers insist more in gramma:r speaki:ng (.) well, speaking <u>no</u>\ @@ (.) and learning English all that way it's (.) boring and…

Sara: well (.) English have become boring for children because they don't know anything\ (.) only colours and numbers\

Another important point to bring to the fore is that the informants remark in several occasions that when they were in class, they often felt under pressure. They had the feeling that had to study very hard in order to pass both classroom exams and the *Selectivitat* exams, and this pressure prevented them from actually learning. Indeed, exams are rather counterproductive considering that, according to the informants, the teachers generally give the lessons hastily because they have to finish the book to be sure that they are prepared for the *Selectivitat* exam. As a consequence, teachers tend to overlook their students' needs, to ignore whether they are learning or not and if they feel at ease in class, which is why some of the participants emphasised the lack of rapport with their teachers.

The feelings of insecurity, fear and embarrassment are closely related to two controversial issues which have already been explained in great detail: grammar and speaking. The respondents express that they feel self-conscious, unsure and even afraid when speaking in English, either inside or outside the classroom, precisely owing to the little opportunities they had of practising the oral part. In order to overcome this insecurity and anxiety, they seek shelter in grammar, for it provides them with the security they need to start speaking. Therefore, for the participants, grammar is a synonym for 'security', whereas speaking means for them 'insecurity', 'fear' and 'embarrassment'.

Lastly, let us briefly comment as well on the teacher's motivation. Even though it is not a matter which the participants remarked much –in fact the topic only appears in one focus group–, it is still worthy of attention. The participants underline that the teachers are not motivated either with the lessons as they are bored of always doing the same, and such demotivation is conveyed to the students. Therefore, it is likely that both the

teacher's mood and the type of activities developed in class affect somehow the way the students feel and their desire to learn.

Excerpt 6 (V1, 31m 10s)

Yolanda: but maybe: (.) I think I think it's the the life of the teacher (.) I mean they are really bored explaining and if you don't like it why are you working there/ I mean you are a teacher (.) an English teacher (.) it's it's supposed you like to teach people and speaking in English and making them feel (.) better and feel…

This first theme and its subthemes reveal, on the whole, the participants' belief that languages have to be learnt to communicate, and this is why they consider speaking and listening the most important skills. Yet, this belief clashes with the reality they encounter in the classroom because grammar is the core of the lessons, which, moreover, is studied through decontextualized and purposeless activities with no meaning other than to pass the exams. Nevertheless, their beliefs about grammar deserve special attention given that they present a general apathy towards it, but, at the same time, they are afraid of setting it aside. This is probably due to the fact that they have been educated with the mentality that language accuracy is a key aspect and the native-speaker is the final goal for foreign language learners. This idea explains why grammar provides them with the security to start speaking and why they feel so unprotected if they are asked to speak without a solid grammatical basis.

English learning outside the classroom

This second main theme can be regarded as a consequence of the previous one. Since students feel that they do not truly learn English at school, they have to explore other ways of learning the language. Although the students might not give importance to their low level of English once they passed all the exams and finish their secondary education, it is not the case. As a matter of fact, they do not remain indifferent to this negative experience, for not being able to communicate in English is for them a sheer frustration. They are very aware of the fact that they need to master English to fulfil the expectations of our society, so they have to seek this learning outside the school domain. The following statement from one of the informants might seem shocking, for she openly states that she did not learn English at all at school; unfortunately, this is not an isolated case, for her colleagues also share this stance:

Excerpt 7 (V1, 27m 51s)

Clàudia: actually I <u>didn't learn</u> English at school (.) 'cause we were always doing the same grammar (.) like (.) what do we keep learning this/ [Yolanda nods] and I just learnt by doing stuff by myself\ […]

Joanna: I totally agree with you\

It is relevant to note that, among other aspects like an excess of grammar, the participants ascribe the unsatisfactory learning to the fact that the teachers tend to use Spanish or Catalan in the classroom instead of English. In the discussions, several complaints arise regarding the little English exposure in class, and they attribute it to both the insufficient level or knowledge of the teachers, who are not able to speak completely in English for the whole class period, and to the practicality of teaching the lessons in the L1, for it is faster and easier for the teacher and the students. This reflects a way of understanding what teaching English means for many teachers: teaching contents in the most efficient way as possible. Note that, in effect, the codes 'KNOWLEDGE' and 'L1 USE' are the codes with the highest frequency (10 and 6, respectively) within the 'TEACHER' domain, which also includes 'RAPPORT', 'MOTIVATION' and 'SKILLS'. The informants, therefore, advocate that native speakers of English and teachers which have spent time in English-speaking countries are a better option precisely because it is an infallible solution to avoid L1 use in class.

Thus, in order to remedy these shortcomings in English education at school, the participants have had to search for alternatives to improve their level of English: the first one is improving or learning English on their own, and the second is attending a language school. However, the latter alternative is a fairly polemical issue.

<u>English learning on their own</u>

The informants give an account of which activities they engage in to foster self-learning. By way of illustration, they mention travelling or doing exchanges, a solution which they continuously propose. Nevertheless, for several reasons they cannot go abroad as much as needed, so their options in the end are reduced to the following: watching videos, movies, television or series in English; listening to music in English and consulting the lyrics, if possible; and reading books or any other type of text which might be of their interest in that language. These activities are the ones which most of them do regularly and which work well for them.

Excerpt 8 (V1, 28m 35s)

Joanna: this year is the first year I (.) I start to watch +em+ Youtube videos in English +e+ see_ +e+ watch +e+ films and I read one book in English (.) and I learnt <u>more than all my life</u> whatever in in the class\

They consider that learning while having fun is more effective because they do not have the feeling of studying. This method is completely opposed to the one employed in class and it seems that these entertaining and at the same time communicative activities are genuinely useful for them. Watching films/TV/videos is the activity which the informants prefer the most, in fact is the third code with the highest frequency (24), followed by listening to music (6) and reading books (5). A participant believes, for instance, that a better way of learning grammar would be by reading books or texts rather than by studying it through theoretical explanations. In line with this, another informant adds that by performing these activities they practice most of the skills and they learn vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation:

Excerpt 9 (V1, 46m 52s)

Èric: I think one possibility is +em+ watch videos about I don't know (.) TV programs movies sports (.) a:nd then you can: pass a good time and you learn all of aspects (.) for example vocabulary grammar +em+ pronunciation: (.) a:nd (.) for example +em:+ if I'm watching a basketball match for example and it's in English I don't care because I I try to understand (.) and then I improve\ […] a:nd no only the teacher (.) because I said only grammar the teacher\

<u>Language schools as a pseudo-solution</u>

Another option highly discussed in all the focus groups is attending language schools to improve their English level and, in turn, to prepare for official exams such as First Certificate in English (FCE). Virtually all of them have attended private language school at some point of their lives, and when the topic is first brought up it seems that all of them are in favour of receiving extra-curricular lessons because (i) the teacher is often native; (ii) the teacher is more aware of each one of the students because they are fewer than at school; (iii) the students feel cosier and less afraid of speaking due to the small groups; (iv) the students have more hours of exposition to the English language; and (v) the students practise the four skills and the language system to a greater degree. Some informants, though, admit that they do not find any differences between the methodology used at schools and in private language schools, but they still support

them because they provide reinforcement; as Raul claims: "I think it's the same that the high school (.) all grammar all grammar (.) but it makes you study more\" (V4, 20m 29s).

Notwithstanding the advantages of private language schools that the informants find in comparison with education at school, none of them declares that attending language schools is the ideal solution. In the majority of cases the participants explain that language schools are a fairly good alternative to improve the English level, and most of them have had positive results. However, when the interviewee raises the issue of money, they start to change their views. The interviewee delivers a short speech to all the groups regarding the unfairness of spending money on extra lessons because the education provided in the school is not useful, and then the participants start viewing the whole thing through another perspective. There are only three participants out of the 31 which claim that language schools are not a solution before the interviewee starts talking about money, and one of them states the following:

Excerpt 10 (V2, 28m 32s)

Cristina: but that's not the solution:n\ (.) I mean if I want to do I will do it (.) but if the government wants me to learn English (.) you teach me English and you give me the: the skills to: to have it\ (.) I mean then everyone wants to learn other things or go to +e+ +e+ official language schools or +m:+ go to summer camps or whatever (.) but that's for me (.) not to communicate and not to to globalize the world\

Therefore, language schools can be designated as 'pseudo-solutions' or 'palliatives', because they are useful as a support to school lessons and help the students to practise and to learn the language, but they are not the definitive and real solution to overcome the shortcomings of the education system.

From this second main theme one of the most important beliefs which can be perceived is that there is a tendency towards native-speakerism, for most of the informants believe that native teachers are better than non-native. This belief may have arisen because the teachers that they had were not proficient enough in English, so the participants think that they only way to avoid L1 use in class is by having a native-speaker teacher or a teacher who has spent a period of time in an English-speaking country. Other spread beliefs are that learning by doing is more effective than learning by studying theoretical concepts, and that learning while having fun is more useful because they do not realize

that they are actually learning. In private language schools they generally do not learn by doing or by having fun, for they claim that the type of teaching is virtually the same that at school. Nevertheless, and although they admit that it is not the ultimate solution, they see the usefulness of attending private language schools because they are more hours exposed to the language and they do extra-work

Fault: who is to blame?

The last main theme provides an overview of a topic which is not mentioned explicitly in any of the group discussions, and yet it is one of the most significant ones. The participants are constantly placing the blame for their failure in learning English to diverse people or institutions, either consciously or unconsciously. In the first place, they put the blame on the government, the education system and/or the curriculum, which form the first group, a total of 17 times, whereas teachers are blamed 4 times and the students themselves only 2. Thence, the educational authorities or administration is the actor which receives more criticism on the part of the students. It is noteworthy to remark that a distinction between the Catalan and the Spanish authorities cannot be established due to the fact that the participants talk about the government in general and do not specify whereas it is the Catalan or the Spanish. Anyhow, attention should also be drawn to the fact that the informants often compare the Spanish authorities with those of other countries, more specifically of northern countries like Norway, Sweden or Finland.

> **Excerpt 11 (V1, 33m 44s)**
>
> Valentí: this this extended problem with English +em:+ this this problem has to be solutionated\ (.) for instance the government_ (.) we +e+ maybe we must take example of countries like Norway or Finland but without rea:ch +em+ his extre:me level that they put so many pressure to the students that some of the:m don't don't support the: pressure\

The participants believe that the government in other countries does a better job than the Catalan and/or Spanish government instructing their students in English and offering them economical resources to do exchanges and to go on Erasmus or summer camps. They explain that students from countries like Norway, Sweden, Finland, Romania and the Netherlands have such a high level of English that they seem native speakers, and that, thanks to this, such students have more possibilities of finding a job than they have. The main difference they perceive regarding English between these countries and

Spain is that they are much more exposed to the English language given that, for instance, the programmes and films they watch on the TV and at the cinema are in their original version and subtitled in the language of the country. Moreover, the level at school is more demanding, and they are put under greater pressure to reach the standards. Ultimately, the participants also highlight that the teachers in these countries always speak in English and that the methodology employed is very different because the activities are designed from a much more communicative perspective, for they are encouraged to speak since they start studying English.

The conclusion of many participants regarding this last main theme is that the educational authorities do not provide them with the necessary resources to improve English neither inside nor outside the classroom. They believe, furthermore, that to learn a foreign language it is not enough to be exposed to it in the classroom, but it is essential to be exposed outside it as well, and this is the reason why they consider that other governments do a better job than the Spanish/Catalan in helping the students to raise the standards.

5.3   Membership Categorization Analysis of English teachers

As we have seen above, the educational administration is the entity which the participants blame the most for the defective English education, much more than teachers. Nevertheless, teachers are the ones who have real contact with students and who make most of the decisions regarding how they will be instructed. As it was commented in the literature review section, the Catalan curriculum does not strictly stipulate the methodology which has to be employed by the instructor. Therefore, the teacher is responsible for choosing the method that will be employed in class, which includes the objectives of the learning units, their contents, the materials used and the activities which the students will perform. Apart from the methodology, the teacher is in charge of the evaluation process and has to choose which aspects of the learning unit will be tested and how. Since the teacher and his/her decisions on the activities involved in the learning process have a major impact on the students' education, it has been deemed necessary to provide a thorough description through membership categorization analysis (MCA) of the device 'kinds of English teachers' which the informants construct along the discussions. Such representations will help us better comprehend in detail (i) the practices which different teachers engage in in the classroom (their

category-bound activities) and (ii) the features which such teachers have (their category-bound predicates) according to the participants.

Various types of activities which different kinds of teachers make the students perform in class can be seen in Excerpt 12. This excerpt thus provides two of the categories which will be recurrent during the analysis, especially the first one: the 'present-simple teacher' and the 'cool-activities teacher'. The category-bound activities (CBAs) from the 'present-simple teacher' –so named because the participants constantly talk about studying present simple in class– are, as Gemma and Ànnia claim in turns 5 and 6, 'teaching grammar' and 'teaching present simple' (although the latter is included within the former). On the other hand, the 'cool-activities teacher' has the following CBAs: 'making the students read', 'making oral exams', 'working with audiovisual materials' and 'making the students work with computers'.

Excerpt 12 (V3, 44m 33s)

1	Interviewer:	so you think the the the +m+ the way we teach English at university is different/ (.) than the way…
2	Ànnia:	I think tha:t that =yes\= [Joan nods]
3	Gemma:	=yes\=
4	Ànnia:	cause in in:: our lesson in English […] +m:+ we don't s-study…
5	Gemma:	gram=mar=\
6	Ànnia:	=pre=sent simple_ grammar yeah [Joan nods] (.) Xavi +m::+ make us we know that\
7	Interviewer:	ok\ (.) ok\
8	Ànnia:	we have learnt that before so…
9	Interviewer:	ok\
10	Gemma:	we:_
11	Ànnia:	in theory we we have to know\
12	Gemma:	we, we read a lo:t (.) we watch videos…
13	Joan:	yeah\
14	Ànnia:	and we have (.) these exams @
15	Marc:	it's better\
16	Joan:	=yeah\=
17	Gemma:	=@@@=
18	Núria:	and and in Friday we go to the computers and we do: …

Continuing with the 'cool-activities teacher', excerpt 13 is closely related to the previous one, for the informants also talk about English at university. In turn 1, Aina expresses that in her degree, his English teacher makes her perform activities that she

likes. If we recover the first excerpt, those "things" are watching videos, reading and working on computers; then, one of the CBAs of the 'cool-activities teacher' is 'setting activities which students like'. The same informant, in turn 3, remarks again the activity of making oral exams, which has already been mentioned. Pilar, in her only intervention, makes a statement due of attention: she shares Aina's view that speaking practice is essential, and brings up the issue of being afraid of speaking. What she means with her statement is that the only way of overcoming the fear of speaking is precisely by speaking; therefore, she beliefs that a 'cool-activities teacher' is one which helps the students to lose the fear of speaking. Therefore, 'helping students lose the fear of speaking' is the last CBA of this chunk.

Excerpt 13 (V5, 28m 19s)

1	Ainhoa:	focus English to things that we like (.) like we do: this this year that we start here and I learnt so much than I learnt before\
2	Sara:	yes\
3	Ainhoa:	and then make exams oral exams but it (.) you: (.) then that's when you know if the person speaks English or not, not if you write\
4	Interviewer:	okay\
5	Pilar:	and lose the: the fear to speak\

In excerpt 14, Aina explains that in Ukraine her English lessons were very dynamic, and that they were based on speaking rather than on writing on a book. It is important to highlight that sometimes when the participants say "writing" they do not refer to producing writing tasks or compositions, but to doing fill-in the gaps exercises and other similar grammar and vocabulary activities. There is a comparison between countries and its English teaching methods in which Ukraine seems to be better because Glòria, frustrated, interrupts Aina to remark that in Catalonia (or Spain) *we* use workbooks. Therefore, if we take into account that workbooks are full of grammar and vocabulary exercises, another activity for the 'present-simple teacher' is 'using workbooks'. Otherwise, the CBAs that Aina attributes to the 'cool-activities teacher' are 'using poems' and 'not setting students writing activities'.

Excerpt 14 (V5, 21m 28s)

Ainhoa:	[…] I remember and I was six (.) it was very: I don't know\ (.) we <u>speak</u> English (.) we learnt poe:ms and we had to speak in class (.) there wasn't writing and…
Glòria:	we do workbooks here\ @
Pilar:	yeah\ @

Míriam (V2, 16m 46s) adds two other activities to the 'present-simple teacher' category when she states that "the teachers just say this is a window (.) this is a pencil (.) vocabulary and grammar (.) but they didn't teach how to use that vocabulary or how to use that grammar speaking\". The CBAs are thus 'teaching vocabulary' and 'not teaching how to use vocabulary and grammar when speaking'. Furthermore, Cristina (V2, 17m 42s) says "what what you learn in school it it doesn't work when you go to someplace where the: the English is spoken". What she means by "what you learnt in school" is grammar, because a few turns before her classmate Cèlia states that at school they only do "grammar, grammar, grammar". Notice how she expresses her loathing towards grammar by repeating the word three times, a strategy employed by many participants on countless occasions. Therefore, 'teaching useless English' would be another activity for the 'present-simple teacher'. Another typical activity of the category under analysis is the one introduced by Sara (V5, 24m 07s) after David claims that in the classes there is a lot of grammar and no speaking. She says "you have to learn to {(CAT) empollar}", so the CBA is 'making the students cram'. In excerpt 15, Glòria continues with more activities of the 'present-simple teacher', which are 'not letting students speak', 'not asking many compositions' and 'not teaching how to write compositions'.

Excerpt 15 (V5, 18m 52s)

Glòria: […] in secondary school I don't think it's a good (.) process how they do
            that\ (.) because +e+ they always do grammar\ (.) grammar grammar
            grammar and always the same\ (.) and they don't let the students to speak
            or things like that\
Sara: +mhm\+
Glòria: they don't do a lot of writings they just say write this but not a lot how (.)
            they should write it\

Before switching the category, Jaume (V4, 17m 31s) presents a category-bound predicate (CBP) for the 'present-simple teacher' when the conductor asks him: "what do teachers want?". The kind of teachers they are talking about is, again, the present-simple teacher, for some turns before the same participant declares that the teachers focus the lesson on grammar. His response to the question is "teachers want to pass the units [snaps fingers] (.) and to pass the exam". Hence, according to this participant (and to some others), the main goal of their English teachers is not that they actually learn the language and to be able to communicate in it, but that they pass the exams, both class

exams and the English exam in *Selectivitat*. The predicate for this category is therefore 'wants students to simply pass the exams'.

In connection with excerpt 15, in which it was said that the teacher did not let the students speak, in excerpt 16 it is described a type of teacher whose activities are based on prohibiting, according to the participants. This kind of teacher has been called 'the forbidder teacher', and the activities associated with it are 'not letting the students speak', 'not letting the students listen to music', 'not letting the students watch films', 'teaches grammar', 'teaches vocabulary'. It has to be remarked that it is not very likely that the teachers strictly prohibited them to do these activities; what probably happened is that this type of activities did not fit their curriculum, which surely was more traditional (grammar-based). Nevertheless, and be that as it may, if the students have the feeling that the teacher forbade them to do certain activities and that situation caused them frustration and demotivation, it is definitely worth paying attention.

Excerpt 16 (V1, 26m 07s)

Joanna: I remember when I s-stay in school my English teachers +em:+ don't let me to talk and listen music and +e:+ see_ watch films (.) and this is so important to learn (.) and now only grammar and vocabulary and yes it's important but the other +m:+ too\

Another category of teacher is the one exposed by Yolanda in excerpt 17, which has been called 'I'm-in-a-hurry teacher'. This kind of teacher sticks –maybe too much– to the program and cannot afford to be distracted because s/he has to finish the lesson on time. His or her CBAs are 'teaching present simple', 'teaching the same every course', 'not letting students speak' and 'hushing'. The participant introduces a predicate as well, which is 'does not have time'.

Excerpt 17 (V1, 29m 41s)

Yolanda: I was last year in Màrius Torres and the teacher enters to the class and (.) hi boys hi girls\ +e+ present simple I am you are he is she is (.) and I was like oh my God I don't understand it (.) when I was 5 years old I was learning it and now still learning it I don't know (.) I mean we don't speak (.) if you try to speak the teacher says okay shut up I don't have time I gotta go or…

In the following excerpt, the participants discuss the speaking activities they carried out in high school. These activities, though, are not the type of speaking activities they like

or are not real speaking activities, because, as it is the case of the oral presentations, they could read from the PowerPoint; this is the reason why the teacher who asks their students to perform these activities is named 'semi-cool-activities teacher', for s/he tries to promote speaking but probably not in the best way. The CBAs linked to this category are 'asking students to describe and compare pictures' and 'asking students to do oral presentations'.

Excerpt 18 (V4, 30m 31s)

1	Jaume:	but the speakings tha:t that we do: all the years was li:ke describe these pictures (.) compare these two pictures and…
2	Raül:	a:nd powerpoint presentations @ [the others laugh]
3	Jaume:	yes also @ (.) but…
4	Interviewer:	there you could rea:d @
5	Raül:	but yes (.) you write the notes and…
6	Interviewer:	@@ okay (.) so not speaking at all\
7	Jaume:	+m:+ no\
8	Lara:	no:\

There is also the 'indifferent teacher', whose main category-bound activity is 'explaining without caring if the students understand', and whose predicate is 'careless about students'. This new category is brought by Mireia (V4, 8m 57s) through the statement "when the teacher speaks and explains the lesson (.) but if the class don't understand they don't care". The next three categories are interconnected, and thus will be commented together. In the first place, there is the category of the 'low-level teacher', displayed by Ànnia (V3, 22m 53s), although some others also refer to it, when she claims: "this is another problem from the low level of of of English here (.) because the teachers don't speak us every time in English\". Thus, 'using his/her L1 in class' is its CBA. In excerpt 19, the subject of native teachers is discussed, and it is clear that the informants prefer native teachers to non-natives precisely to overcome the problem of the L1 use in class. Thus, the CBA of the 'native-speaker teacher' is 'speaking in English the whole class' (note that it is not explicitly expressed by the participants).

Excerpt 19 (V5, 30m 14s)

Glòria:	another thing of the academy is that a lot of the teachers are native\
Pilar:	yes\
Glòria:	+yeah+ native teachers (.) and I think it's kind of better for you I think\

Failing this, in excerpt 20, we see that another option they propose is to make compulsory for undergraduate teachers to stay in an English-speaking country to make sure they have practiced the language properly. Accordingly, another category would be the 'sent-away teacher', and its CBA 'having spent a long period in an English-speaking country'

Excerpt 20 (V2, 26m 47s)

Roger: or that in the universities send the teachers that are learning (.) for example one year to Britain to be sure that they have spoken that\

Moderator: @@ send the teachers <u>abroad</u>

Cristina: +yeah+ no\ because that's a problem (.) there are many teachers that have never travelled to England or America and they have never speak in English and face the world\

The last two categories, namely 'demotivated teacher' and 'motivated teacher' appear in excerpt 21, where Yolanda, rather indignantly, presents some category-bound activities and predicates of such categories. The CBA for the former category is 'giving the lesson unwillingly', and its predicate 'is bored and tired of always doing the same'. On the other hand, the CBA of the 'motivated teacher' is 'enjoying his/her job as a teacher', and its CBPs 'likes teaching people', 'likes speaking in English' and 'likes making students feel better'.

Excerpt 21 (V1, 31m 10s)

Yolanda: but maybe: (.) I think I think it's the the life of the teacher (.) I mean they are really bored explaining and if you don't like it why are you working there/ I mean you are a teacher (.) an English teacher (.) it's it's supposed you like to: teach people and speaking in English and making them feel (.) better and fee:l…

Moderator: okay (.) so do you think this has to do with the insecurity of the teacher/

Yolanda: not insecurity\ (.) it's like they are tired of always teaching the same\

All the categories identified and their CBAs and CBPs can be gathered in two ultimate categories: 'effective teacher' and 'ineffective teacher', taking as a reference Aguilar's (2003) categorization of 'effective teacher' (explained in section 3.1). This distinction has been considered appropriate as a way of summarising all the activities and predicates of the several categories in just two that embrace all of them. Furthermore, the labelling of the categories as 'effective' and 'ineffective' is deemed suitable given that "effective", according to the Cambridge Dictionary online, means "successful or

achieving the results that you want", whereas "ineffective" is defined as "not producing the effects or results that are wanted". Most of the participants' teachers have been ineffective because they have failed to achieve the expected result or objective, which is that students *learn* English. At the same time, they also describe their ideal teacher, an effective teacher, with whom they could truly learn the language and, therefore, reach their main goal as English students.

Therefore, it has to be remarked that, unlike the rest, these two categories are researcher-generated and not participant-generated; yet, all the CBAs and CBPs which they include are extracted from the participants' statements mentioned above. Tables 3 and 4 (see below) compile the ten categories which have been identified through the analysis and which have been distributed as follows: on the one hand, the 'effective teacher' category comprises the CBAs and CBPs of 'cool-activities teacher', 'native-speaker teacher', 'sent-away teacher' and 'motivated teacher'. On the other hand, 'ineffective teacher' encompasses the activities and predicates of the categories of 'present-simple teacher', 'forbidder teacher', 'I'm-in-a-hurry teacher', 'indifferent teacher', 'low-level teacher' and 'demotivated teacher'. Note that the category 'semi-cool-activities teacher' has been obviated for its rather ambiguous nature.

Table 3   *'Effective teacher' category*

'Effective teacher'	
CBAs	**CBPs**
- Making students read - Making oral exams - Working with audiovisual materials - Working with the computer - Setting activities which students like - Helping students lose the fear of speaking - Using poems - Enjoying his/her job as a teacher - Speaking in English the whole class - Not setting writing activities (filling gaps)	- Is a native speaker OR has spent a long period in an English-speaking country - Likes teaching people - Likes speaking in English - Likes making students feel better

Table 4   *'Ineffective teacher' category*

'Ineffective teacher'	
CBAs	**CBPs**
- Teaching grammar/present simple - Using workbooks - Teaching vocabulary - Teaching useless English - Making the students cram - Teaching every course the same - Hushing - Explaining without caring if the students understand - Using his/her L1 in class - Giving the lesson unwillingly - Not teaching how to use vocabulary and grammar when speaking - Not letting students speak - Not asking many compositions - Not teaching how to write compositions - Not letting students listen to music - Not letting students watch films	- Wants the students to simply pass the exam - Does not have time - Is careless about students - Is bored and tired of always doing the same.

6   DISCUSSION

The main goal of this research is to analyse the discourses of first-year university students regarding their negative experiences in English learning by reflecting on their language learning beliefs and emotions. This study adopts a sociocultural approach towards SLA, which takes into consideration factors aside from the cognitive capacity of the learners such as their identity, sociocultural backgrounds, beliefs, ideology and emotions, among others. This perspective regards beliefs and emotions as dynamic, socially constructed and context-dependent, and research shows that they change throughout students' interactions with their peers and teachers (Peng, 2011). Emotions and beliefs are closely related and influence each other and, therefore, emotions like embarrassment or fear can be connected to beliefs students have about themselves and the classroom environment. As it has been discussed, learners' emotions and beliefs tend to shape their perceptions and to affect their actions and behaviour in the classroom either in a positive or negative way (Barcelos, 2000; Pekrun et al., 2002). Therefore, in order to satisfy the students' needs and to ensure a fruitful learning process it is crucial to delve into the emotions they experience in class and beliefs about language teaching and learning.

The Catalan curriculum has a holistic vision of learning that fits perfectly with the sociocultural perspective of SLA. It follows a competence-based approach, which aims to make students competent, that is, to allow them to identify and apply the skills, knowledge, abilities, behaviours and emotions which are necessary to successfully perform a task. Therefore, this educational approach goes beyond the cognitive part of learning to contemplate as well the emotional aspects, for learning is regarded as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, emotions and values which the students have to turn to and to manage in order to be successful when developing tasks. This type of curriculum aims at providing students with affordances, i.e. conditions of the environment/context which facilitate learning, because it encourages teachers to develop highly communicative activities, to employ authentic materials and to evaluate from a global perspective and by using different types and instruments of assessment.

Nevertheless, the results of this research indicate that practice differs considerably from theory, as participants claim on countless occasions that the methodology employed in the classrooms is strictly grammar-based and not at all communicative. Findings show that the participants of this study are not satisfied whatsoever with the English education they received during primary and secondary education; yet, when arriving at university, they encountered a completely different way of teaching English, much more communicative and focused on performing activities which they enjoyed. The most relevant problems they identify according to their English learning experiences are that the teaching method was based on a structural syllabus, with little practice of oral communication, unvaried and meaningless activities and grammar-based exams which evaluated more the students' capacity of memorizing than their learning processes. This method does not foster actual learning, for the participants explain that after many years of studying the language they can barely communicate in it. This is due to the fact that they cannot see the point in the activities they perform in class, and this situation forces them to improve their English level outside the classroom. They do so either by learning on their own –by watching films, videos or series, listening to music and reading in English– or by attending language schools. However, the participants point out that relying upon language schools is not the solution for said educative shortages, and they claim that a change in foreign language learning is absolutely necessary. There is, indeed, a sharp –yet comprehensible– criticism towards the educative system in their discourses that should not be overlooked.

The students reveal both consciously and unconsciously a set of negative "academic emotions" (Pekrun, et al. 2002), which is absolutely comprehensible taking into account the problems which they believe that exist in English language teaching. As a matter of fact, none of the emotions expressed by the students is positive, for the emotions which have been identified are: demotivation, boredom, insecurity, embarrassment, fear and pressure. This suggests that, for learners, the classroom is both a threatening place where they feel insecure, embarrassed, afraid and pressured, and an uninteresting environment in which they feel bored and demotivated. The participants associate the classroom with a menacing and judgmental environment particularly when they have to speak in front of their teacher and peers in English, as it has been reported in other studies as well (see Miccoli, 2001; Aragao, 2011; Yoshida, 2011). This occurs because students tend to have low-self concepts and feel that their competence in English is not as good as it should be due to the lack of oral practice and their preoccupation with correctness and accuracy (Yoshida, 2011), probably induced by the excess of grammar teaching. On the other hand, the classroom becomes an uninteresting setting because as the participants themselves claim, they feel that they do not advance in their learning process because the tasks they are asked to perform are monotonous and devoid of purpose and meaning.

The informants' complaints and their frustrating experiences reveal a set of beliefs related to language learning. The most widely shared beliefs among the informants, identified with (pre-)thematic analysis, are the following ones: (a) the primary goal of learning a language is to be able to communicate; (b) the ideal teaching methodology fosters oral communication much more than grammar; (c) the overabundance of grammar is a problem; yet (d) grammar is the basis of the language and should be studied to speak properly; (e) learning by doing and learning by having fun are the most effective ways of learning; (f) teachers should not speak their L1 in class, so native teachers or teachers who have spent a long period in English-speaking countries are the best alternative; (g) teachers should care about the students' learning process and about them as individuals; (h) the classroom is a boring and threatening environment where feelings of insecurity, embarrassment and fear prevail; (i) having an exposure to the English language both outside and inside the classroom is essential to learn the language; (j) the best ways of improving the level are travelling, doing exchanges and attending private language schools; (k) private language schools are not the solution for

the flaws of the educational system; and (l) the educational authorities are to blame for the failure of English language education in Catalonia.

The beliefs listed above are general beliefs related to English language learning; yet, beliefs regarding the ideal or effective teacher were also displayed by students in their discourses, which were examined through MCA. A thorough analysis of the figure of the teacher was deemed necessary because he/she undoubtedly plays a fundamental role in language education, as he/she is in charge of choosing the method, the activities, the materials and the assessment ways and instruments. It is important to highlight, though, that the participants believe that the educational system is responsible for their defective experiences in English education. This is so basically because there is the general assumption that the curriculum obliges the teachers to teach grammar and, therefore, there is no room for speaking. Be it as it may, it is noticeable that the participants give a central importance to the features that the teacher has (both from a professional and from a human point of view) and to the activities that he/she performs (or not) in class. Although ten categories of teachers were identified, the final analysis reduces them into just two: effective and ineffective teachers. Thus, this inquiry has unveiled several beliefs about what being an effective teacher means; accordingly, the participants believe that an effective teacher (a) makes students read; (b) makes oral exams; (c) works with videos; (d) works with the computer; (e) sets activities which students like; (f) helps students lose the fear of speaking; (g) uses poems; (h) enjoys his/her job as a teacher; (i) speaks in English the whole class; (j) does not set writing activities (filling gaps); (k) is a native speaker or has spent a lot of time in an English-speaking country; (l) likes teaching people; (m) likes speaking in English; and (n) likes making students feel better.

Several teaching implications can be drawn from this study, complementing the ones named by Aragao (2011) with respect to dealing with beliefs and emotions in class. These implications are the following: (a) at the beginning of the course, activities should be developed in order to seize students' beliefs about language learning and expectations about the course, the learning process and the teacher him/herself; (b) debates and other activities should be promoted so as to get to know the students emotions in class, what situations they consider to be face-threatening, and in what situations they feel comfortable; (c) the teacher should provide learning affordances in order to foster positive academic emotions and an agreeable learning environment; (d)

the teacher should be interested in the students' learning process and should show them that he/she cares for them in order to build rapport; (e) the teacher should avoid speaking in their L1 in class unless necessary so that students have a high exposition to the language; (f) oral practice should be much more frequent in order to overcome inhibition and fear of speaking in public; (g) there should be fewer students in the class or work groups should be formed to perform speaking activities; (h) including an oral part in the *Selectivitat* exam should be seriously considered; (i) grammar should not be the pivot around which activities and assessment revolve; (j) amusing and communicative activities which the students enjoy should be more usual –watching films or videos, listening to music, working with computers and reading authentic materials–; (k) the activities performed should have a clear goal both for students and for the teacher so that the formers can recognize its value and use in the real world; (l) exams should not be grammar-based and different types and instruments of assessment should be employed;

Although the research has reached its aims, there are some unavoidable limitations and shortcomings. First of all, the sample population is relatively small, for there was a total of 31 participants, all of them students from Journalism and Audiovisual Communication at the University of Lleida. Moreover, the group discussions were part of an oral exam, so there was a time limitation (from 20 to 35 minutes) and the participants might not have time to fully express what they wanted to. The fact of being an exam, in addition, probably caused uneasiness and nervousness among them, and, since English is not their mother tongue, there was also a language constraint. Thus, if they had discussed the issue in Catalan or Spanish, they would have probably expressed themselves with greater ease, and more nuanced aspects of their experience would have emerged. Ultimately, this study is based on self-reported data, so we can only rely on what the participants claim to be the reality of the classroom. Although the results of the present study are not generalizable, the fact that all the participants show similar discourses of dissatisfaction about English learning points to a transferable and common problem which should not be ignored. In fact, scholars like Miccoli (2001) have identified similar problems regarding excess of grammar and little speaking practice, lack of affordances and disregard of emotions in other parts of the world where English is being taught as an additional language.

In order to overcome these shortcomings, further research should be conducted along three variations: 1) to analyse the practices on the ground; 2) to obtain data from the other side of the coin, i.e. the teachers' side; and 3) to broaden the scope geographically to include other areas within or outside Catalonia. A potential place of interest to analyse the practices on the ground would be courses in which an ELF-oriented pedagogy is being implemented, something which fortunately is gaining momentum. Seildhofer (2011: 7) defines English as a Lingua Franca as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option". I believe students who are exposed to this type of approach would generate substantially different beliefs and emotions about the lessons, so ideally I would like to observe sessions in which an ELF-oriented approach is being implemented and sessions where no such approach is being adopted to see the different beliefs and emotions which arise in the classroom. As for the side of the teachers, recent work by Sifakis (2004) has emphasised the need for a "transformative perspective" for teachers, based on a reflective process on one's one teaching practice, so obtaining data through interviews and group discussions with teachers engaged in such transformative processes and others who are not would complement the findings. As for the third aspect, related to the geographical scope, I would like to limit myself to the Catalan context, given my contextual knowledge of the socio-political reality of this part of the world, although conducting research in other contexts is certainly advisable.

7   CONCLUSIONS

The present dissertation adds up to the ever-growing number of studies which uphold the relevance of emotions and beliefs in foreign or second language learning. The present study has identified some of the major problems within English education in Catalonia from the students' viewpoint, and has unveiled the participants' set of beliefs regarding the best way of teaching English, which includes aspects related to methodology, activities, assessment, and the teacher' role and characteristics, among others. Furthermore, this inquiry has also distinguished the most common academic emotions which the participants experience in the classroom setting, which they regard as a threatening and uninteresting place because of the negative emotions they associate with it, such as fear, embarrassment, boredom or demotivation.

Having analysed the participants' discourses through Thematic Analysis and Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA), some relevant findings emerged in relation to English language learning in Catalonia and to foreign language learning in general. As for the Catalan context, results clearly indicate that there is a paramount need for a change in English language teaching, given that the methodology employed in the classrooms is based on structural syllabuses with little oral practice, meaningless and repetitive activities, and grammar-based exams, even if the methodological orientations of the Catalan curriculum encourage the teachers to employ a communicative approach. As for foreign language learning in general, what appears to be more important is the significance of seizing the learners' beliefs and emotions in order to provide sufficient affordances to empower them and to make them feel comfortable in the classroom setting. Although being aware of the learners' beliefs and emotions may not strictly guarantee a totally successful learning process, a welcoming environment will surely facilitate both teachers' and students' constant engagement, passion and learning.

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9   ANNEXES

9.1   Transcription symbols

Symbol	Explanation
:	lengthening of a sound
@	laughter (per syllable)
(.)	small pause
0.5	5-second pause
_____ (underlining)	stress via pitch or volume
_	reformulation of a sentence
-	repetition of a sound
[ ]	commentaries
…	unfinished sentence
+e+ +em+ +m+	hesitation
{(CAT)}	excerpt in Catalan
\	falling pitch
/	rising pitch
[…]	omission of a chunk

9.2 Participants in the focus groups

	Recording date	Duration	Participants
Video 1	4/12/13	21m 22s	Valentí Daniel Èric Mercè Joanna Clàudia Yolanda
Video 2	4/12/13	26m 53s	Roger Pol Cristina Teresa Cèlia Míriam Jana
Video 3	11/12/13	30m 08s	Ànnia Gemma Núria Joan Mario Álvaro
Video 4	11/12/13	34m 48s	Jaume Raül Sònia Lluïsa Lara Mireia
Video 5	18/11/13	24m 26s	Sara Pilar Glòria Ainhoa David