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How to Use Cooperative Learning for Assessing Students' Emotional Competences: A Practical Example at the Tertiary Level

Cómo usar el aprendizaje cooperativo para evaluar las competencias emocionales del alumnado: un ejemplo práctico de la enseñanza superior

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Cooperative learning allows students acquisition of competences that are essential for the labour market such as leadership, critical thinking, communication, and so on. For this reason, different cooperative activities were designed in a language subject in English Studies so that students could work in groups and acquire those competences. This article describes some such activities and the emotional competences that students acquire with them. Moreover, a survey was conducted in order to establish students' opinions about the main competences they acquired with the activities designed and their opinion about a cooperative methodology. Students' answers were positive and they were aware of what they had learned.

Key words: Cooperative learning, debate, emotional competences, English studies, oral presentation.

El aprendizaje cooperativo permite que el alumnado adquiera competencias fundamentales para el mercado laboral como el liderazgo, la capacidad crítica, la comunicación, etc. Por esta razón se diseñaron diferentes actividades cooperativas en una asignatura de lengua de Filología Inglesa para que los estudiantes pudieran trabajar en grupos y desarrollar las competencias mencionadas. Este artículo describe algunas actividades cooperativas y las competencias emocionales que el alumnado adquiere con ellas. Además, se preparó una encuesta para conocer las opiniones de los estudiantes sobre las principales competencias que adquieren con las actividades diseñadas y sus opiniones sobre una metodología cooperativa. Las respuestas del alumnado son positivas y los estudiantes son conscientes de lo que aprenden.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje cooperativo, competencias emocionales, debate, Filología Inglesa, presentación oral.

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Introduction

The creation and development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has required changes in Universidad de Alicante (Spain): it implies a shift from a University of teaching to a University of learning; similarly, there is a change from emphasizing the importance of *input* to highlighting the importance of *output*. Moreover, the latter must create competent, responsible, and critical professionals who are able to be adaptable in the labour market. The application of new methodologies in the teaching-learning process is one of the main changes requested. In this sense, it is important to promote cooperation in the classroom so that teachers and students share responsibilities.

In the last years, there has been a shift from traditional teacher-centred teaching (Martínez Lirola, 2007; Morales Vallejo, 2008) towards student-centred teaching approaches (Cavazotte, Moreno, & Hickmann, 2012; MacCann, Lipnevich, & Roberts, 2012), which allow students to be active in the teaching-learning process and to construct new knowledge. Teachers' roles have changed from being deliverers-of-information to becoming mentors or tutors. Consequently, students assume that they are the protagonists of their learning and that cooperative learning (CL) allows them to learn actively and progressively because they work with meaningful activities. In Wilhelm's words (2006):

Cooperative learning activities provide meaningful, realistic practice combined with useful developmental feedback. Students are encouraged to view learning as a dynamic process over which they have individual responsibility and group control. The skills developed in using cooperative learning are also important for life-long learning. (p. 154)

CL is one of the most commonly used forms of active pedagogy. It highlights the fact that students learn by working together in groups (Adams & Hamm, 1994; D. W. Johnson, R. T. Johnson, & Smith, 2007; Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010). Following Slavin (as cited in Ahmar & Mahmood, 2010) the two main differences between

cooperative learning and the traditional group work are the following:

Two components of CL (cooperative learning) distinguish it from traditional group work: (a) positive interdependence i.e. the feelings that they cannot achieve their group goal without the joint efforts of team members (b) individual accountability i.e. each member of the group feels accountable for their performance. (p. 152)

In general, studies make clear that students achieve better grades when using active methodologies; in this sense cooperative learning also contributes to a productive classroom climate due to the fact that it promotes the exchange of ideas (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005; D. W. Johnson & F. P. Johnson, 2009; D. W. Johnson & R. T. Johnson, 1989, 2004; D. W. Johnson et al., 2007; Ghaith, 2002; Slavin, 1989; T.-P. Wang, 2009; Tsay & Brady, 2010). In fact, this type of learning involves the acquisition of different skills and the accomplishment of different tasks that reinforce feeling productive and active (Garner, 2010; N. Wang, Young, Wilhite, & Marczyk, 2011).

This article is organized in the following sections: section two offers the theoretical background of the article, paying attention to the relationship between emotional competences and cooperative learning; section three presents the methodology and data and refers to the participants and context used for the study. Section four concentrates on the objectives and research questions of this research. Section five presents ways of implementing cooperative learning through group oral presentations and debates. This section is followed by a discussion of the results of the survey. Finally, the article ends with some conclusions based on the study.

Objectives and Research Questions

The main objective of this research is to point out that the use of a cooperative methodology in a foreign language subject is appropriate for the acquisition of competences that students will need in the labour market such as effective communication, leadership, and critical

thinking. In order to accomplish this objective, different activities were designed (see Procedure) so that students could acquire different emotional competences such as the ones already mentioned. Consequently, another objective is that students do not only learn contents but emotional competences that make them grow as human beings.

These objectives imply that it is necessary to design the appropriate cooperative tasks based on the competences intended to be acquired and to involve students to be active in the teaching-learning process. Consequently, all participants in the group must be active in working together in order to accomplish the tasks.

Our main research questions are the following: Do cooperative activities such as oral presentations and debates contribute to the acquisition of emotional competences in students at the University? What do students think about the cooperative methodology that was used in the subject English Language IV?

Theoretical Background

The main principles of CL following D. W. Johnson and F. P. Johnson (1994), and D. W. Johnson and R. T. Johnson (2004) are the following: Positive Interdependence, Face-to-Face Interaction, Individual and Group Accountability, Interpersonal and Small-Group Skills, and Group Processing. The positive interdependence between the different group members creates feelings of responsibility towards the final product and also towards the group relationships (D. W. Johnson & R. T. Johnson, 2009a; Matsui, Kakuyama, & Onglatco, 1987). Said interdependence promotes interaction and possible discussion about how to perform the task, what steps need to be taken, how to solve a conflict, and so on.

Cooperative methodologies allow working on emotional competences (Bernard, 2006; Cherniss, Extein, Goleman, & Weissberg, 2006; Mikolajczak, Brasseur, & Fantini-Hauwel, 2014; Sheehan, McDonald, & Spence, 2009; Troth, Jordan, & Lawrence, 2012), which can be considered essential for the integral development of

students and for the development of academic skills, as MacCann et al. (2012) make clear:

Emotions and emotion-related skills are important in education for two reasons: (a) as facilitators of traditionally valued outcomes such as academic skills, higher test scores, and better grades; and (b) as a valued outcome in and of themselves. While academic skills are certainly important, it is a worthy goal to have happy students with strong emotional skills, and who are resilient to negative emotions, irrespective of their grades. (p. 315)

Emotional competence (EC) has to do with how people deal with their emotions, as Nelis et al. (2011) make clear: "More specifically, EC refers to individual differences in identifying, expressing, understanding, regulating, and using emotions" (p. 354). Following Jennings and Greenberg (2009), I will refer to

the broadly accepted definition of social and emotional competence developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2008). This definition involves five major emotional, cognitive, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship management (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). (p. 494)

Considering emotional competences implies talking about emotional intelligence. Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee (2000) defined emotional intelligence as the type "observed when a person demonstrates the competencies that constitute self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills at appropriate times and ways in sufficient frequency to be effective in the situation" (p. 3). In this sense, we agree with Divaharan and Atputhasamy (2002) in the type of emotional competences that students can acquire with cooperative learning:

Cooperative learning helps students to develop interpersonal skills (Slavin, 1987) such as: getting to know and trust team members; communicating effectively and clearly; providing support and challenging fellow team members; and engaging in constructive conflict resolution (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). In addition,

these social skills may help students to acquire a sense of social responsibility (Vermette, 1988). (p. 73)

It is necessary that students use, understand, and manage their emotions in order to develop their emotional intelligence and to conduct good social relationships with other human beings. For this reason, in the last few years there have been different studies that point out the importance of emotional competences in higher education (Ciarrochi & Scott, 2006; Kingston, 2008; Tsay & Brady, 2010). In general, these studies coincide in emphasizing that EC, such as the ability to identify emotions, is correlated with different indices of wellbeing such as anxiety or depression (Ciarrochi & Scott, 2006; Ciarrochi, Scott, Deane, & Heaven, 2003; Cicchetti, Rappaport, Sandler, & Weissberg, 2000; Elias, Gara, Schuyler, Branden-Muller, & Sayette, 1991). However, assessing social and emotional competence is not an easy task and has not been given priority in higher education (Barblett & Maloney, 2010).

Method

Participants and Data

The subject English Language IV was a core subject taught in the last year of the degree in English Studies at Universidad de Alicante; its main aim was that students acquire some competences in the use of English that allow the integration of the different skills. For this reason, it is necessary to work together with the five skills of a language, the productive (speaking, interacting, and writing) and the receptive (reading and listening), through both oral and written cooperative activities such as the ones proposed in this article.

The academic year 2013-2014 was the last year in which there was teaching in this subject because that year was the last year of the degree in English Studies (*Licenciatura en Filología Inglesa*), which has now become the “grade” (bachelor degree) in English Studies (*Grado en Estudios Ingleses*) following the guidelines proposed

by the EHEA. Taking into consideration that the teacher has taught this subject before, I decided to follow a cooperative methodology in order to help students develop their emotional competences.

The majority of the students are 22 years old. Most of them intend to sit a competitive exam in order to work as high school teachers when they finish the degree; there are also students who would like to work as interpreters or translators. Some students just want to complete a master’s program that allows them to be better qualified. During the academic year 2013-2014 there were 105 enrolled in the subject; 75 studied the subject in Alicante and there were 30 students who studied abroad with the Erasmus program.

The subject English Language IV was taught four hours per week distributed in the following way: The first hour was devoted to academic writing; the second hour was used for students to prepare an oral presentation on a topic of their choice following the pieces of advice given during the first week; the third hour was utilized to work on grammar; finally, the last hour was used by the same students who had prepared the oral presentation in order to organize a debate in which the whole classroom could discuss the topic.

In addition, students were required to prepare some listening activities in the language laboratory and give them to the teacher at the end of the semester. This organization allows students to work on the five skills that were evaluated through a portfolio with the following structure: written essay (20% each semester), group oral presentation (15% each semester), written grammar exam (10% each semester) and listening (5% each semester).

The teacher designed some cooperative activities (see Procedure) that helped students to work in groups, be active throughout the teaching-learning process, be aware of the emotional competences present in the activities suggested and develop their emotional competences. Moreover, a survey was prepared in order to determine students’ opinions about the main

emotional aspects of the methodology used (see Discussion). All students were sampled after they had given informed consent because they were given the option to participate or not. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Procedure: Implementing Cooperative Learning Through Group Oral Presentations and Debates

CL involves students working in small groups in order to achieve a common goal; in this sense, the fact that the groups are heterogeneous entails that all students benefit from the work and knowledge of the different group members (D. W. Johnson & F. P. Johnson, 1994, 2009; D. W. Johnson, R. T. Johnson, & Holubec, 1994). Different studies (Ahmar & Mahmood, 2010; D. W. Johnson & F. P. Johnson, 1997, 2009; D. W. Johnson & R. T. Johnson, 1999, 2007, 2009b; D. W. Johnson, R. T. Johnson, & Smith, 1998, 2007; among others) point out the main advantages of cooperative learning and its importance in the acquisition and development of social and emotional competences, which are considered essential not only in the educational system but also in life.

Cooperative activities were designed by the teacher throughout the whole academic year in order to develop the different skills. Due to the limitations of space in this paper, we are just going to concentrate on oral presentations and debates as examples of cooperative activities that allow the integration of written and oral competences. These activities are very useful for students because they can apply what they learn and put into practice for the job interviews they will start experiencing as soon as they finish the degree and start applying for a job.

The teacher asked students to organize themselves in groups of four or five people and to prepare an oral presentation on a topic of their choice in order to evaluate their oral skills. Each group member had to

talk for a maximum of five minutes. Students had to organize themselves since they had to choose the people they wanted to work with, select the topic of the oral presentation, and divide it so that all group members work in order to obtain a common goal. This promotes *positive interdependence*, which following D. W. Johnson et al. (1998) is one of the defining characteristics of cooperative learning.

The fact that each group member assumed an *individual responsibility* that made her/him responsible not only for her/his work but for the success or failure of the group results is also essential in CL. Moreover, throughout the whole process, students communicate face to face in order to choose the topic and organize the different materials used to prepare and develop the presentation; in this way, they develop interpersonal and communicative skills because they learn to solve problems together, take decisions, prevent possible conflicts among group members and make common agreements to benefit group work, apart from the different criteria that could appear during the learning process.

In addition, oral presentations had other advantages that are worth mentioning. The fact that it is a semi-autonomous activity was positive in the sense that it allowed students to choose the topic freely. In this sense, cooperative learning is an excellent way of promoting autonomy, interdependency, and taking decisions.¹ I also intended that students would use some bibliographical references on the topic chosen; moreover, they were also required to use certain multimodal resources to prepare the oral presentation, and this activity was also useful in order to integrate written and oral skills when preparing the PowerPoint presentation that was going to be used when students had to give their oral

¹ In fact, the study done at the University of Cantabria by González Fernández and García Ruiz (2007) gathers students' opinions: their capacity to find solutions without external support, that is., without the constant support of teachers, is developed through cooperative learning for 79,4% of students, whereas 35,5% consider that it can also be achieved through traditional teaching-learning methods.

presentation in the classroom. In fact, the process of teaching and learning had to be based on the practice of integrating the receptive and productive skills.

Before presenting the oral presentation in the classroom, students had to take part in a group tutorial with the teacher in order to share the way in which the presentation was to be organized, the materials found, possible difficulties, and so forth. Besides, after the oral presentation, students also participated in another group tutorial in order to receive some feedback on the main positive and negative aspects of the oral presentation already given in the classroom. In this sense, tutorials are essential for cooperative learning because they support students and guide them through interaction, that is, this would be one example of formative evaluation.

Furthermore, once the oral presentation had been made in the classroom, each group sent it to the teacher through the virtual campus so that it could be shared with all the students registered in the subject English Language IV. Consequently, the act of sharing the work done by each small group with the whole classroom promotes solidarity and generosity. This involves the application of another principle of cooperative learning proposed by D. W. Johnson et al. (1998), *the reflection on the work done*, because students deliberate and meditate on the degree of effectiveness of the achievements in the task carried out, during the tutorials with the teacher before sharing the final piece of work. After what has been said in the previous lines, it is deduced that this activity shows unequivocally the defining characteristics that any activity called cooperative should possess. These characteristics also appear in the activities defined in the following paragraphs.

Another activity consisted of organizing and participating in a debate on a topic chosen by students that would take place in the classroom and through *Facebook*.² In this sense, two students that were part of

a project on innovation in teaching created a *Facebook* page called “English Language IV.” Students were free to choose their classmates to prepare the debate (we are aware that choosing one’s classmates is not always the best option for work based on CL). Each group was to organize the internal work inside the group and the roles that each group member had to assume in order to prepare the debate, which affected the individual responsibility of each student and the development of the positive interdependence among all of them, since students were obliged to give thought to accomplishing some common objectives through cooperation right from the beginning of the activity.

Every week, five days before the debate took place in the classroom, the group took part in a compulsory tutorial with the teacher in order to discuss the questions that were going to appear on *Facebook* on the topic chosen and, in this way, reflect on the most effective way to prepare work, which contributed decisively to highlighting critical thinking and to developing social skills of communication and of integration in a work group. At the same time, the teacher supervised the written English that was to appear in *Facebook*. From then on, the group members were given five days to express their opinion on the topic of debate proposed in which they had to proceed in such a way as to use interpersonal skills, take decisions, and combine individual responsibility to accomplish some common objectives such as elaborating some solid arguments to defend, orally, a determined point of view in English related to a particular topic. Consequently, in the preparation of the debate, what each student adds to it influences the final result and determines if the final work is satisfactory or not.

popular. For example, it is important to mention the debates conducted through Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Twenty, etc. within forums and virtual communities in which the interaction of questions and answers creates knowledge with a practical value that, of course, can be applied to teaching. See for example Martínez Sánchez (2003) and González and Esteves (2006).

² We believe that the active participation in social networks is an effective way of motivating students since those networks are very

Another purpose of the said activity was that students could write complete paragraphs in English in a virtual environment. It was thought that using a virtual environment for this cooperative activity would exercise a positive influence on students; this was the case because more than half of the students participated in the debates that were proposed every week on different topics, such as capitalism, the concept of beauty, fears, the anti-smoking law, etc., which favored the development of writing skills.

The fact that students knew the topic that was going to be discussed in the classroom through *Facebook* before the debate took place was very positive because students had time to reflect on the topic chosen; they could organize their ideas and express them in writing through *Facebook* or in the classroom debate. In this way, I attained another purpose of this activity, which was the integration of oral and written skills, which is essential in order to develop communicative skills in the foreign language.

Once the debate had taken place in the classroom, the group was required to meet the teacher in a group tutorial in order to comment on how the debate and its organization had gone, assess students' participation, and analyze the form and function of the comments received through *Facebook*, etc. In fact, students could reflect in groups on the development of their work, which is a fundamental principle of CL as already stated in the previous paragraphs. In addition, they were accorded the opportunity of practicing their English again in a group tutorial. In practice, the space devoted to tutorials also gained prominence in the teaching-learning process because these methods are an integral part of it.³

In a nutshell, choosing cooperative activities has the purpose of integrating students in the assigned task, having them work with a common objective, and causing them to enjoy the phase of production of ideas

with their teammates. Observing the teaching-learning process allowed the teacher to make sure that students were comfortable with the methodology used and that the acquisition of emotional competences was taking place. In this sense, a survey was designed in order to establish students' opinions.

Discussion

Although CL has many advantages there are also some disadvantages. For this reason, a survey was administered so that students could offer their anonymous opinions about working with cooperative learning and emotional competences (see Appendix). Following authors such as Herrera Torres and Enrique Mirón (2008), I consider that the survey is an appropriate method to obtain information from students because it facilitates academic and personal information of university students in this case and points out their worries, needs or deficiencies that they observe in their learning.

The majority of the students think that the University should be a place to contribute to their integral development as human beings (92%) whereas 8% consider that the University is a place to acquire knowledge. The second question identifies students' perceptions about the importance given to content in the degree. More than half of the students (60%) consider that teaching content is the main role of the University and therefore that 70% of the time is devoted to this task and the other 30% to teaching competences. Twenty students (26.26%) consider that content is given even more importance, that is, 80%, so that only 20% of the time is used for the acquisition of competences. Finally, 13.33% consider that the time devoted to teaching contents and competences is equal, that is, 50% for each.

If we ask the same question but related to the subject English Language IV in which cooperative learning and the acquisition of competences were made explicit throughout the whole teaching-learning process (Question 3), we observe that more than half

³ As regards the potential of the spaces devoted to academic tutorials in the EHEA, see García Nieto (2008).

of the students (52%) consider that the time given to teaching contents and competences is equal. 26.26% have different opinions: they consider that there was more emphasis on the teaching of competences (60% of the time) than on teaching content (40%). The rest of the students, 18.66%, consider that the previous percentages are the other way round, that is, content occupies 60% while 40% was devoted to competences.

The opinion of students about taking into consideration emotional competences at the different educational levels (primary and secondary education and University) is very clear: the great majority, 96%, answer positively. Only two students (2.66%) give a negative answer and only one person answers "sometimes" (1.33%). Similarly, 70.66% think that emotional competences are very important in a language classroom, while 2.66% consider that their importance is average and only one person (1.33%) points out that their importance is minimal.

Students express different opinions about the main emotional competences associated with cooperative learning. Seventeen students (22.66%) consider that all of them are present. Apart from that, the competences regarded as most important are communication (62.66%) and cooperation (61.33%), followed by empathy (50.66%), taking the initiative (49.33%), understanding (46.66%), and solving conflicts (28%). Finally, the following four competences were accorded less importance: solidarity (25.33%), optimism (24%), leadership (16%), and security (14.66%).

Question 7 asked students which of the already mentioned emotional competences they had acquired in the subject English Language IV. In this case 10 students (13.33%) chose all. The rest offered different opinions: 65.33% identify cooperation, followed by communication (52%), security (38.66%), and understanding (33.33%). 30.66% of the students who answered the survey consider that leadership and taking the initiative were also developed. Thereafter, 28% select empathy and conflict solving and, finally, optimism and solidarity

are the two least frequently mentioned competences (18.66%).

As already explained in this article, the main cooperative activity in English Language IV was the oral presentation. For this reason, students were asked about the main difficulties experienced in order to prepare them. The main answers were the following: being nervous (44%), difficulties in meeting with all the group members (34.66%), insecurity (22.66%), and being scared of failure (17.33%). Other difficulties pointed out just by a few students were the following: choosing the topic, controlling time (2.6%), organizing the presentation (5.33%), and solving conflicts (4%). It is interesting that two students (2.6%) answered that they did not encounter any difficulty in preparing their presentation.

Additionally, students were asked about the main emotional competences that helped them to overcome the difficulties already mentioned in the previous paragraph. In this sense, most students mentioned the support and cooperation between the different group members (60%), while about half pointed to being optimistic and self-confident (46.66%), and about a third to being patient and empathetic (33.33%).

In Question 10 students were asked if they considered the emotional competences that they had acquired useful for their future as professionals. The great majority of students answered yes (81.33%), 17.33% replied that this was true to a certain extent whereas only one person said no (1.33%).

The ideas presented in this section devoted to the discussion of the survey point out that students were quite comfortable with the chosen methodology and that they were aware of the main emotional competences they had acquired. Consequently, we were able to establish students' opinions about the main aspects related to CL and the acquisition of emotional competences. Therefore, it was useful to conduct a survey so that students could share their

opinions once a cooperative methodology had been used during the academic year 2013-2014.

Conclusions

When students work in a cooperative way in a foreign language subject, they do not only learn contents because cooperative activities request that students become active in the teaching-learning process and that they acquire competences that they will need in the labour market. Consequently, in order to accomplish the cooperative activities prepared for the subject English Language IV, such as oral presentations and debates, students need to negotiate, to communicate, to be critical with the tasks, to cooperate, and to solve possible problems in the groups, among other emotional competences.

The different cooperative activities designed for the subject English Language IV and the analysis of the survey point out that students accord importance to this type of learning and that, in general, the different tasks have been completed positively. CL allows the unity of theory and practice and the acquisition of different competences considered essential for the labour market such as critical thinking, the capacity to take decisions, leadership, and task division.

This type of learning demands time for preparation outside the classroom for teachers and students but its advantages outweigh its disadvantages because it promotes the sharing of responsibilities by teachers and students. This involves that, on the one hand, students assume an active role that allows them to be active and organize their learning progressively. On the other hand, teachers stop being considered as a source of knowledge, to become instead a guide and tutor for students. In this sense, tutorials play a very active role in this type of learning and stop being used just to ask questions during the days previous to the exams.

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Appendix: Survey on Emotional Competences

1. Should the University be a place to
 - Obtain knowledge
 - Contribute to your integral development as a human being (combination of knowledge and competences)?
2. In the degree, what percentage (out of 100%) has been given to:
 - Obtaining knowledge
 - Contributing to your integral development as a human being (combination of knowledge and competences)?
3. In the subject English Language IV what percentage (over 100%) has been given to:
 - Obtaining knowledge
 - Contributing to your integral development as a human being (combination of knowledge and competences)?
4. Do you think that emotional competences should be considered at all educational levels (primary and secondary education and university)?
Yes No Sometimes
5. How important are emotional competences in a language classroom?
Very important Middle importance Little importance
6. What are the emotional competences that are most connected with cooperative learning (choose five)?
 - Leadership - Initiative
 - Empathy - Optimism
 - Solidarity - Communication
 - Understanding - Conflict solving
 - Cooperation - Security
7. Which of the following emotional competences have you developed more in the subject English Language IV (choose five)?
 - Leadership - Initiative
 - Empathy - Optimism
 - Solidarity - Communication
 - Understanding - Conflict solving
 - Cooperation - Security
8. Enumerate the main difficulties found while preparing for the oral presentations.
9. Enumerate the main emotional competences that have helped you to overcome the already mentioned difficulties.
10. Do you think that the emotional competences that you have developed would be useful for the future as professionals in the labour market?
Yes No Up to a certain extent