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AUTUMN

*Retreat for
Teachers*

2025

A decorative border of autumn leaves in shades of orange, red, and brown frames the entire page.

AUTUMN RETREAT 2025
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“English Day” as a Catalyst for Interdisciplinary Project-Based Learning: A High School Model

Prof. Mirian C. Freitas

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Abstract

At our high school, the “English Day” has evolved into an annual showcase for interdisciplinary Project-Based Learning (PBL), where students integrate knowledge across subjects while strengthening English language competencies. This event exemplifies how school-wide initiatives can transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries, aligning with Meeth’s (1978) interdisciplinary pedagogy framework and the PBL principles of authenticity and collaboration (Thomas, 2000).

For three years, teachers have designed cross-curricular projects culminating in the “English Day” presentations. These initiatives merge English with subjects like social studies, philosophy, literature, history and arts through thematic drivers. The 2024 edition, themed “We are all heroes: What kind of hero do you want to be for our society?”, served as a paradigmatic case: students analyzed literary hero archetypes in English classes while examining real-world changemakers in social studies, philosophy, history, etc. They then proposed actionable community projects, presented bilingually during the event.

The project leveraged Vygotskian collaborative learning (1978), with peer feedback rounds and public exhibitions fostering metacognition. Surveys revealed 82% of

participants felt the interdisciplinary approach deepened subject mastery, while 76% reported increased confidence in English communication.

This model demonstrates how institutional events like the “English Day” can structurally support interdisciplinary PBL by providing a shared goal and audience; incentivizing language integration and making learning visible to the community.

We argue such frameworks are replicable in secondary education to advance both transversal competencies and disciplinary knowledge. Future research will measure long-term linguistic and cognitive impacts.

Keywords: *Interdisciplinary PBL, English language learning, student exhibitions, curriculum design*

Introduction

School-wide events often serve as commemorative occasions, but they can also be powerful pedagogical tools when designed with intentionality. At Liceo N°7 in Rivera, the “English Day” has transcended its traditional role as a language-focused exhibition to become a cornerstone of interdisciplinary Project-Based Learning (PBL). This annual event aligns with Meeth’s (1978) framework for interdisciplinary pedagogy, where knowledge integration across subjects enhances deeper learning. Additionally, it embodies Thomas’s (2000) PBL principles - authenticity, collaboration, and real-world relevance - by tasking students with solving problems through cross-curricular projects.

This article presents a case study of the “English Day” as a replicable model for secondary education. We demonstrate how a thematic, school-wide event can structurally support interdisciplinary PBL while advancing language competencies, critical thinking, and civic engagement.

Theoretical Framework

The project is grounded in the integration of two foundational educational theories that inform the design and implementation of the ‘English Day’ as an interdisciplinary learning initiative.

First, interdisciplinary pedagogy (Meeth, 1978) posits that meaningful learning occurs when disciplinary boundaries are bridged, enabling students to synthesize knowledge and apply it in complex, real-world contexts. This approach moves beyond siloed subject instruction by emphasizing thematic connections across curricula, thereby fostering deeper cognitive engagement and transferable skills.

Second, the principles of Project-Based Learning (PBL) (Thomas, 2000) further shape this model, particularly through three core tenets: (1) authenticity, ensuring projects address genuine problems or questions; (2) student agency, empowering learners to direct their inquiry; and (3) collaboration, requiring teamwork to achieve shared outcomes. These elements align with contemporary educational paradigms that prioritize competency development over passive knowledge acquisition.

The “English Day” embodies this theoretical synthesis by:

- Establishing a unifying objective—the public exhibition—which serves as a culminating performance of understanding, motivating students to integrate and refine their work;
- Creating authentic language demands, where English becomes a tool for communication rather than an isolated skill, mirroring real-world multilingual contexts;
- Democratizing learning visibility, as community audiences engage with student work, reinforcing the social and practical relevance of academic content.

By intertwining these frameworks, the event transcends conventional classroom boundaries, exemplifying how theory can be systematically translated into practice to advance both disciplinary and transversal competencies.

Methodology -Design

Project Implementation Process

The “English Day” project follows a structured, participatory approach designed to foster interdisciplinary collaboration and student-centered learning. The implementation process consists of the following phases:

1. Initial Presentation and Teacher Engagement

The project is formally introduced during the school’s ‘*coordinación*’ (administrative and pedagogical planning session), where objectives, interdisciplinary nature, and expected outcomes are outlined. All teachers are invited to participate, ensuring cross-departmental involvement from the outset.

2. English Teachers’ Planning Meeting

A dedicated meeting is convened among English teachers to: discuss the project’s scope and alignment with curricular goals; review and compare students’ topic preferences, gathered through preliminary classroom interactions; identify potential intersections with other disciplines (e.g., linking literature themes to historical contexts in social studies).

3. Student-Centered Theme Development

To ensure relevance and engagement, teachers conduct in-class consultations to gauge student interests. Surveys and discussions reveal diverse preferences, including: Sports-related themes; Cinema and media studies; Graphic novels and comics; Literary analysis and adaptations.

Through collaborative decision-making, teachers and students negotiate a unifying theme, which is distilled into a driving question, a central, open-ended challenge that anchors the project (We are all heroes. What kind of hero do you want to be for our society?). This question embodies the principles of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), requiring students to investigate, synthesize, and present solutions.

4. Digital Collaboration and Asynchronous Coordination

To streamline teamwork among participating teachers, two key digital tools are employed:

A WhatsApp group to facilitate real-time communication for urgent updates and logistical coordination, and a shared Google Drive folder which centralizes resources, including lesson plans, rubrics, and student materials, enabling asynchronous collaboration and iterative refinement of the project design.

This distributed workflow accommodates scheduling constraints while ensuring consistent progress toward shared goals.

Implementation of the Project

The interdisciplinary project "We Are All Heroes" was implemented through a carefully structured process that combined theoretical foundations with active learning methodologies. The project began with the assignment of thirteen hero-themed subtopics to student groups, ranging from mythological heroes to environmental activists, ensuring a diverse exploration of heroism across disciplines. Teachers facilitated collaborative discussions to align these topics with student interests and curricular objectives, fostering ownership and engagement from the outset.

During the research phase, students investigated their assigned hero types using sources in both English and their native language, promoting bilingual literacy and critical analysis. Activities included comparative studies of hero archetypes, debates on ethical dilemmas, and creative writing tasks such as essays and poems. These exercises were designed to deepen students' understanding of heroism while developing their analytical and communicative skills.

The project culminated in a public exhibition, where students transformed the school gymnasium into an interactive showcase of their learning. Each group designed a thematic stand featuring bilingual posters, costumes, and multimedia presentations. Students assumed the role of 'speakers', explaining their projects in both English and Spanish to peers, teachers, and community members. Artistic performances, including

short plays and dances, further highlighted the heroic traits explored in their research. The event not only demonstrated students' mastery of the content but also strengthened school-community connections, with over 200 attendees participating in the exhibition.

Outcomes and Impact

The project yielded significant academic and social outcomes. Students exhibited marked improvements in critical thinking, demonstrating the ability to analyze heroism through interdisciplinary lenses, such as linking philosophical concepts to literary characters. Language proficiency also saw notable gains, as students showed enhanced confidence in bilingual communication during presentations and debates. Collaborative skills were another key outcome, with peer assessments highlighting effective teamwork in resolving cross-disciplinary challenges.

Pedagogically, the project successfully integrated active learning strategies, including Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Vygotskian collaborative techniques, which resulted in higher student engagement and reduced absenteeism during project weeks. Teachers reported that students could articulate connections between subjects, such as applying historical heroes' ethical principles to contemporary civic issues.

Beyond the classroom, the project fostered a sense of community by involving families in the final exhibition. The event served as a model for future interdisciplinary initiatives, aligning with Uruguay's Marco Curricular emphasis on transversal competencies. Challenges, such as varying language proficiency levels, provided valuable insights for refining scaffolding strategies in subsequent iterations.

Conclusion

The "We Are All Heroes" project exemplified the potential of interdisciplinary learning to transcend traditional curricular boundaries. By combining theoretical frameworks with hands-on activities, the initiative not only deepened students' understanding of heroism but also cultivated essential skills such as critical thinking, bilingual communication, and collaboration. The project's success underscores the value of immersive, student-centered approaches in modern education, offering a replicable model for future interdisciplinary endeavors.

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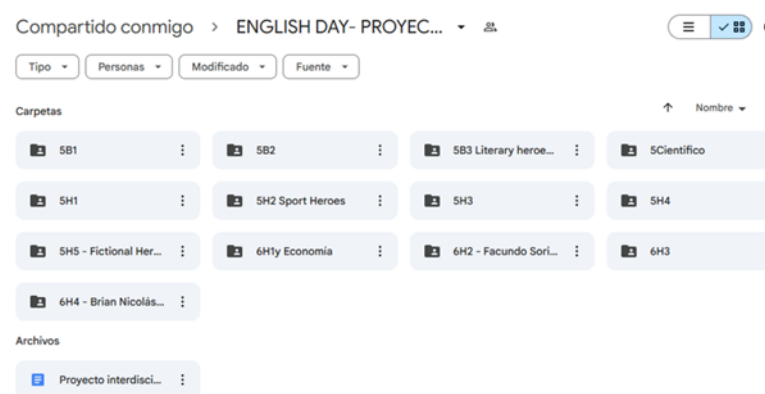
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APPENDIX

English Day Project 2024



Shared Google drive



Students working together



Example of final answers

FICTIONAL HEROES- 5° B/3



- Alice isn't a conventional hero—she doesn't possess superhuman abilities. But, her journey through Wonderland reveals profound lessons about personal growth and resilience. For example, that true bravery means moving forward even when the path isn't clear. Independent thinking is more valuable than blind obedience. Life requires flexibility, we must learn to "grow" and "shrink" as needed. Heroism isn't about perfection, it's about showing up with curiosity and conviction, even when life gets "curiouser and curiouser." Alice taught us that sometimes, the most meaningful adventures begin with simply following your curiosity down the rabbit hole.

Mythological Heroes – 5°B/1



Our heroes, Odysseus, David, Hercules, Sun Wukong taught us something important. A real hero isn't just strong or brave. A hero is many things at once: kind, smart, humble, and never gives up.

We want to be a hero who help people feel less alone. Like David, we'll admit our mistakes. Like Athena, we'll listen. Like Sun Wukong, we'll fight for what's right even if it's hard.

Heroes don't need superpowers. We need heroes who care, who stand up for others, and who never stop trying. That's the hero we want to be and we believe everyone can be a hero too.

The Everyday Heroes Around Us 6o H/4

Real heroes don't wear capes - they wear uniforms, lab coats, or teacher's clothes. These normal people do extraordinary things every day, and they inspire us to be better.

What makes them heroes?

Courage in daily life: Firefighters run into burning buildings, Nurses work long night shifts, Teachers manage noisy classrooms.

Seeing what others need: Doctors understand patients' pain, Social workers help struggling families, Bus drivers wait for running passengers

Never stopping learning : Police officers train for new situations, Scientists research new medicines.

These heroes show me that you don't need superpowers to make a difference. What matters is:

- ✓ Showing up every day
- ✓ Caring about people
- ✓ Doing your best



Our dream? To work hard like them - maybe as a nurse, engineer, or teacher. We want to help our society in simple but important ways. After all, the world needs ordinary heroes more than super ones!

Empowering EFL Learners: Implementing the ECRIF Framework for Speaking Fluency

Prof. M.N. Delbono
(2025)

Abstract

Originally presented at the Teacher's Autumn Retreat 2025 in Minas, Uruguay, this article reports on the presentation of a semester-long action research study that applied the Encounter–Clarify–Remember–Internalize–Fluently Use (ECRIF) framework to foster speaking fluency in fourth-grade secondary EFL learners. Aligned with CEFR A2+/B1 standards and Uruguay's national curricular goals, scaffolded lessons incorporating authentic stimuli, differentiated input, metacognitive strategies, peer feedback, and clear "Students Will Be Able To..." objectives produced gains in fluency, vocabulary breadth, accuracy, and overall confidence. Qualitative feedback from participants highlighted how transparent staging and SMARTA goal journals enhanced their self-awareness and motivation.

Keywords: ECRIF framework; speaking fluency; action research; secondary EFL; affective support; Uruguay

Article

Building on the presentation delivered at the Teacher's Autumn Retreat, this study examines how a structured, stage-by-stage implementation of the ECRIF framework empowered Uruguayan secondary learners to develop greater speaking fluency in English (Delbono, 2024). During the Retreat session, titled "Empowering EFL Learners: Implementing the ECRIF Framework for Speaking Fluency" (Delbono, 2025), participants from multiple institutions participated in a micro-teaching experience—from which the practicality and effectiveness of the ECRIF Framework were shown—to share later practical insights that were subsequently woven into the intervention design. Their shared experiences in learning a specific feature of a new language, along with their analysis of this learning instance, affirmed that collaborative reflection among students not only validates research findings but also generates contextually grounded refinements for classroom application.

Grounded in Kolb's (1984) assertion that "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38) and Communicative Language Teaching's emphasis on authentic interaction (Richards, 2006), the study aligned with Uruguay's

competency-based curriculum, which employs “can-do” descriptors at A2+/B1 levels (Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 2018). The research question guiding the investigation—“How can the implementation of the ECRIF framework transform the speaking abilities of fourth-grade secondary students?” (Delbono, 2024, p. 5)—drove a semester-long intervention structured around five scaffolded stages: Encounter, Clarify, Remember, Internalize, and Fluently Use.

In the **Encounter** stage, learners interacted with authentic stimuli—video clips of everyday conversations, illustrative images, and tangible realia—to activate prior knowledge and contextualize new forms of language. As Kurzweil and Scholl (2007) observe, “Pictures, demonstrations, verbal explanations, peer teaching and practice all contribute to students relating new information to prior knowledge, a key feature of learning” (p. 70). As an example, in one of the lessons taught by ECRIF, students previewed a short clip of a café dialogue and then worked in pairs to describe the setting, participants, and inferred intentions. This initiation not only situated language use in real-world contexts but also lowered students’ affective filters by engaging them through curiosity and personal relevance (Brown, 2007).

The **Clarify** stage provided targeted input and corrective feedback, employing differentiated instruction principles to match materials to students’ readiness and interests (Heacox, 2012). For instance, while some learners received simplified transcripts of the café dialogue, others analyzed key phrases in context-rich tasks. Delbono (2024) reports that “students who engaged with differentiated reading scripts demonstrated faster uptake of target structures, as evidenced by their ability to reformulate questions with 85% accuracy by week three” (p. 62). This phase emphasized form-meaning connections through guided discovery and teacher-led meta-talk, reinforcing grammatical and lexical targets before students engaged in independent practice.

During the **Remember** and **Internalize** stages, students adopted metacognitive strategies—SMARTA goal-setting journals, self-assessment checklists, and mnemonic devices—to consolidate vocabulary and structures (O’Malley et al., 1985). Delbono notes that “when students articulated their own SMARTA objectives (e.g., ‘I will use past simple verbs correctly in five consecutive sentences’), they exhibited heightened ownership of learning and greater perseverance during practice tasks” (2024, p. 68). Concurrently, cooperative learning tasks—such as peer-review of scripted mini-dialogues—supported deeper processing: “Cooperative learning fosters meaningful communication, develops social skills, and supports learners in the learning process” (Fehling, n.d., p. 3). These activities not only reinforced linguistic targets, but also fostered a supportive classroom community where risk-taking was encouraged and normalized, resulting in lower anxiety among students.

In the culminating **Fluently Use** stage, learners applied their skills in debates, role-plays, and mini-presentations that simulated authentic communicative scenarios.

Real-time scaffolding—through prompt cards and on-the-spot corrective prompts—ensured that fluency was prioritized alongside accuracy. Kurzweil and Scholl (2007) highlight that “feedback is a crucial element of the ECRIF framework, as it helps guide and support students throughout their learning journey” (p. 48). By week twelve, 82% of participants demonstrated the ability to carry out a three-minute role-play with minimal hesitation, a marked improvement over the 36% observed in the initial week.

Quantitative analysis of pre-and post-intervention speaking tests revealed significant gains across multiple dimensions: overall comprehension increased by 47%, fluency by 46%, vocabulary breadth by 50%, production by 40%, and accuracy by 57% (Delbono, 2024, pp. 78–80). Complementary qualitative data from learner surveys (n = 28) and semi-structured interviews (n = 10) underscored elevated confidence and motivation. One participant reflected, “I hope the classes continue to be as good as they have been so far” (Delbono, 2024, p. 100), illustrating the positive affective outcomes that complemented measurable skill improvements.

Furthermore, students themselves reflected deeply on the relevance of ECRIF to their learning journeys. In interviews, many noted that the clear staging helped them recognize their own progress: “Seeing how each lesson built on the last made me feel more confident—and I actually understood why we were doing each activity” (Delbono, 2024, p. 102). Survey responses corroborated this, with 85 % of participants indicating that the “Remember” journals and SMARTA goal sheets made them more aware of their strengths and learning needs (Delbono, 2024, p. 83). Such learner perceptions underscore the framework’s significance: by making the learning process transparent, ECRIF not only scaffolds skill acquisition but also fosters metacognitive engagement, prompting students to view themselves as active agents in their own language development

Critical reflection on the intervention highlighted two key areas for future development. First, stage durations must remain adaptable: Delbono (2024) observed that certain target items—especially phrasal verbs—required additional Clarify-to-Internalize cycles to achieve mastery (p. 72). Second, further integration of technology—such as interactive mind-mapping tools—could strengthen form–meaning connections and cater to diverse learning preferences, consonant with Paivio’s (1990) dual-coding theory.

In conclusion, this action research demonstrates that the ECRIF framework, when implemented with fidelity and enriched through practitioner collaboration, effectively bridges comprehension and production, yielding substantial gains in speaking fluency, vocabulary, accuracy, and learner confidence. By situating lessons within Kolb’s experiential cycle and CLT’s communicative tenets—and by honouring insights from fellow educators at the Autumn Retreat—ECRIF emerges as a robust and adaptable model for secondary EFL instruction in Uruguay and beyond. Future research should

investigate the long-term retention of skills, transfer to novel contexts, and scalability across proficiency levels and diverse educational settings.

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Assessing by Examples: Variation, Voice and Choice, and Surprise Effect in Student-Centered Assessment

Profs. Gabriela Marcenaro & Martina Silva Quartiani

Rethinking Assessment: An Ethical and Pedagogical Commitment

Assessment is never neutral. It carries a profound ethical responsibility and shapes how students perceive themselves as learners. As teacher educators, we believe that assessment should be integrated into the learning process, not as a separate, final checkpoint, but as a meaningful and continuous opportunity for reflection, growth, and dialogue.

When assessment is disconnected from learning, it risks becoming punitive, reductive, or merely bureaucratic. But when thoughtfully designed, assessment can become a formative and transformative experience, one that respects diversity, promotes agency, and fosters meaningful engagement. In short, to foster a dialogue to get useful and fruitful information. This dialogue aims high; it goes beyond the welcome fulfillment of a task or a passing mark.

In this article, we reflect on our evolving understanding of assessment and share a framework based on three interrelated pillars: Variation, Voice and Choice, and Creativity and the Surprise Effect. These three principles guide our practice and allow us to offer students richer, more inclusive, and more authentic opportunities to show what they have learned. Assessment should belong to the learning process, and not stand apart from it. We believe in long-term processes which, when done well, can retain lifelong effects.

Star and a wish



Variation: Reaching Learners Through Diverse Tools

Assessment practices often rely on a narrow set of tools that fail to capture the full spectrum of student learning. In contrast, varying assessment tools allow educators to recognize different strengths, learning styles, and ways of expressing knowledge. It provides a more comprehensive view of learning and reduces the limitations of one-size-fits-all evaluations.

Varying assessment tools is important because they capture different aspects of student learning, offering a richer and more accurate understanding of their abilities. It ensures that assessments reflect diverse strengths and learning potentials, rather than relying on a single method that may not suit all students. Among other benefits, it promotes critical thinking and creativity, reduces

assessment fatigue, and addresses the diverse cognitive and emotional needs of learners.

In our practice, we have used a wide range of assessment tools to create inclusive and dynamic learning environments. These include rubrics with clearly defined criteria, metacognitive ladders that guide students through reflection on their learning process, and self-assessment feedforward sheets that promote awareness and goal setting. We also incorporate evaluation targets for self and peer assessment, checklists to support task completion, and simple tools like “Star and a Wish” or “Exit Tickets” that foster feedback and reflection.

These tools are not used randomly, but with a clear intention: to make assessment a continuous, transparent, and supportive process that reflects students’ learning journeys in diverse and respectful ways.

Exit ticket

An illustration of an exit ticket form. It is a rectangular card with a pink tab at the top. The text on the card reads: "My A-HA Moment" followed by "Share one thing you learned" and a horizontal line for writing.

Voice and Choice: Student Agency in Assessment

Granting students' voice and choice in assessment is a powerful way to foster motivation, independence, and deeper engagement with their learning. By allowing students to select how they demonstrate their understanding, educators acknowledge and support diverse learning styles and strengths. This autonomy not only builds confidence but also encourages critical thinking and self-reflection, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

To put these ideas into practice, we have incorporated various strategies that invite students to take an active role in their assessment. One example is the use of choice boards, where students are presented with three or more assessment options and are invited to choose the one that best suits their learning style or interest. In our experience working with pre-service teachers, as well as in secondary classrooms, this approach has proven to be both feasible and effective. For instance, students could choose between designing a formal test, creating a podcast or video presentation, or writing a reflective article — all covering the same content, but through different modes of expression.

This implementation requires trust and rigorous planning. Students are taught to make choices by giving them specific strategies on how to address their choices. The idea of “leaving a topic or activity out” can become a hindrance at the level of motivation, self-monitoring, and general outcome.

Another strategy we have implemented is the Tic-Tac-Toe Test, a playful yet structured tool that offers multiple task combinations within a familiar visual format. This design empowers students to navigate their assessment path while ensuring they meet

learning objectives. The sense of control and personal relevance often results in richer, more thoughtful work and more motivated learners.

Creativity and the Surprise Effect: Reimagining Assessment Moments

1st Mid-term Choice Board

1 Designing Effective Assessments: Formal Test Creation

Design a formal EFL test for the first semester of the Didactics III course adhering to the guidelines provided in general assessment standards, covering the topics and materials studied in class.

Define context, language and content level plus test objectives and thinking skills focus. You will also have to detail criteria for scoring each section, including partial credit. Provide an answer key for objective sections and include sample answers or evaluation criteria (rubric, checklist, etc.) for subjective ones.

Evaluation criteria

- Alignment with Guidelines
- Coverage of Class Materials
- Clarity and Organization
- Quality of Test Items
- Rubric and Answer Key Reflection

All tests will be awarded a mark out of the same number of points.

Submission Requirements

Written Reflection: Must be at least 500 words.

Audio or Video Reflection: Must be between 7 and 10 minutes long.

Deadline: 15th July via mail, gabrielamarcenaro@hotmail.com or martina.silva.quartiani@gmail.com and the CREA platform as well.

2 Reflective Practice: Self-Assessment on Learning Environments

Analyze your work in the practice group through an individual self-assessment, focusing on learning opportunities and the creation of healthy educational environments.

Collaborate with a classmate to design a template for your self-assessment analysis. This step is recommended but not mandatory. The template should guide your reflection and include the following questions:

How has the group evolved since the beginning of the year?
What challenges have you faced?
How much have you learned about learning environments with your group?
What have you done to foster learning and involvement?

Write an individual reflection based on the template you prepared. Your reflection should answer all the questions outlined above.

Review the provided materials to help you think about the questions. Integrate insights from these materials into your reflection.

Evaluation criteria

- Depth of Analysis
- Clarity and Organization
- Insight and Reflection
- Integration of Materials

SCAN ME



3 EFL Insights: Podcast or Video Presentation

Create a podcast or video presentation on one of the topics covered in class. Additionally, illustrate the topic by describing a relevant situation from your practice group. Select one of the topics we have discussed in class.

The podcast or video should be between 5 to 10 minutes long. It must have an introduction where you briefly introduce the topic and its relevance to EFL teaching. The main content will discuss key points, theories, and practical applications of the topic. Summarize the main points and state the importance of the topic in the EFL classroom in the conclusion.

Include a situation from your practice group that illustrates the topic. Describe the context, explain how the topic was applied or observed in this situation and reflect on the outcomes and what was learned from this experience.

Evaluation criteria

- Content
- Depth and accuracy of the topic discussion
- Clarity and organization of the presentation
- Relevance and integration of the practical example

Gabriela Marcenaro & Martina Silva Quartiani

Creativity and surprise play a vital role in transforming assessment into a more meaningful and engaging experience. Creativity and surprise add excitement, promote higher-level thinking, and make assessments more dynamic and meaningful. When students encounter unexpected formats or are invited to engage creatively, they are more likely to connect deeply with the content,

think critically, and feel confident in expressing what they know.

This approach reduces the monotony often associated with traditional testing, encourages problem-solving, and fosters student confidence. One quote that encapsulates our philosophy is from Maya Angelou: “You can’t use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have.” We return to this idea often, using it as a compass to design assessment instruments and modes that surprise, challenge, and inspire.

Among the strategies we use is “One Minute of Glory”, a moment during or after a traditional test when students are allowed to review notes, consult with a peer, or revisit their answers before submitting. It creates a reflective space that transforms a rigid task into a learning opportunity. Another is inviting students to create a cheat sheet, but purposefully and creatively. The goal is not to cheat, but to synthesize, prioritize, and visualize content in preparation for a formal assessment. The idea of test preparation and study wraps up these activities. Some are part of the meta-assessment process of becoming responsible, creative, and autonomous. At all times, students are informed about the purpose of the different suggestions so they can take a meaningful part in the assessment experience and process.

We also engage students with creative reinterpretations of theoretical tools. For example, when teaching Bloom’s Taxonomy, we ask students to illustrate its levels using scenes from well-known series or films. This playful yet rigorous task helps solidify understanding of abstract concepts through cultural references they find meaningful. Besides, they experience that there are many “rights” in the resolution of a task.

In short, by integrating creativity and surprise into our assessment practices, we aim to shift the focus from performance to growth, helping students feel seen, challenged, and valued.

Conclusion: Reframing Assessment as Opportunity

By embracing variation, student agency, and creativity in assessment, we aim to create conditions where all learners can thrive. We recognize that our students are diverse in how they think, express, and process information. It is our responsibility as educators to design assessments that honor those differences.

We want our students to see assessment not as a barrier or a threat, but as an opportunity: an invitation to demonstrate what they know, to reflect on how they've grown, and to take pride in their journey. We hope to build assessment cultures rooted in curiosity, reflection, and trust, where learners feel challenged but also supported.

These proposals by themselves do not make a global change. All these ideas need a shift in the understanding of Assessment. They require a teacher who sees mistakes as part of a process, feels strong enough to help students overcome them, and cherishes students' efforts and results with an open mind.

Ultimately, assessment is not just about measuring achievement. It's about accompanying learners on their path — walking alongside them, co-constructing meaning, and building the confidence they need to keep learning beyond our classrooms.

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Beyond Words: Implementing SEL for Inclusive EFL Classrooms

Prof. Valeria Machines Chappe

Introduction

In today's globalized world, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms bring together learners from diverse cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds. As a result, those learning environments are evolving into more inclusive communities where empathy, connection and a sense of belonging are as important as mastering language acquisition. Within this context, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) offers a valuable framework that supports the development of emotional intelligence alongside language learning. Research has demonstrated that incorporating SEL into language education can improve learners' motivation, academic achievements and interpersonal skills while also helping to reduce anxiety and create a more positive classroom atmosphere (Dörnyei, 2009; Oxford, 2015; CASEL, 2020). Furthermore, when language instruction is integrated with social and emotional learning, it tends to deepen learner engagement and foster intercultural understanding and global citizenship (Zins et al. 2004 CASEL, 2020).

This article explores the integration of SEL strategies in inclusive EFL settings by highlighting practical classroom activities, their theoretical foundations as well as the contributions to emotional development, language learning and meaningful participation.

Social and Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as the process through which individuals acquire and apply knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, establish supportive relationships and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020). Although CASEL does not focus specifically on EFL teaching and learning, the framework can be adopted in language education to develop empathy, emotional regulation and social awareness. Moreover, inclusive learning environments can benefit from it as it caters for variety in social backgrounds, language level and emotional readiness. In addition, it has also been reported that integrating SEL skills supports learners' ability to manage their emotions and perform better academically (Burgin et al. 2023). In their article, the authors observed that role-play, peer collaboration and discussions improved students' EFL language proficiency (Burgin et al. 2023).

Considering the relevance of SEL in language education, the core competencies that CASEL presents offer valuable guidance to address the emotional and social challenges that EFL classrooms have. Those competencies are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). In EFL settings, those competencies take on vital importance as learning a new language can be emotionally demanding due to the fact that students are often afraid of making mistakes, feel misunderstood or struggle to connect with the target culture. In this way, SEL helps bridge the emotional gaps that may hinder effective learning. Thus, this approach aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which highlighted that negative emotions such as fear and anxiety raise the affective filter and make language input less accessible (Krashen, 1982).

Hands-on activities

Among the wide range of SEL strategies available, the "Two-word check-in" is a simple yet effective activity for fostering emotional awareness and classroom connection (CASEL, 2020). At the beginning of a lesson, students are encouraged to express their current feelings and emotions using two words, like for example 'curious' and 'tired'. This brief activity promotes self-awareness and emotional expression while reinforcing specific emotional vocabulary in the target language. Teachers can adapt the check-in using other aids such as visuals, sentence starters, flashcards or drawings. According to Tomlinson (2001), differentiated instruction caters for addressing different needs regarding learning styles and language proficiency.

Another engaging SEL activity involves a three-step collaborative storytelling exercise. First and foremost, students work in groups and draw a set of emojis with different emotional expressions. After exchanging drawings with another group, students label the drawings or images with an appropriate emotion. Then, in a final rotation, groups collaboratively create a story as each group member takes turns to write a sentence at a time using one of the emotions and moving the story forward, a starter can be provided to set off like "It was a ...day. Jamie felt...because..." For example, a story can go "It was a rainy day. Jamie felt sad because the soccer match was cancelled. Then his friend showed up at his house with a chocolate cake, and Jamie felt surprised. After they played video games, he felt happy and relaxed." This creative exercise reinforces emotional language and also promotes cooperation, empathy and meaningful communication in the target language. This activity also meets Diaz Maggioli's (2024) standards of language learning which highlight active participation, learners' interaction and collaboration which depart from traditional models.

Conclusion

Incorporating SEL into EFL classrooms empowers learners to connect not only with the target language, but also with themselves and their community. As it was mentioned in the article, SEL provides a powerful framework for EFL education as it addresses social, emotional and cognitive needs. Thus, it serves as a great framework to be implemented within inclusive and culturally diverse settings. All in all, it can be concluded that SEL transforms classrooms into spaces of safety, empathy and growth - beyond grammar, beyond vocabulary, beyond words!

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How to Teach the Teenage Brain

Prof. Dipl. Gabriela Arias

Introduction

“Our youth now love luxury, they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders, and they love to chatter instead of exercise. Children are now tyrants not servants of their household.”

This phrase could have been easily written last week, however surprisingly, it was said by Socrates almost 500 years BC.

Youth has been always lost for the adult world, there might be a number of reasons why this is and little answers to that question.

Fortunately, science and medicine are shedding light on the subject and have been studying how the teenage brain works regarding behaviour and knowledge processing.

As teachers we should know how the brains of our students work in different situations, not only facing cognitive development but also emotional responses. Neurocognitive science is the scope we need to address to learn about it. The reason, to improve our teaching skills, to build better rapport and to give positive feedback, among other reasons.

There are some important concepts to bear in mind. Neuron pruning is a mechanism in which the brain restructures itself to maximize its capacity and function. Throughout our lives the brain suffers two major synaptic pruning. It is at the teenage stage where the last prune takes place, being this the most important one. The teen brain has an amazing ability to adapt and respond to new experiences and situations. However, it is also very chaotic in terms of information and new knowledge organization.

Imagine you go to the supermarket and fill the cart to the top, you get back home with lots of bags and your family asks you quickly where certain products are. You know they are there, nevertheless it is difficult to know exactly in which bag you have put them. The same happens with the teenage brain when asked for something quickly. It knows the information is there, the difficulty lies in the ability to recall it as fast as it is intended to.

At this stage the brain is a beautiful chaos.

Why do we say it is chaos?

Information travels faster: The myelin sheath covering the neuron's axon is thicker at this stage, as a consequence the electric impulse is stronger than in other periods in life.

Reorganizing structures: At this stage structures formed along childhood are being reorganized, this process takes a lot of energy and time, which in some cases leads to poor cognitive performance.

Teenage brains' neuronal structures get updated and they get off-line while doing so. They are preparing to get into adult life, all these changes are adaptive from the human species, regardless of what the school system needs.

What happens in the frontal neocortex?

The frontal neocortex is the last part of the brain reaching maturity, around the age of 25. This part of the brain is in charge of the executive functions, such as, decision making, future plans and response-inhibition skills, among others. As a consequence of this pruning stage, these executive functions are altered. For instance, it is biologically impossible for teenagers to know exactly in which job area they see themselves the rest of their lives. For them, the real future is the following Saturday. When it comes to making decisions they often make the wrong ones, this is because they are learning how to foresee possible outcomes, however according to a study in 2016, they learn from mistakes more quickly than adults.

Regarding response-inhibition skills, teens' brains are highly dominated by the emotional brain, especially by the amygdala that enlarges at this stage. Teachers are frequently the target of these emotional responses.

Help! The amygdala hijacked my students!

As already expressed, the amygdala is the brain's emotional wheel, which gets bigger during adolescence. Its main function is to keep the species safe and avoid life threatening situations. Here lies the explanation to our students' overreacted emotions. This part of the brain stopped evolving 10 thousand years ago, therefore whenever students feel afraid in class, their brain reads the situation as a life-threatening one, preparing the body to defend itself. The heart starts pumping more blood to the limbs, adrenaline is segregated, lungs get bigger and are filled with more oxygen, the bloodstream to the brain is reduced; the person is now ready... to fight or flight... not to learn.

Students can feel this way when we present them challenges they are not able to achieve, that is to say they do not have the resources for that. It is necessary to point

out that students that are over-resourced facing the challenge also get into the fight or flight mode.

Magic words to avoid hijacking.... yet/ challenge /talent

The way we talk and express ourselves with our students has a great impact on their performance and self-esteem. Changing to a more positive speech is imperative to avoid the amygdala overreaction. The brain is literal, believes everything it is said to, that is why we should use words with positive connotations. For many years teachers have used two concepts to classify students characteristics, 'strengths and weaknesses'. The word 'weakness' has a negative connotation and sets the spotlight on the student, conversely 'challenge' has a positive connotation, and sets the spotlight on the situation, not the student. Furthermore, the student might feel invited to overcome a challenge.

Meanwhile 'talent' can be referred to as a strength, which needs to be worked and polished in order to continue to grow. The crowning touch in assertive language is the word 'yet', this word is as short as powerful, when using it students leave the door open to knowledge, instead of putting a full stop to it. 'You can't solve this, yet!' Definitely a mindset will be changed there.

Is my student a plant or a rock?

If we think about the characteristics plants or rocks have, we can establish a parallelism between these two objects and our students' mindsets. A rock can resemble a fixed mindset where students feel they cannot learn if they do not have the talent, see obstacles as excuses to quit or not to try, and perceive mistakes as failures. On the other hand, we have a growth mindset like plants, obstacles are used to grow challenging them to overcome them; they believe hard work can overstep talent and mistakes are seen as necessary for the learning process.

Am I a plant or a rock?

Being teachers is both an act of rebellion and an act of love, we commit our body and soul to a task that is more about caring than spreading knowledge. We are often burned out and tired of being in the spotlight for the wrong reasons. However we continue, although we have been replaced by technology we have the tools and the 'plant' within ourselves. Let's continue helping our students to grow and shape their plant and nurture their chaotic yet beautiful brains. Socrates was and will always be wrong.

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The Impact of Cooperative Learning on Student Motivation in an EFL Classroom: A Quasi-Experimental Study in Uruguay

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Abstract

This article reports the results of a study conducted in two ESL classrooms in Montevideo, Uruguay, regarding the impact of Cooperative Learning (CL) on student motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation. As the national education system moves toward a competency-based model that emphasizes active student participation, a shift in methodology is necessary to address motivational challenges. Using a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design, two eighth-grade groups were compared: one participated in a cooperative learning didactic unit, while the other followed traditional instruction. Data were collected through questionnaires, observations, cooperative notebooks, and focus groups. Results indicated that CL significantly increased students' intrinsic motivation. The most influential CL principles were individual accountability and equal participation. These findings suggest that Cooperative Learning is an effective strategy for fostering engagement in language learning contexts.

Keywords: Cooperative Learning, Motivation, English as a Second Language, Active Learning, Uruguay.

Introduction

Motivation is a vital psychological component in education, influencing the extent to which students engage with content, persist in the face of difficulties, and ultimately succeed academically (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In Uruguay, recent curricular reforms have emphasized competency-based learning, requiring more active roles from students and more participatory strategies from teachers. Traditional methodologies often fall short in this regard, leading to disengagement and a lack of motivation among many learners.

This study investigated the potential of Cooperative Learning (CL), a student-centered methodology, to increase motivation in ESL classrooms. Specifically, it explored whether CL structures positively impacted motivation when compared to traditional, teacher-centered methods.

Brief Theoretical Background

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative Learning is defined by Kagan (2003) as a structured form of group work in which students interact positively and are held accountable both individually and collectively. His framework rests on four core principles—**Positive Interdependence**, **Individual Accountability**, **Equal Participation**, and **Simultaneous Interaction**—which aim to optimize classroom collaboration.

Motivation in Education

According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), motivation exists on a continuum from extrinsic (reward-driven) to intrinsic (driven by internal satisfaction). Intrinsic motivation (IM), often associated with curiosity, mastery, and interest, is particularly critical in promoting deep, sustainable learning. However, **extrinsic motivation** should not be regarded as negative, as it can also lead to positive outcomes. Nevertheless, educational strategies that foster IM are more likely to produce committed and autonomous learners.

Research suggests that CL enhances not only academic achievement but also social interaction, self-esteem, and motivation (Slavin, 2014). The interaction-rich environment of CL supports autonomy and belonging, both key drivers of IM (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Methodology

The study employed a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design. Two eighth-grade ESL classes at a private school in Montevideo participated: one experimental group and one control group. The same teacher led both groups to ensure consistency. The sample consisted of 42 students, approximately 14 years old, evenly distributed between the two groups.

The data collection instruments included a variety of qualitative and quantitative tools aimed at capturing changes in student motivation and their perceptions of the learning experience. Pre- and post-intervention self-report motivation questionnaires were used to measure motivational levels before and after the implementation of the cooperative and traditional learning didactic units.

Throughout the intervention, students in the experimental group maintained weekly cooperative notebooks, where they reflected on group dynamics, roles, and personal engagement. Additionally, peer and self-assessment tools provided insight into individual accountability and team functioning. Classroom observations—both participant and non-participant—allowed the researcher to gather contextual information on student interactions and behaviors in real time. Finally, focus groups

with selected students from both the experimental and control groups offered deeper qualitative data on student experiences and perspectives regarding the different teaching methodologies.

Triangulation was used to validate findings, combining quantitative data (questionnaires) with qualitative insights (observations, focus groups, and student reflections).

Results

Post-intervention questionnaires revealed a significant increase in motivation levels in the experimental group. Specifically:

- 91% of students reported having helped a peer when they struggled with a task.
- 82% felt supported by peers during difficult tasks.
- 68.2% agreed that all team members contributed equally.

Student reflections and focus group responses suggested that CL activities fostered a sense of belonging, relevance, and responsibility. Several students who were previously disengaged became more involved due to the interactive and supportive nature of CL structures.

One student stated:

"If no one depended on me, I wouldn't do anything. But if someone's relying on me, I want to help them succeed." (Student 1, Experimental Group)

Another reflected on team dynamics:

"If someone always works hard, I'll work harder too. But if someone never does anything, it's hard to care." (Student 2, Experimental Group)

The findings align with existing literature suggesting that CL fosters motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, by promoting autonomy, peer support, and a sense of purpose. The most impactful principles were **individual accountability** and **equal participation**, both of which contributed to increased student ownership and equity in classroom engagement.

The role of **positive interdependence** in building a collaborative classroom culture was highlighted by the participant students, as well as the principle of **simultaneous interaction** in sustaining student attention and participation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Cooperative Learning significantly enhanced student motivation in the experimental group, particularly by increasing intrinsic motivation.

The structured interaction and peer support inherent in CL promoted not only academic success but also emotional engagement.

As Uruguay's educational reforms continue to emphasize student-centered learning, Cooperative Learning offers a compelling strategy for teachers seeking to foster meaningful, lasting motivation.

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Small-Group Cultural Presentations: Fostering Oral Production and Interaction in the Foreign Language Classroom

Prof. Luciana Castro

During my recent experience as a Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) teaching Spanish at the University of Arkansas, I implemented a simple yet effective classroom practice suggested by the Spanish Department, aimed at promoting oral production, encouraging peer interaction, and integrating cultural content into foreign language teaching. This strategy, which can be easily adapted to educational contexts in Uruguay, requires the use of short cultural presentations in small groups. The teaching practice aligns with communicative language teaching (CLT), (Richards, 2006). Furthermore, the approach takes into account Krashen's (1982) *Affective Filter Hypothesis*, which suggests that reducing learners' stress can significantly enhance language acquisition.

What does the practice involve?

At the end of each thematic unit, students prepare a brief (3-minute) presentation at home on a cultural topic related to the unit—such as a tradition, holiday, typical food, or social custom. These presentations are delivered in class, not in front of the entire group, but in trios. This structure creates a low-stress environment, promotes active listening, and increases participation.

Each round includes time for interaction: the two peers listening to the presentation must ask questions or request clarification. This follow-up stage fosters spontaneous language use and meaningful communication. The teacher observes and takes notes on recurring vocabulary, pronunciation issues, or unclear phrasing, which later inform targeted whole-class feedback. Moreover, teachers can take notes of interesting or curious culture information the students share in order to repeat it for the whole class, highlighting the cultural emphasis of the practice.

Digital follow-up and reflection

To extend the activity beyond the classroom, students post a short written summary of their presentation on a collaborative digital platform (e.g., Padlet) and comment on at least one peer's post. This encourages written production, intercultural reflection, and the use of technology for authentic communication.

Observed outcomes

Beyond the immediate goal of practicing vocabulary and grammar in context, this practice helped students:

- Build confidence in speaking.
- Reduce anxiety commonly associated with whole-class presentations.
- Engage with diverse cultural perspectives.
- Develop linguistic, sociocultural, and intercultural competence.

Adaptability in the Uruguayan context

This teaching strategy can be adapted for primary, secondary, or teacher training classrooms in Uruguay. It is suitable for various proficiency levels and curriculum themes, and can be implemented in face-to-face, virtual, or hybrid formats.

Final thoughts

Fostering oral communication and interaction through cultural understanding not only strengthens students' language skills, but also helps cultivate empathy and openness. Language education can—and should—serve as a powerful tool for building bridges across cultures, identities, and perspectives.

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Fostering Written and Spoken Communication

Prof. Sandra García Argañaraz

Interaction is a fundamental aspect of any learning process. However, many students in state middle schools in Uruguay remain reluctant to communicate in English. So, how can Uruguayan English teachers motivate their learners to engage in their second language? Here, I will describe an inspiring interdisciplinary and inter-institutional project aimed at fostering communication among students.

To create and execute a project lasting nine months, collaborative tasks are essential. Prof. Carolina Bentancur, an English teacher at Cardona middle school in Soriano province, and I, Prof. Sandra García, who worked at Liceo N°. 18 in Montevideo, Uruguay's capital city, during 2023, connected to plan and organize this initiative. We agreed on a primary goal: to enhance communication in English among teenagers from two state middle schools—one in Montevideo and another in Cardona, a small city in the southwest. Our overarching aim was to develop students' communication skills, relationship-building, and critical thinking.

The project kicked off with a virtual introduction between students. Before the first contact, they downloaded the Bitmoji app to create avatars, which they then uploaded to the CREA platform. They also provided personal information, such as their names, where they live, and where they study. Even though this initial task was completed in March, students continue to engage through the platform's forum.

One of the first coordinated tasks involved a quiz titled “*How green are you?*” from the #LivingUruguay3 book. After taking the quiz in English class, students worked with statistics in Maths lessons to analyze results and compare their realities on the CREA platform.

In an incredible interdisciplinary effort during the Eco-Awareness thematic unit for 8th graders, students collaborated across subjects. In Science, they researched national organizations focused on flora and fauna. In Computing Studies, they created posters with essential information, including the organization's name, founding date, mission, and other relevant details. During English lessons, students exchanged posters and left comments or questions on each other's work. Additionally, they produced videos about global warming, collaborating with Computing Studies teachers to share and discuss their creations on the CREA platform.

During the Eating Habits thematic unit, students had the opportunity to collaborate again, exchanging recipes with peers from the other high school. They shared both written recipes and instructional videos.

For the History Makers thematic unit, we coordinated with the History teacher. In English lessons, students created word clouds to identify global and uruguayan historical figures. They then researched Uruguayan history makers and, as a mid-course test, wrote letters from the perspective of historical figures during the conquest. These letters were exchanged between students in Montevideo and Cardona through the postal system.

In November, we organized a face-to-face meeting in Cardona, bringing 50 students from Montevideo to interact with their peers. This was a memorable experience for everyone involved. After a warm welcome, students participated in activities designed to foster connections, such as creating crosswords with their names and solving a wordsearch with historical terms they had studied.

Montevideo students taught Cardona students how to download and use the digital game Dragon Box for math learning, while Cardona students introduced Montevideo students to Rendez Vous Estudiantil, Cardona middle school's main spring festival. Roles were reversed, and Montevideo students shared insights about the city's history based on information gathered during a mini-tour.

We concluded our visit with a tour of Cardona, exploring "*La Lata Vieja*" museum, the area's first '*pulpería*', and an open-air museum dedicated to tango, before returning to the capital city.

In summary, Uruguayan English teachers can achieve remarkable results in motivating students by embracing collaborative and interdisciplinary projects. Taking risks and fostering communication can lead to incredible learning experiences. So, take the plunge—your students will thank you!

What Makes Us Human? A Phenomenal Journey Through Eight Minds. A first big step towards Pheno-Based Learning

Prof. Walter Farías

This PhBL (Pheno-Based Learning) project occurred suddenly, quite unexpectedly if you allow me appreciation. About a month and a half ago, I walked into the class, and I realized the biology teacher had not cleaned the board, something she would normally do, so I started reading the board and I noticed the title “The Human Being” followed by thought-provoking questions, such as ‘How can you define the human being?’, ‘Is there only one way to approach this question?’, and some key words were also highlighted with dark blue colour like ‘psychological’, ‘biological’, ‘emotions’ and ‘socio-cultural’. Immerse in my own thoughts I began wandering: “I have seen all this before, but where?” In a matter of seconds, I remember our manual for sixth graders #Living Uruguay 6 and the thematic unit Being Human. I immediately messaged Leticia, the biology teacher, to tell her about a crazy nice idea I had got about designing a project for this group, and from that simple exchange of messages, the project began to take shape. We are now eight teachers burning the midnight oil to design an unprecedented project in Uruguay to benefit students’ learning as it clearly places the student at the centre of it.

PhBL was first introduced in 2016 in Finland as part of the national curriculum reform. It seeks to foster critical thinking skills, autonomy and agency in students, while facing real world challenges. For a PhBL learning experience to be possible, it is necessary for teachers, even if it is from students much better, to think of an inquiry question as open ended as possible so to be approached from multiple angles, in our case the eight disciplines. Students from a 3rd grade EMS (‘Educación Media Superior’) at Liceo N°. 43, Rincón del Cerro, will embark on an interdisciplinary project called “What Makes Us Human” and arrive at some plausible conclusions on what defines the human being and how this question can be approached from different perspectives to finally hold a debate, which will be their end-of-term test in November.

Steps towards an Inclusive Education: The Role of a Teaching Assistant for a Blind English Educator

Prof. Juan Pablo Teske

Introduction

Standing at the front of a classroom, balancing patience, knowledge, and endless challenges, proves that teaching is not just a job; it is a test of heart, vocation and resilience every single day. However, have you ever thought about how you would teach if you lost your ability to see? Camila Duran is one of the first, if not the first, blind English teacher in Uruguay. She has learned how to adapt what the theoretical books say in order to be able to deliver suitable and accurate English lessons. However, there are certain pedagogical decisions, such as board organisation, seating arrangement, or the implementation of visual aids, that are more difficult than others. In this need to provide students with the elements mentioned before, improving both the teacher and students' experience, a new role emerges between a teacher assistant and an English teacher. This article aims to analyse some quintessential aspects of this new role, such as communication, previous organisation, and the boundaries between the new role and the teacher from my experience and point of view.



Image 1. From left to right: Andrea Joyce, Camila Duran, Fabiana Zilli and Juan Pablo Teske. Professional teaching team involved in the course presented in the article.

N/B Taken by the author (2024).

Communication

As in every aspect of life, communication stands for the foundation of a successful experience. In this particular case, communication was the thread that pulled all the parts of the teaching, co-teaching, and assisting experience together.

First of all, being able to communicate needs. Both the teacher and the teacher's assistant will have different needs along the process that would not be the same as the ones I had in my experience. For this, being able to comfortably communicate with them, aiming for assertive communication and a problem-solving attitude will improve the experience for both the teacher and the teaching assistant. Also, in this communication of needs, there should be a space for the setting of clear boundaries between both roles in the classroom.

Second, being synchronised. As teachers, there are different requests or unforeseen situations that must be faced by us, one way or the other. Therefore, the way of answering must be the same, and for that to happen, both the teacher and the teacher assistant must communicate effectively and successfully beforehand, setting clear patterns of action. Moreover, the allowances and prohibitions of the classroom should be clear, and the way of facing rule-breaking attitudes should be set from the first moment. As well as the case previously mentioned, things like allowing students to go to the toilet when they request, authorising students to use their electronic devices or dealing with misbehaviours are decisions that must be taken spontaneously and naturally. Therefore, a clear course of action, or a set of guidelines, for these types of situations should be discussed beforehand so that the teacher and the teacher assistant can act as one and the rules of the classroom will remain the same no matter who the students ask or who needs to face the situation.

Finally, working as a team. There are many things that communication can achieve, but teamwork is especially important. Teamwork in this scenario means feeling comfortable with asking for help, not knowing something and asking each other, feeling included in a low-risk context. In this sense, the teacher and teacher assistant should build up a learning environment where both can rely on each other and know that if one falls, the other has his or her back.

Previous organisation

A second exemplary aspect to be considered is the previous organisation of the different lessons. Even though planning is a teacher's matter, teacher assistants must plan some things in order to get the best results from the lessons. In every classroom, we have different kinds of students, from visual to kinesthetic, each of them demanding and needing different adaptations to make learning a meaningful experience. In that sense, one of the most important factors of this teaching experience is to plan and

coordinate how to address these needs from a position that does not overshadow the teachers' work and that does not take a starring role in the classroom.

Another important feature to be planned with anticipation is the implementation of visual aids and board organisation. The implementation of visual aids in the EFL classroom is more than a usual practice. However, for a blind teacher, this represents a hard-to-achieve challenge. In this scenario the teacher assistant should have reviewed the lesson plan in advance and planned how to implement the visual aids successfully so that students can take as much profit from those aids as possible, this also needs effective communication with the teacher, since he or she is who plans how to integrate the visual aids so that it fits best in the activity taking place at the moment. Moreover, a similar issue arises with board organisation: it is inappropriate for the teacher to dictate content to the teacher assistant during the lesson. The information to be written on the board should be discussed, shared, and planned in advance, so that it emerges naturally from the teacher assistant as the teacher delivers the lesson.

Equally important, the teaching and correction of writing and spelling rely on both the teacher and the teaching assistant. Blind teachers can teach and correct spelling on their own without the need for a teacher assistant. However, it is a highly time-consuming process since, in order to correct spelling, for instance, students have to dictate letter by letter each word so that the teacher is able to check if it is correct or not. In this sense, the teacher and teacher assistant may choose to share this responsibility so that the teacher assistant is able to streamline the process by correcting any spelling mistakes that can be present in students' writing.

Additionally, when working on the macro skill of writing, it is possible to co-teach: the teacher can focus on the more theoretical aspects such as coherence, structure, and formality; while the teacher assistant can address more practical elements like working with language chunks, providing examples of written compositions, and exploring various discursive genres.

Boundaries

First and foremost, establishing clear boundaries between the two roles is essential to maintaining professional integrity and personal well-being, as it prevents role confusion, fosters efficiency, and promotes healthier interactions. Something that can be confusing is that in order to be a blind English teacher assistant, you should have some knowledge about teaching English, and you must have knowledge about the language. However, this does not mean that you are going to take the role of the English teacher in the classroom unless it is needed. Therefore, setting boundaries between the responsibilities of each role is important to avoid confusion about who is who. Students may get confused about the presence of two "teachers" in the classroom and may start asking questions, expecting both to teach, explain, give instructions, and manage the

classroom and this is not the idea. This first experience has shown that the more students understand the difference between the two roles, the more comfortable they feel.

Moreover, the boundaries that are established also help the teacher and the teacher assistant work more efficiently and in a more coordinated manner, as they are aware of who is responsible for assisting certain situations and what to expect from one another.

Another feature that is enlightened by having clear boundaries is efficiency. Clear boundaries ensure that each individual knows their specific duties, such as the teacher focusing on lesson planning and content delivery, while the assistant handles organisational tasks like managing materials, supporting students with specific needs, or organising the board and visual aids. This division of labour minimizes overlap and confusion, enabling both educators to work cohesively without redundancies. Both educators are professionals, and so by clearly outlining roles and duties, they are able to tap into their fullest potential, thus improving the quality of the class as well as working together better.

Finally, setting boundaries promotes healthier interactions by fostering mutual respect and clarity in the relationship. Clearly defined roles reduce misunderstandings and help avoid potential conflicts over tasks or decision-making situations. Boundaries allow the teacher and the teacher assistant to understand their scope of responsibility and to act accordingly without overlapping with their colleague. Therefore, respecting the boundaries set previously encourages open and respectful communication, ensuring that both individuals feel valued and heard. Moreover, the setting of boundaries also promotes healthier interactions with students by providing consistency in their roles and expectations. For instance, when students have a specific need, they will know who to approach, whether it is for academic inquiries or for any other kind of support needed.

Conclusion

All things considered, the role of a teacher assistant who works with a blind English teacher is enhanced by communication, the division of tasks and a clear set of boundaries. The principal aim and scope of responsibility of the teacher assistant is to support the blind English teacher in those activities that are harder to achieve or complete without the ability to see, such as the implementation of visual aids, the organisation of the classroom and classroom management. These two roles are interdependent since the aim of the assistant is to support the teacher and, for this to happen successfully, the teacher needs to support and communicate with the assistant. When the roles are clearly defined and the areas to be managed by each educator are set in place, both educators are able to focus on their pedagogical duties,

therefore improving the teaching experience using both their expertise to get the best out of their lessons. This new role, created to integrate blind professionals into education, is key in the area of diversity and needs further research, but it is a big step on the right path to enable blind people the right to work as professional educators.

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Construyendo Aulas Inclusivas: Estrategias para el abordaje de la Discapacidad Visual

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Introducción: Diversidad, Derechos y el propósito de la Inclusión

En las aulas actuales, la diversidad no es una excepción, sino una realidad cotidiana. Esta realidad nos interpela constantemente, invitándonos a repensar nuestras prácticas y a construir entornos educativos donde cada estudiante se sienta valorado y parte integral. Hablar de educación inclusiva es, fundamentalmente, hablar de derechos. Es reconocer la heterogeneidad de cada persona como un valor y que el sistema educativo debe garantizar su participación plena y equitativa en todos los ámbitos de la vida escolar: la cultura institucional, el currículo y la comunidad educativa.

Este artículo invita a reflexionar sobre los desafíos y posibilidades que implica construir aulas inclusivas, con un enfoque particular en el abordaje de la discapacidad visual. A través del análisis de estrategias pedagógicas y prácticas concretas, se busca aportar herramientas que fortalezcan una educación que no sólo incluya, sino que valore activamente la diversidad como un motor de transformación educativa.

La Educación Inclusiva: un compromiso con los Derechos y la Participación

La educación inclusiva es un proceso continuo que busca aumentar la participación de los estudiantes y reducir su exclusión en todos los aspectos de la vida escolar: la cultura, los currículos y las comunidades educativas. De acuerdo con Tony Booth y Mel Ainscow (2002), la verdadera inclusión no es un objetivo puntual sino que implica un compromiso constante con la equidad y la participación de todos.

En las aulas actuales, la diversidad de los estudiantes es una realidad ineludible que interpela nuestras prácticas cotidianas. Pero, ¿qué ocurre cuando esa diversidad irrumpe de forma inesperada y pone en tensión incluso nuestras planificaciones? En esos momentos, la improvisación y la búsqueda de respuestas inmediatas resultan necesarias en el momento, sin embargo, también se revela con claridad la urgencia de contar con marcos pedagógicos más sólidos, flexibles y sensibles a la complejidad del aula.

La inclusión no debe entenderse únicamente como una reacción ante lo imprevisto, sino como una estrategia consciente de anticipación y diseño intencional. Implica

crear propuestas que reconozcan, valoren y respondan a las múltiples formas de aprender, de expresarse y de participar. Más que adaptarse sobre la marcha, se trata de planificar desde el inicio con la diversidad en mente, construyendo ambientes que habiliten la presencia, la participación y el aprendizaje de todos y todas.

El Diseño Universal de Aprendizaje (DUA): una brújula para la Inclusión

Las soluciones inmediatas son cruciales, pero para construir aulas verdaderamente inclusivas, necesitamos un marco que guíe nuestra planificación. El Diseño Universal de Aprendizaje (DUA) es precisamente esa brújula. Este marco educativo busca eliminar barreras, proporcionando un enfoque flexible que se adapta a las diversas necesidades de los estudiantes.

El DUA promueve la creación de entornos educativos accesibles para todos, ofreciendo diferentes formas de presentar la información, expresarse y comprometerse con el aprendizaje. Su objetivo principal es garantizar que cada estudiante, independientemente de sus habilidades, estilos de aprendizaje o contextos culturales, tenga las mismas oportunidades de éxito. Se fundamenta en la idea de que no existe un único método de enseñanza que funcione para todos, y propone la diversificación de las estrategias didácticas para un aprendizaje más inclusivo y efectivo.

Los tres principios fundamentales del DUA son:

- Representación: ofrecer diversos modos de presentar la información (visual, auditiva, táctil, etc.).
- Acción y Expresión: proporcionar múltiples formas para que los estudiantes demuestren su conocimiento y aprendizaje (oral, escrita, digital, práctica, etc.).
- Implicación: buscar motivar y mantener el interés de los estudiantes, promoviendo aprendizajes significativos a través de opciones, desafíos y colaboración.

Estrategias prácticas para el aula inclusiva

Más allá de los principios teóricos, existen estrategias concretas que podemos implementar en nuestra práctica diaria para construir aulas más inclusivas para estudiantes con ceguera o baja visión:

- Ubicación estratégica: ubicar al alumno cerca del pizarrón, preferentemente en el medio, incluso si su visión no le permite verlo desde su lugar, para facilitar la interacción y el acceso al sonido. En algunos casos, los estudiantes tienen más facilidad para ver el pizarrón con un ojo en particular, por lo que la interacción

con el estudiante y consultarle en qué lugar le queda más cómodo ver la pizarra será clave para que se sienta más a gusto.

- Gestión de la iluminación: considerar la luminosidad del salón para evitar brillos o incomodidad visual. Es fundamental conversar con el estudiante sobre sus preferencias.
- Tiempo extendido: otorgar más tiempo para la realización de tareas.
- Material impreso adaptado: proporcionar material o actividades impresas con el tamaño y tipo de letra correspondientes según la necesidad del estudiante.
- Verbalización constante: verbalizar lo que se escribe o muestra en el pizarrón.
- Uso de marcadores: utilizar marcadores de color negro y bien cargados para mayor contraste.
- Registro visual: permitir sacar fotos del pizarrón y ofrecer ayuda para asegurar que la imagen sea clara, enfocada, legible y pertinente.
- Comunicación continua: chequear regularmente con el estudiante el tamaño y tipo de letra que le faciliten la lectura, ya que su situación visual puede variar. Algunos estudiantes con baja visión se sienten más cómodos con la letra imprenta mayúscula.
- Flexibilidad en evaluaciones: en asignaturas que involucran medidas, trazados o gráficos, evaluar lo conceptual y procedimental, sin hacer énfasis en la exactitud de las medidas o la prolijidad de los trazados.
- Recursos de apoyo: recordar que todos los materiales de cualquier asignatura pueden ser enviados a Centros de Recursos para estudiantes con Discapacidad Visual, especializados para su adaptación. Estos materiales adaptados son propiedad del estudiante y lo acompañarán en su trayectoria educativa.

Además de estas estrategias específicas dirigidas a estudiantes con discapacidad visual, es importante recordar que el DUA nos invita a pensar la enseñanza desde una perspectiva que contemple la diversidad de todo el alumnado. Este enfoque promueve la creación de propuestas accesibles y flexibles desde el inicio, en lugar de realizar adaptaciones posteriores.

Por ejemplo, el uso de herramientas digitales para presentar la información en distintos formatos, la posibilidad de grabar las clases —tanto como recurso de repaso para reforzar conceptos clave como forma de registro accesible—, o el diseño de proyectos colaborativos que habiliten distintos roles y formas de participación, son estrategias alineadas con el DUA que benefician a todos los estudiantes, no solo a aquellos con necesidades específicas.

Reflexiones finales: la Inclusión como motor de transformación educativa

Apostar por la inclusión en educación más allá de ser un imperativo ético, representa una inversión en el futuro de nuestra sociedad. Las aulas inclusivas benefician a todos los estudiantes:

- *Es un derecho fundamental:* La inclusión garantiza que todos los estudiantes tengan acceso a una educación de calidad, un derecho inalienable que el sistema educativo debe asegurar.
- *Fomenta la Ciudadanía Inclusiva y Reduce el estigma y la discriminación:* la educación inclusiva prepara a los estudiantes para vivir y prosperar en un mundo diverso. Al integrar a personas con diversidad funcional desde temprana edad, el aula se convierte en un espacio vital donde se desarticulan prejuicios y estereotipos. Los estudiantes aprenden a desarrollar la empatía, respeto y colaboración, valorando las diferencias como fortalezas, lo que contribuye directamente a la formación de ciudadanos que promueven una sociedad más justa y equitativa.
- *Promueve un Sentido de Comunidad y Pertenencia:* cuando cada estudiante se siente valorado y parte integral de la clase, se fortalece significativamente el sentido de comunidad y pertenencia. Esto crea un ambiente de aprendizaje más positivo y seguro, donde los estudiantes se sienten cómodos para participar, pedir ayuda y apoyar a sus compañeros, sentando las bases para relaciones sociales sólidas.
- *Enriquece el aprendizaje:* todos los estudiantes se benefician de aprender unos de otros, de distintas perspectivas y formas de entender el mundo. Al buscar soluciones para las necesidades de todos los estudiantes, los docentes se ven impulsados a explorar nuevas metodologías y recursos didácticos. Esto lleva a un enriquecimiento general de las prácticas de enseñanza que beneficia a toda la clase, no solo a aquellos con necesidades específicas. Se promueve un ambiente de aprendizaje más dinámico y creativo.
- *Desarrolla la resiliencia y la adaptabilidad:* las aulas inclusivas exponen a los estudiantes a diferentes formas de pensar, aprender y comunicarse. Esta exposición los ayuda a desarrollar una mayor capacidad para adaptarse a situaciones diversas y a resolver problemas de forma creativa, habilidades esenciales en un mundo en constante cambio.

Y sobre todo, es nuestra responsabilidad como docentes movilizarnos para detectar e intentar acabar con las barreras que impiden a nuestros estudiantes aprender.

Construir aulas inclusivas para estudiantes con discapacidad visual, y para todos los estudiantes, es un camino que nos desafía a repensar nuestras prácticas, a innovar y a crecer profesionalmente. La implementación efectiva de la educación inclusiva

trasciende las estrategias individuales del aula. Requiere una colaboración docente activa, donde el intercambio de experiencias y el aprendizaje mutuo enriquezcan las prácticas pedagógicas. Asimismo, el apoyo institucional es fundamental para proporcionar los recursos necesarios, la capacitación continua y un marco que valide y potencie el esfuerzo de los educadores, transformando las aulas en espacios verdaderamente equitativos para todos. Al hacerlo, no solo transformamos la vida de nuestros alumnos, sino que también contribuimos a la construcción de una sociedad más justa y equitativa.

"La inclusión no es llevar a las personas a lo que ya existe; es crear nuevos y mejores espacios para todos." - George Dei

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