Champion Teachers Mexico:
Stories of Exploratory Action Research
Edited by Paula Rebolledo and Deborah Bullock

BRITISH COUNCIL

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FOREWORD

Kevin Mackenzie,
British Council Country Director Mexico

This book is the result of a year's work by a group of teachers working in public schools across the length and breadth of Mexico. What they have done is extraordinary. For the first time in Mexico, teachers in the public education system have been gaining insights into their classrooms under the guidance of experts in the field and reporting them in a systematic way. Their experiences should be illuminating to anyone connected with the profession, and as such these ground-breaking, dedicated professionals truly deserve the title 'Champion Teachers'.

The British Council's Champion Teachers programme can be traced back to January 2013 in Santiago, Chile, when Dr Richard Smith of the University of Warwick first introduced the concept of Exploratory Action Research (EAR) to a group of Chilean teachers of English. EAR is a process through which teachers discover what works or doesn't work in their classroom through undertaking research among their students. This helps teachers understand why what they do is successful (or not) and adapt their teaching accordingly. As such carrying out EAR helps teachers become more reflective and critically minded and enables them to make their own, informed decisions. In late 2016 the programme was launched in Peru and then in 2018 it began in Mexico, with Mexico benefitting by adapting the by now well-established methodology to its own particular context.

This first cohort of Champion Teachers in Mexico have researched everything from motivation to classroom management, from materials to skills development.

Their whole-hearted commitment to the programme has enabled them to implement change in the classroom based on a professional, academic approach that suits their context and challenges. Informed and empowered teachers foster children's creative, critical and innovative minds, helping ultimately to improve the quality of national education and contribute to a prosperous, open and democratic society. As their awareness has grown so, visibly, has their confidence, and some of them are now preparing to act as mentors for the second cohort.

Nine of their stories have been selected for this book while two have been chosen for a separate publication consisting of stories from across Chile, Peru, Colombia and Mexico. We would like to express our appreciation for all of the partners and stakeholders that have helped make the programme the success it's been. These include Dr Paula Rebolledo, mentor, trainer and co-author, with Dr Richard Smith, of A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research (British Council, 2018), headteachers, the Ministry of Education in Mexico and of course the teachers themselves.

I'm sure you will find these accounts useful as a means of understanding both EAR and the challenges teachers face every day. I hope you will also be inspired to undertake Exploratory Action Research in your own classroom. For further information on the British Council's Champion Teachers programme in Mexico please visit *https://www.britishcouncil.org.mx/champion-teachers.*

Figure 1. Champion Teachers Mexico, first cohort, February 2019

INTRODUCTION

Paula Rebolledo, Deborah Bullock and Julieta Jiménez

English language teaching in Mexico

English as a foreign language is a compulsory subject in basic education (preschool, primary and secondary levels) and teachers use a national study programme as reference called *Programa Nacional de Inglés* (PRONI). The programme dictates that all students must have three English classes per week; at preschool and primary these should be 50 minutes, at secondary 40-45 minutes each. However, this may vary depending on the school's programme. The Champion Teachers whose stories are included in this publication have reported teaching between two and five 60-minute lessons each week to as many as six different groups of students, which means that on average, they teach between 9 and 20 hours a week. But then, these working hours may be doubled when working in more than one school, as is usually the case.

The teachers who participated in the CT programme come from twelve different states around Mexico (see Figure 6) and work in primary, secondary and preparatory schools in the public sector. Class sizes in the public sector also vary from 11 to 42 students (see Figure 2 for an example of a typical classroom in Mexico). The contexts where they work differ a great deal from each other. Whereas in some, the resources available are appropriate to achieve the programme goals, in others, these may be limited or non-existent. For instance, not all schools have internet access or computer labs, and although all students are entitled to textbooks, not all receive them.

English teachers in Mexico do not need to have a degree in English language teaching to work in the school system. Many of them may have a degree in education or may have taken a short teacher training course. Consequently, some teachers struggle when planning their lessons. What is more, many of them have low levels of English language proficiency so they experience various difficulties when teaching English. Even though teachers have expressed a need for access to professional development that would bridge this methodological and linguistic gap in their training, they are usually only offered short training sessions provided by their school authorities which are rarely focused on English language teaching.

The Champion Teachers programme

Figure 2. Patricia Valderrama's classroom

The Champion Teachers programme started in Chile in 2013 as a form of professional development for teachers of English working at public schools. It was initiated to support teachers in the design and implementation of small-scale research projects in their own settings whereby they could understand their learners and explore their teaching through the collection of evidence. This exploration process would then result in action points to make improvements. Thus, via Exploratory Action Research (EAR) – the approach used – teachers would be able to make informed decisions about their teaching to influence their students' learning.

To that end, the programme called for, and continues to call for, volunteer teachers working in state and state-funded schools to take part in a three-phase process to carry out such research projects. In the first phase, teachers participate in an initial workshop where they learn the basic principles of Exploratory Action Research[1]. During this workshop, teachers reflect on their own classroom situations and identify successes, challenges or 'puzzles' that they wish to explore further and address. Subsequently, the programme enters its second phase which consists of an online mentoring process where teachers receive the support of near-peer mentors (peers with experience in EAR) who support them for approximately five months to carry out their EAR projects. The mentoring process is based on collegial dialogue, active listening, constructive feedback and emotional support where mentors take teachers through the different steps of exploratory action research as indicated in the following table:

_____

1. For more information about Exploratory Action Research, see A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research (2018) by Richard Smith and Paula Rebolledo.

Week	EAR Stage	Actions
1	Planning to explore	Initial contact mentors-mentees
2		Narrowing research questions
3		Designing tools
4		
5	Exploring	Applying tools
6		
7	Analysing and reflecting	Analysing data
8		
9	Planning to change	Analysing data/Designing action plan
10		
11	Acting	Implementing action plan
12		
13		
14	Observing	Evaluating action plan
15		
16	Reflecting	Conclusions

Finally, the third and last stage of the process involves a closing meeting where Champion Teachers gather to share their projects through poster presentations. They also give each other feedback and later write their final reports assisted by a recording of their own presentation.

Although since 2013, the programme has been in constant evolution due to its flexible design, the three main phases described above, have remained unchanged. The programme has maintained the mentoring process as its backbone and as a result of their experiences, both mentors and mentees have reported an increase in reflective attitudes, stronger student-teacher relationships and an increased sense of teaching efficacy. The positive appraisal of the programme led to its expansion to Peru in 2017, where 54 Champion Teachers have since finalised their EAR and it is now in its third iteration, Colombia in 2018 with the participation of 27 teachers, and most recently Mexico.

Champion Teachers Mexico

Figure 3. Initial EAR workshop, August 2018

The Champion Teachers Mexico programme was launched in August 2018 with an initial workshop in Mexico City, which a total of 29 teachers attended. During the two-day event, teachers reflected on their classroom situations and identified their main area of concern by drafting a brief EAR proposal. Based on this proposal, Champion Teachers entered the second phase of the programme with the support of their mentors. As this was the first year of the programme in Mexico, three experienced mentors from Chile were requested to assist their Mexican colleagues. These mentors had already carried out their own EAR and had also mentored teachers for the programme in Chile, Peru and Colombia. With the assistance of these mentors, Champion Teachers went through the stages of EAR detailed above and engaged in processes where they reflected on their practices and their students' learning, designed data collection tools, analysed the information obtained, designed an action plan and evaluated final results.

A total of 22 Mexican teachers completed all the stages of the process and finalised their classroom-based research projects. As indicated in the table below their areas of interest were varied although the development of skills seemed to be a main concern.

Summary of projects

	Name	Main topic	Students' level	Location
1	Daniela Avilés Pérez	Motivation	Primary	Ciudad de México
2	Regina Corona Gala	Reading	Primary	Yucatán
3	Martha de La Cruz Quintero	Classroom Management	Secondary	Sayula, Jalisco
4	Elizabeth Espinoza Carballo	Attitude/Motivation	Primary	Huatulco, Oaxaca
5	Aline Gómez Luviano	Speaking	Secondary	Estado de México
6	Ana Herrera Benavides	Vocabulary	Secondary	Puebla
7	Teresa Juárez Ballinas	Classroom Management	Primary	Puebla
8	Edna López Jimenez	Motivation	Primary	Tamaulipas
9	Gabriela López Rivera	Writing	Secondary	Veracruz
10	Olaf Morales Barrales	Technology	Primary	Baja California Sur
11	Martha Pérez García	Motivation	Primary	Baja California Sur
12	Ana Lilia Rodríguez Zamora	Classroom Management	Primary	Guanajuato
13	Omar Rugerio Pineda	Speaking	Secondary	Estado de México
14	Claudia Sánchez Bravo	Writing	Secondary	Estado de México
15	Rossana Sánchez Conejo	Motivation	Secondary	Guanajuato
16	Dulce Sánchez Zapata	Listening	Primary	Mérida, Yucatán
17	Patricia Valderrama Morones	Motivation	Secondary	Ciudad de México
18	Cruz Vázquez Domínguez	Vocabulary	Secondary	Veracruz
19	Dulce Vázquez Franco	Materials	Primary	Hidalgo
20	Rafael Velasco Argente	Speaking	Preparatory	Quintana Roo
21	Ana Fabiola Velasco Argente	Reading	Preparatory	Quintana Roo
22	Claudia Zavala González	Speaking	Secondary	Estado de México

For the final phase of the programme, the 22 teachers identified above gathered in February 2019 to share their experiences. In order to do this, they prepared a brief summary of the process and designed a poster illustrating the different actions carried out, the information collected, and the conclusions reached. These posters were used to support a 5-minute presentation. This presentation was recorded and subsequently used by teachers themselves to write their final report. This innovative process of report writing[2], allowed teachers to write their research in a less threatening way, using their own language to describe it.

Additionally, three champion teachers had the opportunity to share their projects with a broader audience at the BBELT conference[3] a few days prior to the closing meeting. In sum, the Champion Teachers in Mexico showed commitment to their own professional development and their participation in the programme. They used their own resources and personal time to improve and make a difference.

Figure 4. Rafael Velasco presenting his EAR to his peers

2. For more information of this process, see 'By teachers for teachers': innovative, teacher-friendly publishing of practitioner research' by Richard Smith, Deborah Bullock, Paula Rebolledo and Andrea Robles López (2016), in English Language Teacher Education and Development (ELTED) Journal 20: 116–125.

3. The BBELT (Best of British English Language Teaching) conference is an annual conference organised by the British Council in Mexico City. This conference gathers over 1,000 ELT professionals working in different educational settings in Mexico.

The purpose of this book

Two years after the start of the programme in Chile, teachers expressed a need to see examples that would illustrate the different stages of EAR and the actions carried out. It was then that the first collection of stories came out – *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* (Rebolledo, Smith & Bullock 2016). This collection proved to be highly useful during the initial workshops of subsequent programmes to allow teachers to see written examples of EAR, and also during the mentoring process to see samples of the data collection methods used. However, the Stories book has also been used outside the Champion Teachers programme, mostly by teacher educators in need of case studies of teacher research, both from the region and further afield. In addition, the *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (Smith & Rebolledo 2018) was published to be used in tandem with the Stories and provide further support to those interested in carrying out and promoting EAR as a form of teacher research.

Given the usefulness of the publication as a testament to teacher research in school contexts and as material for the learning of EAR, a second book of stories was published showcasing the research reports of Champion Teachers in Peru to accompany the Chile series (*Champion Teachers Peru: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* by Rebolledo, Bullock & Smith 2018).

The present publication expands the series by offering nine additional stories of EAR carried out by teachers of English working at public schools. This addition to the stories enriches the array of topics studied and provides more samples of data collection tools. Additionally, unlike its predecessors, this collection provides a detailed description of the action plans designed by teachers. It highlights how and where the ideas came from and illustrates the implementation of the action plans in greater detail.

Figure 5. Champion Teachers reading EAR stories during the initial workshop

The stories from Mexico

The nine stories included in this publication were selected and edited from the reports teachers wrote at the end of the Champion Teachers programme in February 2019. These teachers work in primary and secondary classrooms in diverse contexts and regions stretching right across Mexico, from Baja California Sur on the Pacific west to The Yucatán Peninsula on the Gulf of Mexico (see Figure 6). Interestingly, each of the nine stories is concerned with a different issue. Five focus on language and skills – reading, writing, speaking, listening and vocabulary; three focus on aspects of classroom management – attention, participation and behaviour; and one centres on the use of technology. All the teachers except one chose their topics to further understand an issue that needed improvement, and you can read more about the background to each of the research topics at the start of each story. What is also interesting to note is the range of methods for gathering evidence used, including video journals, interviews with colleagues, peer observations, focus groups, and questionnaires. Overall, the stories illustrate the extent to which engagement in EAR can have positive effects on teachers and learners alike, and we hope that they will inspire you too to look into questions that arise in your classroom.

The first story is by Ana Velasco who decided to investigate why her secondary students were finding reading comprehension so difficult. Ana assumed, wrongly as she later admits, that they simply needed to apply the strategies she had taught them. Her explorations, however, revealed that there were a number of other factors at play that she was completely unaware of. Ana concludes her story by reflecting on how important it is to provide opportunities for students to raise their voices, and listen.

In the second story, Omar Rugerio describes his frustration at getting his secondary students to speak

Figure 6. Locations where Champion Teachers are based in Mexico

in English. Despite numerous efforts, they kept reverting to Spanish. His story describes how he determinedly managed to get to the crux of the issue and successfully implement a number of changes to foster positive feelings about speaking English.

In chapter 3, Martha de la Cruz describes how being unable to manage disruptive behaviour almost led her to quit teaching altogether. However, through focused exploration of the situation, and a carefully thought-out approach to changing perceptions, she succeeded in not only managing the situation, but also developing positive attitudes in her students, and herself.

The next story is by Claudia Sánchez and focuses on writing skills. What Claudia set out to learn more about was her approach to teaching writing, and her students' needs and preferences. What she discovered was that EAR is useful in helping her to identify what she is doing well, and not so well; what is, and what is not working. In her final reflections, Claudia also reflects on how doing EAR enables her to become autonomous and develop both personally and professionally.

Elizabeth's research looked into why a number of students were reluctant to participate in classroom activities. However, after analysing the responses to an exploratory questionnaire administered to the whole class, she took the decision to extend her research to include the perceptions and preferences of all her students. What she discovered led her to implement two key changes which not only resulted in greater participation, but also positive attitudes.

In chapter six, Olaf explores the extent to which his primary students enjoy and benefit from using technology. By means of peer observation, video recordings, reflections and student feedback, he was able to draw a number of interesting conclusions which will influence his future use of technology.

Ana Laura's research arose out of her concern about her secondary students' vocabulary. She noticed that they had difficulty in remembering it, and didn't seem to have enough words and phrases to perform tasks. What she discovered led to changes in the way she approached teaching vocabulary, and the realisation that knowing what her students think and feel can be a great source to improve teaching and learning.

In chapter eight, Ana Lilia recounts how she sought to understand and address behaviour issues with a particularly difficult primary class. Her research findings revealed that she needed to work on a number of classroom management strategies and rethink the activities she typically used. For Ana Lilia, this was a difficult journey, but she recognises that it has not ended – it has just begun.

The final story is by Dulce, who noticed that her primary students showed less enthusiasm for listening than they did for other skills. She initially put this down to the fact that the topics were uninteresting, but her research showed that her assumptions were wrong. As a result of her findings, she implemented a number of successful strategies, but one which was less so, and which she will explore further. For Dulce, what was most remarkable from this experience was that she has stopped assuming, and started discovering.

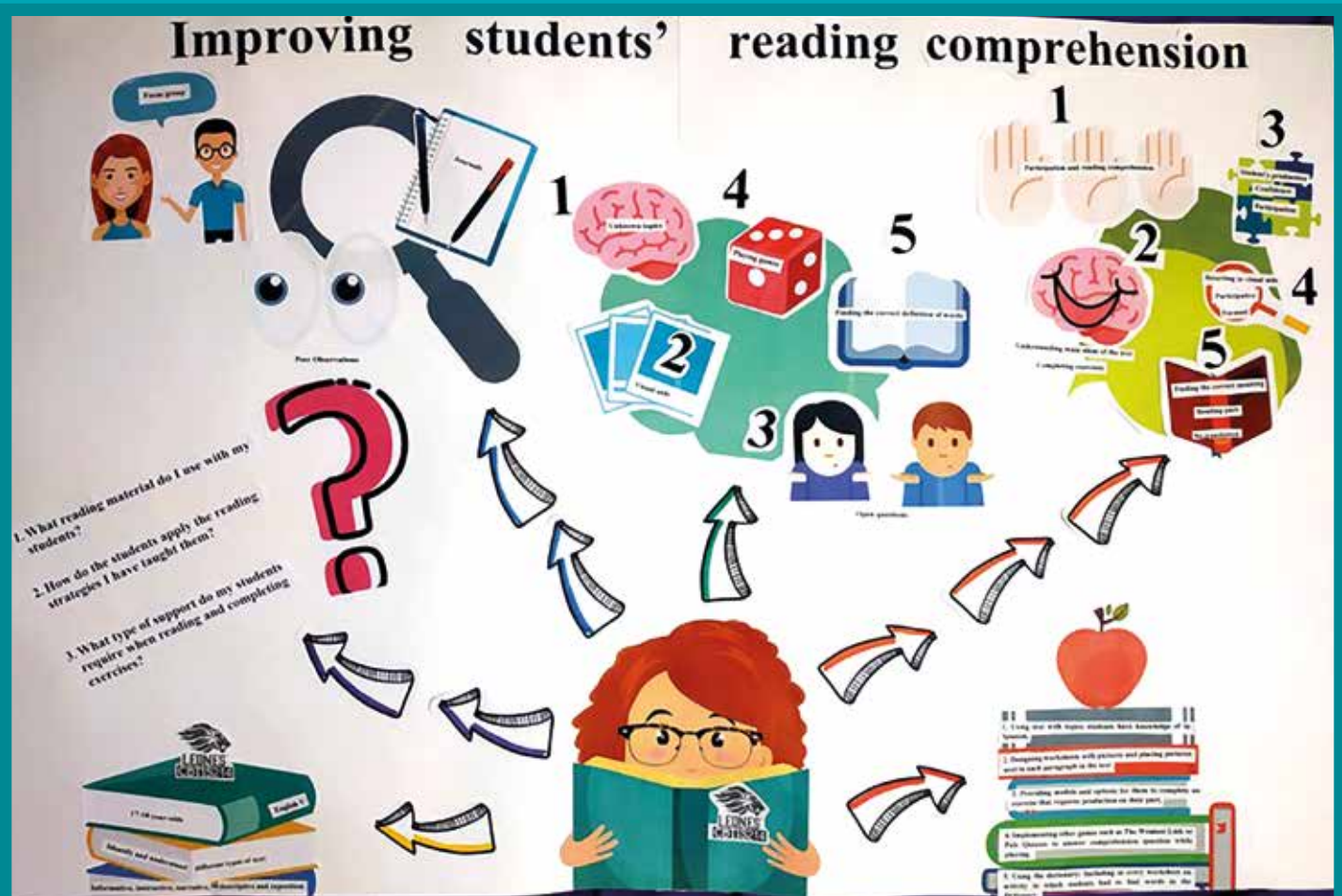# 1 Improving students' reading comprehension

Ana Fabiola Velasco Argente

Chetumal, Quintana Roo, Mexico

Teaching Context

Ana Velasco has been teaching English for almost three years, and almost one year at Centro de Bachillerato Tecnológico Industrial y de Servicios N° 214 Ignacio Allende, in Chetumal. When she joined the Exploratory Action Research programme, she was teaching English V, a course developed to help students identify, analyse and comprehend informative, narrative, descriptive, and exposition texts. Her class consisted of 24 students aged 17-18, with a basic level of English, which she estimated to be CEFR A1-A2.

From the start, she noticed that they were having a hard time with reading comprehension so she immediately introduced some strategies. However, it seemed to her that they just weren't using them at all.

Exploratory questions

To identify what she needed to do, she asked herself the following questions:

1. What reading material do I use with my students?

2. How do students apply the reading strategies I have taught them?

3. What type of support do my students need when reading and completing comprehension exercises?

Data Collection

To collect data to find answers to these exploratory questions, Ana decided to use a reflective journal, classroom observations and a focus group:

- Observing students and making notes on their behaviour, and the strategies they used during reading tasks, seemed appropriate.

- Additionally, having a record of what activities worked best with the students from a different viewpoint, i.e. a colleague, would raise her awareness of what she might need to work on.

- Giving students an opportunity to express their opinions – on the texts, the activities and how they applied strategies before, during and after reading – would also give her some insight.

> Students are not using the reading strategies I have taught them. I don't know why as they are very simple. They just have to apply some of those when reading and voila! Yes, that was me a few months ago, putting all the responsibility on my English V students when they were having problems understanding texts and completing comprehension exercises.

Ana collected data over a two-week period (4 x two-hour lessons and 2 x one-hour lessons). She recorded her own observations after each two-hour lesson and noted any points of interest related to her three questions. The two peer observations took place each week, also during the two-hour lessons. The focus group took place in the first week and involved nine students of Ana's choosing – 3 high level, 3 average and 3 struggling students.

Focus group questions

1. What types of texts does the teacher use in her class?
2. What do you think of those kinds of reading texts? Why?
3. What activities/exercises does the teacher do before, during and after reading?
4. What do you think of these exercises/activities? Why?
5. What makes them difficult/easy?
6. What reading strategies has the teacher taught you?
7. What strategies do you use before, during and after reading? Why?
8. What would help you better understand the texts that are used in class?

Findings from the exploratory phase

After gathering the data, Ana triangulated the information from her journal, the peer observation notes and the focus group, and was surprised to find that the readings were not difficult for them and nor was applying the strategies she'd taught them; they demonstrated that they *did* use the strategies when necessary. They were also able to understand the main ideas of the texts because they were able to explain these to Ana

in Spanish. The only constraints that she could find in the data were the types of comprehension exercises and the topics of the texts.

What Ana found was that her students had difficulty in understanding texts on unfamiliar topics. Moreover, they struggled to find the correct definition of words in the dictionary, which influenced their reading comprehension and their reading pace. As a result, it was difficult to complete the exercises, especially answering open questions in which they had to express their opinions.

Concerning the types of support needed, Ana found that her students required, and actually relied on, visual aids to help them comprehend the texts. Furthermore, they expressed that playing reading comprehension games, such as Hot Potato[1] and 100 Mexicans[2], was one of the activities they enjoyed most, although they expressed a desire for a wider variety of games.

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1. In this game students try to answer questions alone, then Ana gets them to pass a paper ball and when she says 'Hot potato' the student holding the ball answers. The class discusses whether they agree with the answer.

2. This game is based on 100 Mexicanos Dijeron – a popular TV show in Mexico. One male and one female student from each team sit on chairs at the front of the class with their texts. Ana asks a question and the two look for the answer. At the same time the rest of the class look for and underline the answer in their texts. The first student at the front to raise their hand, answers the question. Everyone discusses whether the answer is right or wrong. If the answer is wrong the other student at the front gets a chance to answer. The game is repeated with new team members. The team with the most correct answers wins.
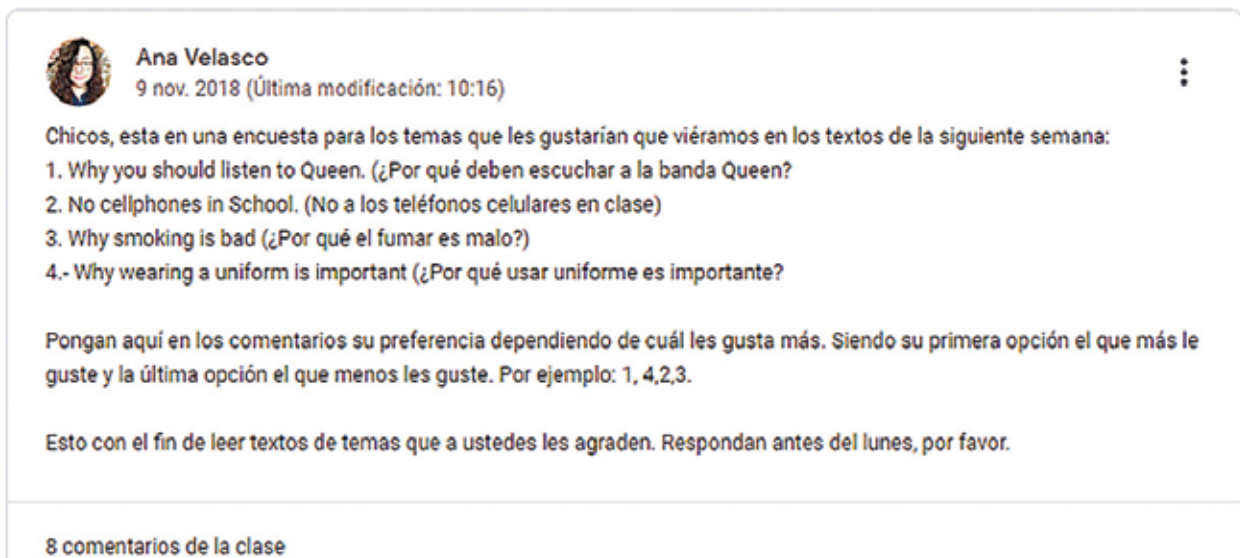
Action

Based on her findings, Ana decided to make some modifications to her lessons. All the changes she introduced were based on the information she gathered from her students and her own observations during the exploratory phase.

Giving a choice of texts on familiar topics

At the end of the lessons, or via Google Classroom, Ana gave the students four options and asked them which topic they would prefer to read about. For example, during the first week of the implementation phase, she gave them the options:

- Why you should listen to Queen

- No cell phones in School

- Why smoking is bad

- Why wearing a uniform is important

She then asked them to order these according to their interest level.

Ana Velasco
9 nov. 2018 (Última modificación: 10:16)   ⋮

Chicos, esta en una encuesta para los temas que les gustarían que viéramos en los textos de la siguiente semana:
1. Why you should listen to Queen. (¿Por qué deben escuchar a la banda Queen?)
2. No cellphones in School. (No a los teléfonos celulares en clase)
3. Why smoking is bad (¿Por qué el fumar es malo?)
4.- Why wearing a uniform is important (¿Por qué usar uniforme es importante?)

Pongan aquí en los comentarios su preferencia dependiendo de cuál les gusta más. Siendo su primera opción el que más le guste y la última opción el que menos les guste. Por ejemplo: 1, 4,2,3.

Esto con el fin de leer textos de temas que a ustedes les agraden. Respondan antes del lunes, por favor.

8 comentarios de la clase

Original survey given to students by Ana

Ana chose these options because she knew students were familiar with them and thought they would be interesting. She also chose them because at that point they were learning about exposition texts. In fact, Ana predicted that the text about Queen would be the favourite as the movie 'Bohemian Rhapsody' had just come out. Surprisingly, though, students chose 'Why smoking is bad', which Ana thought would be the least interesting!

> Hmm
> what I find interesting
> may not necessarily be of interest
> to my students!

Using the dictionary

In every worksheet, she included a pre-reading activity in which students had to look up words in the dictionary. For each activity she included no more than ten words, and provided the grammar function of these words.

Providing visual support

Ana designed worksheets with pictures placed by each paragraph to support understanding of the main ideas.

Providing models and options

To support students in answering open questions e.g. those that require them to express their opinions, Ana provided model answers, sentence frames and word banks.

Games

Ana introduced other reading comprehension games and quizzes such as The Weakest Link[3] and Pub quizzes[4].

So, where did the texts and activities come from?

Ana searched the internet for texts appropriate to her students' age group, e.g. an infographic on how teens use cell phones[5]. The games she introduced were games she had used before with other students – she knew from experience that students would enjoy them because they have to compete with one another. The Pub Quiz was a new idea that she heard about during the Champion Teachers training.

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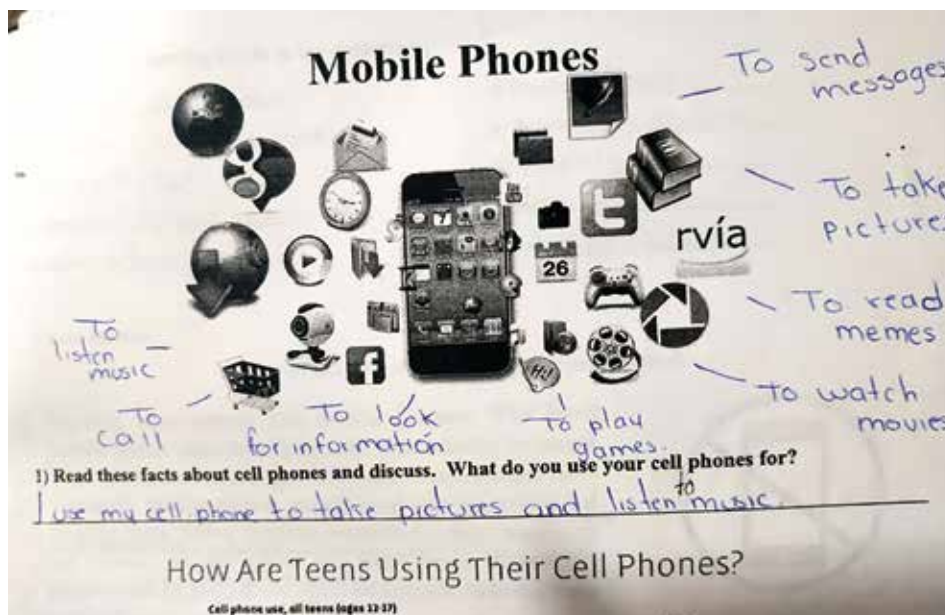
3. The Weakest Link is a question and answer game. The students are divided into two teams: male and female. Ana asks a question and all the students have to write the answer in their notebooks. They have around one minute to write their answers. Once Ana says 'Stop!' they raise their notebooks in the air and show Ana their answers. The team with the most correct answers wins a point.

4. Students work in pairs and read the questions in the handout but they cannot write the answers. Ana reads the questions one by one in random order so they pay attention. Once they hear the question, they have around one minute to write their answer. Ana then reads the next question and so on until all the questions have been answered. Pairs then exchange their handouts with another pair and check the answers. While doing this, Ana leads a discussion of all the possible answers. The pair with most correct answers is the winner.

5. *www.techinasia.com/teens-using-cell-phones-infographic*

How helpful were the changes?

To evaluate to what extent her actions had been helpful, Ana used the same methods as she had during the exploratory phase, i.e. a questionnaire, a focus group and peer observation.

Giving a choice of texts on familiar topics

Analysis of the data demonstrated that the careful selection of texts of interest to the students had increased every student's engagement and participation. During the focus group students said they appreciated the fact that Ana was giving them choices and taking their preferences into consideration. They claimed that this increased their interest in the texts. Ana had also noted this in her reflection journal, and felt that it had increased their participation in the associated activities, too. Students also mentioned that giving them a choice of topics that were familiar to them facilitated their comprehension. More importantly, Ana felt that the students' reading comprehension had improved because in addition to explaining the main ideas of the texts clearly, they could also provide detailed information about the topics discussed in the readings.
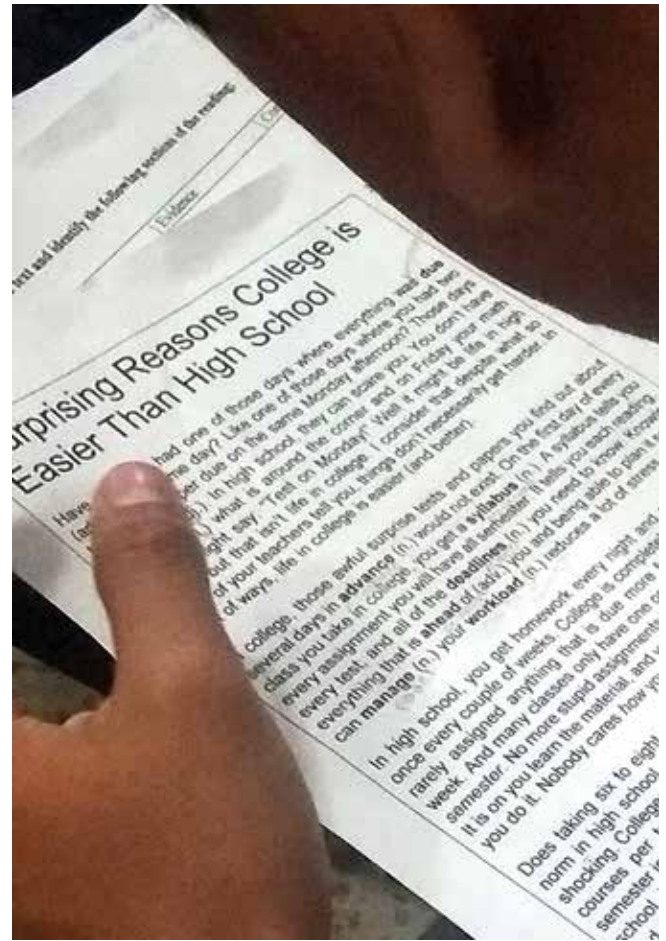
Using the dictionary

Support with using the dictionary also impacted positively on comprehension. During the focus group students stated that providing the grammatical function of the words had enabled them to identify the correct meaning in the dictionary, which helped them to better understand the text. Ana noticed that as a result of looking up words in the dictionary *before* reading, the students' reading speed also improved as they weren't constantly using their dictionaries *while* reading. Moreover, translating while reading was no longer necessary since the words in bold together with the pictures enabled them to get the main idea of each paragraph. Ana's colleague noted:

> Students gave the definitions of the words confidently when they were asked to provide these. Giving the grammatical function of each word allowed them to identify the correct definition in their dictionaries faster, as they ran their fingers thought the text until they found the correct meaning.

Providing visual support

During the focus group students said they liked the fact that pictures were included in the texts and they found them helpful: they were able to more quickly and easily complete gist questions, and become more involved in the discussion of the main arguments with confidence. Ana also observed that once the students were aware that the pictures were there for a reason, they looked at them throughout the activities and used them to predict and locate particular content.

Providing models and options

Ana and her colleagues noticed that providing additional support for answering open questions such as examples, sentence frames and word banks facilitated the students' production – they felt more confident when sharing their opinions in English and in turn participated more in class.
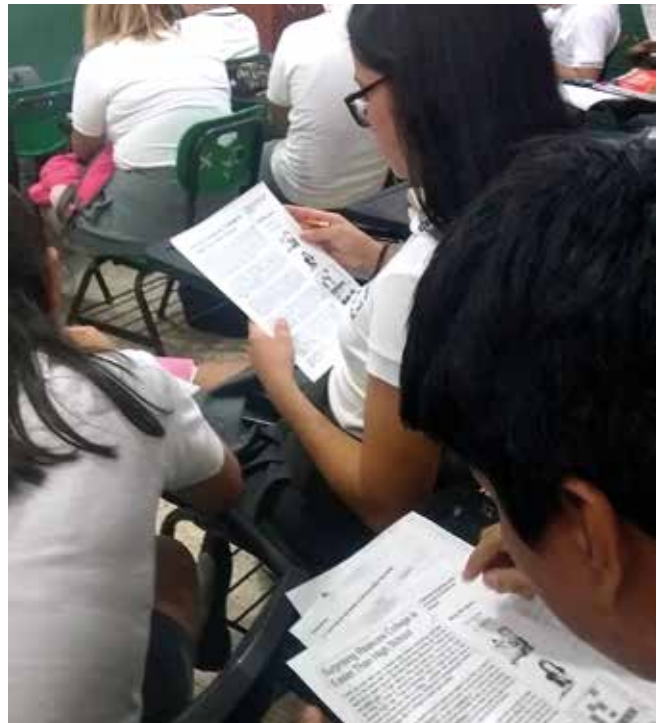
> Students were participative when asked to answer the open questions.
> They did this all in English and were using the structures and options that were written on the board.

During the focus group students said they used the examples to guide them, explaining that they were able to analyse the sentence structures and reproduce them. They also said they felt good about themselves, even though they were working with pre-fabricated structures and dictionaries because they could use any words they wanted and express their ideas.

Games

Finally, the games Ana introduced were successful in a number of ways. In order to answer the questions she asked, students were forced to refer to the pictures and the vocabulary they had looked up in the dictionaries. The games also ensured that all students were involved in the activity, and that they participated and were focused. Students stated that the games required everyone's participation and this was engaging and fun. Moreover, the fact that they had to compete motivated them more. They also recognised that the games encouraged collaboration since they needed to work together to answer all the questions. Ana's colleague also noted how engaged students were during games:

> In these games, students give their full attention and they are determined to find the answer. No student is distracted while doing these activities.
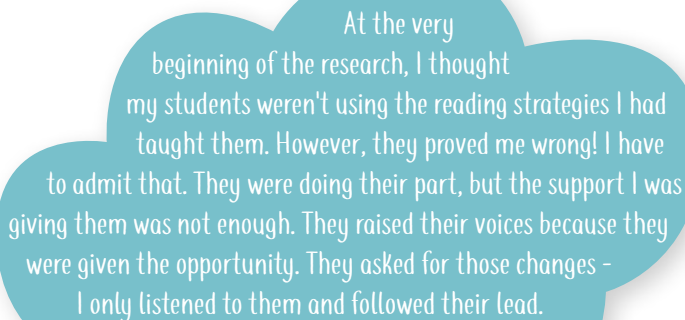
Conclusions and reflections

Ana feels that all the changes that she implemented benefited her students to some degree because they were based on, and designed to meet their specific needs and preferences.

> At the very beginning of the research, I thought my students weren't using the reading strategies I had taught them. However, they proved me wrong! I have to admit that. They were doing their part, but the support I was giving them was not enough. They raised their voices because they were given the opportunity. They asked for those changes – I only listened to them and followed their lead.

"Once I'd applied those changes, I could evidence how helpful they were, not only for their reading comprehension, but also for their written production. Their academic performance improved significantly, and partly as a result of these changes. I, personally, enjoyed my classes more, and I could see that my students were more focused and engaged and eager to participate during the lessons. Even though choosing the topics of the texts, and designing my worksheets was time-consuming and not easy, the results make it all worthwhile. I am glad of the results, and I'm very happy that I could help my students because they helped me to help them."

And how does Ana feel about her first experience of EAR?

"Being part of this programme taught me a different meaning of research. I had the idea that this is an arduous process, since I had carried out research of this nature before. However, following this new approach showed me that for us teachers it is feasible to address an issue if we are willing to give the students a chance to speak up, and try something new. EAR proved to me that the opportunities for creating a positive impact on our teaching environment are there. We just have to be curious enough to explore the issues we're facing in our classrooms. Are you willing to try? Who knows? Maybe, the solution to a problem is right in front of your eyes, and if not, you can always carry out more research."

Reflection questions

1. One action Ana decided to implement was giving students a choice of reading texts on familiar topics. Do you give your learners choices of topics for reading or writing? If so, how could you find out if it has an impact on learning? If not, how could you find out which topics they are familiar with and interested in?

2. After analysing her results, Ana was forced to acknowledge that her assumptions about her students' behaviour and interests were wrong. What assumptions do you have about your learners? Have you ever tested these? Which assumptions would you be interested in testing?

2 Leading students to speak

Omar Rugerio Pineda
Tlalmanalco, State of Mexico, Mexico

Teaching Context

Omar Rugerio teaches at the No. 0112 'Profra. Laura Méndez de Cuenca' Secondary School in a small semi-urban municipality, Tlalmanalco in the State of Mexico. This school is relatively small; there are nine classes of around 25 students, who are 11 to 15 years old. Students are mostly kind, respectful and well-behaved and fortunately, Omar hasn't had any problems with his students, although there are some who find it more difficult to pay attention. However, he can't complain – it's his job to do his best to help them learn, and more importantly, he enjoys doing so.

As an English teacher, Omar dreamt of having his own classroom (his own space where he could arrange the furniture and display on the walls as he liked) and being able to do everything he wanted to encourage students to learn and empower them, too. Fortunately, that dream came true, together with another one – becoming part of the Exploratory Action Research programme!

The puzzle

Omar decided to focus on speaking skills and his 3rd grade (of secondary) group 'A' – a group of 21 students aged 14 to 15 and at beginner level (CEFR A1). This group had three 50-minute English lessons per week. It seemed that no matter how many times he went over classroom language at the beginning of the academic year, or how many mini-conversation activities he implemented in class, or how much effort he put into using English in the classroom, his students insisted on speaking in Spanish. That was puzzling him, and he started to feel frustrated – it was as if his teaching skills and constant work were getting him nowhere.

Exploratory questions

He decided to grasp the nettle and do something to get his students to speak in English. To begin with, he came up with a series of questions to get to the crux of the matter and to find evidence of what was really happening in his classroom. He came up with four questions:

1. How do students feel about speaking in English during the lesson?

2. How do students prefer to interact during speaking activities?

3. What kind of support do I provide when working with speaking activities?

4. What kind of language do students use in the classroom (target language, classroom language, or L1, i.e. Spanish)?

Data Collection

Once Omar was clear about what he wanted to explore, he considered which tools to use. First, he designed a student questionnaire to get to know how students *felt* during speaking activities, the *support* they thought they needed, and *when* they used English in the classroom. Second, he asked three colleagues to independently observe three of his lessons. Questions focused on the same areas as the questionnaire but also included a question focused on interaction patterns (see Q6). Finally, he used a journal to note down what was happening.

Observation questions

1. At which moments of the lesson does the teacher ask students to speak?
2. Which speaking activities does the teacher carry out during the lesson?
3. What kind of support does the teacher give students before the speaking activity/ies?
4. What does the teacher do during the speaking activities?
5. How does the teacher provide feedback?
6. How are students organised during speaking activities (in pairs, small groups or as a whole class)?
7. How is students' participation during the speaking activities? Do they participate more in one activity? Which one?
8. When students speak in the lesson, what kind of language do they use?
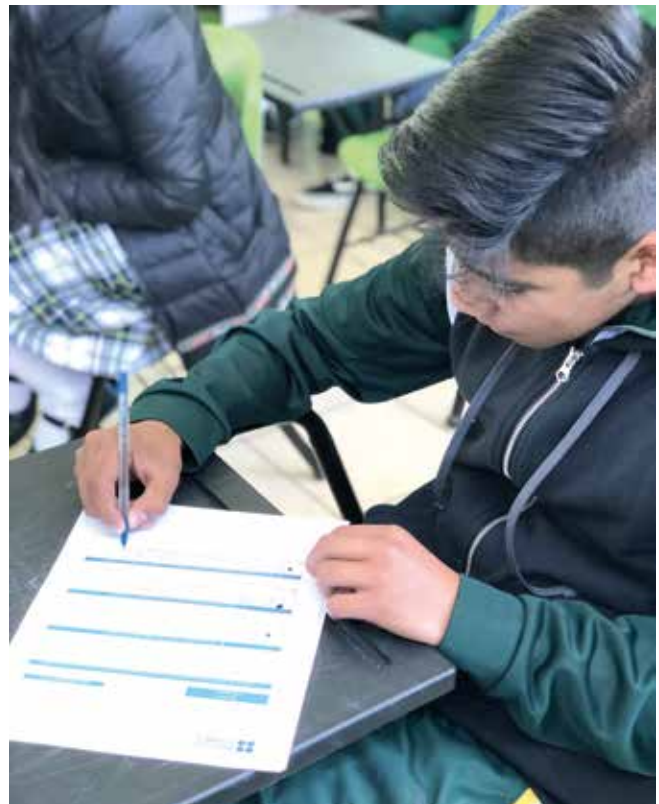
Findings from the exploration phase

Omar analysed students' and colleagues' responses as well as his journal notes, and found some answers to his four questions:

1. Nine students have negative feelings about speaking English because they are afraid of mispronouncing words, or nervous about making mistakes and not being understood by others.

3. Omar was already providing a lot of support, e.g. referring to previous knowledge, giving clues to remind them of useful language, and giving examples.

4. Students mainly used the target language, sometimes used classroom language and sometimes used Spanish too.

How do you feel when you get involved in a speaking activity in class?

- A Motivated: 7 students
- B Confident: 5 students
- C Unsure: 5 students
- D Frustrated: 2 students
- E Other: 2 students
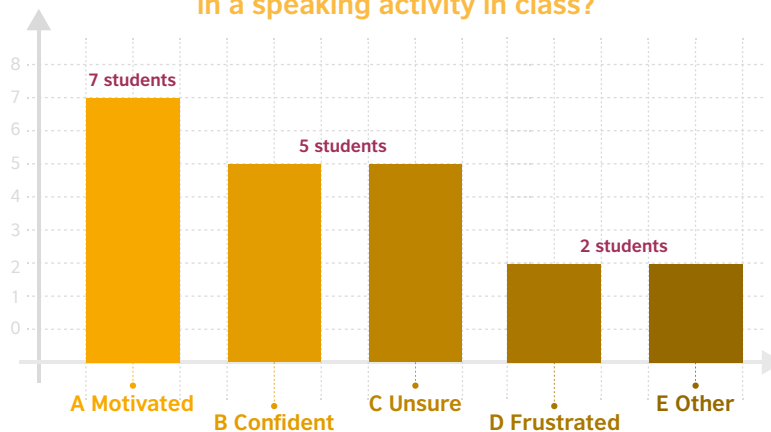
2. 16 prefer whole-group and team activities. This was surprising because Omar thought they preferred pair work.

How do you prefer to interact when speaking English in class?

- A As a whole group (Whole class): 9 students
- B In pairs: 4 students
- C In teams (of 3, 4 or 5 members): 7 students
- D Other: 1 student
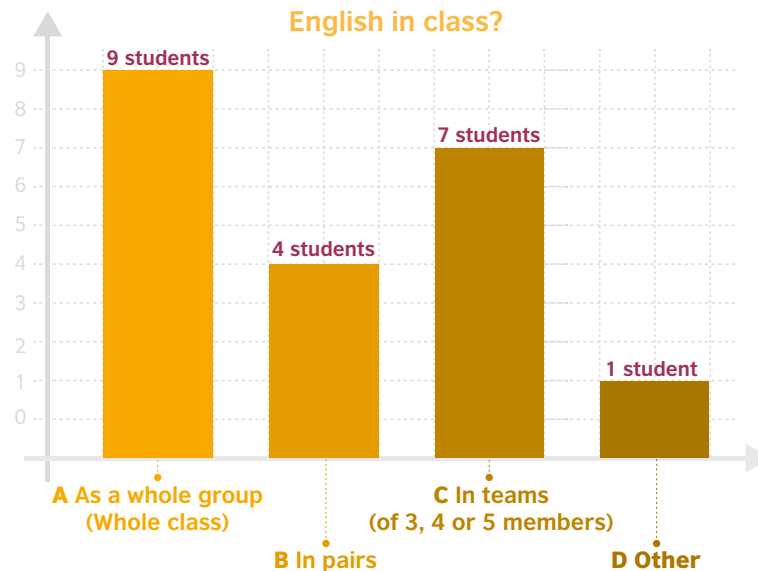
Action

Based on the results of the exploration, Omar came up with ideas to help students speak in the classroom. He implemented these changes over the course of ten lessons.

1. Five expressions

The first action he implemented was to pre-teach five expressions which students would use during the core speaking activity of the lesson. For example, to begin with he would get them to match pictures and words or order the words of a phrase. Then to practise the pronunciation of those phrases, he used choral repetition, back chaining drills, and sometimes individual drills. Finally, he adapted activities, e.g. broken telephone, dictation and speed writing by making them interactive and competitive to check that the students had learnt the phrases and could use them meaningfully. Students recorded all these expressions in their mini-books (see below).

2. Small group activities

Omar's second action was related to working in small groups. He got students to make presentations about familiar topics, e.g. their New Year resolutions, perform role plays in which they acted out feelings of famous people, and have conversations related to lesson topics such as discussing past experiences and future plans.

For more demanding tasks that required more confidence, i.e. presentations and role plays, Omar let students choose their own partners to ensure they felt relaxed and comfortable enough to express themselves in English. With conversation activities, he used a variety of ways to pair/group students. For example, playing music while students walked around the room, and when the music stopped students conversed with those nearest to them.

3. Mini-book of classroom language

Omar also wanted to give the students more language support so that they would speak in English as much as possible and be able to keep a conversation going. So what he did was produce a mini-book for classroom language and questions. He pre-taught these using the activities described in Five expressions above, students noted them down and could then refer to them during speaking activities.

Collecting evidence of impact

To evaluate the impact of the actions, Omar designed another questionnaire which he applied twice – once in the middle of the implementation phase, and again at the end of the final lesson. This questionnaire aimed to provide information about:

- the effectiveness of the pre-teaching of phrases and their pronunciation;
- students' feelings and their willingness to participate in speaking activities;
- their favourite speaking activities;
- how they preferred to interact with their peers;
- how useful the mini-book was in supporting them to speak in English.

He had three colleagues peer observe too – during the first, third and tenth (final) lesson of the implementation phase. The purpose of these observations was to get his colleagues' views on whether the actions he had planned were being applied and, more importantly, to know how effectively they were being applied in terms of:

- the teaching of pronunciation as preparation for the core speaking activities;
- the way students interacted during the core speaking activities;
- and how students were using the mini-book (and expressions) during the speaking activities.

Finally, Omar also decided to interview six students individually to get their opinions of the activities and actions, and to find out to what extent these had helped them to express themselves in English.

Omar selected the students based on their speaking performance; he chose three very good students and three who had not performed well at the start of the project, but who had demonstrated some improvement. He prepared nine questions focused on a) students' own perceptions of their pronunciation, speaking level, and feelings during speaking and b) how useful they found the mini-book, how they preferred to interact, and whether they wanted to continue to improve their speaking skills. The interviews were then conducted in Spanish, recorded and summarised.

Impact
Positive feedback from students

Omar was happy to learn that all the learners found the pre-teaching of phrases with their pronunciation useful. What is more, 17 of them experienced positive feelings during those activities.

The majority of students (13) felt that role plays were the most beneficial speaking activity, and most (14) also thought that working in small groups was the best way to interact in English. Omar had never used role plays before, and admits that his assumptions about what he deemed 'appropriate' activities were wrong.

Lastly, 12 students considered the mini-book useful, although some felt that it didn't contain enough phrases, and others didn't feel the need to use it all the time.
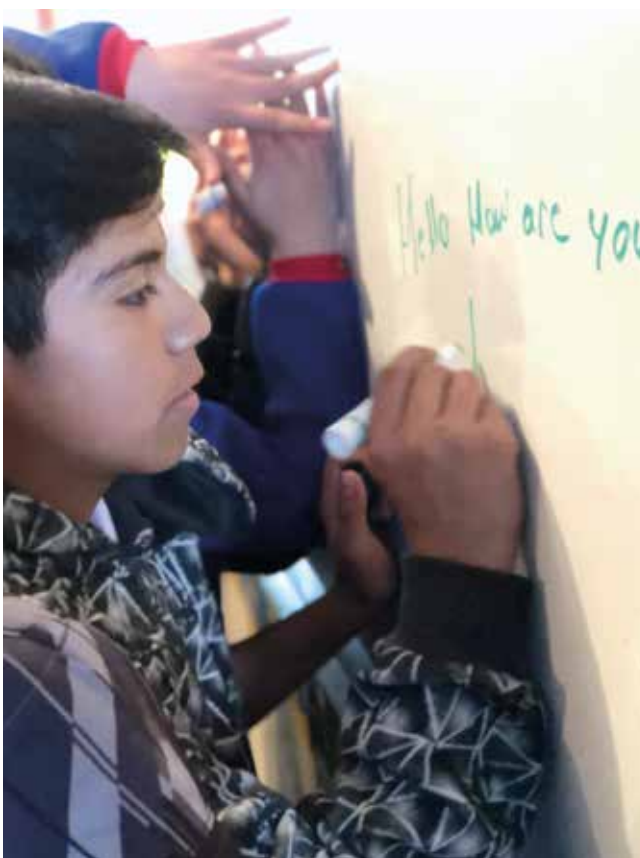
He performs an activity where he and another student act out as if they were greeting each other, eliciting from the group, the kind of expressions they maybe using.

Teacher encourages students to participate and speak to the emotion he gave them; teacher practised with students some phrases; teacher gave them feedback in a positive way to motivate students and they participated more.

Encouraging feedback from colleagues

Omar's colleagues' observations confirmed that he had focused on pronunciation in the way that he had planned and used a range of activities to practise the phrases in motivating and engaging ways:

His peers also observed that students used the mini-book to find examples of questions to ask during activities, but also to interact with their classmates and Omar!

The teacher practiced the pronunciation of the expressions that the students had to use in the speaking activity. He modelled the way the students had to ask the questions orally and he walked around the classroom to monitor the activity.

(...) they mostly pronounced correctly from the beginning.

The students used their inventories to register the examples of the questions that they had to ask to get information about personal experiences. The students used the classroom language to understand the teacher's instructions.

Students tried to use it during the class but not just for academic purposes, I mean, students used it to communicate between themselves (...)

Reflections

"What I learned from this experience is that I will make teaching decisions based on evidence. I will more carefully select strategies to truly benefit my students' learning. I will consider my students' opinions and preferences as essential to finding ways to improve their learning, and at the same time, my teaching.

In terms of speaking, which was the main focus of this EAR project, I will continue to find ways to focus on pronunciation skills so that my students can take part in speaking tasks more easily and with confidence; and use tasks that they find motivating either because they like acting out or working in groups to share their ideas with their peers.

I must say that as a result of this experience, I have learned to believe more in my students and their abilities. I have learned to take their 'voices' into account and turn these into opportunities for all of us to change for the good. I got to know that when students realise they are important to you, they become intrinsically committed to participating and getting better and better every lesson. I learned that students can experience negative feelings that affect their language performance but those feelings can be turned into positive ones if the teacher implements appropriate actions; it is just a matter of believing in them.

I would also like to say that being involved in this type of research helped me to learn that I can come up with my own ideas and solutions to my context; and that an issue can generate a fruitful process of coming up with practical ideas to find solutions based on evidence.

Thanks to this experience I can say that my students have now become the centre of my teaching; and that Exploratory Action Research has allowed me to value the importance of teamwork, as it required the participation of my students, their parents, my colleagues and my online tutor, whose feedback was always welcome and helpful to my personal and professional growth."

Reflection questions

1. As a result of his findings, Omar introduced several actions to encourage and support his students to speak English. Do you think any of these – five expressions, small group activities and a mini-book of classroom language – could help your students to speak more confidently and willingly in English?
2. Omar was surprised to find that students enjoyed role-plays, an activity he hadn't previously considered appropriate for his students. What activities do you use with your learners? Are there some that you avoid because you assume they won't work? How could you test your assumptions are correct?

3 Improving behaviour in the disruptive classroom

Martha De La Cruz Quintero

Sayula, Jalisco, Mexico
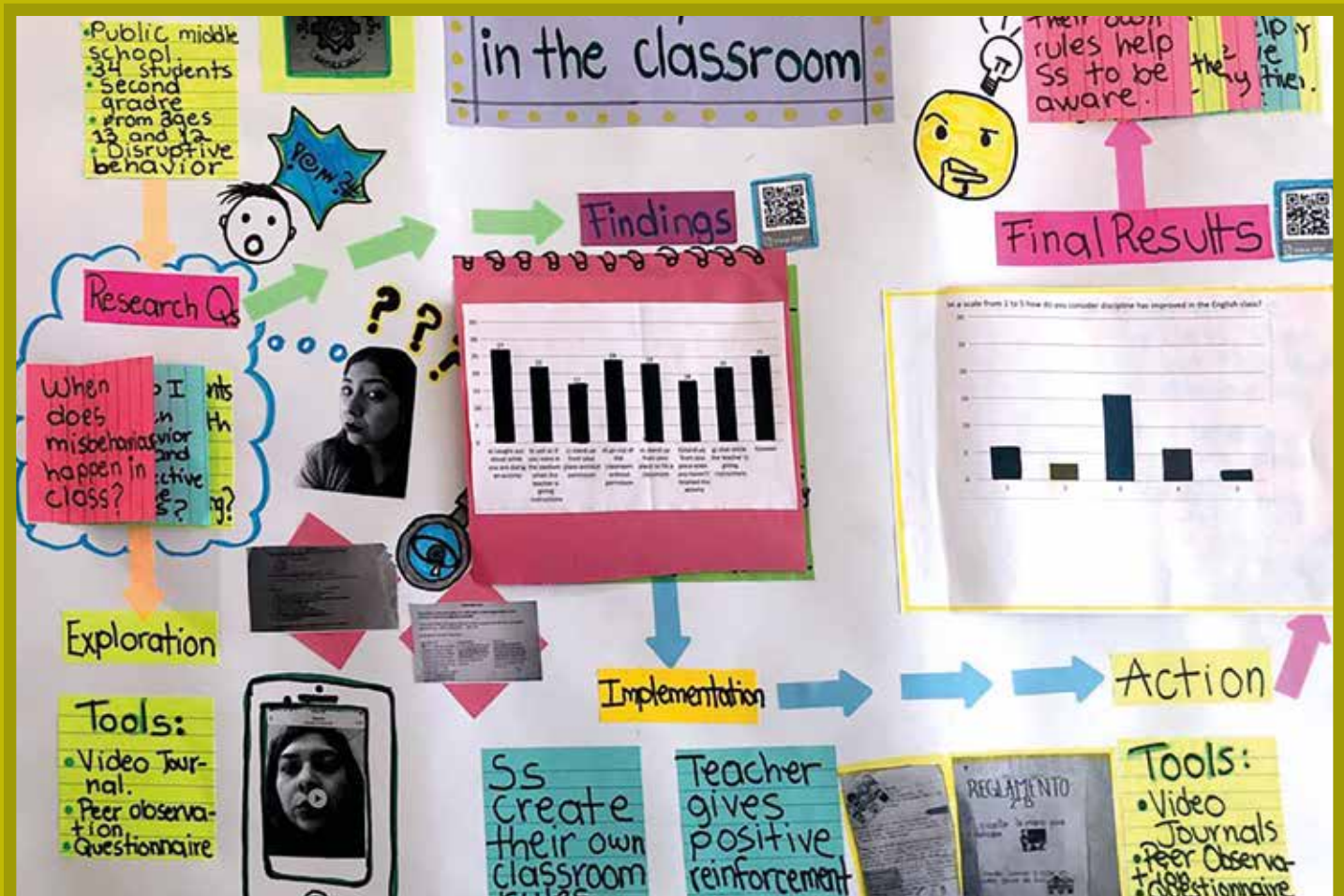
Teaching Context

Martha De la Cruz teaches second-graders at a public middle school, Escuela Secundaria Tecnica 11, in Sayula, Jalisco, Mexico. The class she chose to carry out her EAR project with was 2B – a group of 35 students (20 boys and 15 girls), aged 12 to 13 and they had three, 50-minute English lessons per week. According to the results of a test she carried out at the beginning of the school year, their level of English was CEFR A1.

The puzzle

Martha loves teaching, but there was a situation that was puzzling her. She noticed that her students were very disruptive when break-time was over and it was time to come back to the classroom and start their English lesson. They would hit objects as they walked through the hall, and it would take her around ten minutes to get them all into the room. Then they would start misbehaving – laughing out loud during activities, yelling and chatting during instructions, getting up and leaving the room without permission, especially towards the end of the lesson. The situation made it extremely difficult for Martha to teach, and she actually became so frustrated that she even thought about quitting or asking for a different class – she just didn't want to teach 2B any longer.

Then she heard about the Champion Teachers Mexico programme, and decided to apply. She needed a solution and thought EAR might help her to find a way to improve the situation with this specific group of learners. During the training she learned how she needed to have a good understanding of the situation before taking action – first, she needed to explore what was happening and why.

Exploratory questions

Martha came up with three questions to help her in this exploration:

1. When does misbehaviour occur in class?

2. What do I do when misbehaviour occurs and how effective are my actions?

3. Do students agree that they are misbehaving?

> I should do exploratory action research in order to find a better solution to the situation I am going through, since I have started feeling very frustrated. I've even thought of quitting or asking the principal to give me another group since I don't want to teach 2B any longer.

Data Collection

To gain a better understanding of the problem and to get a range of perspectives, she decided on three ways of collecting data: a video journal (to record her own perceptions), peer observations (to gain colleagues' ideas), and a student questionnaire (to find out how they viewed the situation).

For six weeks she recorded her own reflections in her video journal after each 2B lesson. She described the students' behaviour, her reactions to it, and paid particularly close attention to thinking about the moments when students misbehaved the most.

Then she asked two English-teaching colleagues and her principal to observe her teaching 2B. The observations were conducted separately and were spread out over the six-week exploratory period. Finally, she administered the questionnaire (after the second observation) to find out what her students' views of the situation were.
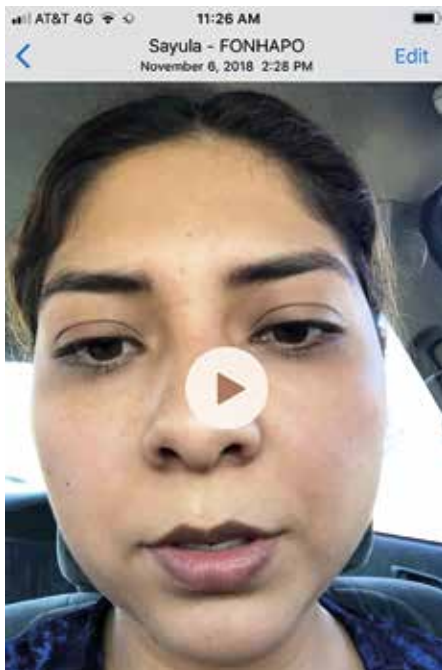
Findings from the exploration phase

In answer to her first research question, Martha noticed from her video journals that students misbehaved more frequently at the start and end of lessons, and observations by her colleagues supported this finding. However, in responses to the questionnaire, the majority of students felt they misbehaved throughout the lesson.

In answer to her second question, data from all three instruments revealed that nothing Martha did, worked. Student responses about what students did and how Martha reacted were varied, as shown in the chart below, and revealed that her main strategy was punishment e.g. writing a report, talking to their parents, giving them an absent, scolding, punishing them. Martha understood that this approach was not effective since the misbehaviour continued and she was still unable to gain their attention and get them back on task.
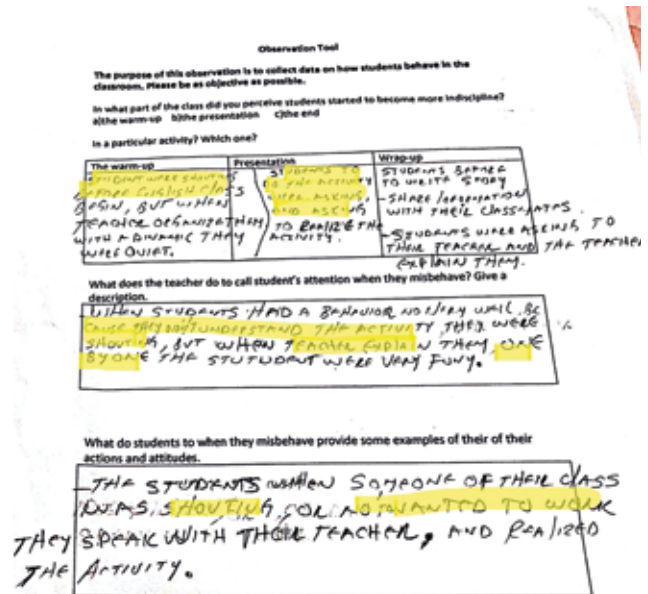
3.1 How does the teacher maintain the discipline when students are misbehaving?
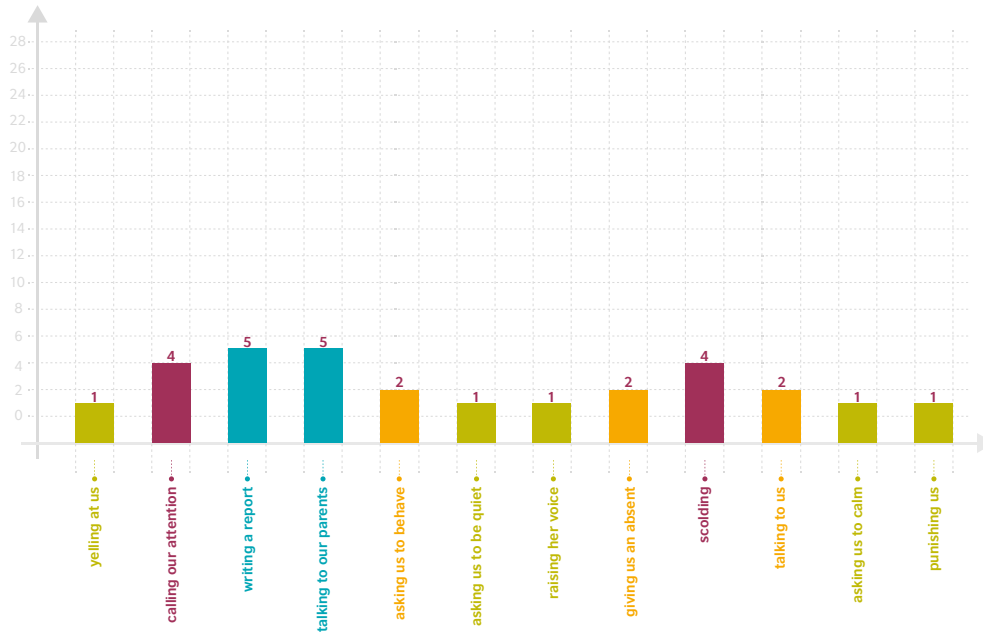
In answer to Martha's third research question – the majority of students indicated that they did misbehave, so they agreed with Martha's observations. Martha also asked them to identify what they considered bad behaviour from eight examples, and in all except one case (stand up from your place without permission), the majority agreed that these were indeed examples of undisciplined behaviour. However, not all students identified all examples as bad behaviour – many seemed unaware of how they should behave in class.

2.1 Choose the behaviours that you think characterise an undisciplined English class
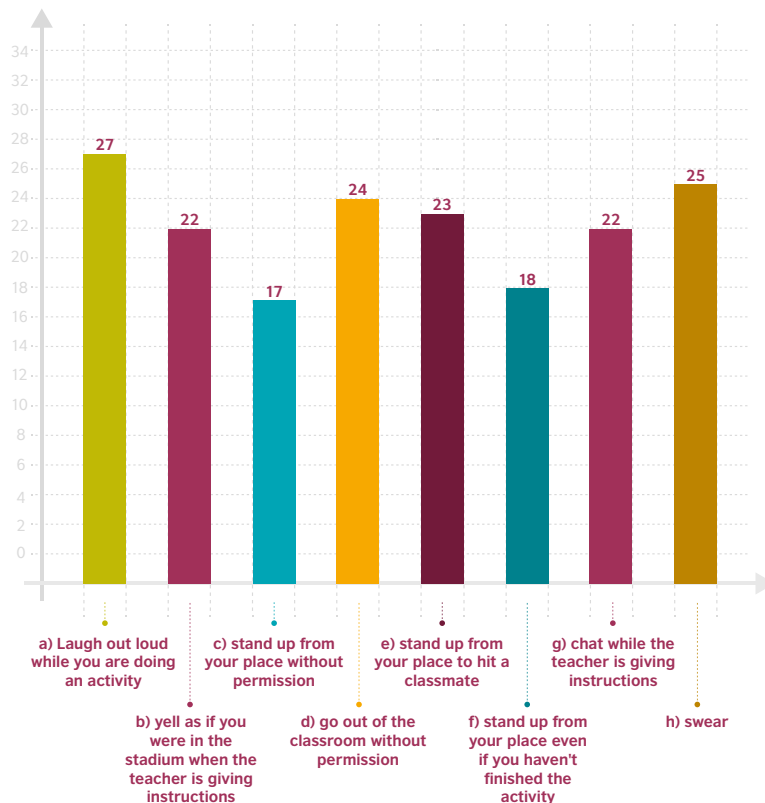
Conclusions

Martha summarised her main findings in order to find a way forward:

- Students misbehave at the start of the lesson.

- Students misbehave at the end of the lesson.

- Whatever I do to address misbehaviour is ineffective.

- Many students are unaware of how they should behave during lessons.

Action

Based on her findings, Martha chose to focus on two intervention strategies:

1. Get students to create their own classroom rules.

2. Practise positive reinforcement.

Why did Martha decide to do this?

- All students are given school rules at the start of the year in the form of a booklet. However, questionnaire results showed that students paid little attention to them.

- These rules were not written by students; they hadn't come up with them themselves.

- Martha needed to agree on rules and reinforce them in order to gain the attention of her students.

- Martha also realised that her students needed to believe that they could behave better. During the exploratory period, her video journals helped her to realise that her students had a very negative view of their behaviour. They mentioned that they knew they were 'troublemakers' and none of the teachers liked them. Martha felt strongly that she needed to change this view through positive reinforcement.

Where did she get the ideas?

She went online and found various ideas on YouTube:

- An idea for *creating rules*

- An idea for *reinforcing rules* Plevin, Rob (2013)

- The concept of *positive reinforcement*.

What did she do?

Martha planned an activity focused on classroom rules. She also made a conscious decision to use Spanish to be sure that her students could clearly understand and express themselves, and they did:

1. She got her students to reflect on why it is important to have rules for behaviour in the classroom, by asking them two questions:

- What are rules?

- Why are rules necessary in the classroom?

2. Students answered individually by writing their answers in their notebooks, and then she invited them to share their answers with the whole class.
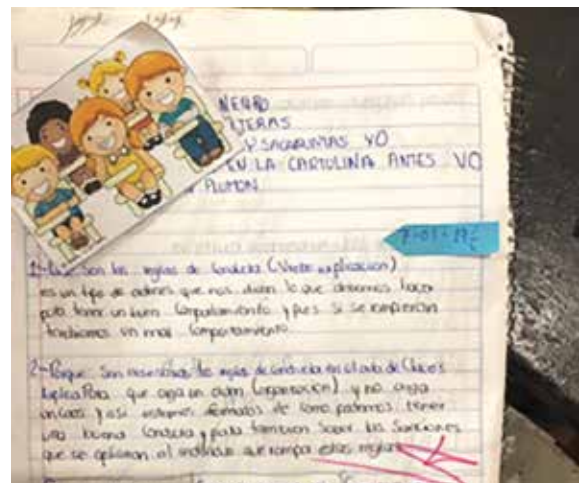
3. She then got them to work individually to complete a chart describing what a respectful classroom felt like, looked like, and sounded like.

4. Finally, she organised students into groups of three or four, and asked them to write some rules which could make the respectful classroom they had visualised in the previous activity become a

reality. Students then stuck their posters up on the walls for future reference.

Martha then focused on reinforcing the rules and positive reinforcement.

• Whenever students were disruptive, Martha referred them to their rules. From the YouTube videos she had learnt that it was better to approach and talk to a student personally than to yell across the classroom, and that it was also important to show them that she believed they were capable of obeying the rules. So, in some cases, she would approach a particular learner, ask which rules they had written and whether they thought they were behaving accordingly, but also remind them that all the students were working hard to achieve the ideal classroom, and she believed that they could do that too.
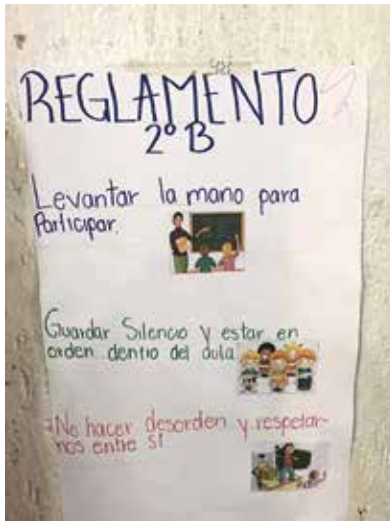
• Martha also had to work on her tone of voice – strong and loud but never desperately shouting.

She also made a conscious effort to praise good behaviour.

• When students arrived, she greeted them and told them she was happy to see them.

• When students arrived on time, even if there were just two or three, she would say:

> Thank you for being on time.

• During the lesson she praised good behaviour and work:

> The class is starting to look like the ideal classroom you visualised.

> Your behaviour has improved a lot.

Collecting evidence

The implementation period was four weeks and Martha used the same methods to collect evidence on the impact of her actions as she had during the exploratory phase, and for the same reason – to get multiple perspectives. Once again she recorded her video journal after every lesson, the peer observation took place one week after the classroom rules activity, and the student questionnaire was administered at the end of the implementation period.

I have been working with positive reinforcement and the classroom rules. I've been saying things like, "Thank you for being on time". I told my students that phrase since the very first day of classes, at the beginning there were just two to five students and today it is the very first day the majority of the students were inside the classroom. I'm going to keep saying that phrase to see what happens.

(January 18th, 2019)

Surprising results

Martha's and her colleagues' observations

During and after the intervention, Martha noticed that students had become less disruptive and more respectful, and noted quite early on that positive reinforcement seemed to be working.

Her colleagues' observations confirmed her own and they commented on how the students were now working in a more orderly and behaved way.

Her colleagues particularly noted, as did Martha, that student behaviour at the end of the lesson had completely changed – none of them got up and left or disrupted the others when the lesson was almost over. Instead, when they heard the bell, they were seated, quiet, and even continuing to work if they hadn't finished.

"I can see all the students peacefully working, it feels a peaceful environment." (Colleague's observation, February 8th)

"When the bell rang for the break time, the teacher asked students: It's break time, there is still one more question to answer, should we finish the activity or you want to go to the break? –students answered: Let's finish answering the question and then we can go to the break." (Colleague's observation, January 29th)

At the beginning of the lesson, after the break, the majority of students had started to arrive on time and there was no more unruly hitting of objects and yelling. Students still chatted a lot when they came in, but with time they started to focus more on their work and by the end of the lesson they were totally on task.

Students' perceptions

So, how did students perceive the changes? When asked whether they felt behaviour had improved, students were asked to rate the improvement on a scale of 1-5 (1 = no improvement; 5 = total improvement). 16 students selected 3 (moderate improvement), eight selected 4 or 5 (considerable improvement), while six saw no improvement at all.

When asked what had helped to make the rules clear to them, student responses clearly indicated that the activities had had an impact.

a) visible on the wall

b) T constantly reminds us

c) we wrote them

d) none of the previous options

e) other

f) didn't answer
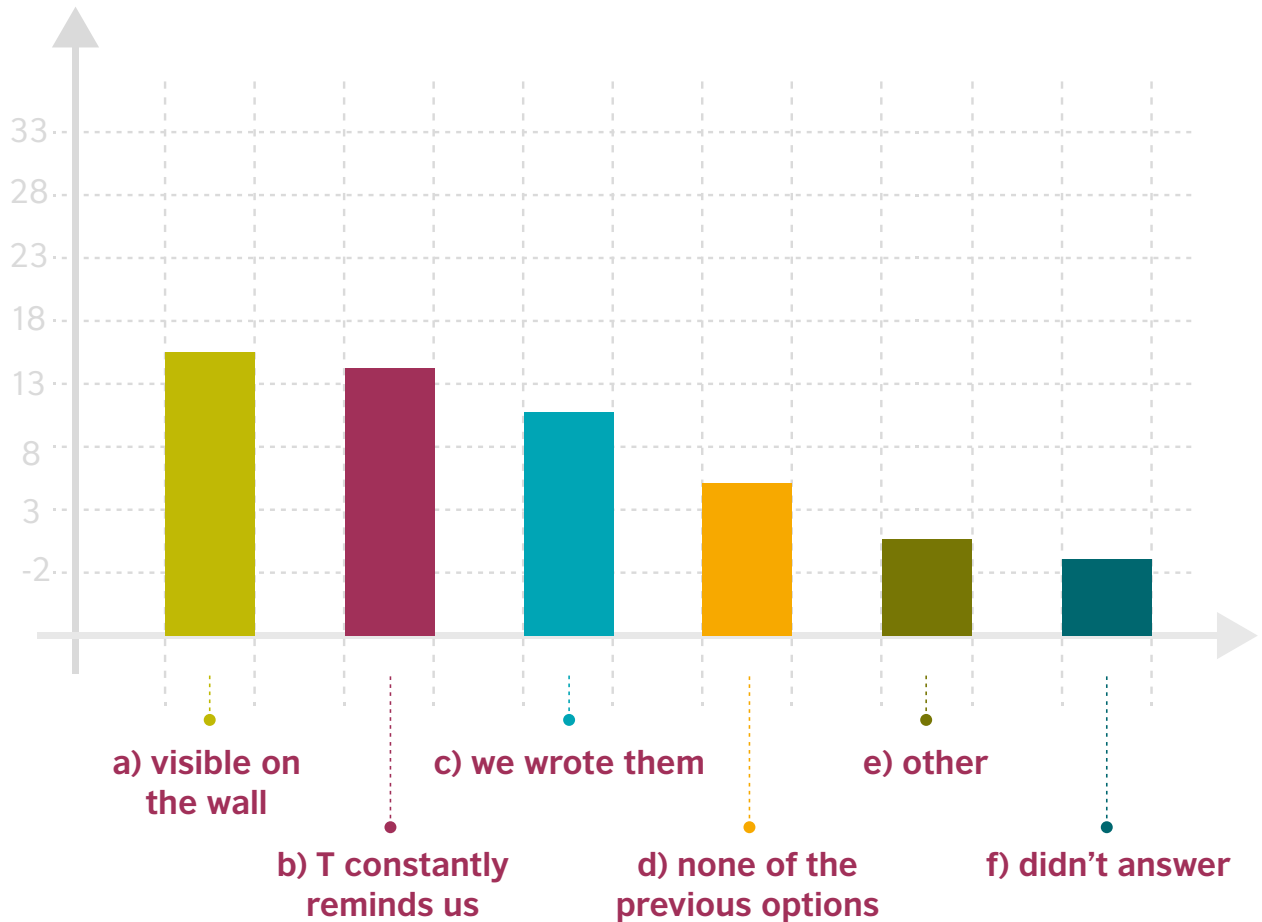
When asked if they felt Martha encouraged and praised them enough, a large majority of students (25) responded: **YES!** They reported the most-used phrases as:

"Your behaviour has improved a lot."

"The class is starting to look like the ideal classroom you visualised."

"I can see you concentrate way more when working on activities."

"Well done, you're doing such a good job."

Overall Martha felt that her intervention had helped to address most issues with behaviour. She also noticed that the more she positively reinforced good behaviour, the more positive she herself became.

As I reported in my video journals, I realised I had a negative attitude toward my students. Every time I had to teach 2B, I had negative feelings, I didn't want to go into the classroom. Even knowing that later that day I was going to teach that group, I didn't want to teach. But once I started with the positive reinforcement my attitude also started to change. I started seeing the positive aspects of my students and I realised it was also me who had to change.

What Martha learnt

"Now, I can concentrate more on delivering the lesson, rather than trying to maintain discipline. The environment in the classroom has helped me and my students to feel less stressed. I don't feel like quitting any more. And now I want to try different activities to work on other areas such as motivation or developing my students' skills. Seeing the classroom behaviour improving, has made me feel like trying to implement more actions to see if I can make all aspects of my students' behaviour more positive. I feel pleased with the results obtained after the implementation, and I will definitely continue working with exploratory action research on my own."

Changed perceptions

"Before this experience I was afraid of doing research. I used to think research was complicated and not for teachers. At the beginning I had an internal conflict, since I was used to implementing whatever solution I thought was best, without first exploring the context and analysing the real source of the problem. I learned that observation is crucial. During the exploration period, I had the opportunity to reflect on my students' behaviour, but also on my own teaching practice. I became more critical and learned to focus on data and evidence, not assumptions or feelings. I learned that it is possible to change something that is puzzling us as teachers – but through research, not by randomly taking action with no planned process. Exploratory action research can really help us as teachers to apply a better action (solution) to our problems. Now, I feel empowered to do research any time I see a situation that needs intervention, rather than just thinking about quitting teaching."

Reflection questions

1. Martha used a video journal to describe and record her students' behaviour and this helped her to identify when her students misbehaved the most – at the start and end of the lessons. Have you ever used a video journal to record your observations or reflections? Would you like to try? What would you focus on and record?

2. Many teachers have problems with student behaviour at times. What kind of issues do you have with student behaviour? What have you tried in order to address these issues? What do you think about Martha's activity to get her students to create classroom rules – asking them to describe what a respectful classroom felt, looked and sounded like? Is this an activity that you could try?

4 Improving my students' writing skills

Claudia Sánchez Bravo
Metepec, State of Mexico, Mexico

Teaching Context

Claudia works at a public secondary school, Secundaria 632 'Juan Escutia', which is located in The Hípico neighbourhood in Metepec. The school is relatively small – there are about 300 students, and only two classes in each grade. Claudia teaches Grade 3 English. The group which she chose for her EAR project is quite large, with 43 students aged 13 to 15, and their English level is quite low. Their strengths are giving their best to reach their goals; if they aim for something, they look for a way to achieve it. They also demonstrate a positive attitude to working cooperatively, and seem motivated and interested when Claudia uses visual resources to introduce and explain topics. Among their weaknesses, Claudia noticed that they are easily distracted, and some of them show immaturity and a lack of responsibility. After applying a diagnostic test, Claudia realised that the skill they found most difficult to develop was writing, so she decided to focus her research on improving writing.

Exploratory questions

To begin exploring she came up with four questions – two to understand her own behaviour and perceptions of the issue:

1. How do I teach my students the writing process?

2. How do I know that my students do not use writing strategies?

And two more to discover her students' perceptions and preferences:

3. How do my students feel about writing different types of text?

4. What kind of texts do my students prefer writing?

Data Collection

In order to collect data to answer these questions, Claudia asked two of her colleagues to independently observe her lessons and to focus on the way she introduced the writing process, the kind of pre- and while-writing activities she used, and how she made sure her students were applying strategies. She also asked her students about their needs, preferences and feelings via a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions – mainly multiple-choice with additional 'Why?' questions to elicit reasons.

> I notice that the most difficult skill to develop for them is writing, so the main topic of my action research is to improve students' writing.

Dear Student, this questionnaire has been developed with the purpose of knowing your likes and writing preferences, as well as how you feel when you write a text. Answer it with all honesty since your answers will allow me to develop activities that improve your learning.

Writing preferences questionnaire

1. How do you feel when you write a text in English?
   a) distressed
   b) confident
   c) enthusiastic
   d) enthusiastic
   e) other _____
   Why do you feel this way? _____

2. Do you like to write texts in English? Explain why _____

3. What type of texts do you write most?
   a) academic texts (reading reports, essays, articles, etc.)
   b) literary texts (stories, tales, poems, novels, songs)
   c) descriptive texts (letters, diaries, emails, messages)
   d) instructional texts (recipes, rules for games, stages of an experiment, tutorials, etc.)
   e) other _____

4. What type of texts do you like to write most? Explain why _____
   a) academic texts (reading reports, essays, articles, etc.)
   b) literary texts (stories, tales, poems, novels, songs)
   c) descriptive texts (letters, diaries, emails, messages)
   d) instructional texts (recipes, rules for games, stages of an experiment, tutorials, etc.)
   e) other _____

5. What type of text ***don't you like*** to write? Explain why _____
   a) academic texts (reading reports, essays, articles, etc.)
   b) literary texts (stories, tales, poems, novels, songs)
   c) descriptive texts (letters, diaries, emails, messages)
   d) instructional texts (recipes, rules for games, stages of an experiment, tutorials, etc.)
   e) other _____

Claudia Sánchez Bravo

6. What motivates you the most to write?
   a) narrate an experience
   b) writing a letter or an email to a friend
   c) describing how was your day in a diary
   d) other _____
   Why? _____

7. How do you feel when you write an email?
   a) comfortable
   b) motivated
   c) bored
   d) frustrated
   Why do you feel this way? _____

8. How do you feel when you have to write a text that is *not to your liking*?
   a) relaxed
   b) confident
   c) insecure
   d) indifferent
   Why do you feel this way? _____

9. Do you like to write academic texts? (essays, articles, reports)
   Explain why _____

10. What strategies do you use when writing?
    a) brainstorming
    b) graphic organisers
    c) drafting
   d) editing with a peer
    e) other _____

Findings from the exploration phase

Claudia analysed the questionnaire responses and the peer observation notes and discovered some general findings related to her four questions.

The writing process and writing strategies

Writing strategies were being taught before students engaged in writing activities, and some students claimed that they used them, although mainly drafting, but Claudia's colleagues noted that she did nothing to check that students were using these.

10 What strategies do you use when writing?

- 14% a) brainstorming
- 7% b) graphic organizers
- 73% c) drafting
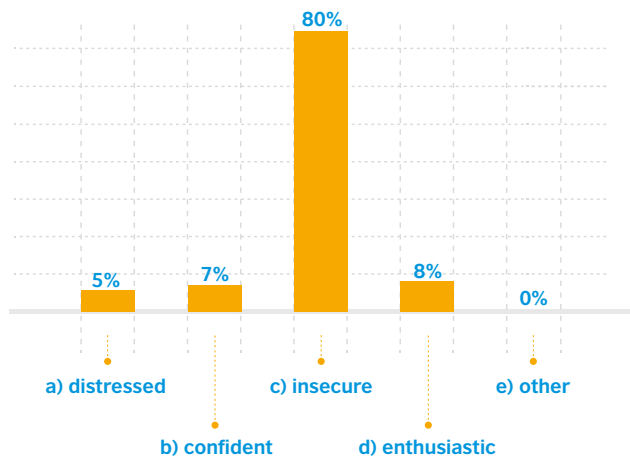- 5% d) edit with a peer the text
- 1% e) other
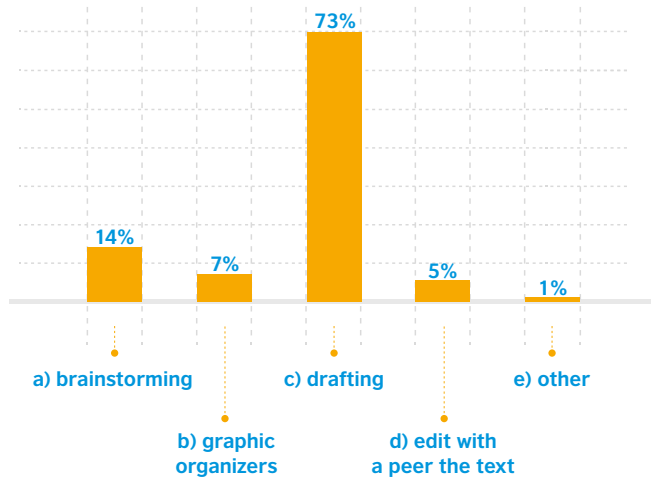
Peer observation data did show, however, that Claudia's use of pre-writing activities – describing a picture, creating a mind map of the topic and spelling exercises – was particularly helpful in preparing and supporting students to write.
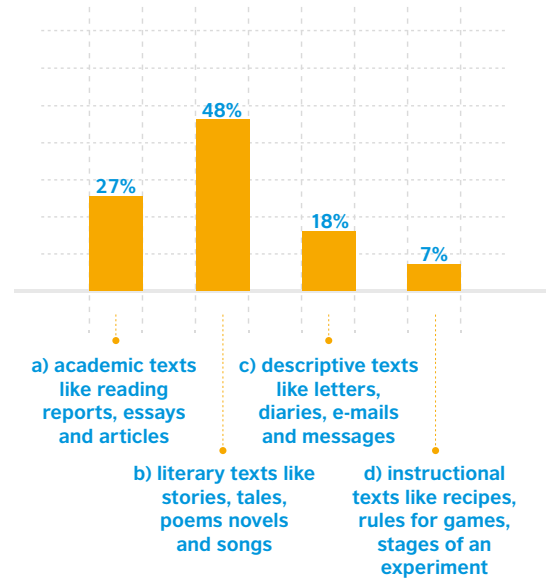
Students' feelings and preferences

From the questionnaire responses she also learnt that her students felt insecure when writing due to their lack of vocabulary and grammar, and that they preferred to write literary texts such as stories, tales and poems.

1.- How do you feel when you write a text in English?

- 5% a) distressed
- 7% b) confident
- 80% c) insecure
- 8% d) enthusiastic
- 0% e) other

4.- What type of texts do you like to write the most?

- 27% a) academic texts like reading reports, essays and articles
- 48% b) literary texts like stories, tales, poems novels and songs
- 18% c) descriptive texts like letters, diaries, e-mails and messages
- 7% d) instructional texts like recipes, rules for games, stages of an experiment

And finally, she discovered that she needed to include writing activities related to her students' interests.

Action

Establishing goals

Claudia reflected on her findings and focused on what exactly she wanted to do. Her main goal was to enable her students to use writing strategies so that writing would become easier for them. Since findings indicated that her pre-writing activities were useful, she wanted to focus more on these to give students a clear idea of the tasks and to help them generate sufficient ideas.

She was also aware that vocabulary was an issue and that students would find it difficult to express themselves unless she could give them the basic vocabulary to do so.

Looking for ideas

Claudia referred mainly to Jeremy Harmer's book *How to teach writing* (Pearson Education, 2014) to determine how she would approach the writing process. She also searched the internet for activities she could adapt to her learners' needs and preferences, e.g. the British Council *TeachingEnglish* website and Pinterest.

Activities

Claudia then decided on the actions she would take during the implementation period. The first thing she did was to plan a lesson to introduce students to the strategies. She created a mind map of the writing process and stuck this in front of the class on the top of the board so that it was always visible to the students. She also searched the internet for some useful information and created posters.

Then over the course of the next ten lessons she introduced the following:

1. Use pre-writing activities appropriate to the text students are going to write, and vary these:

• watching a video and taking notes

• brainstorming ideas

• describing a picture

• clustering.

2. Continue to pre-teach vocabulary appropriate to the text they are going to write:

• unscramble words

• Pictionary

• infer meaning

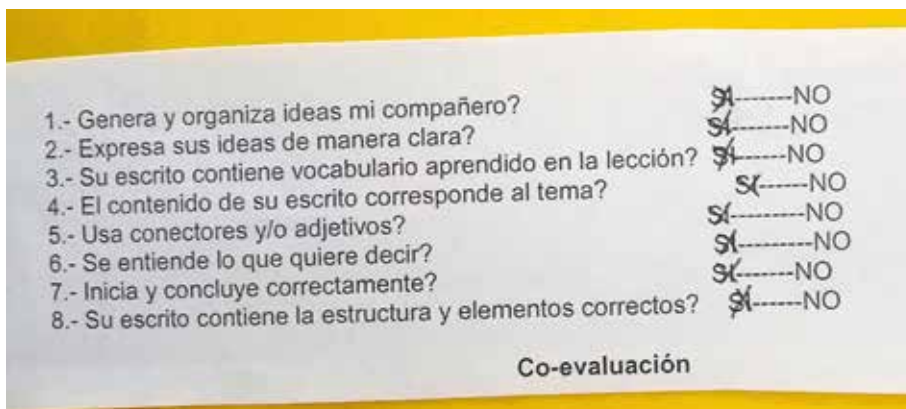• complete sentences with key words.
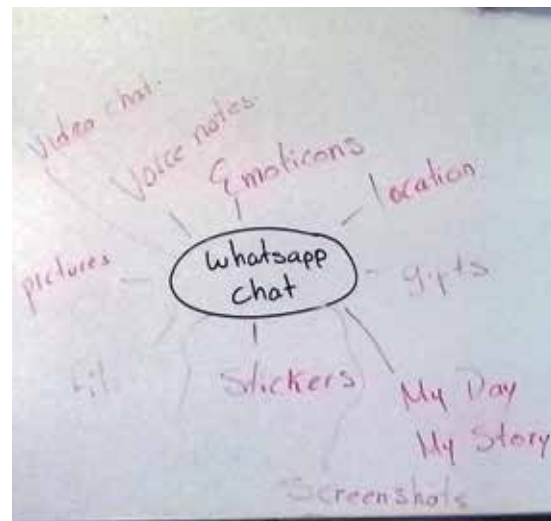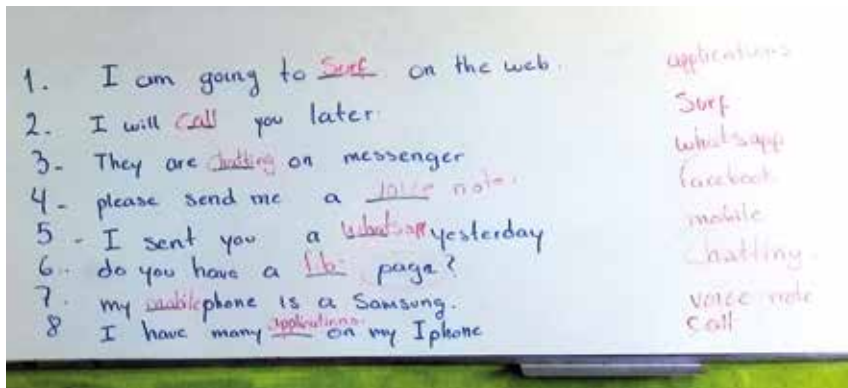
3. Continue to teach writing strategies before the production of the text:

• generating ideas

• organising ideas

• drafting

• editing.
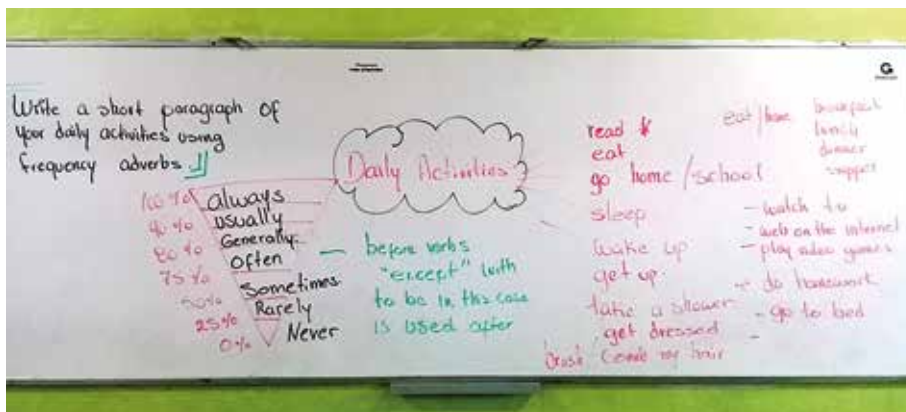
4. Introduce a post-writing self- and peer evaluation activity using a writing strategy checklist. Claudia decided to do this in Spanish to be sure her students could easily understand and answer.

5. Implement writing activities taking into account:

• students' needs, interests and preferences

• improving the redrafting of literary and narrative texts

• reminding the students of the writing process before each writing activity.
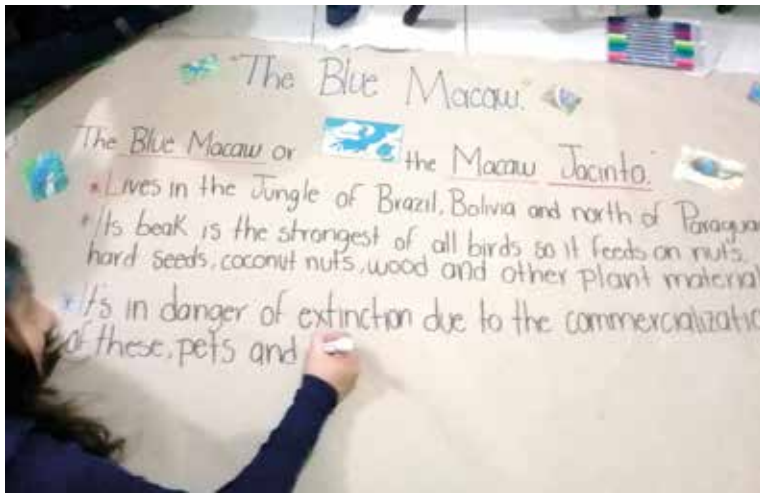
Evaluating the impact

To evaluate the impact of her actions, Claudia asked the same two colleagues to peer observe her lessons again, and she also invited a colleague from another school. The three observations were conducted during the final three lessons of the implementation phase and the aim was to check if the activities were being implemented as planned. To find out if the activities had been interesting and useful to the students, Claudia also organised a focus group. She selected some students at random, prepared some questions, explained the purpose of the meeting and moderated a discussion.

Claudia's findings

Claudia analysed her colleagues' and students' comments and the main findings were:

• Observing students and making notes on their behaviour, and the strategies they used during reading tasks, seemed appropriate.

• The strategies and resources used to pre-teach vocabulary were appealing and motivating. However, the vocabulary introduced was not enough for some students – to create longer texts, they needed more.

• Teaching pre-writing and while-writing strategies made it easier for the students to create a text. However, they still found revising and editing difficult and this was something to keep working on during the rest of the school year.

• The evaluation activities were helpful – most students were able to identify the strategies they were using, and the ones that couldn't were able to do so during self- and peer evaluation. Students were also able to identify which strategies they were not using and what they needed to do to improve.

• Taking into account students' needs, interests and preferences not only motivated them to write, they started to enjoy writing and as a result, despite their low level they were able to create texts in English.

Reflections

"I consider that my teaching will improve from now on. I will keep on doing action research in order to help my students, not only to develop and improve their English skills, but also to help me to deal with classroom issues such as bad behaviour, time management, use of media tools, etc. I will establish teaching priorities according to my students' needs, always taking into account their likes and interests, and I will action plan on the basis of classroom data, not only my assumptions.

The EAR project was a useful experience for reflecting on my teaching practice. It helped me to realise what I was doing well, and not so well; what was, and what was not working well in my lesson plans. I became autonomous because I decided on the area to explore in order to improve it and the actions to implement to achieve my goals. I learned that through exploration, I can understand which situation or skill I have to focus on or improve. EAR gives me the opportunity to develop in a personal and professional way, as well as to consider different options when facing an issue. I learned that I have to go forward when researching; looking for ways to help my students to achieve their learning goals. I learned that for activities to be successful, I have to take into account my students' needs and interests."

Reflection questions

1. Claudia decided to introduce a post-writing self- and peer evaluation activity using a writing strategy checklist. Have you tried using post-writing self- and peer evaluation checklists with your students after writing? If yes, how do they help learners? If no, would you like to try? How do you think these could help your learners?

2. Claudia concludes by saying that EAR helped her to realise what she was doing well, and not so well; what was, and what was not working well. Would you like to try EAR to evaluate your teaching practice? What skill or aspect of teaching and learning would you choose to focus on? Why?

Claudia Sánchez Bravo

5 Encouraging reluctant students to participate

Elizabeth Espinoza Carballo
Santa Cruz, Huatulco, Oaxaca, Mexico

Teaching Context

Elizabeth works at a public primary school called Centro Escolar Huatulco. It is located in Santa Cruz, Huatulco, which is situated on the Pacific coast of Mexico in the state of Oaxaca. She teaches Grade 6, which consists of 27 students (10 girls and 17 boys), aged 12-13, and they have English twice a week for one hour.

Unfortunately, the group has had a number of English teachers since Grade 1 – each of them stayed for a month at most, and then left for various reasons. In addition, the majority of the learners had never had formal English lessons before. A few had had some private lessons, but they had only learnt a few phrases.

Some concerns

At the outset, Elizabeth was very concerned that some students were not participating fully in class. Although lots of students raised their hands to answer questions, it was always the same few who never did so. Another reason for looking into this was that these students were also falling behind. They had been studying English for more than a month, but many couldn't remember the basic language they had learned earlier on in the course. And finally, their reaction towards working with others was quite negative – their participation in teamwork was not what Elizabeth expected, and time when they should have been using the language was wasted because of their negative attitudes.

Elizabeth's puzzle, then, was to investigate why that was happening – why wasn't that small group of students actively participating in class?

Exploratory questions

Elizabeth came up with three exploratory questions:

1. What kind of activities does this small group participate in?

2. What does this small group of students think about participating in class?

3. What do I expect from this group of students in terms of participation in my class?

I am very concerned about why some students are not participating in class, and many of my students are falling behind in the   lessons.

Data Collection

In order to collect the relevant information, Elizabeth decided to use the following methods over the course of six lessons:

- a journal so she could keep a better record of what she had observed. After every lesson she reflected and made notes.

- a student questionnaire since her students' opinions were crucial to her research. She decided to make this anonymous, and to give it to all her students to answer.

- peer observation: although she was noting her own observations, she felt she needed an extra pair of eyes to inform her about what was really happening in the classroom, and point out what she couldn't see, so she asked a colleague to observe two of her lessons.

Rethinking the focus of the study

Although Elizabeth set out to focus on just a small group of students, after seeing all the responses from the questionnaire, she thought about it and decided that it would be worthwhile to explore the whole group's opinions and to test her assumptions, so she adjusted her exploratory questions to include 'the whole group'.

Interesting results from the exploration phase

Elizabeth gained some interesting results from the data collection.

From the student questionnaire responses, she learnt that all her students liked to participate, but only 7 out of 28 reported that they *always* participate. The reason given for non-participation was, 'I don't know the answer'.
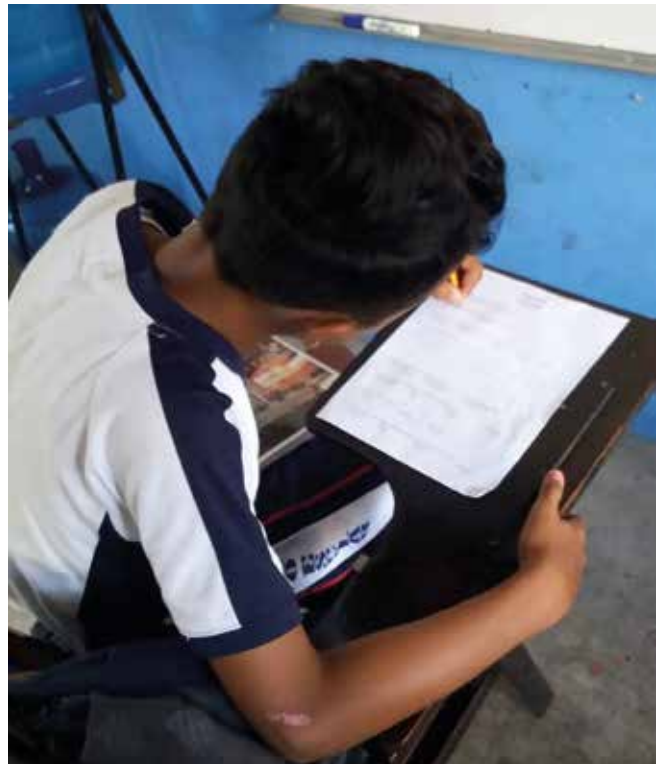
Do you like to participate in class?

|	
Yes	64%
Sometimes	36%
No	0%
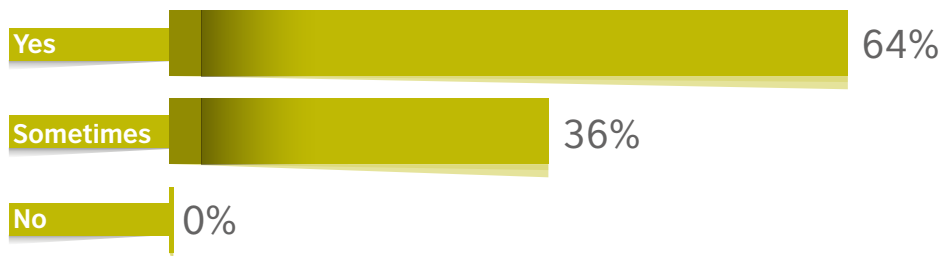
She also discovered that the activities they participated in the most were games, group competitions, movies, Pictionary, puzzles and songs – not reading, role plays, oral exercises or spelling.

In relation to how they felt about participating, 11 students responded 'nervous' or 'insecure', and the reasons they gave were a lack of confidence when using new language and being afraid of being laughed at.

> Most students participated actively. Only 2 or 3 students don't get involved when being in teams. Students sat at the bottom were silence even when working in teams; because the team had a big number of members (6 students and not all of them work).

How do I feel when I participate?

Excited (9)
                        → **17**
Good (8)

Nervous (8)
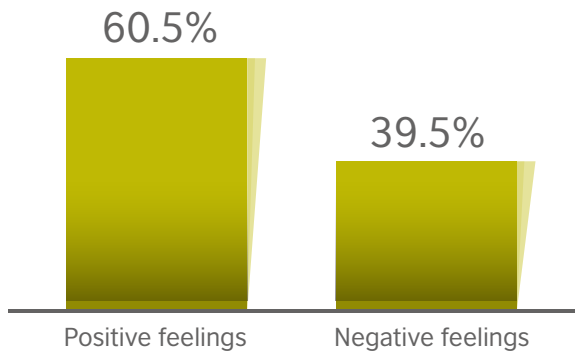   → **11**
Insecure (3)
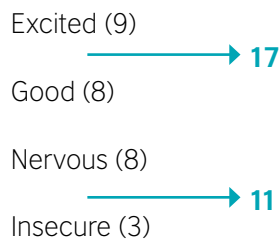
Suggestions:

Form groups with less members ~~some~~ and arrange the seats in a better way.

Elizabeth noted this too in her journal:

> Journal entry
>
> Teams of five aren't working well.

How do I feel when I participate?

60.5%   **39.5%**

Positive feelings   Negative feelings

And finally, for students, participation meant 'asking questions', 'helping in their teams' and 'doing the classroom activities'. For Elizabeth, however, it also meant all students staying on task and contributing equally, and students encouraging each other and working to solve problems together.

Conclusions

Elizabeth drew some conclusions from her findings:

- A lot of students, almost half, feel nervous about participating and being laughed at.

- Students don't participate because they don't know the answer.

- Students feel they work better in teams.

- Not all students contribute when teams are too big.

Most students (15) also said that they worked better in teams, and this was backed up by the peer observation comments. However, her colleague noted that teamwork was only effective when students were not in the same team as their friends, and as long as the teams weren't too big – in large teams, not all members contributed to the task.

Action

After analysing all the information, Elizabeth went online and started looking into classroom management more, and especially for strategies that would help her to get all her students participating. She came across lots of ideas but finally decided on a particular cooperative learning strategy – *'Numbered Heads Together'*[1].

'Numbered Heads Together'

With this strategy, learners are divided into teams of equal numbers, and each assigned a number, e.g. 1-4. Elizabeth then asks a question and the students have time to think individually about the answer. When the bell rings, all the team members stand up, share and discuss their answers, and when they reach an agreement they sit down. The teacher then calls out a number and on the count of three, all those students answer in unison.

Rationale

Elizabeth chose this activity because it:

- ensured that all team members knew the answer to the problem or question, making it possible for her to nominate any student to answer.
- encouraged each student to take greater responsibility for their own learning, and peer learning.
- encouraged them to participate more freely.

Her research had also revealed that students felt nervous or insecure about answering questions because they didn't know the answer – she felt that using this strategy would lessen their anxiety.

Students working during the action phase

Students forming teams and being assigned roles

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1. *www.teachervision.com/numbered-heads-together-cooperative-learning-strategy*

Extra measure

To maximise participation, Elizabeth also assigned roles, so that each member of the team would and could participate equally. Since almost half of the students had expressed a lack of confidence, assigning an important role to every student would give them an opportunity to participate more fully, and become more confident. Elizabeth had learnt from her internet search that assigning group roles provides all students with a clear opportunity for participation, and they are less likely to feel left out or unengaged when they have a particular duty that they are responsible for completing within their team.

The roles she chose to use with 'Numbered Heads Together' were:

|	
Help Seekers	those responsible for communicating any queries or questions the team had
Quiet Captains	those responsible for making sure team members weren't talking too loudly
Coordinators	those responsible for making sure all team members were involved in the activity
Energisers	those responsible for cheering the team on during a task and making sure everyone had a positive attitude

Time to evaluate

Elizabeth implemented these actions over the course of six lessons. Then she used the same methods as she had during her exploration – a student questionnaire, journal notes, and peer observation – to evaluate the impact. This time, she also invited her colleague to observe her classes twice as she also wanted feedback at the end of the implementation period, when students had become used to the new way of team working. The second student questionnaire differed too, focusing on how learners felt about the new strategies and whether their feelings about participating had changed as a result (see Appendix 1).

What did the students think about the action plan?

To Elizabeth's amazement, after implementing the action plan, 26 out of 27 said they participated more now as a result of the new activities – participation increased!

Do you think that you participate more in class now?

- 8% No
- 92% Yes
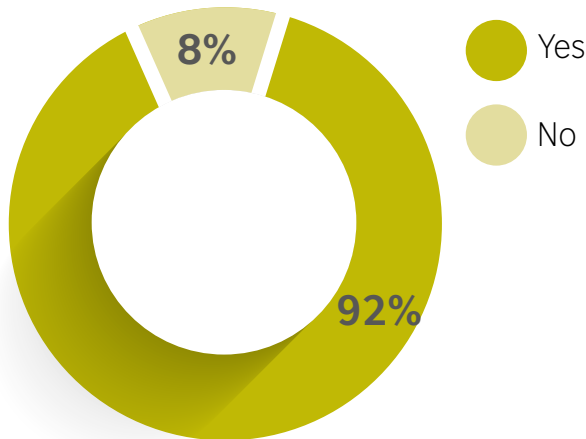
Her colleague also confirmed this after his observations.

> They followed the teacher's instructions, to perform the activity. They shared their answers with their teams and when the teacher elicits a member from each team, they gave the answer they had discussed in teams previously.

> Students didn't refuse to form teams and work with their classmates. When they worked in teams, each member did it quite well.

Working collaboratively in small teams had helped the students to feel less nervous or shy, and as a result just three students now expressed negative feelings about participating in class compared to 11 at the beginning of the programme. The other 23 reported feeling 'excited' or 'good'.

Similarly, 24 students felt good about having a team role. Generally, students liked their roles and Elizabeth will continue to use them when needed. However, she acknowledges that she will need to be a bit clearer about what the responsibilities of each role are in order

to get better results, as well as making sure that each student has the opportunity to experience all of them. She would probably also introduce other, different roles for different kinds of activities in the future.

Peer observation feedback and reflection notes showed that overall, the negative attitudes towards working with others had decreased, and that there were only one or two students who were still reluctant to work with particular individuals.

Her colleague also observed that the pupils who took their roles seriously, and worked collaboratively with their team outperformed the others.

What Elizabeth has learnt

"There is always room for improvement; I consider that I have become a better professional because of this whole new experience. I am not the same educator as I was at the beginning of this journey. I feel empowered and motivated. And although doing EAR adds more time to our already busy

schedule, it also brings plenty of practical benefits. I can see clearly how this has had such a great impact not only on me, but also on my students and classroom.

I will continue to get my students working in groups, because it improved participation and their attitudes towards working with their classmates. I also noticed that although sometimes a few students couldn't remember some information, they were able to review it and improve within their teams. With time, rapport between students improved, and I want that to continue. Hopefully, 100% of students will feel completely comfortable, and 0% will feel nervous when taking part in class; that is one of my next objectives."

Reflections about EAR

"This experience helped me to reflect, analyse and learn more – not only about my classroom situation, but also about my students – and it enabled me to make informed decisions about their welfare and performance.

Having developed research skills in my own classroom with my own students, and having made my own decisions based on their needs, I was able to reflect on my teaching and be more aware of what was really happening in my classroom. Now, I feel that I can help my students learn in a better way based on what they tell me, and make better decisions to expand their learning in different areas. Moreover, my students feel that they are being taken into consideration; and as a consequence, they are more involved.

I will continue doing EAR in my future lessons and with other groups as well. I cannot picture myself not doing so; it has brought so much knowledge to my teaching life that I cannot help but continue to learn and research! And I never imagined that I could do research in such a short time; my ideas of what research entails were so different to what they are now, having completed this programme.

Often research is done by individuals who have no experience in that particular context and have not lived it first-hand. But now, we as teachers, can be both teachers and researchers in our own teaching environments. So, this is just the beginning of a new journey since professional development never ends, and there is always something we can improve. I know that with my newly acquired skills and tools, I will continue to implement actions in my classroom that will have a positive impact on my students and hopefully, on my school and society as well."

Reflection questions

1. To find out more about why students weren't fully participating, Elizabeth created a questionnaire to find out how they felt about participating and why they didn't always take part. She also kept a reflection journal. Which of these do you think gave Elizabeth the most useful information? Which of these do you think would be most useful to you if you were to investigate student behaviour in your classroom? Why?

2. Elizabeth implemented two strategies to encourage greater student participation with her learners – Numbered Heads Together and assigning roles. What strategies have you tried to get your students to take a more active part in activities? Were they successful? Do you think the two strategies Elizabeth tried could prove useful with your learners? Why?

ENCUESTA DE INGLÉS
(English survey)

TEMA: Participación
(Subject: Participation)

No necesitas escribir tu nombre. (You don't have to write your name)

Contesta las siguientes preguntas. (Answer the following questions)

1. ¿Te gusta trabajar en equipos ahora con las nuevas actividades desarrolladas por la maestra? (Do you like working in teams now with the new activities developed by the teacher?)

    A) Si (Yes)   B) No (No)   C) A veces (Sometimes)

2. ¿Piensas que todos tus compañeros participan cuando trabajan en equipo ahora más que antes? (Do you think all your classmates participate when working in teams now than before?)

    A) Siempre   B) Usualmente   C) A veces   D) Rara vez   E) Nunca

    (Always)   (Usually)   (Sometimes)   (Hardly ever)   (Never)

3. Desempeñas los roles que te tocaron de forma: (You carry out the roles you are given:)

    A) Excelente   B) Bien   C) Más o menos   D) Mal

    (Excellently)   (Well)   (more or less)   (Badly).

4. ¿Cómo te sentiste cuándo tienes un rol en tu grupo? (How do you feel when you had a role in your group?)

    A) Emocionado   B) Bien   C) Nervioso   D) Inseguro

    (Excited)   (Good)   (nervous)   (insecure).

5. ¿Qué roles te han tocado en clases? (Which roles have you taken in the classes?)

    _____

    _____

    _____

6. ¿Cuál role te gusta más y cuál te gusta menos? (Which role do you like the most and which one the least?)

    _____

7. ¿Cómo te sientes ahora cuando participas en clase? (How do you feel now when you participate in class)

    A) Emocionado   B) Bien   C) Nervioso   D) Inseguro

    (Excited)   (Good)   (nervous)   (insecure).

8. ¿Sientes que participas más en clase ahora? (Do you think that you participate more in class now?)

    A) Sí   B) No

    (Yes)   (No)

6 Use of technology in the classroom

Olaf Morales Barrales
Todos Santos, Baja California Sur Mexico, Mexico

Teaching context

Olaf currently teaches English in Todos Santos, a very small town located between La Paz and Los Cabos. He teaches English to grade 5 and 6 students at Todos Educando primary school, which is located on the outskirts of Todos Santos.

For this EAR project, he chose to work with 6th graders – a class of 11 students aged 10-11. Their backgrounds are very diverse – some have used English since they were very young while others are true beginners. This happens because Todos Santos is a tourist destination and families from around Mexico and the USA move to Todos Santos to look for better job opportunities and their children enrol in the local schools.

The puzzle

Olaf decided to focus his project on 'use of technology in the classroom' since it's something he's always been interested in. In his experience as an English teacher, he's tried many different teaching styles as he likes his students to have some fun while learning. Technology is one of the tools he uses, and he's seen how much students, especially children, can learn with the help of digital resources such as video, audio, interactive games, etc. A few years ago, Olaf was only able to use a standard TV connected to his computer to show basic presentations and videos, but nowadays there are many apps which students can use to improve their skills, even by themselves. So, what he wanted to examine, during this project, was just how effective technology was and how much students could learn from it.

Exploratory questions

To explore the pros and cons of technology, and better understand how to use it effectively, Olaf came up with four exploratory questions:

1. What do students enjoy the most when using technology?

2. What do I mean by technology in the classroom?

3. Why do I think the use of technology is beneficial for my students?

4. What do my colleagues think of using technology in the classroom?

Initial data collection

To collect initial data, he decided on three different methods – videoed interviews with students, conversations with teachers, and reflection notes.

Olaf interviewed students in pairs/groups of three friends so they would feel comfortable. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on what students enjoy doing most when using technology. They were also carried out in Spanish so students could express themselves freely.

Olaf's conversations with the teachers took place in groups of two or three, in English and based on questions he had prepared in advance, which would help him to organise his findings.
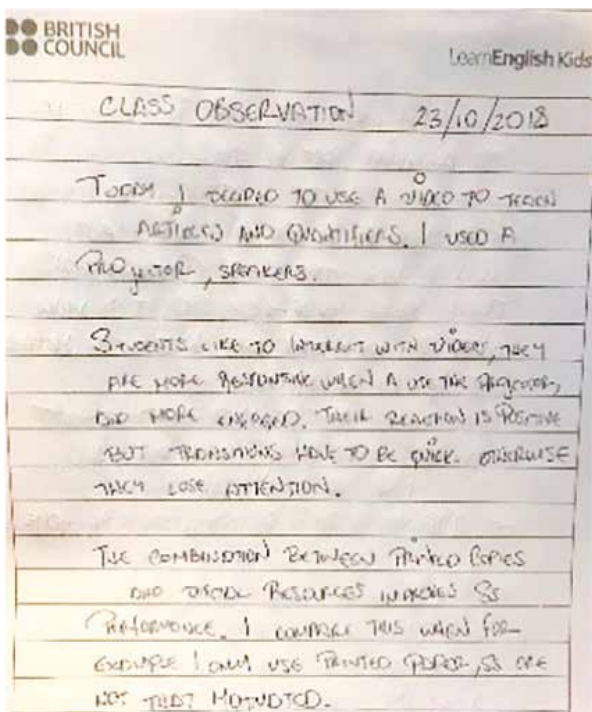
Olaf also prepared questions to aid his post-lesson reflections. He then video-recorded some lessons and used the questions to help him reflect on how and why he was using technology. He then wrote a report containing the most important information.

Reflection questions
• What are my students' reactions when we use technology?
• How do my students perform when I use these digital resources?
• What extra comments can I make about this lesson?

## Findings from the exploration phase

After analysing his initial data, Olaf realised that students spend a lot of time using technology, but not often to learn English. Generally, they think that they can only use their electronic devices for translating unknown words.

How students use technology in their lives
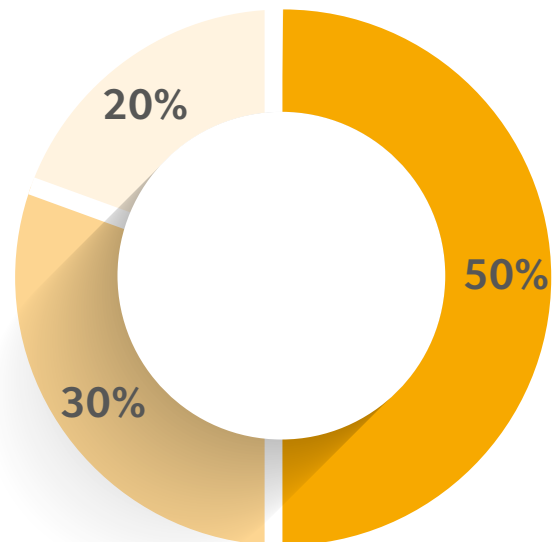
- 50% Entertainment
- 30% Search information
- 20% English study

Teachers, on the other hand, mentioned that in some cases, the use of technology is the only way students can learn about other cultures and experience how other people live since most of them cannot travel to other places. They also pointed out that the use of digital resources can help students learn according to their individual abilities and needs; it gives teachers the opportunity to work with students individually and cater to different learning styles.
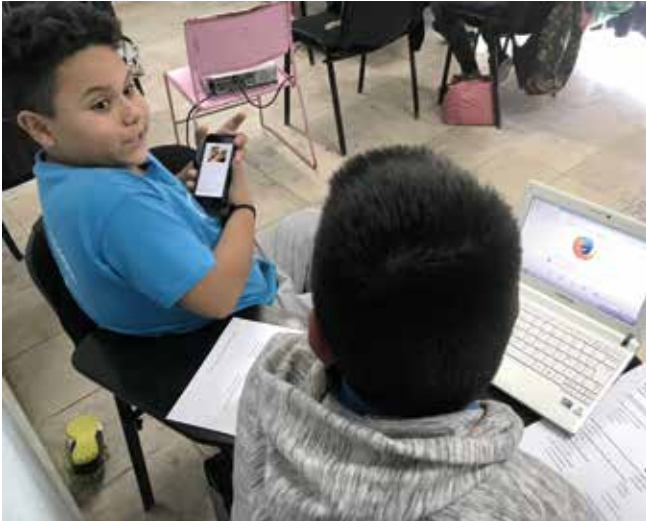
What Olaf observed was that it was the combination of digital resources and printed materials that benefited his students' learning, in addition to promoting collaboration.

Action

The implementation period was two weeks, and Olaf first thought about the equipment he would need for the digital resources he was planning to use. He set up his classroom so that he and his students could use a projector with speakers and he asked all students to bring a laptop or tablet with them to school. He would use the school's internet connection to show videos or use online interactive resources. He imagined that children would work individually on the introductory activities and in pairs for video activities and online games.

Olaf finally decided to use three digital resources in the classroom:

Short videos (YouTube) – as lead-ins to the lesson. For example, *'Communication then and now'*, *'Do Aliens exist?'*, etc. Olaf would first select a reading text on getepic.com and then find a video on YouTube that related to the topic and information of the text.

Digital flashcards and games – to pre-teach, practise and review vocabulary. Olaf needed a website that was easy to use and navigate, and fun. He found *quizlet.com* very easy to create flashcards and students found it easy to play vocabulary games. *Cram.com* is very similar to quizlet.com but Olaf used it because of two games – 'Jewels of wisdom' and 'Stellar Speller' – which students particularly enjoyed.

Digital reading resources – to practise reading. Olaf decided on *getapic.com* because there were many different types of articles grouped into different categories and levels. It's also free and students are able to interact by clicking on words to get the meaning and pronunciation. Afterwards, they can also do an online quiz to check what they remember.
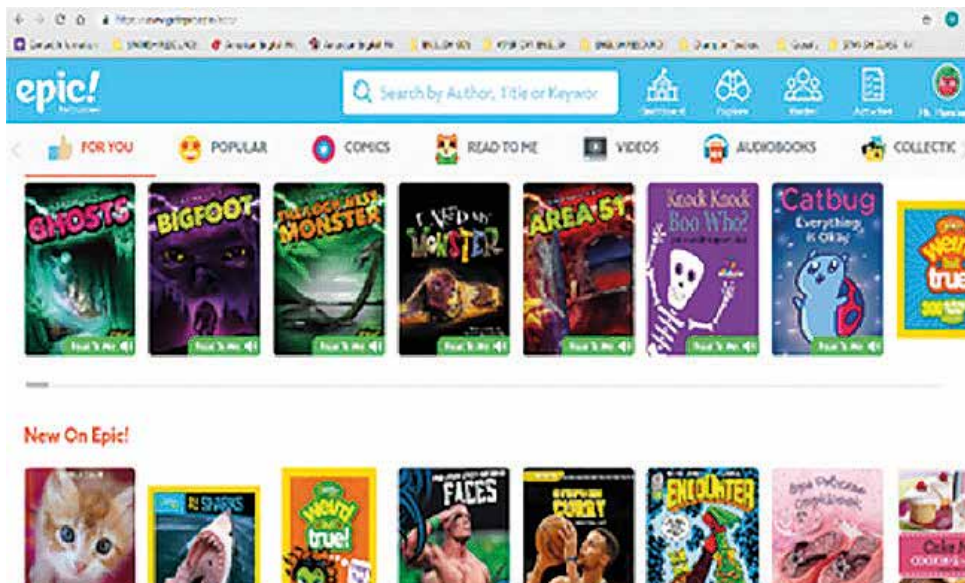
He linked and integrated these resources by focusing on skills development and each lesson followed more or less the same structure:

Stage	Aim
Lead In	To contextualise the topic of the lesson
Pre-teach vocabulary	To give students the MFP (Meaning, Form, and Pronunciation) of some words used in the reading article
While – reading	
Reading for gist	To give students the opportunity to use some skimming and recognise the main idea of the article
Reading for detail	To give students the opportunity to go deeper in the text and analyse it in order to answer some questions
Production/freer practice	To give students the opportunity to develop their writing skills by making a secret code of signs, letters, or numbers.

For example, in the first lesson:

Lead in – students discussed different forms of communication, watched a video and completed a worksheet. (Olaf decided to create his own worksheets to be sure they were appropriate to his learners).
Pre-teach vocabulary – students focused on vocabulary by playing a game on quizlet.com.
While-reading – students read a story at getepic.com.
Production – students created a secret code and worked in teams to find out the hidden message.

This all created a good atmosphere where students could not only practise their reading skills but also their listening and speaking.

Time to evaluate

At the end of the intervention Olaf gave students a questionnaire to find out what they thought about using the digital resources. He also asked two English teachers to separately peer observe his lessons. Olaf had also continued to make reflection notes and at times he also video-recorded his lessons to help him remember important information.

What was the impact?

Short videos

According to the findings, videos are a great source of information. Olaf and both observing teachers noticed that students paid more attention when information was presented via video than they did when it was presented on the board, and this resulted in improved performance when working on post-tasks. On reflection, Olaf also realised that students could connect words and their meanings more easily when these were presented visually; once students were really connected to the visual content, they could transfer all that information and remember better.

Digital flashcards and games

Using online resources as a way of presenting new vocabulary also proved effective – eight of the eleven students said they liked the way they could learn and practise new vocabulary in this way. They felt more engaged in the lesson and thought it was more entertaining than reading words from the whiteboard.

Digital reading resources

By using digital reading resources, Olaf was also able to observe how students interacted with technology while handling texts. What Olaf noticed most about students using electronic devices to read, was that they seemed to process information faster. When he asked them about this, most of them said they prefer to read on screen, although there were a few who prefer printed matter, but only because they prefer writing answers to typing them.

A high number of students also preferred the online reading quizzes to paper versions. They said that getting positive feedback throughout, and instantly knowing their score at the end, increased their confidence.

Conclusions and reflections

"From my perspective, technology can be a game changer; today's technology gives us access to unlimited information and we should not forget that students are digital natives. This Exploratory Action Research project gave me the opportunity to think about the way I have been teaching, and I am still in the process of adjusting my lessons so I can improve my students' learning. Now I feel more motivated than ever to continue growing and improving as a teacher."

For Olaf, the Champion Teachers Programme was exciting, but challenging. Having taken part in different programmes through his teaching career, he felt this was completely different because it had given him the opportunity to explore and analyse what he felt would be beneficial for his students. Moreover, his students were also very excited to take part – they told him that they'd never used technology in this way before, and they were really keen to explore and engage more with technology during class time.

I am very grateful to have been selected by the British Council, and it was an honour for me to present my findings with colleagues from different cities around Mexico. I really hope many other teachers around the world will read my story and maybe implement some of my strategies.

Reflection questions

1. Olaf used a variety of online resources during the implementation phase of his study. Have you tried any of these with your learners? Would you like to try any? Why? How do you think they would improve learning?

2. Olaf found it useful to reflect on his lessons by video-recording some lessons, reflecting on *how* and *why* he was using technology with the aid of questions he had prepared, and then writing a report containing the most important information. Do you think you would find this approach to post-lesson reflection useful? Why? / Why not?

7 Boosting vocabulary learning

Ana Herrera Benavides

Puebla, Mexico

Teaching context

Ana works at Secundaria Técnica No. 1, a public secondary school, which is located in Xonaca, not far from downtown Puebla. Most of the students' parents are factory workers and shopkeepers so cannot afford private English classes for their children. The class Ana chose to focus on consisted of 38 students – 18 girls and 20 boys – aged 13-14, and they had been learning English for one year.

The puzzle

Ana noticed that her students didn't seem to have enough vocabulary to perform classroom tasks, and they also seemed to have problems remembering vocabulary. This led her to think that they had difficulties learning vocabulary, and caused her students to complain that they didn't know English.

Ana herself believes that vocabulary is essential to learning a language so she decided to explore the ways that her students learn vocabulary, and to find ways to teach them vocabulary more effectively in order to increase their repertoire. She also felt that she would need to change her attitude, i.e. pay more attention to her learners' needs, and worry less about covering the content of the programme.

Exploration phase

Research questions

To better understand the situation, Ana came up with four questions that she could use to explore her students', her colleagues' and her own perceptions, and her students' behaviour:

1. What do students think about learning vocabulary?

2. What strategies do students use to learn vocabulary?

3. Why do I think students have poor vocabulary?

4. What do my colleagues think of students' difficulties in vocabulary?

> It's not possible to speak, write, read or listen if you don't have the vocabulary.

Methods

To find out if other teachers faced a similar issue, Ana decided to interview a colleague, who was also a former teacher of this group of learners. This interview was more of an informal conversation, which she recorded.

She also invited a different colleague to peer observe a lesson by focusing on five questions related to the teaching and learning of vocabulary. Finally, the third method she used to explore this situation – and according to Ana, the most important one – was a student questionnaire consisting of six questions.

Interview questions

1. Do you think that learning vocabulary is important? Why?
2. What strategies do you use when you teach students vocabulary?
3. What do you think about the activities that you use with your students? Why?
4. Why do you think students struggle to learn vocabulary?


Ana Herrera Benavides
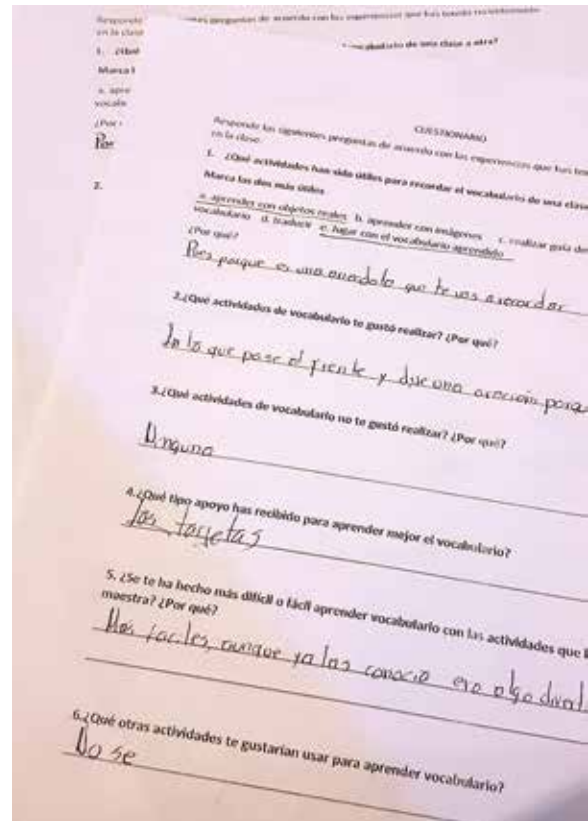
Findings

From the questionnaire responses, Ana discovered that generally students thought learning vocabulary is difficult and the reasons they gave included: it's different to Spanish, it's complicated and difficult to pronounce.

Do you think that learning vocabulary is...?

- 19% Easy
- 11% Very difficult
- 70% Difficult
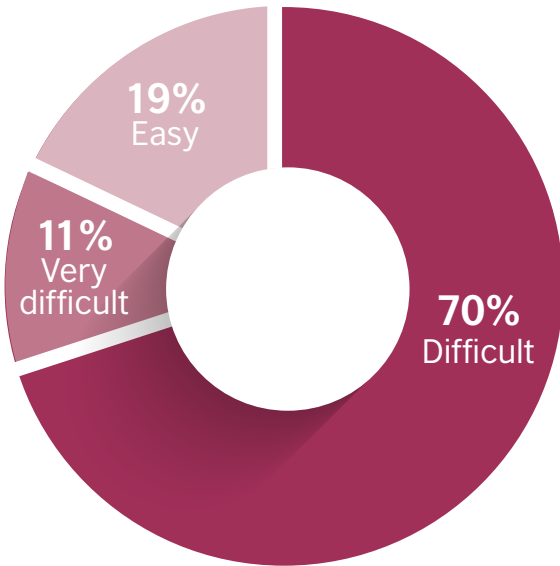
23 of the 38 students claimed they don't remember vocabulary from one lesson to the next, and the reasons they gave for this were that they don't get enough practice, and the vocabulary is not consolidated.

Do you remember most of the words you learn from one class to another?

- No
- Yes
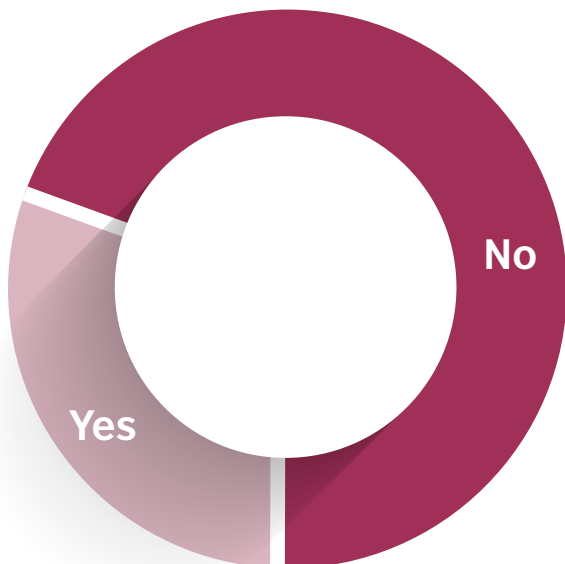
Ana also learned that students prefer to learn vocabulary by playing games, doing translation, and grammar exercises because these activities help them to learn more easily.

With regard to strategies, during the interview with her colleague, Ana discovered that recording vocabulary with pictures was a key strategy used:

> I use different strategies, the most important strategy is when I told the students to make a picture or to cut a picture and paste it in the notebook and write the word in English like Pictionary.

Finally, she found that the observing teachers and the students themselves thought that their vocabulary was 'poor'. Teachers pointed to the fact that most students don't learn English at primary school and this affects learning. They also mentioned that students don't pay attention or don't practise.

Ana reflected on her findings, and realised that students were learning too many words at a time and weren't getting enough practice with these – they weren't using them. So, she decided to slow down and give her students the chance to learn, practise and consolidate the vocabulary that they were learning.

Action

Ana decided on three different actions to support the learning and consolidation of vocabulary: visual support, games, and worksheets, which she would use every lesson.

Why did Ana choose these particular strategies?

Ana based her choices on her learners' preferences and her mentor's suggestions. She felt visual aids – realia and flashcards – could be used to present language, and games and exercises to consolidate language.

Where did she look for ideas and resources?

She downloaded the images for the flashcards from *Vocabulary_Free time activities*[1]. She chose games that are well-known, fun to play and which don't require a lot of material or preparation. She created the worksheets herself.

Extracts from worksheets

I. Write the verb

_____ shopping

_____ book

_____ comedy movie

_____ to the movies

_____ romantic movie

II. Circle 5 pictures and play bingo

III. Look at the example and write 3 sentences about your preferences.
Example: I´d rather go shopping than play a sport.

1. _____

How did she use the resources and the games?

- Ana used flashcards and realia (e.g. a book, a shopping bag, some DVD cases, etc.) during the presentation stage of each lesson to teach five items of vocabulary. She used these to drill, practise and memorise vocabulary.

- She also used games to consolidate new vocabulary – bingo, tic-tac-toe (also known as noughts and crosses) or hot potato (the teacher plays music while the students pass a toy around, and when the music stops the student holding the toy creates a sentence with the new language).
- And finally, she gave them a worksheet with exercises that required them to use the new words to write sentences.

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1. *www.vocabulary.cl/Lists/Free_Time_Activities.htm*

Effects of the action

To find out what effect the actions had had, Ana kept a journal, she invited two colleagues to observe her lessons, and she gave her students a questionnaire to learn their opinions about the different activities she had introduced.

Visual support

The students and teachers agreed that flashcards are particularly useful in remembering vocabulary.

Teacher 1:

> The teacher presents flashcards to students so that they learn and practice vocabulary. Then, she writes on the board the vocabulary. Yes, flashcards help students to remember what they represent.

Teacher 2:

> In this case, the flashcards used by the teacher helped the students to relate the words or phrases with the verbs she presented.

Student response:

> That she taught us with the images and we had to repeat all together because I have more words.

Ana also noticed that her students seemed to remember the vocabulary after doing flashcard activities:

Journal entry

> I was monitoring when they were matching the words with the pictures, and helped them to remember the vocabulary. Most of them could remember the previous vocabulary and did the tasks.

The use of realia was also considered relatively helpful by students; 12 students indicated this was a useful strategy.

Games

The students also agreed that the games were helpful in consolidating vocabulary; in fact, 20 students identified games as 'useful' compared with 18 for flashcards. Most students explained that playing games such as bingo, tic-tac-toe and hot potato helped them to remember and learn vocabulary better because they had fun while learning.

> The games, I feel that with more pressure to win we wanted to learn and memorise.

> The more games we played, the more fun we had and learned English.

> Throw the bear [hot potato] and play cat [tic-tac-toe] or discover because it motivates to learn and I remember them better.

Ana also noted how engaged they were in the games.

Journal entry

> We played hot potato and they were active and excited. They paid attention to what we were doing and their performance was good.

The observing teachers also noticed how students were encouraged to use the vocabulary by participating in the games. However, there were a few behavioural issues, and some students didn't like certain games, e.g. with hot potato some felt it didn't offer enough opportunities for everyone to participate.

Worksheets

The worksheets weren't so popular initially; Ana noticed that students were reluctant to do them, some didn't finish them and some complained that they didn't know enough English. However, toward the end of the intervention phase, this changed as the vocabulary became more familiar to them, and in the questionnaire students acknowledged that they were useful as did the observers:

> Students practise vocabulary by doing different activities where they have to use the vocabulary provided before. The activities provide meaningful practice because they are similar to the activities made by the teacher before.
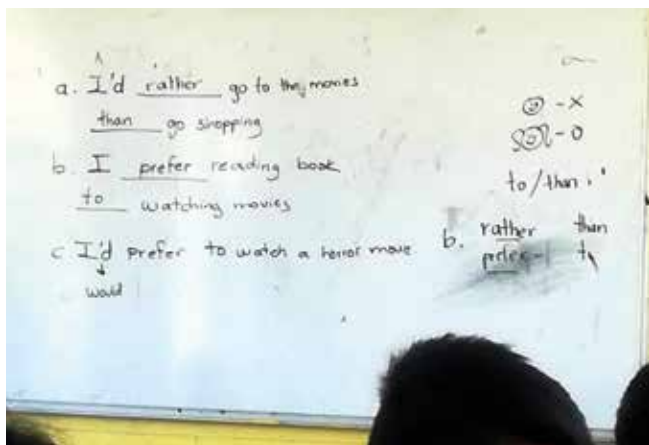
Conclusions and reflections

From this experience of exploratory action research, Ana understood that learning English could be difficult for students. She realised that teaching too many new items of vocabulary at a time did not work well. She also came to understand that learning vocabulary is a process which involves visual support, practice and consolidation, and this process needs to be part of her daily teaching:

> Even though some students don't like exercises, they provide good practice, so I will continue to include extra practice in my lessons.

Ana also realised the importance of knowing her students' individual preferences and that she needed to use a variety of strategies to help all students better understand the language. And finally, she recognised how crucial it was to create a positive learning environment, and felt that promoting team work and games were helpful in achieving this.

And what about Ana's experience of exploratory action research?

> "I learnt what exploratory action research is – the process as well as learning about some instruments to gather information. I learnt that there is always something we can improve in our teaching to help our students to learn and understand. I learnt that knowing what our students think and feel can be a great source to do things differently in order to improve their learning and the way we teach."
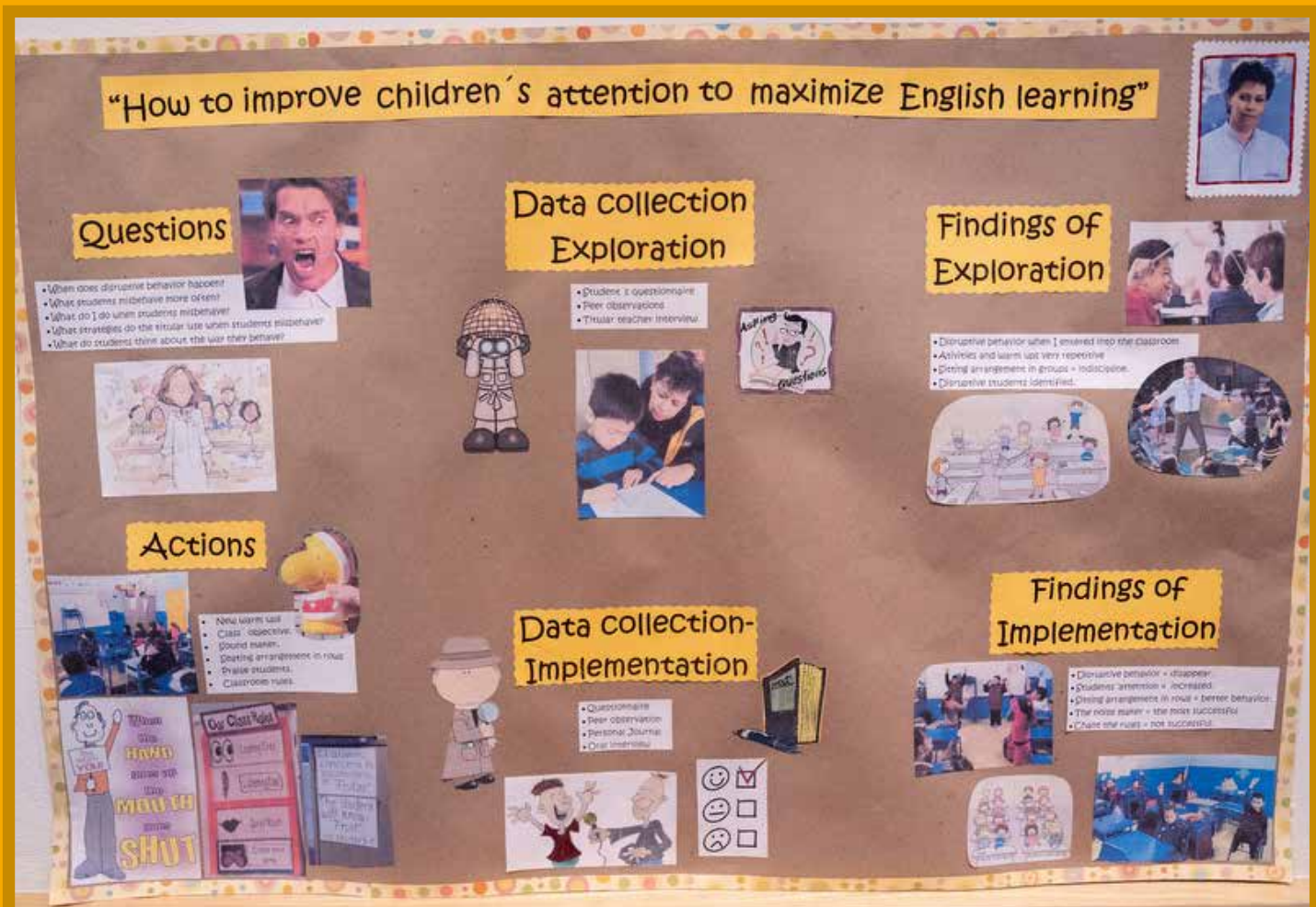
Reflection questions

1. To find out if other teachers faced a similar issue, Ana decided to prepare some questions and informally interview a colleague. Why do you think it's useful to consult with colleagues about problems? Does this happen where you work? What would you consult a colleague about?
2. Ana decided to use flashcards to introduce vocabulary, and games to practise and consolidate it. Have you used images and games in this way? Do your learners find them useful? Are the activities effective? How could you find out?

8

How to improve learners' attention to maximize English learning

Ana Lilia Rodríguez Zamora

Acámbaro, Guanajuato, México

Teaching context

Lili teaches second-graders at a public primary school in Acámbaro, Guanajuato, Mexico. For this project, she chose to work with class 2ºA. There were 34 learners (20 boys and 14 girls) aged 7 to 8 and they had three, 50-minute English classes per week.

A difficult group to work with

Lili chose to focus on the topic mentioned above because it was very difficult to work with class 2ºA. The learners paid no attention to her, and were always busy talking to each other. To make things worse, the layout of the classroom meant they were seated in groups of four or five, schoolbags scattered on the floor, and their benches were so close together that it was very difficult for Lili to walk around the classroom to monitor. There were also some learners that groaned and complained from the moment she entered the room. Generally, they didn't work and didn't participate in activities.

To be part of this exploratory action research programme has been one of the most interesting experiences of my teaching life. When I first entered the programme, I had no idea what it was about, and that it would lead me to a deeper reflection of my teaching. From the beginning I had difficulty understanding what EAR was, and choosing a topic was also a problem. My main issue was bad behaviour in class, but I changed this to "How to improve learners' attention to maximize English learning".

Exploring the situation

Questions

The first thing Lili had to do was to explore the situation and she came up with some questions:

1. When does disruptive behaviour happen?

2. Which learners misbehave the most?

3. What do I do when learners misbehave?

4. What strategies does the class teacher use when learners misbehave?

5. What do the learners think about the way they behave?

Methods

To find answers, Lili created a questionnaire in Spanish with 14 multiple-choice questions. Learners responded by colouring in a face to indicate 'yes', 'sometimes' or 'no'. A few children were learning to read but none were able to read by themselves so Lili also had to read out the questions and monitor while they answered.

To get a different view of what was happening in the classroom, Lili invited an English-teaching colleague to peer observe twice. However, the experience was not very useful as the teacher congratulated Lili on her activities and made a few comments, but did not provide answers to her questions on managing behaviour. So, she asked the class teacher to observe her instead since she was having very similar problems. She also interviewed the class teacher to find out which strategies she used to deal with disruptive behaviour in the class.

Findings

Observation feedback

The findings were very important and confirmed some of Lili's suspicions. From her colleague's observation Lili learned that:

- Disruptive behaviour occurred at the beginning and during the lesson;
- Four or five learners were identified as the main instigators;
- Warm-up activities had become repetitive so they got bored and became disruptive.

She also noted that when learners misbehaved, Lili called out their names to involve them in the activity, and went to ask them to work or to give personal attention or help. The most interesting observation she made was that Lili needed to use different activities to suit different learning preferences – not just colouring, cutting and pasting because it was no longer interesting for them.

> My lessons had become routine as well as the warm-up activities!

Interview findings

During the interview the class teacher informed Lili that the students misbehaved during her lessons too, especially when she spoke loudly, used attractive materials or played games. When this happened, she explained she would get their attention by either speaking softly, doing a routine 'silence' chant, or simply stopping the lesson.

Learners' responses

From her learners' responses to the questionnaire, Lili discovered that:

- The children generally consider themselves well-behaved;
- The classroom layout/seating arrangement encouraged them to talk a lot and not pay attention.

Most learners (24) believed they were well-behaved; eight thought they sometimes behaved well, and just two believed they behaved badly. More than half said they liked to chat with their table friends in their groups. The majority also reported that they paid attention and had fun – just three learners claimed they weren't having fun.

Action

Once Lili had the answers to her questions, she did some research and planned some actions to implement over the course of the final six lessons.

Warm-up activities

She searched the internet for attractive warm-up activities to engage learners and prevent disruptive behaviour from the start, and found ideas in *a video*[1] where the teacher got the learners moving using funny voices and invited different learners to lead the activity to vary the routine.

Displaying lesson objectives

To let learners know what she wanted them to accomplish by the end of the lesson, Lili wrote the lesson objectives in English and Spanish, and asked learners to read them out in Spanish and then in English. She helped them in this part as some of them could not read. She then displayed the objective at the front of the classroom to remind them of what they would learn that day. She found *this idea*[2] on the internet too.
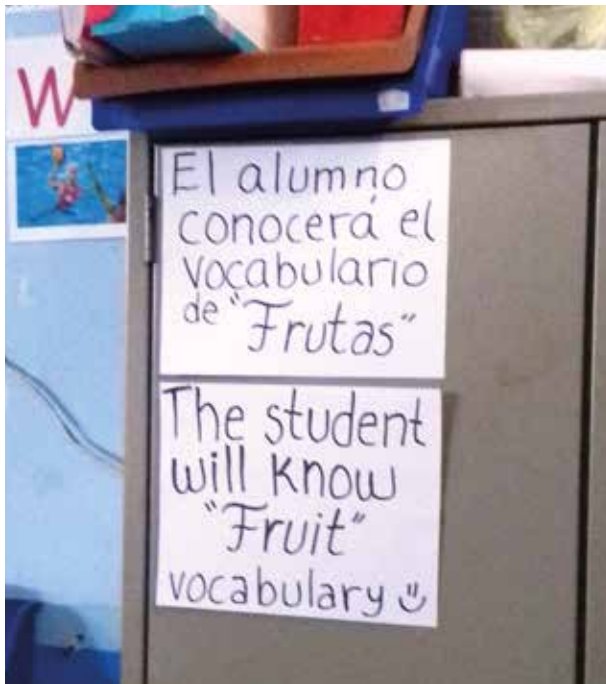
Displaying and chanting classroom rules

Lili felt it was important to set classroom rules, and display these so the learners could be reminded of them. She searched the internet for examples and chose a poster which was attractive and included short phrases and images to support understanding. She then adapted this to include 'cross your arms' and turned it into a chant (a strategy the class teacher used to good effect) to make the rules easier to remember. As soon as learners started to behave disruptively, she got them to chant the rules.

1. *www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9Vex9CAJVo*
2. *www.mastermiddleschoolmath.com/*

Changing the classroom layout

Lili read a few articles online e.g. *TesolClass.com* about seating arrangements and how these can influence behaviour and interaction, and as a result decided to separate out the tables and chairs to discourage chatting, and also to create space for monitoring the learners.

Praise and reward

Lili also found out more about the importance of praising learners from a *YouTube video*. She made a conscious effort to say something positive to her learners every day, e.g. to praise good behaviour and work, and to also reward them with star stickers when they behaved well. Some learners collected these in their notebooks and counted them to see who had the most, others preferred to stick them on their foreheads and proudly wear them.

Getting learners' attention

Lili needed an effective way to get her learners' attention and she came up with the idea of using a squeaky toy (a squeezable, plastic duck called 'Emilio'). She first got the idea as she was watching the news. After the earthquake in Mexico City when rescuers were looking for survivors, they used a signal for everyone to be quiet so they could listen for signs of life as they searched through the rubble. Lili trained her learners to respond to Emilio – whenever they heard him squeak, they stopped talking and raised their hands to show they were ready to listen.

Ana Lilia Rodríguez Zamora

Looking for evidence of change

Methods

To evaluate the effects of the action plan, Lili used the following tools to find out whether the changes had had any impact:

- a reflective journal
- a different learner questionnaire focused on how learners felt about the changes
- two peer observations by the class teacher
- a group oral interview with learners.

The group interview was held on the last day of term with about 15 learners in the classroom and took about seven minutes. Lili had prepared questions in advance and the learners expressed their opinions openly and freely.

Peer observation form

Peer Observation Form (5 Dec 2018)

PURPOSE: This form has been created to _describe what happens during the English class with the changes that are being implemented_ with the second grade students at 'Ferrocarriles Nacionales' school. It is requested to _observe in detail the participation of the students and their attitudes while the teacher delivers the lesson_. It is not about judging how the teacher delivers the lesson.

1. Mention how the children behaved when the teacher entered the classroom.
2. Describe the behaviour of students during introductory activities.
3. Describe the attitude of the students when the teacher is explaining the lesson objectives.
4. At what point during the lesson was disorderly behaviour observed by children identified as undisciplined?
5. How did the students behave when sitting in rows and working individually?
6. How did the students react when asked to chant the classroom rules?
7. Describe what happened when the students heard the sound of 'Emilio'.
8. How did students behave when their good behaviour was recognised?
9. Mention which teacher's actions had the greatest impact when there was some indiscipline in class.

Findings

- Peer observation notes and Lili's reflective journal showed that engaging warm-up activities had a positive effect because there were fewer groans and complaints when she entered the room, and behaviour during the lesson was better because the children were participating more in the activities.

- Responses in the questionnaires revealed that the children felt more comfortable with the new seating arrangement, and some learners were behaving better as a result. Lili and the class teacher also noticed a positive change in behaviour.

- Notes in Lili's journal and observation notes by the class teacher confirmed that the children's behaviour had improved as a result of introducing outdoor Total Physical Response (TPR) activities (e.g. learners formed a line and jumped forward if they heard the word 'apple' and backward if they heard the word 'orange') and engaging games such as bingo, which they seemed to enjoy.

- Using the squeaky toy was very useful as the learners reacted immediately to the sound by raising their hands, being quiet and waiting for instructions; they knew exactly what to do when they heard Emilio.
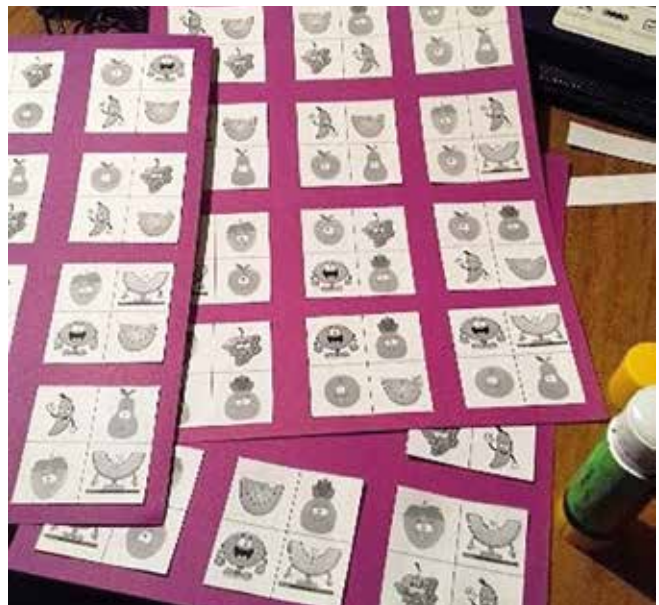
Journal entry

Today we went to do an activity related to fruits outside the classroom and the kids were excited as it was the first time I did it. It was very cold so it was very short. Some students were running around the yard so I sounded "Emilio" and they got together again. It was a fantastic strategy to call their attention back on the class.

- Reading out the lesson objective proved useful not only because learners knew what was expected from them, but also because they were happy to read in English, as responses during the oral interview showed:

I'm going to learn to read with these changes

I can read more and pay attention

- Stopping to chant the rules when disruptive behaviour started was only successful at the beginning of the implementation. With time learners missed the instruction to start chanting because they continued talking. It was more effective to use the squeaky toy. Lili thought this strategy would work as it did in the Spanish class, but it didn't – not in English.

Conclusions and reflections

Lili saw positive changes as a result of the action she took, even though this was only implemented over six lessons. She also learned that this kind of action research can be very useful in finding solutions to any teaching problem. She recognises, though, that it was a difficult journey, and that it hasn't ended – on the contrary, it has just started!

"I am more committed to my group now because my research showed me that the main root of the problem was that the activities I was doing were not the right ones, and my learners

got bored. It's true that second-graders are very enthusiastic and have a lot of energy, so this energy has to be focused on productive activities. However, it's also true that discipline at home is something that parents can forget to teach, and in the classroom learners believe they can behave as they do at home – as they like! It is also true that my action plan is not magic, and there will be times when the activities are no longer effective, but I will continue to look for new ones in order to be successful.

Teaching is hard to do because we are forming future professionals and we are dealing with human beings. Even though they are children, my learners have a lot of problems at home and this is sometimes reflected in their behaviour, as in the case of my most disruptive learner, whose brothers are drug addicts and whose mother pays him little attention. I am anxious to return to classes and see my learners again!"

Reflection questions

1. Do you work with children? Do you sometimes find it difficult to manage their behaviour and gain their attention? Do you think any of the actions Lili implemented – changing the classroom layout, displaying the classroom rules, praising and rewarding, and using a signal – could help?

2. In her final reflections Lili admitted that 'the main root of the problem was that the activities I was doing were not the right ones, and my learners got bored'. How do your learners behave? What does their behaviour tell you? How do you know that the activities you use are the 'right' ones for your learners? How could you find out?

9

Improving listening skills: small changes make big differences

Dulce Sanchez Zapata
Mérida, Yucatán, México

Teaching Context

The primary school where Dulce works is called 'Ichcaanzihó', and is located in the northeast part of Mérida, Yucatán, México. It is a big school with 12 classes – two in each grade, from 1 to 6. The school is well-equipped with internet, an overhead projector, screen, speakers, and a whiteboard in every classroom. For this project, Dulce decided to work with her 5B students – 17 boys and 12 girls aged 10-11. This group has two, 50-minute English lessons a week.

Dulce's students have a good level of English considering their age and grade. Some of them have the opportunity to take English classes outside school, and a few of them have relatives who speak the language, too. During the lessons the students are well-behaved and they are keen to participate in all the activities, but Dulce realised that they were not as enthusiastic about listening as they were about the other skills. For this reason, and because listening forms part of the curriculum, she chose to focus on listening skills for her Exploratory Action Research project.

Exploratory questions

First, Dulce reflected on the questions that could help her to get enough data to come up with an action plan. After a lot of thought, she settled on five questions:

1. How do my students feel about listening activities?
2. What listening activities motivate my students?
3. How often are my students exposed to listening activities during a lesson?
4. What is an effective listening activity for me?
5. What opportunities do my students have to practise listening outside the classroom?

Data collection tools

Having these questions in mind, Dulce then decided on tools to collect the information. First she designed a student questionnaire. This was in Spanish and contained eight multiple-choice questions followed by 'Why?' to gain more understanding about their feelings, preferences and how they listened to English outside class.

She also designed a peer observation form focused on the strategies and activities she used and student engagement. Dulce invited two colleagues to observe her but unfortunately they were unavailable at the time of her lessons so she gave them video recordings and they completed the form while watching the videos.

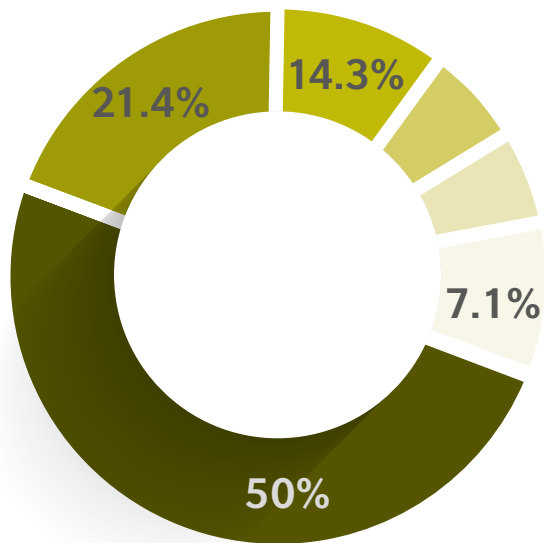*Peer observation form*

Peer Observation

Dear teacher, this questionnaire was created in order to get information about the effectiveness of listening activities during my lesson. Your answers will help me to know better how to choose strategies and activities to improve my students' listening skills.

1. What kind of warm up activities does the teacher present before listening to the audios?
2. How do students do better during the listening activities?
3. What kind of listening activities are carried out during the lesson?
4. Were the students engaged in the activities? How did you know?
5. Which listening strategies does the teacher use during the lesson?

Findings from the exploratory phase

1. How students feel

Dulce had assumed that her students felt *frustrated*, and that the topics weren't interesting enough, but after analysing the questionnaire responses and the peer observation comments, she was surprised to learn that her students mainly felt *confused* because the audio was too fast.

Why do you feel like this?

14.3%

21.4%

7.1%

50%

Because it's very fast

Because it's very fast and I don't understand

- - - - - ● Confused   - - - - - ● Confident

- - - - - ● Motivated   - - - - - ● Focused

- - - - - ● Bored   - - - - - ○ Frustrated

2. Which activities motivate students?

- The audio types that students find most motivating are songs and videos.

Songs	Conversations
Dialogues	Videos
Other	

- 48.1%
- 25.9%
- 11.1%
- 11.1%
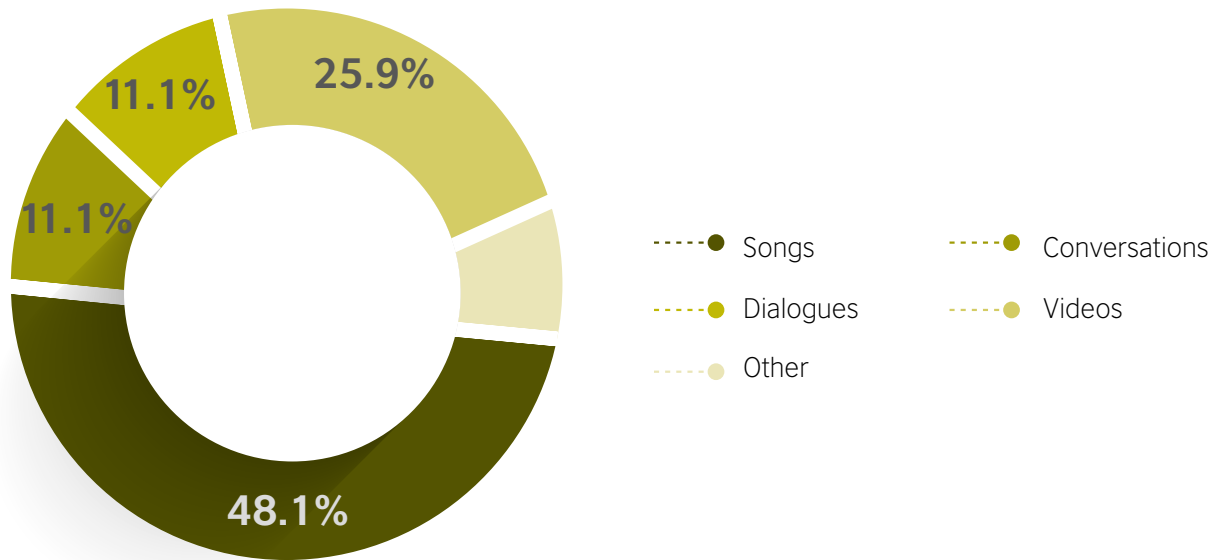
- The most popular activities are identifying the speaker, gap-filling, and matching columns, i.e. matching images to audio.

Activity	Value
a) gap-filing	9 (32.1)%
b) Identifying images	7 (25%)
c) Ordering a sequence	6 (21.4%)
d) Matching columns	9 (32.1)%
e) Multiple choice	5 (17.9%)
f) Identifying words	5 (17.9%)
g) Identifying the speaker	10 (35.7%)
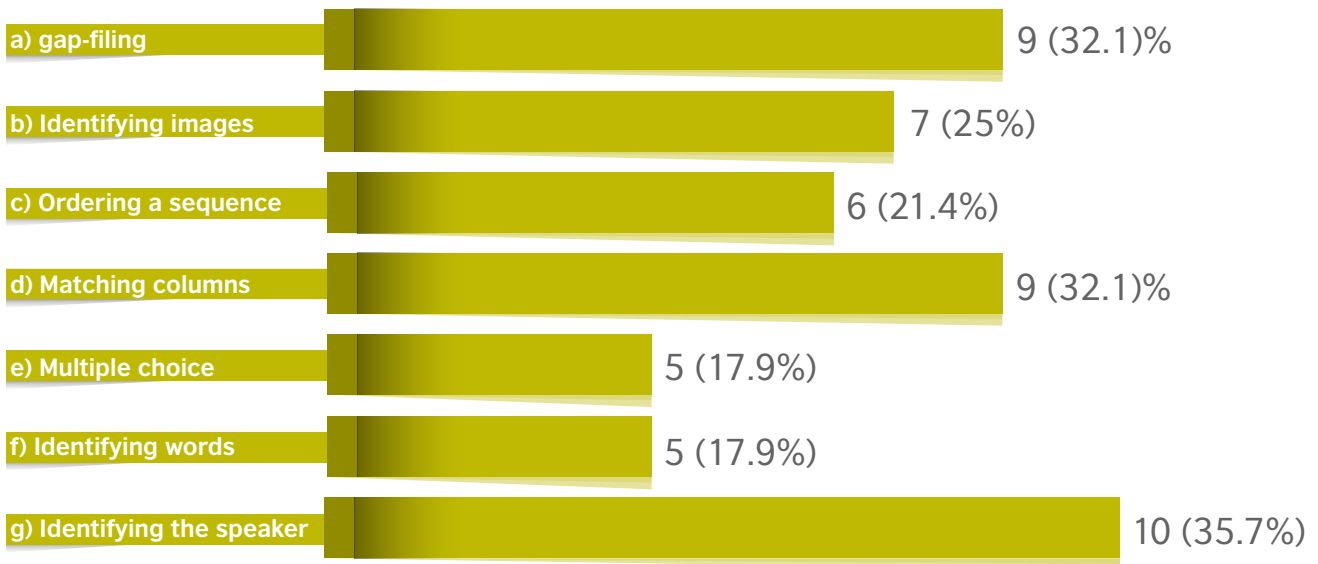
3. How often are students exposed to listening activities?

Although Dulce was already aware of how often she did listening activities (once a week), she was interested to know students' perceptions. In fact, she was surprised to find that some students thought 'once a month' – either they didn't understand the question or they didn't understand what activities were 'listening activities'.

- Most students think they do listening activities once a week.
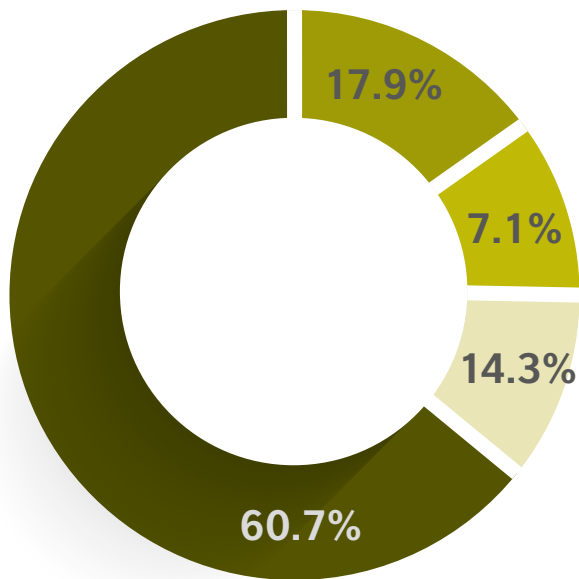
- ----● Once a week
- ----● Once every two weeks
- ----● Once a month
- ----● Every class

4. What is an effective listening activity?

- From the peer observation comments, Dulce concluded that an effective listening activity is one where students manage to focus on the speaker throughout, i.e. it is not too long, and are able to answer the comprehension questions, i.e. it is manageable.
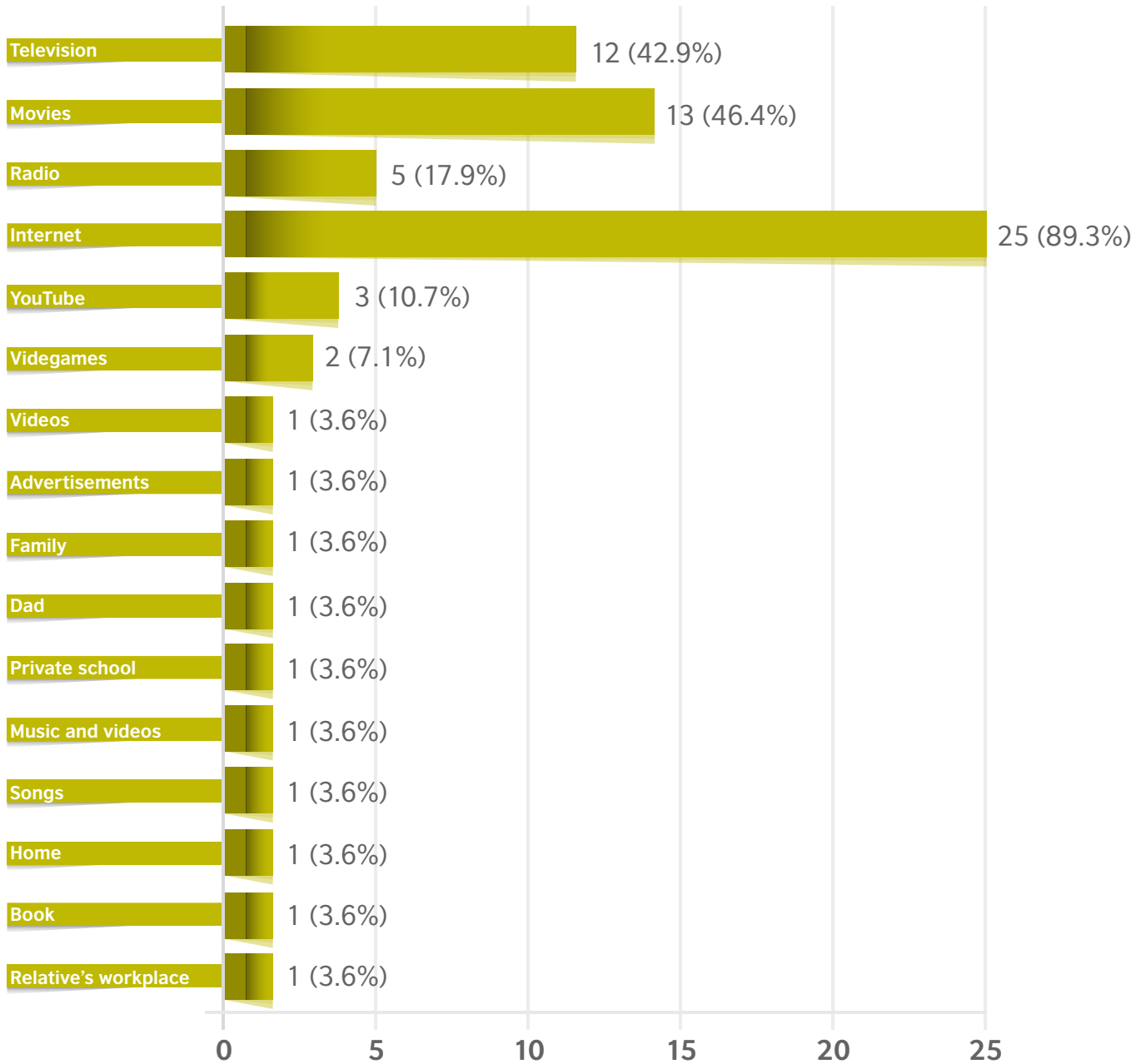
Observer 1

They were engaged in the first activity because they were participating, and they said it was easy. The second audio was more complicated, and they seemed distracted.

Observer 2

Some of the students were engaged in both activities but in general, the most of them participated more in the first audio, probably because it was short and easy. By the time they listened to the second audio they were a little bit lost, they were not paying enough attention.

5. What opportunities do students have to practise listening outside the classroom?

- Most students have access to the internet and there they are in contact with English. In addition, some students listen to English words when they watch TV or when they play videogames.

Category	Value
Television	12 (42.9%)
Movies	13 (46.4%)
Radio	5 (17.9%)
Internet	25 (89.3%)
YouTube	3 (10.7%)
Videgames	2 (7.1%)
Videos	1 (3.6%)
Advertisements	1 (3.6%)
Family	1 (3.6%)
Dad	1 (3.6%)
Private school	1 (3.6%)
Music and videos	1 (3.6%)
Songs	1 (3.6%)
Home	1 (3.6%)
Book	1 (3.6%)
Relative's workplace	1 (3.6%)

Action

After analysing her exploratory data, Dulce could finally plan how to improve listening practice with her students. She decided on four strategies that she would use in each of the five listening activity lessons during the implementation stage:

- use shorter audios
- use videos, songs and images
- get students to listen at home
- use listening activities every lesson.

Dulce also planned each lesson to follow the same structure;

1. Pre-teach vocabulary using images.

2. Show a short video that includes vocabulary, so the students can hear the pronunciations from a different source.

3. Explain the instructions for the listening activity, gap fill, match, circle, etc.

4. Play the audio and let them work.

5. Check for comprehension.

6. Assign homework.

Dulce prepared by selecting some videos from the internet related to topics on the curriculum, e.g. the weather, TV shows, natural disasters, plurals and action verbs. She used YouTube videos since these are popular with students. e.g. *Top 10 natural disasters caught on camera.*

Then, she showed some pictures to develop vocabulary using PowerPoint slides. She sourced her pictures from *Pixabay.com* because they are free to download. She showed the picture, elicited the vocabulary, showed the vocabulary and then asked students to repeat.

Volcanic eruption

Finally, she gave instructions for the listening activity and played the audio.

Since responses to the questionnaire showed that the students had internet access, Dulce had the idea to give them online homework to extend the listening practice. She turned to the British Council website *LearnEnglish Kids* – a very user-friendly site with content that is appropriate for children, and which has a lot of different video-related activities, e.g. *Ali and the magic carpet*. At the end of each lesson, she assigned homework tasks which involved students watching a short video and completing a worksheet.

Learn the Weather for Kids | Weather Types | Weather English | Weather | Weather Children

Time to evaluate

After the implementation stage, Dulce needed to evaluate the impact of her actions, so she designed a new student questionnaire to find out to what extent students felt the changes had been helpful to them, particularly with respect to:

- the listening activities
- the speed of the audio
- the images and videos used
- the increased frequency of listening activities
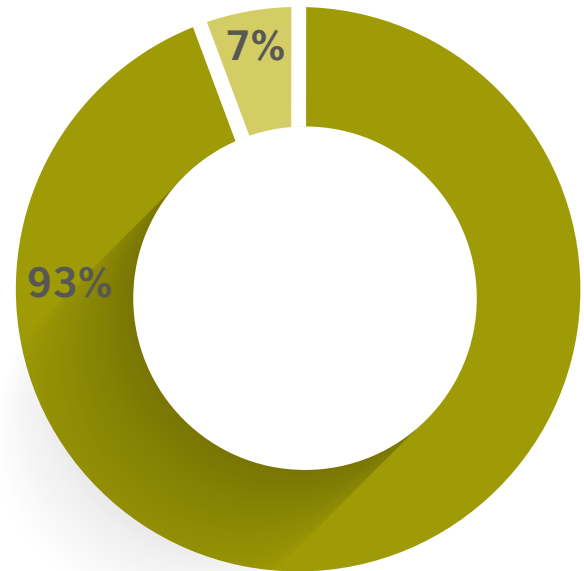- the homework tasks.

She also invited the same two teachers to come and peer observe again – this time they were able to observe 'live'. The purpose of the peer observations was for Dulce to find out how students responded during different stages of the listening activities.

Some important findings

Dulce analysed the data in the same way that she had done after the exploratory phase, and she was really happy to discover some important findings. Student responses revealed the following:
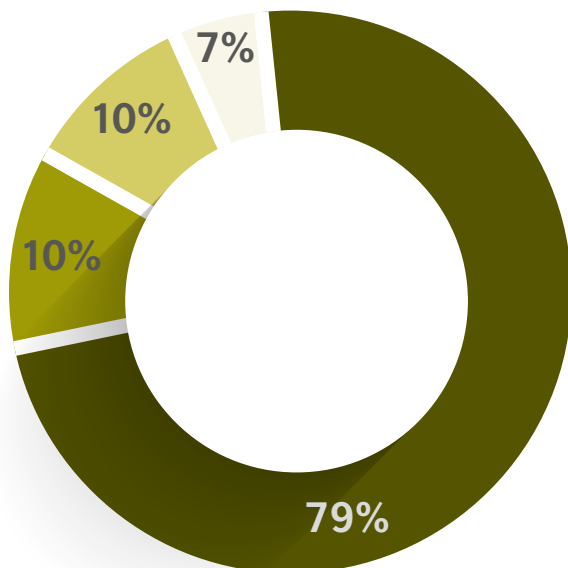
- Most of the students thought the activities were easy.

----- ● Easy   ----- ● Very easy

----- ● Difficult   ○ Very difficult

- The majority of students considered the speed of the audio made it easier to understand.

----- ● Yes   ----- ● No

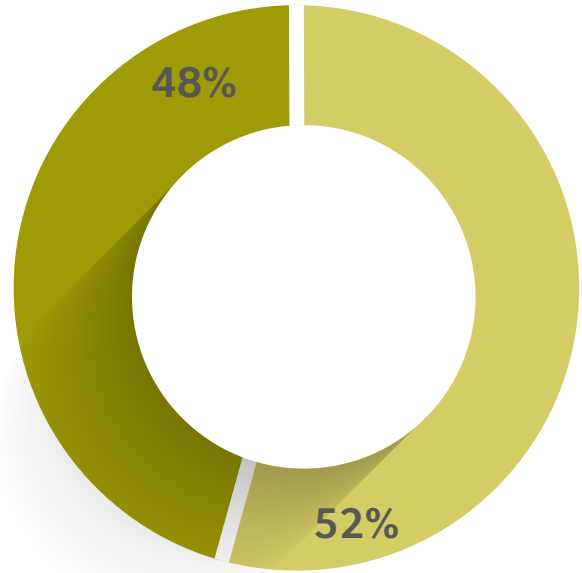- Nearly all the students found the images and videos helpful.
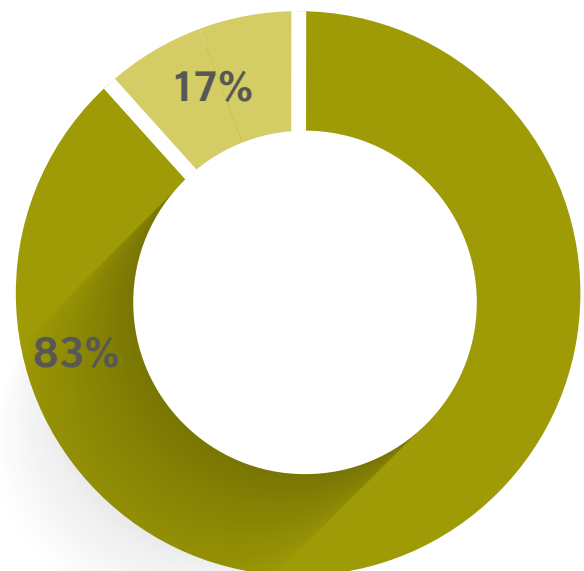
----- ● Yes   ----- ● No

The observing teachers also commented on the positive impact of the images and videos, e.g.
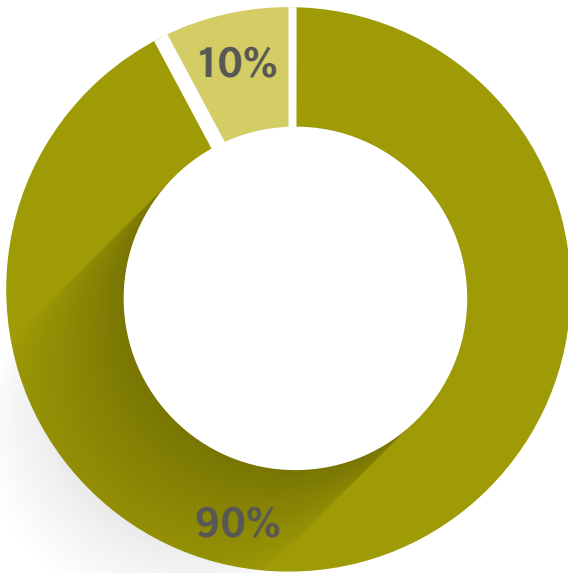
Observer 1

> The teacher used the images to elicit ideas from the students to find out what the audio was about. Then when they listened to the audio it was easier for them because the teacher did not have to repeat the audio several times.

• 90% of students felt that being exposed to listening activities every lesson helped them to understand the audios.

10%

90%

----● Yes   ----● No

• Opinions on whether home activities helped to improve listening skills were divided. However, this may be due to the fact that only a few students did the homework, others said they practised at home but there was no evidence.

48%

52%

----● Yes   ----● No

The observing teachers also agreed that the students were participating more during the listening lessons, e.g.

Observer 1

> They seem to enjoy the audios because they were participating and paying attention, there was no time for them to get distracted.

Conclusions

It seemed to Dulce that her actions had helped in developing students' listening skills in a variety of ways:

First, there was a routine established for listening tasks – students knew what to expect and what was expected of them during listening activities.

Second, there was significant progress in listening comprehension – because of the pre-listening tasks, students had the vocabulary and gist of the topic before listening to the audio and as a result, the recording was only played twice instead of three, four or even more times.

However, giving them homework every lesson was not successful. Although almost 50% thought it was useful, few did it, although with time more did participate. On reflection, Dulce thinks that twice a week was too much, and that once a week would have been better considering the amount of homework they have to do for other subjects. Even so, Dulce decided that rather than assume this was the case, she would conduct new research to explore this finding.

Reflections

"During this exploratory action research project, I learnt that following a few planned, simple steps could lead to a big change in the teaching-learning process. I have two groups of learners at the same level and I only applied these actions to one of them – the difference was very significant! This group of students became more motivated, so it was easier to work with them; their listening skills improved and I only needed to play the recordings twice – in general it was a positive and enriching experience.

I think the most remarkable change in my practice was to stop assuming, and to start discovering my students' needs and interests. During the implementation process, I realised that my students were becoming more enthusiastic about learning English, my lessons were more clearly structured, and I was using more audio-visual resources. I will definitely continue to prepare and plan my lessons with those resources, and my new perspective."

Reflection questions

1. Dulce prepared some questions and invited colleagues to peer observe her lessons, which gave her useful feedback on her approach to listening lessons. Have you ever invited a colleague to peer observe you? What do you think the benefits are of an extra pair of eyes? What aspect of teaching and learning would you like to get feedback on?

2. Dulce decided to extend listening practice by giving learners activities to do at home, but even though many found it useful, few did it. Do you give listening homework? If so, is your experience similar to or different from Dulce's? How do you think you could check whether listening practice at home is useful or effective? Is this something you would be interested in finding out?