

# Champion Teachers Mexico: Stories of Exploratory Action Research in *Escuelas Normales*

Edited by Paula Rebolledo and Deborah Bullock





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### ***Champion Teachers Mexico: Stories of Exploratory Action Research in Escuelas Normales***

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# FOREWORD

This book is the result of 12 months' hard work by a group of teacher trainers (Formadores de Inglés) from Estado de Mexico. For the first time in Mexico, teacher trainers in Teacher Training Colleges (Escuelas Normales) in the public education system have experimented with Exploratory Action Research (EAR) under the guidance of experts in the field and they have reported their findings in a systematic way for publication.

Their experiences will no doubt be of great interest to anyone connected with the profession and will positively impact the work that Teacher Colleges do in the development of Basic Education teachers who are majoring in English Language Teaching. What these teacher trainers have done is extraordinary, and as such they truly deserve the title 'Champion Teachers'.

The origins of 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 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 by undertaking research among their students. This helps teachers understand why what they do is successful (or not) and it allows them to adapt their teaching accordingly. In this way, 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 Basic Education teachers in the public sector. In 2019 a second delivery followed together with a course for teacher trainers in the Teacher Colleges (Escuelas Normales) of Estado de Mexico.

For this first and exclusive cohort of Champion Teachers in Escuelas Normales of Estado de Mexico the EAR

methodology was adapted to the needs and contexts of teacher trainers. Their research interests ranged from multi-level groups to well-being in the classroom, and other topics from language skills to Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Their whole-hearted commitment to the programme has enabled them to implement change in the work based on a professional, academic approach that suits their context and challenges. As teacher trainers with relevant experience in EAR, they can inform and empower future teachers to 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. Twelve of their stories have been selected at a national level for this book.

We would like to express our appreciation for all the partners and stakeholders who have helped make the programme the success it has been. These include Dr Paula Rebolledo, mentor, trainer and co-author, with Dr Richard Smith, academic advisor, senior mentor of the programme and co-author of *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (British Council, 2018), the Ministry of Education in Estado de Mexico, Dirección General de Educación Superior para Profesionales de la Educación (DGESPE), the authorities of Teacher Colleges in Estado de Mexico, headteachers, and of course the teacher trainers themselves.

I am sure you will find these accounts useful as a means of understanding the EAR methodologies and the benefits it can bring to the education methodology of future teachers in Mexico.

For further information on the British Council's programmes in Mexico please visit <https://www.britishcouncil.org.mx>

**Liliana Sánchez,**  
Head of Basic Education, British Council Mexico

# INTRODUCTION

Omar Rugerio

## Escuelas Normales in the State of Mexico

*Escuelas Normales* are teacher training colleges in Mexico that have traditionally been responsible for educating teachers to work with students at preschool, primary and secondary education in different areas. *Escuelas Normales* offer bachelor's degree programmes in Education and the Teaching and Learning of Spanish, Math, English, Physical and Inclusive Education among other disciplines that are part of the curriculum in basic education<sup>1</sup>.

The curriculum at *Escuelas Normales* aims at educating teachers with general, professional and subject-specific competences who can address challenges in basic education professionally, creatively and sensitively in different contexts (CEVIE-DGESPE, n.d.<sup>2</sup>). In addition to that, it is expected that student teachers from these institutions, regardless of their major or area of specialisation, become bilingual so that they can interact in different social practices of the language with a large number of people from diverse backgrounds but, more importantly, to advance their future students' learning (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2018<sup>3</sup>). In order to respond to this reform, more hours devoted to the learning of English were added to the curriculum.

To make bilingualism at *Normales* possible, the Ministry of Education released a call to summon English teachers categorised as *formadores de inglés C* to work at public *Escuelas Normales*. Whereas the language teachers

working at these institutions needed, at least, to hold a bachelor's or master's degree and a B2 level based on the CEFR to be able to teach the language, *formadores de inglés C* were required to hold a C1 or C2 level of competence in the language based on the CEFR, international English teaching qualifications – no matter the area of specialisation – and pass an examination on intellectual skills and ethical-professional responsibilities to be officially selected and hired (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2018<sup>4</sup>).

Once hired, *formadores de inglés C* and professors at *Escuelas Normales* (teachers working at *Normales* and teaching English prior to the programmes to the 2019 curriculum change) started the implementation of the new programmes for the training of future teachers that consisted of six hours of English lessons a week depending on the bachelor's degree programme.

Public *Escuelas Normales* in the State of Mexico are coordinated by the Ministry of Education's office for Higher Education Institutes and Teacher Training Colleges and the Dirección General de Educación Normal. This office is in charge of promoting continuing professional development opportunities (CPD) for professors, *formadores de inglés C* and students at *Escuelas Normales* also known as *Normalistas*. One of those CPD opportunities is a local and annual conference titled *Congreso y Encuentro Estatal Fortalecimiento Académico de la Educación Normal*<sup>5</sup>.

1. For more information about the programmes that are offered at *Escuelas Normales*, please, visit <http://bit.ly/EscuelasNormales2018>

2. CEVIE-DGESPE. (n.d.). *Planes 2018*. Planes de estudios 2018. <http://bit.ly/Planes2018>

3. Secretaría de Educación Pública. (2018). *Escuelas Normales. Estrategia de fortalecimiento y transformación*. Secretaría de Educación Pública.

4. Secretaría de Educación Pública. (2018, February 12). *Comunicado 37.- Asigna SEP las primeras plazas para maestros de inglés en Escuelas Normales*. Press release accessed in <http://bit.ly/SEPPressRelease37>

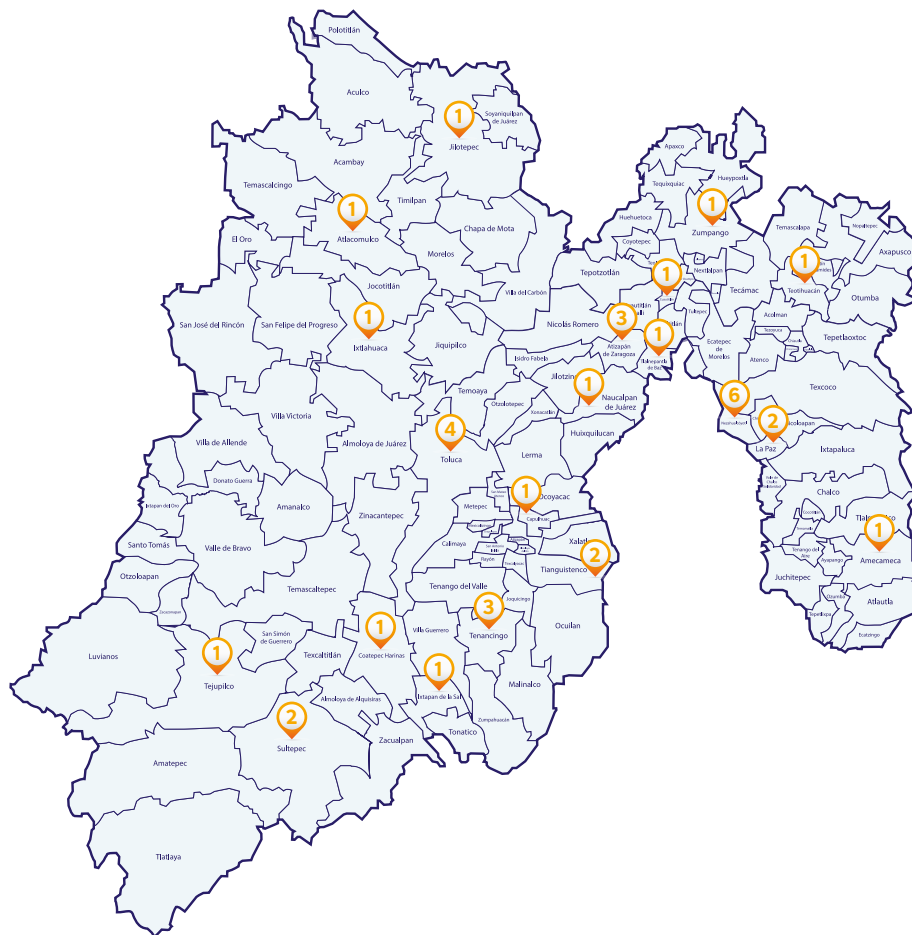
5. The *Congreso y Encuentro Estatal Fortalecimiento Académico de la Educación Normal* is a local conference held by the authorities of *Escuelas Normales* in the State of Mexico in coordination with the British Council Mexico.



In 2019, the Congreso y Encuentro Estatal included the presentation of the Exploratory Action Research projects of two teachers who had taken part in the first cohort of the Champion Teachers programme. Their stories generated interest among the audience and particularly the state authorities from the Dirección General de Educación Normal y Fortalecimiento Profesional. Since the curriculum reform described above highlights the importance of teachers and students carrying out research projects to promote contextually sensitive reflective practices

(Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2018<sup>6</sup>), the authorities from Normales were convinced that this programme was particularly relevant. Therefore, in alliance with British Council Mexico, a special cohort of Champion Teachers from Escuelas Normales started in the upcoming months.

The teachers of this special cohort of the Champion Teachers Programme work in the State of Mexico, which is the state that administers most of the public teacher training colleges in the country, 35 in total.



**Figure 1.** Locations of Escuelas Normales in the State of Mexico where Champion Teachers work.

6. Secretaría de Educación Pública. (2018). *Escuelas Normales. Estrategia de fortalecimiento y transformación*. Secretaría de Educación Pública. The number indicates the number of Champion Teachers working in each location.

The teachers, both professors and formadores de inglés C, participating in this edition of the programme work in similar conditions. They teach students aged 17 or older, and class sizes vary from 14 (or fewer) to 40. Students' level of competence in English in their freshman year varies from A1, A2 and, in some cases, up to B1 level based on the CEFR. The exit language level requirement to graduate, according to the Dirección General de Educación Superior para Profesionales de la Educación (2018)<sup>7</sup>, is a B2 for student teachers studying the bachelor's degree in English, a B1+ for the students of the bachelor's degree programmes in preschool and primary education as well as for the teaching of Physical Education, Telesecundaria, Biology, Spanish, Physics, Ethics, Geography, History, Math and Chemistry. Finally, an A2 exit level is required for the students of the bachelor's degrees in Inclusive Education, indigenous preschool and primary education with intercultural and bilingual approach.

## The Champion Teachers Programme at Normales

The Champion Teachers Programme in Mexico started in 2018 as a result of its success in countries such as Chile, followed by Peru and Colombia. The first Mexican cohort consisted of 23 teachers that worked at public primary, secondary and high schools. They carried out an Exploratory Action Research project in their schools over a period of four months and shared their results with their colleagues and presented their results at different conferences such as BBELT<sup>8</sup> 2019, in Mexico City, and the Congreso y Encuentro Estatal Fortalecimiento Académico de la Educación Normal<sup>9</sup>, in Toluca, State of Mexico.

As an initial step, 39 Champion Teachers took part in a two-day initial workshop in Toluca, State of Mexico in which they learned about the Exploratory Action Research<sup>10</sup> approach and reflected on their everyday



**Figure 2.** Claudia Dominguez' classroom in Escuela Normal de Ixtlahuaca.

7. Dirección General de Educación Superior para Profesionales de la Educación. (eds.). (2018). *Plan de Estudios 2018. Programa del Curso. Orientaciones curriculares para los cursos de inglés*. Secretaría de Educación Pública.
8. BBELT (Best of British English Language Teaching) is the annual, international and most relevant conference in ELT in Mexico held by the British Council Mexico that provides opportunities for teachers to improve professionally.
9. The Congreso y Encuentro Estatal Fortalecimiento Académico de la Educación Normal is a local conference held by the authorities of Escuelas Normales in the State of Mexico in coordination with the British Council Mexico.
10. For information about Exploratory Action Research, consult *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (2018) by Richard Smith and Paula Rebolledo.



**Figure 3.** Champion Teachers programme initial workshop, Toluca, Mexico. September 2019.

teaching practice to identify a puzzle, successful story or concerning issue to address in their classrooms. Besides identifying a topic area, teachers worked on the first draft of an EAR proposal so that at the end of the event they could go back home and start with the second stage of the process.

Teachers subsequently, and as part of the second phase of the process, were allocated to four mentors, three former Champion Teachers from the first Mexican cohort and one experienced mentor from Chile along with one senior mentor. They all worked collaboratively to support objectively and, especially, in a non-judgmental but supportive way (Smith, 2020<sup>11</sup>) the work of all teachers in the programme.

All participating mentors in the programme went through a process of training and preparation prior to the start of the programme. The training sessions covered topics such as building rapport and managing mentoring meetings as well as areas related to the process of exploratory action research such as the definition of exploratory questions, the design of data collection tools, the analysis of data and the design of an action plan, among others. In addition to that, mentors for the Normales cohort collaborated with senior mentors and other experienced mentors from other countries in the Americas allowing novice mentors to learn from their knowledge and experience.



**Figure 4.** Mentors and Senior Mentor, Paula Rebolledo, in the final workshop.

11. Smith, R. (2020). *Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms: a practical handbook*. British Council.

During the second phase of the programme, teachers had their first online meetings with their mentors to get to know each other and work, now with the support of their mentor, on their research questions and start their

research process. The agenda each mentor and mentee established was based on a calendar with three different stages and steps which was aligned with the processes of the EAR as shown in the figure below.

EAR Phases and steps		Activity		Week
<b>EXPLORATION</b>		Initial workshop	Mentor allocation	1
	Plan to explore	Defining exploratory research questions		2
		Data collection tools design		3-5
	Explore	Data collection tools application		6-7
	Analyse and reflect	Analysis of data		8-9
<b>ACTION</b>	Plan (to change)	Action plan design		10-11
	Act	Implementation of actions planned	Evaluation of action plan	12-14
	Observe			15-16
	Reflect	Analysis	Conclusions	17-18
<b>REPORT</b>		Final report	Poster design	19-21
	Closing workshop			22

**Figure 5.** EAR stages, steps (adapted from Smith and Rebolledo 2018), and timings in this edition of the programme.

Although there was a pre-established calendar, the different deadlines established remained flexible to address the needs of teachers and students at Escuelas Normales. Organising a research project while students were carrying out their practicum was particularly challenging since some of the practicum terms overlapped with the implementation of some actions from the EAR process, hence Champion Teachers needed to adapt their agendas with the support of their mentors to stay on track.

After going through the steps of the EAR process, the teachers gathered again in a final workshop to share

their findings and experience with their colleagues and mentors, who – after nearly five months of virtual work – could finally meet face to face. Two teachers from this cohort also had the chance to share their experience with a wider audience at BBELT<sup>12</sup> 2020 some days before the final workshop along with their colleagues from the Schools cohort who also presented their findings at the time.

Adhering to the tradition of the programme, creative and hand-made posters were the means through which teachers presented their EAR protocols in a 5-minute presentation, which was voice or video-recorded, and later discussed with their colleagues in greater depth.



**Figure 6.** Teacher recording the presentation of a colleague during posters presentations.

12. BBELT (Best of British English Language Teaching) is the annual, international and most relevant conference in ELT in Mexico held by the British Council Mexico that provides opportunities for teachers to improve professionally.

A total of 36 teachers finalised their projects and presented them during the final meeting. Teachers' issues of interest varied from topics about the

teaching of pragmatics, motivation and culture to skills development as illustrated in the summary table below.

	Name	Topic	Escuela Normal
1	Manuel Dario Acosta Martinez	Motivation	De Amecameca
2	Citlalli Arce Palacios	Exams	De Coatepec Harinas
3	Raul Becerril Garcia	Grammar	De Tlalnepantla
4	Bernardino Benitez Miranda	Speaking	De Sultepec
5	Adriana Amelia Buendia Camacho	Listening	No. 1 de Toluca
6	Irma Isela Ciprés Mata	Learner Autonomy	De Educación Especial del Estado de México
7	Eva Monserrat Cuevas Rodriguez	Motivation	De Sultepec
8	Claudia Elena Domínguez Porcayo	Reading	De Ixtlahuaca
9	Sandra María Del Carmen Flores Castillo	Speaking	De Atizapán de Zaragoza
10	Iliana Ivonne Gonzalez Mendoza	Motivation	De Atizapán de Zaragoza
11	Guillermina Guadarrama Valdés	Pragmatics	De Tenancingo
12	Rubén Octavio Guarneros Palacios	Learner Autonomy	De Capulhuac
13	Angélica Nayeli Huerta Piña	Grammar	De Santiago Tianguistenco
14	Priscilla Janet López Valdéz	Speaking	De Tejupilco
15	Isabel Montserrat López Delgado	Well-being	De Ixtapan de la Sal
16	Haydeé López Garduño	Culture	De Santiago Tianguistenco
17	Michel Marin Nájera	ICT	De los Reyes Acaquilpan
18	Omar Michael Martínez Avila	Literature	No. 4 de Nezahualcóyotl
19	Diana Mejía	Speaking	De Educación Física "Gral. Ignacio M. Beteta"
20	Gabriel Molina	LMS Platform	De Atlacomulco "Profra. Evangelina Alcántara Díaz"
21	Rocío Monroy	Culture	De Naucalpan
22	Miguel Angel Muciño Zuñiga	Listening	No. 3 de Nezahualcóyotl
23	Dulce Monserrat Nava Castro	Speaking	No. 3 de Toluca
24	Jorge Edmundo Nava Flores	ICT	De Tenancingo
25	Gabriela Peña Rico	Multi-level Groups	No. 1 de Nezahualcóyotl
26	Araceli Malleli Peña Vargas	Materials	Superior del Estado de México
27	Pamela Quintos Talavera	Multi-level Groups	De Tenancingo
28	Luz Angélica Racilla Sánchez	Writing	De Zumpango

	Name	Topic	Escuela Normal
29	Sarai Romero Marin	Concepts	De Texcoco
30	Luisa Alejandra Romero Pereda	Homework	De Cuautitlan Izcalli
31	Dante San Martín	Vocabulary	De los Reyes Acaquilpan
32	María Del Socorro Sánchez Serrano	Interaction	De Teotihuacan
33	Haydeé Tamara Sánchez Velázquez	Learner Autonomy	De Jilotepec
34	Valeria Soto Dominguez	Pronunciation	No. 1 de Nezahualcóyotl
35	Juan Manuel Torres Ramírez	Oral Presentations	No. 4 de Nezahualcóyotl
36	Cynthia Liliana Zuñiga Pioquinto	Mobile Phones	No. 3 de Nezahualcóyotl

Finally, in order to share the results in a written way, teachers reported on the process of their research projects by writing a narrative. In order to do that, they

used the feedback received by their peers to ensure their narrative was reader-friendly but true to the process carried out.



**Figure 7.** Champion Teachers writing their narratives after receiving peer feedback.

## The stories at Normales

The stories in this book intend to contribute to the academic and professional background of those interested in improving their teaching practice through research by providing examples of projects carried out by teachers working in similar contexts. Ideally, this publication aims at inspiring teacher educators, teachers and student teachers alike to become Champions in their own contexts by exploring their own practice and listening to their students' voices.

The opening story pictures Gabriel Molina and his interest in helping his students remember what he had previously explained in class so they would be able to complete the exercises from a textbook-associated Learning Management System. The actions he implemented led him to provide more productive skills practice and conclude that when students perceive teachers care about them, they will care more (about the lesson) too.

Socorro Sánchez, who at the time of doing this research worked with future Spanish teachers, shows in her story the determination of understanding in greater depth why her students were more disposed to speaking in English while working interactively. And, as a result of this finding, how she engaged them in spoken and written communication activities through charts and pair-work. This story, notably, represents how EAR is not only useful to address issues and tackle wrong assumptions about learners but also to boost strategies that are actually being successfully implemented in the classroom with Champion Students.

After feeling she was the worst teacher ever, Angélica Huerta, in story three, questioned herself on why her students were able to communicate effectively but struggled with the understanding of grammar. She then carried out actions that consisted of teaching language systems using task-based learning, assigning roles in group activities and using authentic materials to get to the point of making the teaching of grammar a student-centred process.

The following story, Citlalli Arce's experience of using some strategies on relaxation and music to help her

learners deal with negative feelings (and even physical effects) when taking an exam, shows how important it is to nurture students' emotional needs to foster more positive results by embracing new ways to deal with the inevitable in the classroom. Citlalli's case is a particular example of how the EAR was constantly adapted due to the difficulties of timing at Escuelas Normales and how the work among mentors, CTs and students was coordinated.

Priscilla López, in the next story, got to the root of understanding why her students were reluctant to speak in English and, by doing that avoided feeling disappointed in herself. She understood that when students do not speak in class it is not always because they do not want to do so, it is because they might feel nervous, lack interest in the textbook-based activities, or something else. After knowing the reasons, she made informed decisions and acted upon them immediately with activities and strategies that addressed her students' requests, feelings and needs. Priscilla, in the end, confirmed how her students' attitude to speaking changed thanks to her actions.

Alejandra Romero addresses the importance that homework has so that students can keep on practising the language at home after class time. After exploring, Alejandra knew that she was focusing on the negative side of homework and that she needed to establish plus communicate clear objectives along with instructions when it came to assignments. The changes she implemented to her approach to homework turned out to be beneficial as she noticed improvements in her students' attitudes. It was also eye-opening to learn that one of her regular classroom activities was not particularly enjoyable for her learners.

The seventh story portrays how Dario Acosta's findings guided him to address his interest in understanding why he believed his students were not motivated or engaged in his classes. Unexpected findings such as getting to know that his students were indeed motivated and that some others felt they were even unnoticed in the classroom – just to mention two – led Dario to break the routine and dare to create a learning environment



in which his students could learn from their mistakes and improve their skills in a balanced way using songs, sitcoms, games and mingling activities.

Assumptions are taken for granted and may be based on beliefs, but they do not always suit students' needs, preferences and feelings. In the eighth story, Michel Marin narrates how he had to change his intention to develop speaking using a voice recording app after figuring out his students had gone through negative experiences learning English before becoming student teachers. Michel resorted to modern songs and different interaction patterns instead that, eventually, produced interesting results and benefited pronunciation as well as the atmosphere in the classroom.

Luz Racilla's experience focused on understanding what 'meaningful writing' meant to her and, eventually, to her students. As a consequence of her findings, she acted by getting her students involved in the organisation and development of writing tasks, among other things. In the end, she concluded that EAR had given her a more human view on her students even when the implemented actions do not always work as expected.

Gabriela Peña's story depicts her case in teaching mixed-level groups of learners through projects in the classroom. Her project illustrates how she tackled some assumptions regarding her learners' preferences at the moment of working with different classmates, and how she decided to make a community of work by colour-coding her students depending on their language level. Surprisingly, her actions not only fostered improvement in the language but also ended up influencing students' teamworking attitudes, organisation skills and independence in the classroom.

In the next story, Mel Buendía addressed a group of future English teachers' listening skills. She decided to focus on that since she does not only believe that listening is the most difficult skill to be developed but also because language qualifications are highly important in the national education system. Mel was happy that, as a result of her exploration in the classroom, her students' thoughts were similar to hers; they felt they needed

more preparation to succeed in that skill when taking a proficiency examination, in consequence, she worked on that.

Guillermina Guadarrama, whose story closes this book, focused on a different but interesting topic, the teaching and learning of pragmatics. She knew it was going to be a challenge since her students' level of English made the understanding of the content of the course difficult. Moreover, she initially thought her students did not care about that subject, however, they did. By putting all the pieces from the data collected together, she decided to act upon that by moving from a theoretical approach to a practical one and venture to use resources that she had not thought of beforehand to make that possible. Guillermina recognises that not all her students think they performed as she expected, however, she felt satisfied that they became more 'aware' of pragmatics by the end.

## Acknowledgements

Personally, I would like to start by acknowledging the invaluable work my colleagues and mentors in this cohort, Carla Barra, Ana Velasco, and Olaf Barrales did throughout the programme. It has been awesome to travel this journey together.

On their behalf, it is with particular pleasure that I express my gratitude to Paula Rebolledo who helped, inspired, and motivated us to be supportive mentors but more importantly, we are thankful for her guidance throughout our first mentoring experience in a kind and patient way, making sure that our biweekly online meetings and the workshop environment was enjoyable, friendly, and memorable. Thanks for your teachings and feedback, Paula!

I should like to express special thanks to the Gobierno del Estado de México and the authorities from the Subsecretaría de Educación Superior y Normal and Dirección General de Educación Normal, Marco Antonio Trujillo Martínez, M.A., Edgar Alfonso Orozco Mendoza, M.A, Francisco José Plata Olvera, Ph.D, the professors in charge of the department of research at Dirección General de Educación Normal, all those involved in making the academic alliance with the British Council

possible to promote Exploratory Action Research at state-run Escuelas Normales in the State of Mexico, and, in particular, to Ricardo Llanos García for his very considerable contribution to make this all possible. Thanks for believing in Education and continuous professional development.

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Congratulations, Champion Teachers!

**#OrgullosamenteNormalistas**



**Figure 8.** Champion Teachers, authorities from Escuelas Normales, mentors and British council managers in the final workshop, February 2020.

## Notes on permissions

The British Council policies on equality, diversity and child protection were addressed throughout the research carried out by Champion Teachers. All the pictures used in this book were taken under consideration of those portrayed by signing a consent form for publication. Regarding the stories, the teachers who wrote them advised editors and approved the final versions contained in this publication in order to make them reader-friendly to a wider audience.



# 1

## Complementing and supplementing the Learning Management System (LMS)

**Gabriel Molina**

Atacomulco, State of Mexico



## Teaching Context

This EAR project took place at Escuela Normal de Atlacomulco in the State of Mexico, where Gabriel was working with a group of 17 learners aged 18–20 years old at B1 level. The primary goal of the students was to take and pass an accredited exam which certified they had reached B2 level (equivalent to Band 12 in the National Certification of Language Level in Mexico (CENNI)).



Because of their age, these students enjoyed working with technology, and since they got along well, they also enjoyed working in groups or pairs, although they worked well individually too. Mainly, the group needed encouragement and opportunities to use English as much as possible in addition to gradual exposure to the grammar features of the language that were known to them but not used accurately or appropriately. At the time of the project the group was working with a textbook that included online self-study via a Learning Management System (LMS), which included exercises to consolidate the learning done in the classroom.



## Limitations of the LMS

In this digital age one of the key features of many ELT books is that they come with some sort of online practice or LMS. Fortunately, in Gabriel's context, where a language lab and computer room are available, there is the opportunity to take advantage of this technological support offer. Gabriel understood that the LMS could offer learners a great opportunity to further practise the content covered in class in an interactive and appealing way if he could make the most of it. Moreover, it could offer a lot in terms of reinforcing and consolidating the topics and language he had covered in the classroom and he could learn how best to provide students with a better learning experience which could impact their level and confidence.

However, at the beginning of the course when he took his students to the language lab to work on the LMS and consolidate the topics they had studied in class, he noticed that at some point more than half of the learners had difficulties completing some of the exercises as they weren't able to remember what they had learnt and this led to two main problems:

1. Although a few learners were making use of their books or notes to clarify their doubts, Gabriel found himself quite busy answering questions, giving clarification and basically trying to help most of them.
2. A minority were finishing the exercises in a reasonable time while others were taking more time than expected.

All in all, Gabriel needed to take some action to provide his students with some useful reinforcement that would support them to manage their self-study while helping them to improve their overall English level. To that end he decided to explore how to complement and supplement the LMS.

## The exploration

Gabriel gave it some thought and came up with four questions to focus his enquiry:

1. What do I expect from my students regarding the LMS we are currently using?

2. What do my students feel and think about the LMS?
3. How often do my students work on the LMS and for how much time?
4. What strategies do I use to supplement or take advantage of the LMS?

### Exploratory tools

To find answers, he chose to use three different tools – student questionnaires, a journal and a focus group.



*Questionnaire:* Gabriel chose to use a questionnaire because it can give information from all students both quickly and efficiently. The nine questions focused on the time students spent on the LMS; what they liked/disliked about it; how easy it was to use; and how they felt while using it. The questionnaire was in English and completed in the language lab using an application called ‘Forms’, for which all students had an account. Using this app also made data analysis easier.

*Journal:* Gabriel felt that keeping a journal would give him the opportunity to reflect on what happened during lessons and in a way, promote self-criticism. After he’d decided on some guiding questions, he started reflecting and writing about the most important things that had occurred in relation to the content of each lesson.

*Focus group:* Gabriel wanted to hold a focus group because he could ask for further information on responses to the questionnaire and he thought students would be able to express their opinions, ideas and feelings clearly if the environment was relaxing and open. He chose five students with different learning characteristics and carried out the interview in Spanish.

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

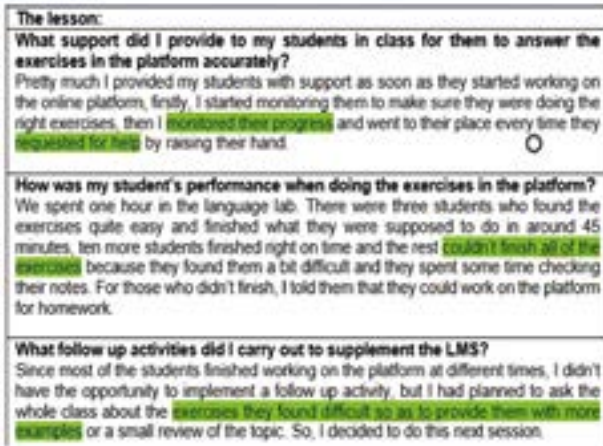
1. How often and how do you work on the LMS? Why?
2. How do you feel about working with it? Explain your answer.
3. How easy or difficult is it for you to answer the exercises? Why?
4. Do you think it has made an important contribution to improve your level? In what sense?
5. What would you like to add or change in the platform? Why?
6. What kind of support do you get from the teacher in order to make the most of it (prior to using it/while using it/after using it?)
7. What additional support do you think you need?



### Some answers to Gabriel’s questions

#### What do I expect from my students regarding the LMS we are currently using?

In seeking answers to this question, Gabriel found the process of noting his reflections in his journal valuable since doing this helped him to clarify his expectations. From his notes, he discovered that what he expected from the LMS was that his students would review and consolidate the topics covered in class, and as a result of clarifying this goal, he felt more motivated to create the right conditions to make this happen.



Journal extract

### What do my students feel and think about the LMS?

Questionnaire responses showed that students thought the platform had helped them to improve their receptive skills, but half of the class wanted more practice with productive skills as well as vocabulary.

I would like to have the opportunity to practise more the vocabulary that is interesting or useful.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

More than half of his students also said they had difficulties answering different exercises on the platform and because of that they needed more support. In the questionnaire responses, they admitted that this was partially because they were not taking time to review the topics that they had covered throughout the unit prior to working on the platform.

### How often do my students work on the LMS and for how much time?

Responses from the questionnaire and the focus group revealed that 13 of his learners worked on the platform only when he took them to the language lab; they did not use it outside of class time. This finding made Gabriel realise just how important it would be then to take full advantage of this resource when he used it during lessons. Moreover, his students reported that the platform was not meeting their expectations in terms of practising their productive skills or vocabulary.

I feel that the speaking or writing exercises are very simple.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

I want to know if I can use the important vocabulary or expressions correctly and with good pronunciation.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

### What strategies do I use to supplement or take advantage of the LMS?

Gabriel was surprised to learn that according to his students, he was not doing much in terms of providing further or additional exercises to complement or supplement the work done in class.

Basically we only complete the exercises on the platform and that's it.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

Gabriel thought about what he had discovered and wondered what he could do to effectively complement and supplement the LMS in view of his findings.

How can I use the LMS to practise productive language skills? And how can I support students prior to and while working on the platform so that they feel more confident and complete the activities within the allotted time? How can I better support them? And how can I wrap up the session and provide formative feedback?



## Action

Having thought about it carefully, Gabriel came up with three actions and a few strategies and activities that he would implement over the course of four lessons.

**1. Review.** Gabriel decided to carry out a quick review prior to working on the platform. He did this by eliciting what had been covered in class – mainly grammar and vocabulary – and encouraging participation orally and in writing, so that students would be better able to cope with the platform and require less support. At the same time, Gabriel also started **monitoring** students more closely while working on the platform to check the reviews had been effective.

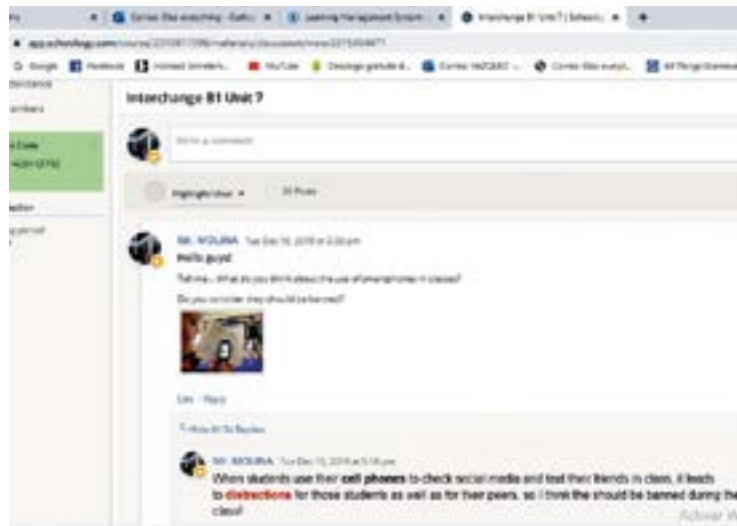


**Review**



**Monitoring**

**2. Online forums.** Since his students had requested more writing and speaking practice, Gabriel also decided to complement the exercises on the platform by making use of **online forums** and extend the activities with **plenary discussions**. This way his students could practise all language skills with an emphasis on production.



**Online forum**

**3. Personalised vocabulary bank.** To address students' expressed need to practise and consolidate vocabulary, Gabriel came up with the idea of them creating a personalised vocabulary bank of six–eight words or expressions that they wanted to master each lesson. They identified these words at the end of the session and added them to their glossary – an online document where they noted definitions and example sentences. At the end of each lesson, Gabriel played a **guessing game** 'Heads up' to review and check how well the students remembered these words.



Playing the vocabulary game



Vocabulary bank

### Evaluation of actions

To gather data on the impact of his actions, Gabriel again decided to use his journal and the focus group, but instead of a questionnaire, this time he chose peer observation.

**Journal.** Again Gabriel noted his observations in his journal after each lesson.

**Focus group.** This was organised as before but this time at the end of the implementation period and Gabriel asked his students for their opinions on the changes.

**Peer observation.** Gabriel felt it would be useful to get feedback from a colleague so he invited an experienced teacher he respected to come and observe two lessons in the language lab.

PEER OBSERVATION FORM	
Date:	
Venue / schedule	Escuela Normal de Atlacomulco (Language lab)
Teacher's name:	
Teacher observed:	Gabriel Molina Vázquez
STAGES	
BEFORE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How was the students' participation and contribution to the review?</li> </ul>	
WHILE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you notice any difficulties that students had while working on the exercises on the platform?</li> <li>• What type of support does the teacher offer the students while working on the platform?</li> <li>• How do the students react to this support?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the forum task engaging and motivating for students? How do you know?</li> <li>• What skills seem to be developed through the use of the platform? How do you know?</li> </ul>	
AFTER	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did students use the glossary?</li> <li>• How do students benefit from working on it?</li> <li>• What was the students' reaction when this feedback was given?</li> </ul>	
Any other comments...	

## Findings

### 1. Review

By analysing the evidence gathered from the three instruments used, Gabriel found that the review at the beginning of each session had had a positive effect on students' performance while working with the platform.

**Before I used to be very busy trying to help students with their doubts...**

(Extract from Journal)

He observed, and his students reported during the focus group, that they answered the exercises with more confidence and accuracy and requested less support.

Somehow the review has made a difference.

This gave Gabriel the opportunity to be more available to learners, monitor their progress more closely and even give some feedback on their overall performance, as observed by his colleague:

**The teacher went with every student to see how well they were doing even if they did not request for help or support.**

(Comment from peer observer)

An added bonus from having more time to attend to them on an individual level, was that rapport also improved.

**The fact of spending some time with all students while they work on the platform has given them the confidence to express doubts they have and even ask questions about topics we are not working with. A couple of them have asked me for my opinion about what else they can do to improve and pass an examination.**

(Extract from journal)

### 2. Online forums and discussions

Gabriel also noted that the online forums and the oral discussions allowed his students to develop both their productive and receptive skills

**I have observed that they take this activity seriously and that they are encouraged to use the language the best they can because they know that their classmates will read or listen to their point of view and that they need to support their ideas.**

(Extract from journal)

Feedback from his colleague confirmed this as a 'well thought-out plan', and his students agreed:

The topics were linked to the content of each unit and they made us think about our point of view.

Sometimes the teacher asked us to be for or against and it was difficult to decide.

It helped that somehow we had an idea of the topics because of what we had seen in class and we could express our opinion in the activities.

However, it is also relevant to mention that using the forum *and* discussion was possibly too much:

Working on the forum and the discussion is sometimes tiring and a little repetitive.

It would be a good idea to work on only one of them because we do not have much time in one session.

His colleague also commented on this:

**Both activities are similar and that it would be a good idea to do the first one and instead of the discussion just a conclusion.**

(Comment from peer observer)

And Gabriel had noted this in his journal too:

**I observed that the level of engagement fell a little bit during the oral discussion and that students started running out of ideas so probably it would be a good idea to carry out one or the other.**

(Extract from journal)

To sum up, feedback from all instruments indicated that working on both the forum and the discussion each session was sometimes a little time-consuming and tiring – students’ level of engagement dropped because they ran out of ideas. On reflection, Gabriel thinks it would have been better to alternate these activities.

### 3. Personalised vocabulary bank and game

Gabriel’s students especially appreciated the introduction of the vocabulary bank.

It takes some time to work on the vocabulary bank but it has helped me remember the vocabulary.

One way to learn a word or expression is by using it and that is what we do with this task.

I like it because some of the words that I choose are similar to the ones my classmates chose.

And Gabriel noticed how improvements in their range and accuracy enabled them to get their message across in the forums and during discussions, which again had

a positive effect on their confidence levels. Even his colleague noted how confidently students participated:

**It was a little surprising to see that two girls I used to consider shy were participating actively and enjoying the activity.**

(Extract from peer observation)

And students really enjoyed the final guessing game, and made several encouraging comments:

Can we do it again?

Why don't we do this more often?

Next time we will win!

I feel good when the teacher uses some of the words on my list for the Heads up game.

Overall, Gabriel felt the changes he had made contributed quite well to tackling the issues he had identified during the exploratory phase. Students produced more with the language with fewer mistakes and with less support, which benefited them and their learning.

### What Gabriel learnt

Gabriel reports that from here on in, the way he teaches will be influenced by this wonderful experience which helped him identify some key aspects in which successful language learning takes place through the use of a LMS. He will also continue to use questionnaires or focus groups to get information about his students’ needs, motivations and expectations of the course so that he is able to implement appropriate activities.

I will somehow put myself in my students’ shoes. I do believe that this is going to help me build a good rapport with my students and they will feel more comfortable in the learning environment.

A key learning point has been to stop assuming that his learners have understood everything, so he will continue to carry out regular reviews, even if they are not about to work with the platform, to identify what needs reinforcement and check students are doing well.

Bearing in mind that there is no perfect LMS, he will also continue to look for resources to complement and supplement this, monitor students' performance more closely and encourage them to keep going even if they make mistakes since these are part of the learning process.

### Final reflections

After this EAR experience, Gabriel is even more convinced that his job as a teacher is never done, that there is always something he can do to do his job better and ensure that most, if not all his learners succeed academically.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my learners and all the amazing people with whom I have had the pleasure to work during this project. Most importantly, I wish to thank God and my loving and supportive family for always being there by my side.

### Reflection

Gabriel felt that what he learnt from responses to the student questionnaire and focus group gave him important information about his students' needs, motivations and expectations of the course. Have you ever used these tools to get feedback from your learners? Would you like to? What would you be interested to find out?

I'm the kind of teacher who cares about students' language development, but I have to admit that for this project I made a bigger effort and somehow my students noticed it. Amazingly, I also noticed that eventually their attitude and commitment was much higher than before so in a few words it was like, 'If you care more, we will care more too'.

And finally, I'm glad to share that at the end of one lesson I heard a student saying to a classmate, "I loved this class", which really motivated me. When students enjoy the lessons, I enjoy them more because it is me who created the right conditions for learning to take place.



# 2

## Boosting interactive activities at the 'Escuela Normal de Teotihuacan' (ENT)

**María del Socorro Sánchez Serrano**  
Teotihuacan, State of Mexico



## Teaching context

Socorro Sánchez teaches at Escuela Normal de Teotihuacan (ENT) located in the northeast part of the State of Mexico. This training college trains teachers for primary and middle school education and at the time of this project, 2019–2020, there were eight groups and around 200 students. The group Socorro carried out her EAR project with was in the first semester of Spanish for middle school and consisted of 30 students (18 women and 12 men) aged 18 to 33 and at CEFR A1 level. They had three 100-minute classes a week with Socorro and particularly enjoyed kinaesthetic activities and cooperating in pair and group work.



## Focus of the research

Seeing how well these students performed in lessons where they were given the opportunity to interact with their peers, and noticing that they seemed more willing and confident to speak in English when working this way, Socorro was interested to look into this area further. She felt that if her students were given enough confidence and the basic tools to communicate with others, even at an elementary level, they would see that speaking is not so difficult since they do it naturally in their mother tongue.

## Exploration phase

Having identified an area to explore, Socorro spent some time thinking about this and narrowed down the topic to focus on interactive activities. What she wanted to explore was:

- what she understood by interactive activities;
- the types of activities she did in class; and
- what her students thought about interactive activities.

## Exploration tools

Then, to gather information on these three areas, she decided on three exploration methods.

### Background reading

To begin, she decided that it would be useful to read about what other English teaching professionals had written about interaction and interactive activities to compare their ideas with her own and to gain a better understanding of what interaction is and what interactive activities involve. The book she had access to at the time was *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* by H. D. Brown<sup>1</sup>, which gave a detailed description of what constitutes an ‘interactive activity’ and examples of such activities for use in the classroom. She also accessed a couple of online sources for ideas: [www.brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning-resources/teaching-resources/classroom-practices/active-learning/interactive](http://www.brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning-resources/teaching-resources/classroom-practices/active-learning/interactive) and [www.bookwidgets.com/blog/2018/06/20-interactive-teaching-activities-for-in-the-interactive-classroom](http://www.bookwidgets.com/blog/2018/06/20-interactive-teaching-activities-for-in-the-interactive-classroom).

### Journal

Socorro also decided that it would be useful to keep a journal and note down her reflections on how her students interacted with each other during classroom activities and the type of interactive activities she was using. She did this after each lesson for two weeks.

### Questionnaire

And finally to find out how her students felt about interacting in the classroom, Socorro designed a student questionnaire (cuestionario). She included multiple-choice questions focused on interaction, activities and materials and also invited her students to describe their feelings during interactive activities and suggest activities they would like to participate in.

The questionnaire was completed online using Google Forms, which was a great help to Socorro since percentages were automatically calculated and answers were categorised. Students completed it anonymously in the English lab at school.

1. Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. New York: Pearson Education.





## Questions included in the online student questionnaire

1. How do you like to work in the English class?
  - a) individually
  - b) in pairs
  - c) in teams
  - d) as a whole group
2. What activity do you like to do the most in English class?
  - a) interview two classmates
  - b) answer grammar exercises
  - c) write a paragraph about a classmate
  - d) complete a chart with information about a classmate
  - e) practise using an online platform
3. How do you feel when you have to interact with your other classmates?
4. What kind of material do you like to use the most in English class?
  - a) QR codes
  - b) grammar exercises from a book
  - c) material designed by the teacher
  - d) textbook
  - e) puppets
  - f) an online platform
5. What types of activities allow you to participate more in class?
  - a) interviews with classmates
  - b) grammar exercises from a book
  - c) material designed by the teacher
  - d) practice on an online platform
6. What activities do you think limit your participation in class?
  - a) interviews with classmates
  - b) grammar exercises from a book
  - c) material designed by the teacher
  - d) practice on an online platform
7. What percentage of class time do you think you interact with other classmates?
  - a) 80%–100%
  - b) 60%–80%
  - c) 40%–60%
  - d) 20%–40%
  - e) 0%–20%
8. What type of interactive activities would you like to have in English class?

## Some findings

At the end of the two weeks, Socorro carefully analysed and organised the information from the three tools and found that she had some useful feedback to consider and work with in relation to her exploratory questions.

### What do I understand by interactive activities?

From her reading of Brown's book (p. 53), Socorro took away three key ideas about interaction and interactive activities that she felt were important. Firstly, she understood that it was important for her as the teacher to 'create opportunities for genuine interaction in class'. Another key takeaway was that interaction is a 'product of negotiation, of give and take, as interlocutors attempt to communicate'. And finally, she understood that interaction should involve 'producing language for genuine, meaningful communication; oral communication and writing to and for real audiences'.

Socorro reflected on these key ideas and concluded that the interactive activities she introduced in class should involve genuine communication – spoken or written – and that activities such as interviews, role plays, discussions, conversations and games could prove effective in achieving this.

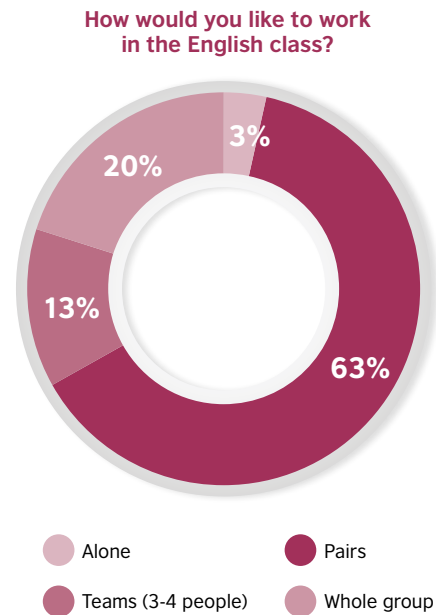
### What type of interactive activities do I do in class?

From her journal notes, Socorro was able to see that she included many interactive activities in class – interviews as suggested by the textbook, controlled and freer dialogues, role plays, games, surveys, mingles and pair work. However, she concluded that real and meaningful interaction was mainly taking place when students used the structures and conversation examples from the textbook as a guide, and then adapted these to engage in real-life communication with others. This is also when she noticed that students tried to keep conversations going in English and prompted each other when they slipped into L1.

### What do my students think and feel about interacting?

The majority of students (19) reported that working in pairs was how they liked to work best although four

preferred working in teams and six as a whole group; only one student preferred working alone.



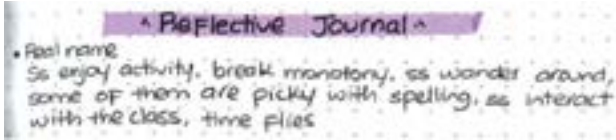
Concerning the activities students preferred, questionnaire responses showed that 21 students favoured interviews, conversations and practice dialogues, while three mentioned that they liked working on English language platforms. Three students said that they liked to complete charts by interviewing their classmates and two said they liked writing compositions about others.

21 students also felt that doing interviews in class provided them with the most opportunities to interact during lessons, while five felt that using the workbook afforded more. Three students identified handouts designed by the teacher, and one thought working on the online platform was best for this purpose.

In response to which activities they would like to have, the majority of students (14) said more interviews and conversations while two requested games and two, outings. Other suggestions included reading aloud, performing sketches, watching movies in English, giving presentations, doing handicrafts, and working with puppets.

Socorro had also asked them what percentage of class time they thought they spent interacting with others during the lessons, and the majority thought it was

between 60 and 80 per cent of the time. Some students commented on how the 'time flies' since the interactive activities help to break the monotony. Socorro had also noted in her journal that the majority seemed to enjoy talking to others since it reduced their affective filter and broke up the monotony.



But how did students feel when interacting with their classmates? Most felt 'fine', a few 'confident' or 'comfortable', but three reported feeling 'nervous'.

Socorro was satisfied with the data that she had managed to obtain from her three instruments and felt that it gave her enough information to start thinking about an action plan. She was also excited about the next stage of the project because her students were enthusiastic about doing interactive activities.

### Time for action

Having reflected on her findings from her own observations and her students' responses, Socorro decided that she would implement one specific interactive activity over the course of the next six lessons. Taking into consideration what she had learnt about interactive activities and her students' preferences, Socorro planned this with three aims in mind:

- to give her students the opportunity to engage in meaningful communication – spoken and written;
- to promote pair work; and
- to give them the chance to engage with many different partners.

The activity was based on the topics, vocabulary and interview format contained in the textbook, but with the addition of a chart which Socorro designed for students to complete with information after each activity.

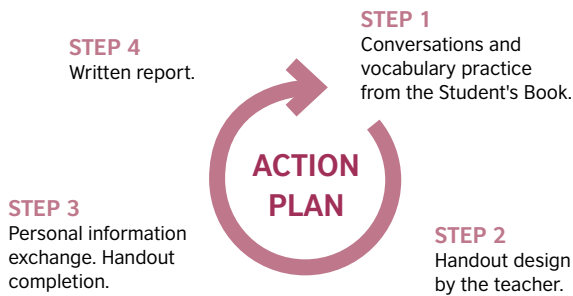
In total she created six different charts for six different lessons based on the lesson topics:

1. My partner's name
2. A new number and email address
3. My favourite actor and actress
4. Who's that?
5. My family
6. My favourite colour

‘My partner’s name’ sample chart			
First Name	Middle Name	Last Name	Nickname
Isabel	María	López	Isa
David	-	Tapia	Davo
Rocío	Andrea	Arias	Ro
Ignacio	Jesús	Moller	Nacho

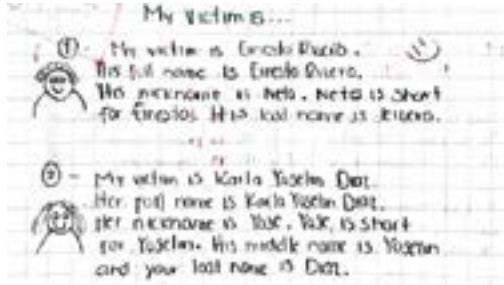


Students working in pairs using the charts



Socorro's action plan

After students had used the interview format to exchange personal information about themselves with two other partners, and filled in their charts, they used the information to write short paragraphs.



## Evaluation of the activity

Over the course of the six lessons, Socorro continued to write reflection notes in her **journal** and paid particular attention to how students interacted with each other, if they succeeded in completing the chart, and if comments about their performance arose.

Socorro also invited two colleagues or ‘critical friends’ to **peer observe** her lessons because she was interested to know if they could see what she was seeing, i.e. how positively her students were reacting to the interactive activities. To guide these observations, she prepared some questions focused on her own and her students’ behaviour during the interactive activities.

And finally, at the end of the implementation period, Socorro also administered another **student questionnaire** that she had designed to find out how her students felt about the activities. Once again this was completed online using Google Forms, but this time questions focused on:

- how useful the pre-teaching of vocabulary had been;
- how difficult it was for students to use and complete the tables;
- to what extent students perceived they interacted with others;
- how difficult they found the different parts of the activities, e.g. working in pairs, writing, etc. (ranking question); and
- to what extent and in what ways students felt the activities had helped them to improve their speaking.

## Changes as a result of the activity

Socorro noticed a lot of changes during the course of the six lessons, and after analysing the data from her journal, her peers and her students, she discovered that her students’ attitudes, feelings and behaviour had changed as a result of the activity she’d introduced.

## How did students feel about the activity?

Socorro noticed from her journal notes that the more students got used to completing the charts, the more

### PEER OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

**Purpose:** This peer observation questionnaire focuses on obtaining data to evaluate my intervention. It will also give information for exploratory action research; in no way should this peer observation constitute an evaluation of the teacher. No constructive feedback on the lesson is needed.

### OBSERVATION FORM

**Instructions:** Observe the lesson, focus your attention on interactive activities and pair work. Answer the questions.

1. What happened during the presentation of vocabulary?
2. Describe the strategies the teacher uses when presenting vocabulary. For example: a) context, b) pictures, c) translation, etc.
3. What do the students say when the teacher asks them to work in pairs?
4. What support does the teacher provide when students are working in pairs?
5. How do students interact when writing the paragraph?

comfortable they felt; they didn't react negatively or complain when they did this or when they wrote their short reports. She also observed that they were comfortable working with more than two students in class and that they were relaxed when asking for guidance when they did not know what to do.



Journal entry

Students feel comfortable working with each other. It shows because whenever they receive the handout, they cut it, paste it and turn to a partner in order to gather information from one another in the target language.

The vocabulary presented at the beginning of the class helped me to exchange personal information because I improved my pronunciation in English and increased the words I know.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

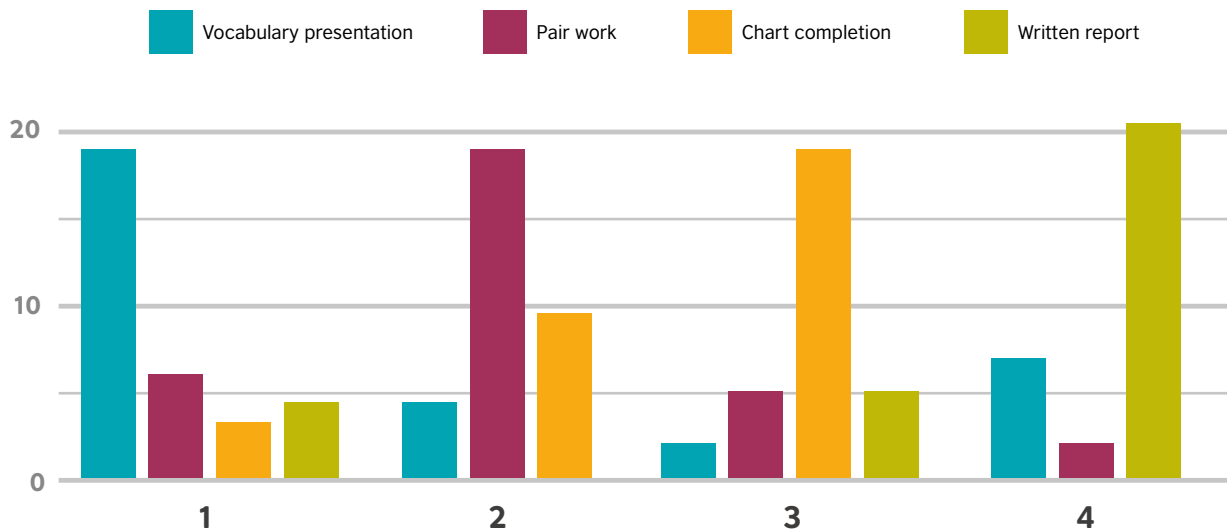
In their responses to the questionnaire, the students also stated that they felt comfortable using the target language when speaking in class because they had the tools needed to communicate.

When asked to rank each part of the activity according to difficulty, perhaps not surprisingly, most felt that the written report was most challenging.

Socorro noted that students used the conversations provided in the book as a guide, but felt comfortable asking her for prompts whenever they felt they needed a different structure or some vocabulary. The students also reported that the vocabulary and example conversations presented at the beginning of the class had helped them a lot.

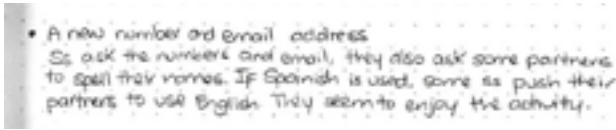
This visual report generated by Google, numbers the different aspects of the interactive activity according to difficulty from 1 = easiest to 4 = most difficult. Hence, according to students' ranking, vocabulary presentation was the easiest (1) and the written report was the most difficult (4).

**5. Rank the activities from the easiest (1) to the most difficult (4).**



## How did students behave during the activity?

From her own observations, Socorro noted how the students seemed to enjoy the activities and work well together. She also noticed that if students spoke in Spanish, their classmates would push them to keep the conversation going in English.



Socorro's colleagues also noted how eager students were to engage and interact in pair work and how well they worked together:

**Students say 'yes' when the teacher asks them to work in pairs, and begin working with another classmate. Students saw their partners as mentors if help was needed.**

(Observer 1 comments)

**Students are on task practising the dialogue, students move around looking for partners to work with. Students work with each other to write a paragraph, then they exchange writings to revise the work.**

(Observer 2 comments)

And Socorro's students also commented on how collaborative and helpful their classmates were:

When I completed the charts, my partners helped me a lot. They were a guide.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

My classmates help me improve from my mistakes. They give me comments and then I can practise.

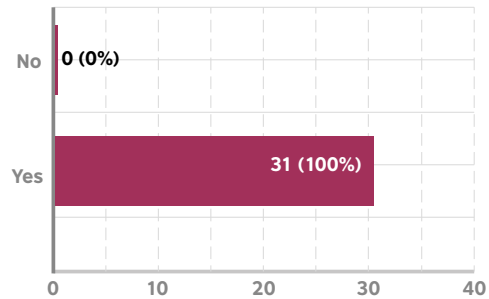
*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

## How did students benefit from the activity?

In response to question 6 in the questionnaire (*Do you think that the interactive activities helped you improve your oral production (speaking) in English?*), all Socorro's students answered 'Yes', which was very encouraging.

### 6. Did the interactive activities help you improve your speaking in English?

31 respuestas



And in their justifications to this answer, the majority felt they had improved their pronunciation, while others mentioned vocabulary.

How to pronounce the words, and how to use them.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

Now I am more able to pronounce English words.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

Students also mentioned other benefits – they felt the activities were a great way to participate in class, share ideas, be active, and work in different ways with different partners.

I became involved in class by talking to my classmates and sharing ideas with others.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

I improved my pronunciation and writing in English with the interactive activities we did in class.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

Overall Socorro was pleased with the impact of her actions although she wishes she had had more time to implement her Action Plan; it would have been interesting to see how her students' mindset towards speaking English changed over a longer period of time.

## What Socorro learnt

Undertaking and completing this EAR project helped Socorro to take into account students' opinions and perceptions when it came to planning her lessons and designing materials for them, and she recognises that this was important because it empowered her students to give her ideas on what they wanted to do and practise in class. Also important is that they felt heard and that their opinions mattered.

Socorro also learned more about how to make interactive activities more effective by implementing a simple technique that was new to her and which had a real impact on her students' learning in a short period of time.

And finally, taking part in the EAR project helped her to realise that there are some things she needs to improve: how to design questionnaires, how to work in an online setting (since her mentor was from Chile) and organise her time in an efficient way, and how to create an informative and attractive poster.

## Socorro's reflections:

As teachers we do not know everything so it is important to keep updated, learn from our colleagues, and be open to the possibility that our students can help us plan lessons if we give them the chance to do so. Although it was a hard process to collect and analyse all the information required, the results have been worth it since I truly discovered new answers to the questions that I had.

Finally, as you can see from my story, doing this project helped me to realise that my assumptions were wrong – my students didn't see English as a threat; they knew they had a low level, however

they encouraged each other to keep conversations going in the target language and realised that learning English was not as difficult as they had thought it was. I would say these students are Champion Students!



## Acknowledgements

I thank all the members of LEAEEES 2019-2022 for your enthusiastic participation in this project. Thank you Ale Romahn for your company in this adventure, and a special note of gratitude to Karely Gutiérrez for her invaluable help.

## Reflection

Socorro noticed that her students were eager to work collaboratively and wondered how she could use this to promote interaction in her classroom. As many of her colleagues, she asked her students about their views about this but she also decided to explore what other people wrote about this. In order to do this, she came up with a question to focus her reading and thus find the answers she was looking for. Have you done anything similar? What value do you see in doing focused reading to inform your teaching? What areas of your teaching could you do some background reading about?





# 3 Addressing issues with grammar

Angélica Nayeli Huerta Piña  
Santiago Tianguistenco, State of Mexico



## Teaching Context

Angélica works in the centre of Mexico, in the municipality Santiago Tianguistenco, about 40 minutes from Mexico City. Angélica has lived in Tianguistenco since she was a child and although it is now considered a city, it has the traditions of a small town and is made up of small communities of different cultures and backgrounds.

Angélica has been a teacher in Tianguistenco since 2018 at the Escuela Normal de Santiago Tianguistenco – a teacher training institution which offers bachelor degrees in elementary and junior high education. Angélica teaches on the elementary bachelor programme, and in line with the national syllabus, her goal is to support her students in reaching B1 level in English by the end of their studies. During this research project she was teaching a group of 25 Grade 2 students aged 19 to 21. They had already completed one year of English studies and their English level was A1–A2. Angélica had three two-hour lessons per week with them and had already been teaching them for six months.



## Problems with grammar

At the start of this project when she was reflecting on her students and their difficulties, Angélica recalled a particular lesson in which she was teaching present simple question forms. She had written some examples on the board, her students had used the examples to create their own questions and within minutes they were using their questions in speaking and writing activities without too much trouble. But at the end of the lesson, when she tried to analyse the structure with them, *“First we need the question word, then we need ...”* it was a complete mess! She clearly remembers one student saying:

**Teacher, I don’t understand what is happening. I was making questions to my classmates and it was clear for me but now that you explain this, I’m very confused, I don’t know what I’m doing!**

She felt totally demotivated and that she was the worst teacher ever! After that horrible experience, she started to reflect and question:

**Why are my students able to use the grammar point in speaking and writing but getting so confused every time I try to explain grammar in a formal way?**

And that is where her journey began...

Angélica decided to look into this because for her it wasn’t logical that her students should have such problems with grammar when they were able to use it. She wanted to know if the problem lay in her way of teaching, or the activities that she used, or something else – it was important for her to understand how to teach grammar so her students not only memorised rules, but also analysed and understood it in addition to communicating effectively. She also recognised the issue was relevant and important to her students since grammar forms part of their final evaluation in becoming certified teachers.

## Time to explore

Angélica came up with three exploratory questions to focus her enquiry:

1. What kind of activities do I use when teaching grammar in the classroom?  
Angélica realised that her own perceptions could be very different from her students’ or other teachers’ perceptions so it was important to get their opinions about the activities she used to teach grammar.
2. What do my students think about grammar activities?  
Angélica also wanted to know if her students

believed the teaching of grammar was useful for learning English or if it was just ‘something difficult’. She reasoned that if her students didn’t recognise the importance and necessity of grammar, then they wouldn’t get good results.

3. What do my students think about how I teach grammar? Although Angélica felt confident about the way she taught grammar, she thought that knowing how her students felt about her explanations, examples, etc. was a must to be sure she wasn’t doing something wrong or being unclear.

### Data collection tools

As previously mentioned, Angélica was keen on getting others’ perspectives on her approach to teaching grammar, so to get an idea of how her lessons looked from a different angle, she decided on **peer observation**. She organised for two English teachers to observe three of her classes and answer some questions about her teaching and her students’ reactions to it.

Also, to help her become more aware of her teaching and her feelings when teaching grammar, she decided to write some **reflection notes** in English guided by some questions she had prepared.

#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What kind of language do I use when I teach students grammar?
- Do I use technical language or easy-to-follow language?
- How many examples do I use to explain grammar points? Are they meaningful and familiar to them?
- When teaching grammar, what is the most common interaction pattern I use and what is my students’ reaction to it?
- Do I use Spanish as a tool for my students’ understanding or just because it is easier for them?

- How do I evaluate the understanding of grammar?
- What is my students’ reaction when studying grammar?

And last but not least, she organised two **focus groups**, each with five randomly-chosen students, and in Spanish so they didn’t feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions. Questions focused on students’ opinions about grammar – whether they thought it important, what difficulties they had, what they liked or disliked about the activities, and whether they found her grammar explanations easy to understand.



Focus group

### Some findings

#### A change in teaching approach?

What Angélica found surprised her. Based on the evidence there was a lack of variety in the grammar activities that she used – she always followed the same pattern or approach. In every grammar class, she wrote some meaningful examples on the board, her students used these to create their own, and finally they had some time to practise orally or in writing.

#### 3. What kind of strategies does the teacher use to assess the understanding of grammar points during class?

Asking students to complete examples and group participation, asking students to create sentences following a model and asking them to share them in group.

Extract from completed peer observation form

Although this worked well, during the focus group some students mentioned that they would like different activities since the examples were a little bit restrictive when they wanted to express something different.

I don't like that some examples are limited and when I want to express something different I can't do it because I didn't learn how to use the grammar point, I just followed the example.

Before getting this feedback, Angélica thought that she taught grammar using a variety of strategies so when she found out that she always used the same routine, she was quite shocked and actually a little bit disappointed.

**A change in interaction patterns?**

From her reflection notes, Angélica also noticed that she included a lot of group activities and that her students worked well in teams, but on reflection she realised from her notes that some of the students weren't benefiting from this interaction pattern – they were relying on the stronger students and this wasn't helping to develop their confidence or independence.

**A change in activities?**

Another notable finding was that students wanted some activities in which authentic materials were used in order to link grammar with something relevant to them, and some activities to recycle previous knowledge.

Angélica reflected on her findings in order to come up with some possible actions to address the issues she'd discovered:

What strategies can I use to teach grammatical points?  
 What kind of activities can I implement to use authentic material?  
 What kind of activities or projects can I design to recycle previous knowledge?

**Time for action**

Angélica decided to take a TBL (Task Based Learning) approach to teaching grammar as she thought some of the principles of TBL, such as self-evaluation and the designing of specific tasks, could help address some of the problems and preferences of her students.

First of all, she designed five specific authentic tasks for her students to work on together (based on articles or videos), each of which focused on a grammatical point, and she designed pre-task activities too.

**CHAMPION TEACHERS PROGRAM**  
**TEACHER: ANGÉLICA NAYELI HUERTA PIÑA**  
**WORKSHEET 3: ACTIVATE SCHEMATA**

Before you start talking about the task, remember all the vocabulary and phrases that can be useful to fulfill the objective with your team, brainstorm the word or phrases that can be useful. Each member of the team has to mention 2 at least.

MEMBER 1	MEMBER 2	MEMBER 3	MEMBER 4	MEMBER 5

**Example of a pre-task activity to recycle vocabulary**

**CHAMPION TEACHERS PROGRAM**  
**TEACHER: ANGÉLICA NAYELI HUERTA PIÑA**  
**WORKSHEET 2: TASK-GRAMMATICAL POINT: HAVE TO**

**TASK 1**

You are teachers in a primary school. In the next teacher's meeting (consejo técnico) you will have to make "metas compromisos" (which are the obligations that you have to set for you class) for each of the following subjects:

- English
- Maths
- PE
- Science
- Geography

Read the article about problems in each of the subjects.  
 List at least 3 problems mentioned in the article.  
 Based on the problems of each subject, write two obligations that you have as a teacher so that your students learn.

**Example of a task**

**CHAMPION TEACHERS PROGRAM  
TEACHER: ANGÉLICA NAYELI HUERTA PIÑA  
WORKSHEET 4: EVALUATING AND REPORT YOUR SOLUTION**

ASPECT	YES	NO	OBSERVATIONS
1. We totally fulfill the task (read, list, solutions)			
2. We use appropriate vocabulary			
3. Our ideas are clear			
4. We know how to pronounce all the words			
5. We participate collaboratively			

**Example of a self-evaluation rubric**



**Students working on the tasks**

She also planned group activities, but based on her reflection note observations, was careful to assign specific roles to each member of the group. And, finally, she designed a rubric to support her students with self-evaluation after the task.

**Time to evaluate**

To evaluate the effects of her action plan, Angélica again decided on peer observation and her reflection journal but instead of a focus group, this time she chose to use a student questionnaire so that she could get feedback from all her students.

**Peer observation.** She organised for three English teachers to observe her grammar lessons and answer some questions to find out if the action plan had had any impact. Angélica’s questions focused on the clarity and effectiveness of her own explanations by asking the observers to note how her students reacted and behaved, e.g. did they seem confident or puzzled? How did they demonstrate they had understood?

**A questionnaire.** To get opinions from her students, Angélica designed a questionnaire. This was in Spanish and included questions to elicit opinions about the usefulness of the grammar activities, the materials used and Angélica’s approach.

**Instructions: Read each question carefully and select the option that best represents your point of view.**

1. What is your opinion about the grammar activities that were done in the last five classes?  
Do you think they helped you understand the grammar point to review?

Easy                                      Difficult                                      Very easy

2. The material (the worksheets, the texts and the audio about education in Great Britain) that was used in the last classes is:

Useful for understanding the grammar point

Not useful for understanding the grammar point

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Do you think that the grammar activities that we did in the last classes helped you understand the grammar points covered in class? Justify your answer.

Yes                                      No

4. Do you consider that the activities to remember previous knowledge were useful to you to understand the grammar point of the class? Justify your answer.

Yes                                      No

5. Do you consider that the activities (the ‘have to’, ‘must’ exercises and the exercises of activities in the classroom) carried out contributed to the practice of the grammar point in your oral production? Justify your answer.

Yes                                      No

*Student questionnaire (translated from Spanish)*

**Reflection notes.** Again Angélica kept a journal and designed questions to focus and guide her reflections.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

- How do students react to the problem I set?
- How do I feel when giving instructions and what is the students’ reaction?
- How do students behave during the ‘activate schemata’ activity?
- How do students behave during the grammar activities?
- When working in teams or in pairs, do my students fulfil their roles? Why/Why not?
- How do students behave when evaluating and reporting their results?
- What strategies do I use to make sure students have understood the grammatical point?
- In what ways do I use the layout on the board?

## Findings

### How did Angélica's students respond to the changes?

From questionnaire responses, Angélica found that the vast majority of her students (20) considered **grammar activities** useful in understanding the grammar points because the grammar points were explored more deeply and even though some of the activities were challenging, students felt they were necessary and a good thing.

**1. What is your opinion about the grammar activities that were done in the last five classes? Do you think they helped you understand the grammar point to review?**

At the beginning of the class, I had problems because it was something new for me but that's a good thing because I learn more and we checked the knowledge in more detail.

**Student response  
in the questionnaire**

Students also mentioned that the use of **authentic materials** made the lesson more enjoyable and meaningful. Reflecting on her own notes, Angélica noted similar findings – her students liked to be challenged and needed a variety of activities to take them out of their comfort zone. Peer observation feedback showed that although students confronted some initial difficulties when faced with new challenges or different approaches to teaching and learning, they were willing to participate and overcome these as long as Angélica guided and supported them.



Journal entry

I noticed that my students were able to use the grammatical point in oral and written utterances without having lots of problems. Even the students that struggle a little bit with English were able to fulfil the task.

With regard to assigning roles in groups, the impact was notable and Angélica was pleased to see that those students who were reluctant to participate, or who considered themselves as weak, started to contribute in their groups. It was also encouraging that they came to the realisation that they were able to participate and contribute with the knowledge that they had.

### What Angélica has learnt

After carefully considering the feedback she got from students, peers and her own reflections, Angélica drew three conclusions.

1. Her key realisation was that **grammar teaching must be a learner-centred process**. The students must be the ones who build their own knowledge and identify their strengths and difficulties.

Sometimes teachers become the providers of all the information because it is easier and timesaving. It is comfortable for the teacher and the students as well. However, with this approach the responsibility of learning lies on the teacher and not on the students. By getting students to build their own knowledge, they gain in confidence and independence and the grammar is more meaningful to them.

2. She also understood how **it is necessary to introduce students to a variety of activities** so they don't become 'used to' everything or too comfortable. Rather, they need to be taken out of their comfort zone and challenged – allowed to explore all their capabilities, to gain confidence in what they know and resolve any doubts they have.

3. And finally, **grammar shouldn't be treated in isolation**; it should be connected with other and previous knowledge. As she put it:

**I'll definitely teach according to what I discovered because it is very important to let the students create their own knowledge and trust in them. My role as a teacher must be a guide and not a provider. By doing this, my students will feel challenged and they will be actively participating in their own knowledge building. Even though teaching this way takes more time, it enriches my classes since the knowledge becomes more long-lasting.**

**I also realise that I tended to underestimate what my students are capable of. Now I know that with guidance and support they are able to learn and analyse different grammar structures and take the next step of transferring all this knowledge to the communicative process, which is ultimately the most important goal of language.**

### Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to acknowledge the Escuela Normal de Santiago Tianguistenco since it gave me the opportunity to take part in this program. Secondly, I would like to thank my mentor Olaf Morales Barrales, who was always there for me willing to help me. And last but not least, I would like to say thank you to my students who were part of the research.

### Reflection

Angélica learnt how easy it is to assume a lot of things about our teaching and our students and how these assumptions lead to actions that do not necessarily help or improve. What assumptions do you have about your students or the way you teach? How could you collect evidence to check whether your assumptions are well-founded? What language area or skill would you focus on?

## Angélica's reflections about EAR

In a nutshell, by doing this research I learnt that as teachers we tend to assume a lot of things about our way of teaching and our students without any evidence to support it, and this leads us to take actions that don't necessarily help or improve a situation. Although it was a hard process to collect and analyse all the information required, the results have been worth it since I truly discovered new answers to the questions that I had. For example, I never imagined that my students would like to feel challenged by the activities. I always thought that by giving them the information in small chunks, they'd feel more comfortable and less afraid or nervous. However, I was totally amazed by the fact that they want to know more and communicate with all that they already have.



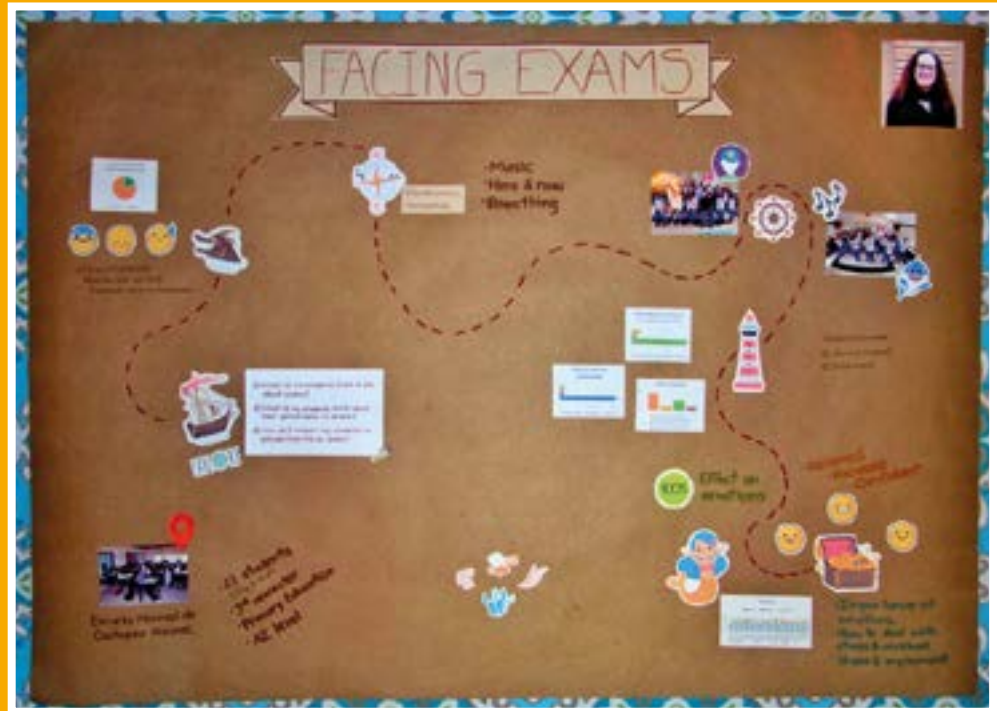




# 4 Helping students to face exams

**Citlalli Arce Palacios**

Coatepec Harinas, State of Mexico



## Teaching context

The Escuela Normal de Coatepec Harinas is a public teacher training school which offers three undergraduate programmes – Primary Education, Inclusive Education and Special Education, and it is located in the southern part of the State of Mexico.

The group Citlalli worked with for this project, was a Year 2, third-semester class from the Primary Education programme. The group consisted of 21 students (15 women and 6 men) aged 19–21 at English level A2. Citlalli had been teaching them since their first year at the school and describes them as very enthusiastic and creative, a group that enjoys activities and commits to challenges. As she had been teaching them for some time, Citlalli noticed they had a very hard time when it came to exams. They were very negative about them, had poor results, and no matter how diverse the activities used to reinforce topics, it seemed to Citlalli that their grades did not truly reflect their English knowledge and abilities.

Citlalli considers exams to be an important part of the learning process since assessment is necessary and relevant to get some idea of the students' progress and areas to work on in relation to specific skills and topics. Undoubtedly, exams cannot be avoided and students have to learn how to cope with them. Additionally, results provide a rich source of information which Citlalli can also use to reflect on her teaching practice and improve.



## Exploring the issue

Having reflected on the situation, Citlalli decided to look into this issue with exams, and to do this, she came up with the following questions:

1. What do my students think and feel about exams?
2. What do my students think about their performance in exams?
3. How do I support my students in order to prepare them for an exam?

Then, in an attempt to gather some information to help her answer these, she designed some exploration tools.

### Data collection tools

The first tool Citlalli chose to use was a *questionnaire*. This consisted of multiple-choice and open questions and was written and completed in Spanish. In the first part she asked about how well the practice activities corresponded to the requirements of the exam and also how well students felt their results reflected the effort they put in. In the next section she focused on how students felt when sitting exams and when receiving their results. The final part focused on the activities students found most useful and what more they felt they needed, both inside and outside class to help them prepare.

Additionally, Citlalli asked her students to complete a *reflective writing task*, also in Spanish. This was structured using specific questions related to students' performance in English exams and factors which could influence their results.

Finally, Citlalli analysed her lesson plans and materials to get an overview of the activities and resources she used to support her students and prepare them for the exams. This analysis was carried out in a template to answer the following questions:

- What did I do to familiarise students with the exam tasks?
- How did I help students to answer tasks similar to those in the exam?
- How often did students ask for help or clarification regarding the mock exam tasks in class?

The categories included for the analysis were:

- Look for tasks similar to those in the exam.
- Cover all the skills that will be evaluated.
- Make extra tasks involving games.
- Answer questions and clarify terms, when doubts arise.

## WRITTEN REFLECTION

**Instructions:** The purpose of the following activity is for you to reflect on your performance during English tests. Take some time to think carefully about it; use the following questions to guide you.

1. How would you describe your performance when you take an English test? Describe in detail.
2. Mention the factors that you think influence your performance when taking an exam.
3. Finally, in a general way, write the word you would use to rate your performance in English tests.

**Thank you very much for your cooperation!**

### Exploratory findings

Once Citlalli had the information from her exploratory tools, she analysed it and identified some answers to her questions.

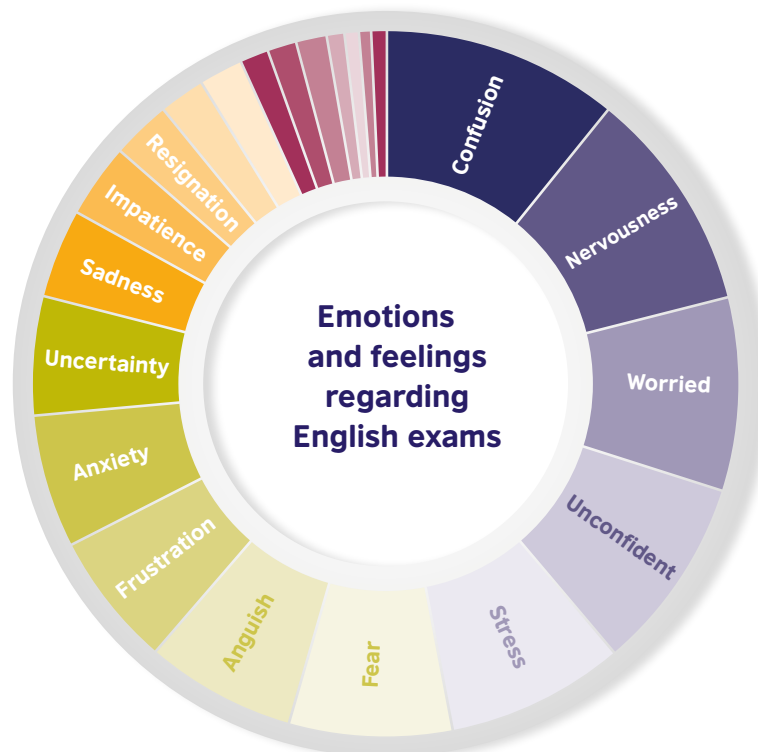
#### What do my students think and feel about exams?

Citlalli confirmed her assumptions about her students' negative feelings regarding the English exams. Questionnaire responses showed that the vast majority did not feel positive. In fact, a lot of negative feelings were selected including confusion, nervousness, worried, stress, fear and more.

In the reflective writing, students expanded on some of the reasons for these negative feelings, e.g.

**When I have the exam in front of me, my performance is not sufficient, because it makes me feel nervous, stressed and it's not possible for me to project my knowledge. My mind blocks and I can't clearly understand the exam, it makes me feel anxious and as a result, I don't answer properly.**

(Student response)



**At the beginning of the exam, I am blocked. I believe it's because I feel nervous. After, when I read, I start establishing relationships among words and it's possible for me to remember. I try to answer the things that I know first. Sometimes, I can't remember the topics.**

(Student response)

**Even if I study, and the exam contains topics we have reviewed in class and I understood, I feel frightened in the exams, because I know they are going to have a grade.**

(Student response)

Citlalli also got to know that almost half of the group even experienced physical reactions, such as headaches, stomach ache, tiredness, etc. and these affected their performance. As soon as she learned about this, Citlalli was already thinking about introducing some relaxation exercises to help students feel better and less stressed.

### **What do my students think about their performance in exams?**

In most cases, students thought their performance was fair (10) or good (5); just six students considered it to be bad, unsatisfactory or poor. This surprised Citlalli considering their proficiency levels and grades were not that good, but it did indicate that they had a positive view of their performance. She also wondered whether they perhaps didn't expect to get good grades because they considered English a difficult subject. Factors they identified as influencing their performance included emotions, the effort and time they dedicated to study and revision, study habits, stress, workload and personal issues.

### **How do I support my students in order to prepare them for an exam?**

After analysing her lesson plans and materials using the questions and codes outlined above, Citlalli realised that she did in fact support her students on a regular basis

by providing exercises that helped them practise inside and outside class, and she dealt with some strategies on how to answer questions and complete exercises. She was also able to confirm that everything that was going to be evaluated in the exam was practised.

Her students agreed: 20 considered that the class activities prepared them for the exams and they all considered that the activities they did in class were relevant to those which feature in the exams.

**In class we are given the necessary tools to solve it, however, sometimes I consider we need more.**

(Student response)

**Exams are without any doubt about things that we saw in class, nevertheless, the exam is frustrating, and it doesn't reflect my knowledge.**

(Student response)

**Very frequently we do reviews, mind maps, and other activities that help us studying. All the exams are according to the topics we deal in class and they are properly explained.**

(Student response)

**All the assignments and activities we do in class are the ones included in the exam.**

(Student response)

**The exercises in the exam present similarities with the activities we do in class.**

(Student response)

Additionally, all students felt they were supported with exercises to practise all skills in addition to activities like notetaking, using online practice platforms, doing reviews and playing games. Citlalli was reassured and pleased that students were aware of the variety of activities used in class.

It made me feel great, because on one level I thought that my students' performance was influenced by a lack of activities and reviews, but after looking at the data I could see that they had a clear idea of all the different activities and techniques we apply in order to learn and reinforce knowledge. It also made me think more about what could be having a negative impact on their performance, and this led me to think more about the emotional aspect.

## Action plan

After realising that the emotional factors associated with exams were impacting so negatively on her students' performance, Citlalli decided to focus on addressing this. She thought about it, did some research online and consulted a friend of hers, who is a yoga and meditation teacher. As a result, she decided to introduce her students to some activities focused on mindfulness and relaxation which they could use before the exam.

First she decided on a breathing exercise, which is easy to do and doesn't take a lot of time. Then she introduced a technique to practise concentration which involved focusing on one object for two minutes.



At the same time she introduced music to help with managing emotions. First she tried lively music, so that students would be more active and focused on the activities. For this she used children's songs which students could move and dance to. At other times she played relaxing music while they were working on activities.

Citlalli applied these exercises and techniques during the three sessions prior to the students' practicum phase and kept notes on what she did in each session. Citlalli noted that students found the activities relaxing:



### Session 1:

They worked in teams and discussed some reflective questions regarding alternatives that they can perform as individuals, in group and in the class to deal with stress. After that, I asked them to stand up and dance a children's song (Baby shark).

### Session 2:

I taught them the respiration technique and we did a couple of exercises. After the first practice, we tried with the respiration exercise and an affirmation. Finally, they tried the concentration exercise, in which they focus their attention in one object. After this, they shared their experience and said that they felt relaxed.

### Session 3:

They were working with a review of verbs in past simple with the computers in the English lab. I played some relaxing music while they were performing the exercises. In this lesson I asked them to keep the record of their practices and breathing exercises.

Citlalli had also planned to give her students a mock exam so they could assess their strengths and weaknesses and get ready for the 'real exam', and in preparation for this she had planned to include a special focus on different exam sections during each lesson. However, unfortunately none of this was possible due to

the practicum schedule, and in the end she only had the opportunity to explain and practise some of the exam preparation activities, e.g. reading techniques, in class. In an attempt to make up for this, what she decided to do for the practicum period was to ask her students to a) practise the relaxation exercises and keep a record of when they did this; and b) keep a record of the time they dedicated to revision in preparation for the exam.

## Evaluating the action

### Data collection tools and questions

Two weeks later, to find out the impact of her actions, Citlalli again decided on a *questionnaire* but this time the questions were designed to uncover students' views on the effects and benefits (if there were any) of using the relaxation techniques and music, and to find out which kind of music they preferred and when it proved most helpful, e.g. before, during or after an activity. She also asked whether keeping a record of when and how much time they spent on relaxation and revision exercises during the practicum had proved useful and why.

As already mentioned, Citlalli had also got her students to keep records of a) when they used techniques and/or music during the practicum, and b) the amount of time they dedicated to study and preparation for the exam. These *student records* also served as data collection tools.

And finally, Citlalli decided that it would also be interesting and useful to organise an *informal interview* with her students, so that she could ask them some questions about the effects of the techniques on their performance in the final exam. Unfortunately, because of the timing of the practicum, the exam and the winter break, the interview couldn't be carried out face-to-face. However, Citlalli's students were committed to the research project and keen to give feedback, so agreed to answer her questions via WhatsApp: Citlalli sent them the questions, they voice-recorded their answers and sent them back via WhatsApp. Citlalli then transcribed and analysed them.

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

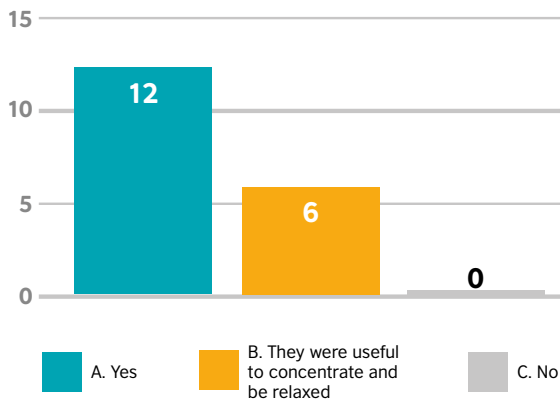
1. Taking into account that we practised activities for mindfulness, breathing techniques and using music, what has been the most effective activity to promote mindfulness within you before taking an exam?
2. How do you think music has affected (either positively or negatively) your performance before taking an exam/dealing with an activity of an exam?
3. Have you noticed a difference in your performance in an exam when listening to music for concentration?
4. Do you consider there was an impact or a difference in your (final) results after having practised all the relaxation techniques?
5. Do you consider there was an impact or a difference in your results after solving the mock exams and preparation exercises?
6. Was the reflective journal useful for you to practise the activities of mindfulness and relaxation on a daily basis?  
  
How did you do it?  
  
To what extent do you think it helped you to improve your performance / get ready for an exam?



## Findings

Feedback from the questionnaire and the WhatsApp recordings revealed that most of the students considered the relaxation activities and the use of music useful before the exam because they felt more focused, less stressed and relaxed. 12 believed the techniques had had an effect on their grades, whereas six felt they were useful to concentrate and relax but had not had an impact on their exam results.

**5. Do you consider that applying the relaxation techniques had an effect or made a difference in your exam results?**



Various reasons were given by students in their journals:

**The exercises help me a lot. It's a good way to relax and take good decisions. I also applied some music with my practicum group to calm my students and call their attention.**

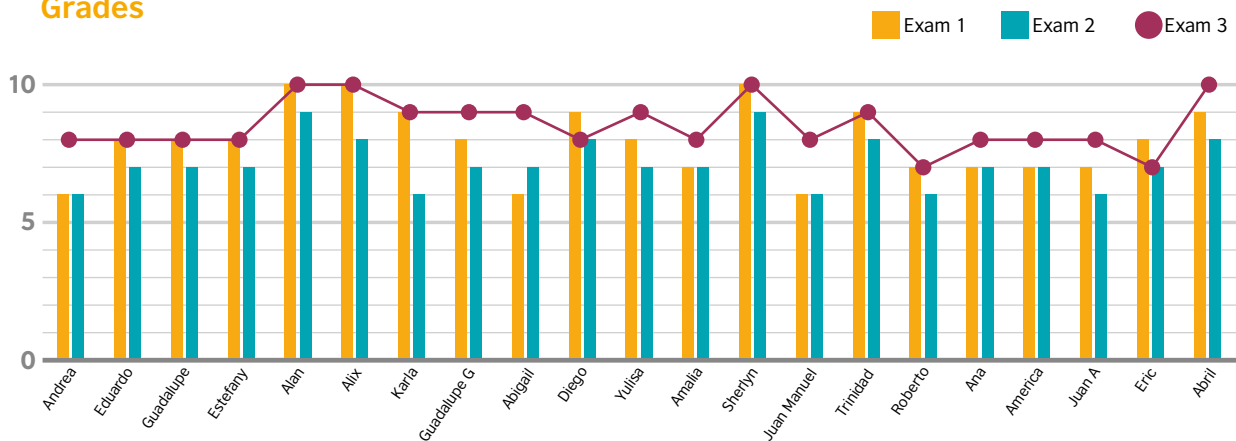
**After doing the breathing exercises I kept calmer and more confident in front of the group.**

**I did the breathing exercise, before entering to the group every day during the practicum period, because I was very nervous. During the second day, I did the technique even in the classroom, because the children were misbehaving, but I didn't want to get desperate. I consider the breathing technique a very good way to be relaxed and make proper decisions.**

**During my practicum period, I was tense because the teacher would be absent and I would be in charge of the group for 6 hours. I applied the techniques, and they were very useful.**

The majority of students also reported that they thought their exam results were better after applying the breathing techniques. As an experiment, Citlalli decided to compare their results to previous scores, and she found that only two students achieved the same grade while the rest had improved, some of them markedly (3 or 2 points above their previous grade). Citlalli believes that even though they may not have been aware of it, students performed better because they were more relaxed and able to concentrate.

## Grades



Finally, an encouraging finding was that students found the mindfulness techniques useful not only for study, but also for dealing with their emotions out of school at other times in their daily lives when they felt stressed. Moreover, they reported that they will use them during their practicum as teachers in training and for their future professional lives in education.

The most important part is that I not only use the strategy in my practicum, but also when I feel tense.

I liked doing the breathing exercises, because I was relaxed and could study better.

I'm still practising the exercises some days.

### Final reflections

Considering all her findings, Citlalli believes that her outlook has changed. At the start, she believed that a lack of study was the main reason for poor exam results but thanks to this research, she now understands that as a teacher it's not only necessary to teach the lessons, review topics, use technology and practise games in the classroom, but also to listen carefully to her students, be aware of their emotions and to create conditions in the classroom for opportunities to embrace new ways to deal with stress and workload.

Analysing the situation not only with my eyes but also from my students' views and opinions in an organised way nourished my outlook and I understood that they were dealing with plenty of work and problems at the same time, and this could make a difference to their performance at school. Learning to deal with stress and negative feelings is something important for both students and teachers.

It was also interesting for Citlalli to find that asking students about their thoughts and feelings was something 'new' to them, and that applying relaxation techniques was perceived as innovative and interesting, too.

At the beginning I thought that my students would consider the relaxation techniques as something crazy or unusual, not appropriate to the classroom, but fortunately, they enjoyed and adopted the techniques for stressful moments and some of them have made it part of their daily routines. Furthermore, some of them want to implement these practices in the future in their own classrooms.

Finally, as a result of this experience, Citlalli has decided that she will continue to practise relaxation and mindfulness with her students, learn more about this and share her experiences with her colleagues, because they too need to cope with stress on a daily basis.



### Acknowledgements

I deeply thank my students, who were extremely committed and excited to do the research with me; my mentor Omar and the senior mentors, who led me and supported me every step of this journey; my school, to give me the opportunity to participate in this project; my family for their encouragement and love.

## Reflection

As a result of her research, Citlalli realised how important it is to analyse situations not only through her own eyes but also through her students'. By doing this she was able to appreciate the powerful impact that emotions have on learning and success. How do your students react to exams? How well do they cope with stress and workload? How could you find out? Do you think relaxation techniques would benefit you, your students and your colleagues?



# 5 Encouraging students to speak English in class

**Priscilla Janet López Valdez**

Tejupilco, State of Mexico



## Teaching context

This story focuses on speaking and is set at the Escuela Normal de Tejupilco, a school located in Tejupilco, a municipality to the south of the State of Mexico. The students who participated in Priscilla's Exploratory Action Research project were 2nd-grade trainees in the third semester of Kindergarten and Elementary education programmes. There were 19 students (16 women and 2 men) in the group with an elementary level of English and aiming to reach CEFR A2 level.



## A reluctance to speak

Although the students were hardworking and progressing well with English skills and language, Priscilla noticed that when it came to speaking they seemed shy or nervous; they preferred not to speak and couldn't seem to express their ideas when they did. Priscilla was aware that speaking in English was a necessary skill and requirement of the course and felt she needed to do something about it. She felt disappointed that she hadn't been able to address this problem, and decided she should try to get to the root of it even though it seemed a big challenge to start with.

I had to know if my teaching approach was useful to my students and whether the materials and strategies I was using were effective.

## Exploration

Having identified the focus of her study as how she could encourage her students to speak, Priscilla came up with four exploratory questions to guide her research. These focused on her approach to speaking and how her students felt about it.

- EQ1. What do my students feel and think about the speaking activities?
- EQ2. How often do my students practise speaking in the class?
- EQ3. What strategies do I currently use to develop speaking?
- EQ4. What do my students think about the materials used during speaking activities in the class?

Then in order to collect information which could help to answer these questions, Priscilla thought about what methods she could most usefully employ. After some thought she decided on a student questionnaire, reflective writing, peer observation and materials analysis.

## Data collection methods

*Student questionnaire.* Priscilla designed a questionnaire in Spanish which contained 20 multiple-choice questions and some space to justify answers. Students were asked to give their opinions on the activities and resources Priscilla used, to indicate how motivated they were to speak, to state which interaction patterns they preferred, to comment on the frequency of speaking practice, to suggest topics they were interested in, and finally, to respond to a number of questions focused on the speaking activities included in the textbook (cf. EQs 1, 3 and 4).



*Reflective writing.* Then, in addition to the questionnaire, Priscilla asked her students to remember and write about a particular situation where they had had difficulty expressing themselves in English (cf. EQs 1 and 4). This was done in Spanish and each section was scaffolded with questions. Students worked on this in class for an hour to give them time to fully express their thoughts. Priscilla based the template on Gibbs' Reflective Model<sup>1</sup>.

## REFLECTIVE WRITING

- 1. Description:** Think of a situation where you had some difficulty expressing yourself orally in English while doing an activity in your class. What happened? Describe the activity and the materials you used.

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- 2. Feelings:** At this stage you are going to describe the emotional response you had to this experience. Consider what you felt, how your body felt, what you did, and how others reacted to your actions. What were your reactions and feelings when you expressed yourself in English during the speaking activity?

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- 3. Evaluation:** At this stage you will consider the situation and your reactions objectively. You should consider the experience from the perspective of other people besides your own. This will help you understand if the situation was bad just for you or for others as well. Do you consider that the materials used to work on the speaking activity were according to your level of English and that of your classmates? Did the materials used allow you and your classmates to feel comfortable and more confident expressing yourself in English?

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- 4. Analysis:** Once you have considered the situation in an evaluative way, you can begin to analyse it in detail by considering the following questions: What sense can you give to this situation? What was really happening? Were other people's experiences similar or different? Why do you think you had these feelings when you described the activities and materials? Were your classmates' feelings similar to yours?

---
- 5. Conclusions:** When drawing your conclusions you should consider the general application and your specific situation. Think about what your conclusions mean for you, your context and for others as well. What can you conclude from the experience of expressing yourself in English and from the materials used in class? What can you conclude from your personal situation and your way of working with oral expression activities and materials in English?

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- 6. Personal action plan:** Think, what can be different to improve your oral expression? What materials and activities can be different to improve your oral expression in English in class? How do you think you will know that you have improved your oral expression after a certain period of work in which you are given the necessary support?

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### Reflective writing template questions (translated from Spanish)

1. Gibbs, G. (1998) *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Further Education Unit, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford.

*Peer observation.* Priscilla also arranged for two colleagues to observe her lessons on two separate occasions. Priscilla felt that maybe there were aspects she was not taking into account and she hoped that her colleagues would be able to help her identify these. For this she created an observation protocol to focus them on specific aspects of the lessons (cf. EQs 2 and 3). This was written and completed in Spanish too.

### PEER OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

1. At what moments during the lesson were speaking activities implemented? What type of interaction was worked on in the speaking activity? What activities were carried out? Describe.
2. How much time of the lesson was devoted to speaking activities?
3. What digital resources, prints or materials were used to support speaking activities? Describe how they were used.
4. What instructions did the teacher give to carry out the speaking? What did the students do?
5. In addition to the speaking activities, did the students produce the language orally at some other time? What happened?

*(translated from Spanish)*



*Lesson plans and materials.* Finally, Priscilla decided to analyse her plans and materials from five lessons too, as she felt this would help her find some answers to EQs 2 and 3, i.e. how often students practised speaking and what strategies she used to develop this.

## Findings

Priscilla was able to get a lot of useful information from this initial data collection, which she then analysed and organised, and there were several important findings which provided her with answers to each of her exploratory questions, and ideas of what she could do to improve the situation.

### EQ1. What do my students feel and think about the speaking activities?

At the start of this project Priscilla had thought that the students did not want to speak, or were reluctant to speak because they were shy or nervous, but this assumption was only partially correct. Students indicated that the reason they didn't speak was not because they didn't want to, they did, but they felt nervous. 14 of the 19 students reported feeling nervous during speaking activities and seven of these explained that this was because they were 'afraid of making a mistake'. However, when they worked in pairs, they reported feeling more confident and motivated: questionnaire responses indicated that 19 students felt positive about pair work.

In response to Priscilla's question about being corrected, 14 students reported feeling 'good' and stated that they wanted to be corrected, e.g.

**I felt good because this helps me improve my pronunciation.**

*(Student response, translated from Spanish)*

**I felt good and confident, it was useful.**

*(Student response, translated from Spanish)*

Moreover, 20 students argued that immediate correction was very useful, and five students also mentioned that immediate correction helped them, especially with pronunciation.



**It helps me improve my pronunciation.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

As a result of these findings, Priscilla recognised that she should promote pair work more, and in response to students' suggestions, provide immediate correction, particularly of pronunciation, where appropriate.

**EQ2. How often do my students practise speaking in the class?**

Priscilla discovered that students practised speaking with their partners and with her for an average of 20 minutes per lesson. This estimate was based on her lesson plan analysis, the speaking activities planned using the textbook and peer feedback. However, one colleague wrote that perhaps Priscilla spent too much time speaking when giving instructions.

Students' opinions on how much time was spent on speaking differed: some felt it was 'OK' and others felt it wasn't enough.

Priscilla needed to focus on reducing her teacher talk time, and provide students with more speaking practice by supplementing the textbook with other dynamic and fun activities.

**EQ3. What strategies do I currently use to develop speaking?**

Priscilla found that the strategies she applied were based solely on the textbook activities: dialogues in pairs, interviews and questionnaires. 16 students said they found these 'interesting', two found them 'not interesting' and one was indifferent. 12 students said that the speaking activities in the textbook motivated them to learn English whereas seven were 'not sure'.

Priscilla felt she should start to vary speaking activities, and not work only to the book. She would need to find and use supplementary materials.

**EQ4. What do my students think about the materials used during speaking activities in the class?**

Students considered the textbook and audio-visual resources suitable; they felt confident and motivated by them because they were appropriate to their English level, and this made them easy to work with. 15 felt that the activities in the book helped them to improve their speaking. Additionally, most of the students (16) liked the textbook activities but some felt they needed something else related to their age and interests. And some felt that some of the activities were repetitive, boring or not related to their interests, e.g.

**Some activities where we don't use the book could help us.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**Sometimes they bore me.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**Not all of them are of interest.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

Students suggested a number of different activities that they would like, such as: 'performing karaoke on computers to improve pronunciation', 'karaoke with Spanish subtitles', 'role plays', 'audio-visuals', 'more fun activities', 'games', etc. They also suggested topics of interest, e.g. hobbies, friends, music, artists, experiences, places, etc.

Priscilla recognised she needed to introduce speaking activities based on topics of interest with audio-visual resources to complement the textbook.

**Time for action**

Priscilla organised her initial responses to what she had found from her exploration and came up with a three-point action plan which she would implement over the course of six lessons.

### Pair work activities

Because students had expressed feeling more comfortable speaking with a partner, Priscilla decided to include pair work during supplementary activities, such as ‘create and continue the story using images’ and jigsaw/information-gap activities to build confidence. She also planned opportunities for students to express themselves freely during the warm-up stage and during the main activity of the lesson.



### Error correction

In response to her students’ need for immediate error correction, particularly of pronunciation, Priscilla implemented correction techniques during the main independent speaking practice activity of the lesson. She was careful to do this without disturbing the flow of communication and encouraged students to self-correct if they repeated the same mistake.

### Varied speaking activities

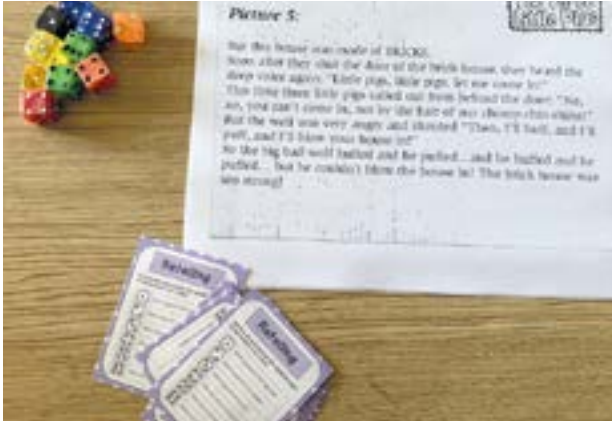
During every lesson Priscilla introduced at least one speaking activity in which students worked in pairs using different supplementary resources, e.g. bingo cards, fairy tale images, pictures and karaoke. For each of these activities Priscilla chose authentic material, such as videos and songs from the Internet, which she adapted for the classroom and which would appeal to her students’ interests.



Error correction



Using fairy tale images



Using pictures



Using karaoke

## Time to evaluate

Priscilla decided to use the same three tools to evaluate the impact of her actions – a questionnaire, reflective writing and peer observation – since she had found them so useful during the initial exploration.

### Data collection methods

The *peer observations* were conducted by the same colleagues and took place three times during the implementation phase. The protocol Priscilla designed focused on how well students participated during pair work, how they used the materials and whether these effectively promoted speaking in addition to how Priscilla corrected oral errors and whether students took the correction on board. This time the questions were written and answered in English.

The *student questionnaire* Priscilla designed focused more on students' feelings and opinions about working in pairs, the supplementary materials and the error correction techniques. Priscilla was interested to know whether these strategies had proved useful in reducing students' feelings of nervousness and promoting and developing speaking skills. This was administered at the end of the sixth lesson and this time in English. Most responded in Spanish (13) although six answered in English.

The *reflective writing task* for this phase was much simpler and less scaffolded than it was for the exploratory phase (but still structured) and this time it was presented in English. Basically, students were guided to comment

on how they had felt during the past two weeks during speaking activities and how useful they had found these, the pair work and the error correction. Again, Priscilla got her students to write this in the classroom. Most of the students answered in Spanish, some used a mix of English and Spanish and two responded entirely in English.

Once Priscilla had collected, analysed and organised all the data from these three tools, she set about identifying key findings.

## Some positive findings

### How do students feel about speaking now?

Priscilla got a lot of positive feedback on her actions and she was happy to learn that all 19 of her students reported experiencing positive feelings when speaking and that they felt motivated to do so. Even more encouraging was that none of her students reported feeling 'nervous' or 'stressed' during pair work; all of them reported feeling either 'confident' or 'optimistic', and considered this an easier and more enjoyable way to learn and speak because they were able to practise pronunciation, learn vocabulary from each other and support each other. In the reflective writing they expanded more on this, for example:

**I like the way I work.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

## QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How do you feel now when doing speaking work in pairs?  
a) confident                      c) nervous                      e) other \_\_\_\_\_  
b) optimistic                      d) stressed
2. How useful is speaking in pairs for you to improve your language?  
a) very useful                      c) partly useful  
b) useful                      d) not useful
3. To what extent did the pair work activities in class promote speaking?  
a) quite a lot                      c) a bit  
b) a lot                      d) none
4. How did you feel when being corrected immediately by the teacher during speaking?  
Did it help you to correct your utterances?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. How useful did you find the teacher's immediate corrections when speaking?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What strategy did you find more useful when you were given feedback immediately?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Do you think correcting you immediately interrupted your communication when doing speaking work? In what way?  
a) yes                      b) no
8. What did the teacher correct most?  
a) pronunciation                      c) accuracy  
b) fluency                      d) none
9. From the list below, what materials did you find more effective when doing speaking work?  
a) cultural activities                      c) playing bingo                      e) fairy tales  
b) videos                      d) karaoke                      f) presentations
10. Which one did you enjoy working with most? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. Do you consider that practising speaking in pairs during the lesson could be applied continuously for your improvement? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. What do you think the teacher should continue correcting when doing speaking work?  
\_\_\_\_\_

**I felt comfortable.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**I felt more confident.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)



Moreover, students considered that practising speaking in pairs should happen regularly and continuously throughout the course for their continued improvement. 19 students considered that speaking in pairs was helpful for their development and improvement and commented on why, e.g.

**Yes, because practising in pairs benefits our speaking since I feel that I learn better.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**Yes because you lose your fear.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**Yes, I like it because I learn from my partner.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

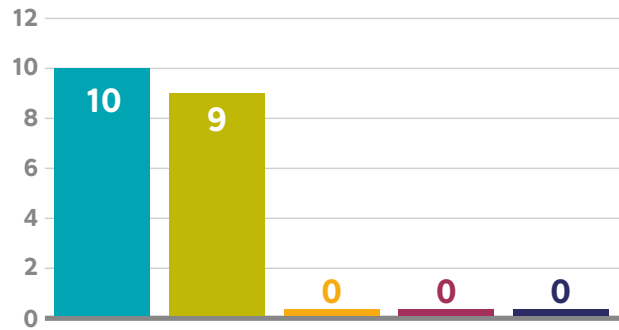
**Yes, because talking or interacting with another partner makes me feel confident.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**QUESTION 1**

**How do you feel now when doing speaking work in pairs?**

<span style="color: teal;">■</span> A. Confident	10
<span style="color: yellow;">■</span> B. Optimistic	9
<span style="color: orange;">■</span> C. Nervous	0
<span style="color: purple;">■</span> D. Stressed	0
<span style="color: blue;">■</span> E. Other	0



**How do students feel about the correction techniques?**

Priscilla had asked her colleague to observe how she corrected students and feedback indicated that she used both immediate and delayed correction techniques:

Teacher made the corrections after finishing singing in order to not interrupt.

Teacher corrected students immediately, students made the correction during the speaking.

Teacher corrected students during the presentation.

When students were asked which they preferred, the majority (15) expressed a preference for being corrected immediately, during the activity. However, six wanted to be corrected at the end together with the whole class, and one felt that individual correction at the end of the class would be better. Interestingly though, when asked which error correction technique they preferred, all students felt it was most useful to be corrected immediately as this made them 'feel good' and gave them 'more confidence', so there was some contradiction in the findings.

## How do students feel about the materials and activities?

Students appreciated working with different resources – photos, karaoke, pictures, and stories – in addition to the textbook. In the reflective writing students were asked about the activities and all of them (19) had positive comments about these:

**I consider that all the activities help to improve my speaking.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**I liked these activities because I had fun and I learned.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**I really liked these activities because they got us out of the routine while at the same time continuing to practice.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**These activities motivate me to continue learning English.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**The activities are a fun way to learn English.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

**I found the classes interesting.**

(Student response, translated from Spanish)

And, Priscilla noticed that they especially liked the karaoke:

*It was fantastic, they enjoyed it a lot. They could sing in English!*

Feedback from the peer observations was also positive. Priscilla's colleague noticed how in spite of the students' level, they had no difficulty understanding the instructions, participated actively in pair work in English, and that the activities were varied.

## Conclusion

Overall, Priscilla felt that the activities and the materials introduced to develop speaking had been effective (to the extent that the textbook was used as a supplement!) and as a result students were more confident and their talk time had increased.

Finally, Priscilla also got some constructive feedback from her colleagues on other aspects of her teaching:

- Provide students with more vocabulary so they can converse even more fluently.
- Give shorter instructions.
- Reduce teacher talking time a bit more.

And Priscilla agrees with her colleagues:

*Sometimes we don't realise some aspects of our teaching so peer observation is a good way to improve our practice and teamwork. Naturally, I'm interested in being a better teacher, so I'm working on the suggestions my colleagues gave me.*

## Final reflections

As a result of Priscilla's experience of this EAR project, she has learned that being an English teacher is a big challenge and there are a lot of aspects to consider. Even though she loves working with students and has always tried to do her best, this was not enough; she recognises that there were many things she was taking for granted and reflecting on her teaching was missing.

Priscilla acknowledges that her students had needs she was unaware of but by doing exploratory action research she was able to listen and make changes to her

approach to help them improve their speaking ability. For this reason, she now understands how important it is to be in touch, to research areas where she is missing something, to reflect on her teaching constantly and look for new, interesting and useful ways to support her students.

Taking part in this EAR project has helped me to reflect on my teaching practice. I learnt that there are many things to take into account to plan and teach well. From now on I will continue working with pair work activities to help students overcome their nervousness and reluctance to speak; I will make use of other kinds of activities, not only those in the textbook; and most importantly, I will listen and pay attention to my students' interests, feelings and suggestions to know what they need to learn and how to help them learn. It has been a memorable experience!

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my special thanks of gratitude to my husband and to the British Council for giving me this opportunity to grow as a teacher. I think I will never finish learning – there is always something new to learn.

### Reflection

Priscilla started her EAR thinking that her students did not want to speak in class and later found out that in fact they were interested but were too nervous to do so. This insight, along with other important information she got, allowed her to understand the value of involving her students in her decision-making process. What do you think about this? How important is for you to plan your lessons based on your students' suggestions? What tools could you use to collect this information?







## Teaching context

Alejandra teaches English at Escuela Normal de Cuautitlan Izcalli, which is located in the state of Mexico. At the time of the project, she was teaching an all-female group of 29 students aged 19 to 21 at CEFR A1 level. The group was studying English as part of their bachelor's degree in preschool education and had three 1.5 hour lessons per week.

The vast majority of them wanted to get an A2 Cambridge certificate as this would offer them a better possibility of being offered a good post in a public school, and when Alejandra first met them, many of them had never taken English classes before.



## Focus of the exploration

Alejandra chose to explore how homework could become a useful tool for her students. The reason she chose this topic was because her students had many other different activities which took up time, especially teaching practice when they were often absent from classes, sometimes for weeks. Alejandra had read that the more English becomes part of learners' daily lives, the more familiarised they will become with it. She therefore concluded that it would benefit her students if they were given the chance to be in touch with English every day via homework. However, her students didn't seem motivated to do homework; if they did it, they did it sporadically and she was concerned that this was affecting their progress. This was especially evidenced when they came back from teaching practice, and were usually unable to answer questions about the previous lessons or do simple exercises related to previous topics.

## Exploration phase

To focus her exploration more, Alejandra reflected on the topic and came up with five specific questions:

1. How often do my students do the homework I give them
2. What are my objectives when giving my students homework?
3. What do my students think about the homework I give them?
4. What kind of activities would my students prefer to do as homework?
5. How do I encourage my students to do homework?

She then thought about how she could get some answers to these questions and she decided on three separate methods.

## Tools to collect information

To find answers to questions 1, 3 and 4, Alejandra designed a *student questionnaire*. This was written in Spanish and required students to choose to what extent they agreed with a number of statements about homework:

- whether they thought it was useful or not for understanding grammar and vocabulary;
- if they thought it helped them to develop their skills and if so, which ones;
- if they felt the time spent on homework was worth it; and
- the types of activities they would like to be given as homework.



Students were asked to complete this in class and as honestly as possible.

Alejandra also decided that keeping a *journal* would prove useful; she could note her thoughts about students' attitudes towards homework, and reflect on how she introduced it. She did this over the course

of four lessons and the questions which guided her reflections were:

- How do I link the homework given to the development of the lesson?
- How do I give my students homework? (What do I say/do etc.?)
- What do my students say when they don't do the homework?

And finally, Alejandra organised a *focus group*. The questions for this were developed after she had received responses to the questionnaire so that she could dig deeper into students' answers by giving them the opportunity to present their ideas orally (again in Spanish) and in a more personal way. She presented this idea to the group and asked if any of them would be interested. Ten volunteered to take part.

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- What should be the main objectives when assigning homework?
- What characteristics should homework tasks have to be useful?
- How have the homework tasks helped you in your English learning?
- What aspects of the homework tasks do you consider to be inappropriate for your level of English?
- What aspects of the homework tasks do you consider interesting?
- How long do you take to do your English

### Useful findings

When Alejandra looked at the data she had obtained, she felt that these data collection methods had enabled her to get a good amount of useful information, and that she had gained a clearer understanding of why students were not doing homework.

First and foremost, she was able to notice from her **journal** that the homework she was giving students was not well planned; she did not have clear and specific

objectives and she was not communicating what students would achieve, e.g. the skills or language they would practise, so the students couldn't see the point of the homework tasks. Moreover, she noticed that she focused too much on the negative consequences of not doing homework by telling students that if they didn't do it their grades would be affected. She also discovered that the vast majority of the time, students attributed not doing homework to a lack of clarity in her instructions, which she'd also noted in her journal.

Extract from journal, 26 September

They mentioned they hadn't understood what they had to do.

From **questionnaire** and **focus group** responses, she learned that 10 students didn't find homework useful due to the amount of time needed to complete it and 10 students thought the level of difficulty was too high for them. She also found that 13 students wanted homework related to both their personal and learning interests. 20 students expressed a preference for grammar and vocabulary exercises using the online platform. Interestingly, the majority (17) of them were interested in homework that would help them to develop listening and speaking skills, areas they identified as struggling with most.

As far as motivation was concerned, there were some students who felt that more dynamic and creative ideas to practise grammar and vocabulary would motivate them more to do it, and prove more effective.

**Practising grammar and vocabulary through games makes it much more memorable and understandable for me. I have previously had some experiences trying to learn grammar and vocabulary through learning structures and memorizing words through repetition and it has never worked for me.**

(Student comment)



However, 10 students actually liked the traditional grammar worksheets that Alejandra used.

During the **focus group**, Alejandra's students were happy to give examples of the kind of homework activities they were given in other classes and made suggestions on how Alejandra could adapt these to practise English at home. For example, they mentioned how they had made use of other media resources such as movies or TV series and social media to either learn about something or to share what they had learned.

## Time for action

The feedback Alejandra got from her exploration provided her with lots to reflect on.

### How can I...

...encourage my students to do homework and make sure they do it?

...make it more meaningful and relevant to their needs?

...make sure it's appropriate to their level?

...make the objectives clear?

And after thinking about it for some time, Alejandra decided on two major changes:

1. Change the type of homework so that it meets students' needs; and
2. Change her own approach to homework, a contributing factor to students not doing it.

Then she came up with two specific actions to implement over the course of the next seven lessons. In order to

make the homework instructions and objectives clear, the first thing she did was to display a calendar in the classroom showing the dates, instructions and objectives of the homework for each lesson. Doing this was quite developmental for Alejandro too, because it forced her to sit down before each lesson and think about the specific objectives she wanted her students to achieve for each piece of homework and how she would make that an essential part of the following lesson. Alejandra also took time to carefully go through the homework instructions with the students and check that they all knew what to do and why, i.e. the point of it.



Then Alejandra turned her attention to homework activities, focusing on those her students said they enjoyed and the skills they felt they needed to develop. Based on these two factors, she designed a variety of tasks built around songs, movie extracts and online exercises.

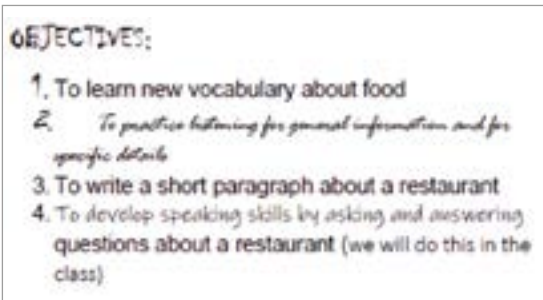
**Songs:** For these activities Alejandra designed worksheets for students to complete. First they were instructed to listen to a song and complete the lyrics with the words given. Then they were asked to think about the meaning of the song. Finally, they completed a grammar awareness task based on the grammar in the song, e.g. identifying sentences in the simple past.

**Movie extracts:** Again Alejandra designed worksheets and students were asked to watch an extract from a movie scene and order the lines of a dialogue. Then they were asked to focus on vocabulary used in the scene. Finally,

they had to imagine they were in the same situation and prepare a dialogue with a partner, which they would present to the group during the next lesson.



**Online exercises:** Alejandra instructed her students to complete exercises on the topic of ‘food and restaurants’ on an online platform called English Discoveries. Based on the model in that unit, students then wrote their own restaurant reviews on small posters and presented these to the group in subsequent lessons.



**Grammar worksheets:** And finally, because quite a few students had reported liking the grammar worksheets, Alejandra continued to hand these out for students to complete.

## Evaluation phase

At the end of the seven lessons, it was time for Alejandra to evaluate what impact the changes had had and for this she decided to continue with her journal, design another questionnaire and give her students a reflective writing task.

Throughout the implementation period, Alejandra had continued to note her own reflections in her **journal**, paying particular attention to her students’ attitudes and reactions to the changes and activities. She also kept a record of how many students completed the homework, whether they did it on time, and whether they did what they were asked to do.

The new **questionnaire** was again written in Spanish and consisted of a number of statements which students were asked to think about and then indicate the extent to which they agreed. Statements covered:

- the usefulness of the calendar, the instructions and objectives;
- the usefulness of the activities based on songs, videos, grammar worksheets and the online platform;
- how much the activities had helped to develop skills and language;
- whether the tasks were appropriate to their level; and
- whether the time given to complete the tasks was sufficient.



And finally, Alejandra asked her students to do a **reflective writing** task to give them the opportunity to expand on their feelings and opinions about the changes, and to comment on any benefits they had noticed as a result of these. The original questions were in Spanish and students responded in Spanish, too.

### REFLECTIONS

With the aim of delving into the responses obtained in the questionnaire, write a reflection in answer to the following questions.

- How did having written objectives, instructions and delivery dates of the tasks help in your perseverance and motivation to perform them?
- What benefits did you notice from the grammar exercises?
- What benefits did you notice from the use of songs and videos?
- What benefits did you notice from the use of an online platform?
- What benefits did you notice from preparing presentations?

### Some pleasing results

Once again Alejandra was able to obtain a lot of useful information from her data collection tools, which she spent some time analysing and organising. Once she had done that she was able to identify some key findings and she felt generally pleased with the results of her actions.

### Homework calendar

Firstly, she found that displaying a homework calendar in the classroom was a very simple yet effective strategy for motivating students to do homework and caused Alejandra to fully appreciate the importance of providing students with a simple visual reminder.

Students easily forget or fail to understand how to carry out a homework activity, so having detailed, and step-by-step instructions makes them feel more confident about what they are

doing especially, I believe, when they are at a basic level. Furthermore, including the objectives motivates students because it assures them that the homework has a purpose and that it has been planned and thought out by me.

And, the vast majority (26) of her students agreed with her. In their questionnaire responses, they wrote various comments about this:

**The calendar helped me a lot with managing my time better. Sometimes due to the homework load that I have, I fail to manage my time properly or I forget about all the things that I need to deliver, even if I write them down.**

(Student comment)

**Knowing the objectives of the homework changed my focus from thinking that I needed to do homework because it would have an impact on my grades, to thinking I was going to do homework to learn something or practise a skill.**

(Student comment)

**Some teachers from other subjects were able to see the calendar and started doing the same as we mentioned it had been helping us a lot.**

(Student comment)

### Songs and videos

Student responses to questions about the use of songs and videos were positive. 21 students stated that when a song is used as part of the homework, they find the homework to be much more appealing and therefore they feel more motivated to do it. 18 students felt they had noticed more development in their listening skills through listening to songs. 23 mentioned that watching videos as part of the homework encouraged them to carry out the tasks as they find this to be an attractive way to learn the language and develop skills. And 20

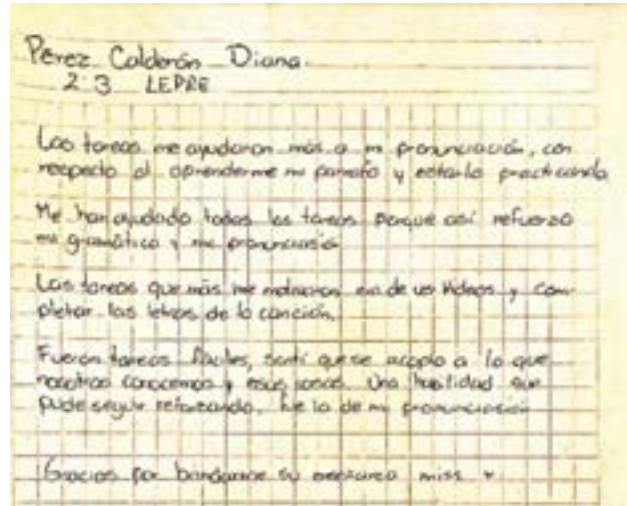
students agreed that presenting dialogues based on videos they watched as homework helped them to improve their speaking skills, especially in the area of pronunciation and intonation.

With the introduction of songs and videos, Alejandra also noticed a huge change in her students' attitudes – even as she was explaining the homework she noticed that they were really interested and keen to carry out these activities, not only because they were fun but also because they wanted to test how well they could cope with 'real' English on their own and outside the classroom. She also noticed that after doing this type of homework, students did not seem to be as stressed when doing listening activities in the classroom; they appeared to catch the general idea and familiar words faster.

I have noticed that, lately, students don't need to listen to a track 5 or 6 times. This doesn't mean they catch everything at once but I definitely have been playing the tracks fewer times and I notice they don't get as stressed as they used to.

Furthermore, students mentioned that they had started using songs and movies they liked to practise listening at home.

Today during the class, I asked my students how they had been feeling with homework assignments. One student mentioned she had started to listen to more songs in English and she was trying to write down all the words from the songs that she could understand. When she mentioned this, more of my students agreed, some of them mentioned they were watching movies or series in English. Another student said that she preferred to practise English in this way because she felt it was more challenging "sometimes the audios from the book sound unnatural".



Example of student's written reflections

**The tasks helped me more with my pronunciation as I needed to learn and practise to give the presentation of my homework in class.**

**All the tasks have helped to reinforce my grammar and my pronunciation.**

**The tasks that motivated me the most were watching videos and completing the lyrics of the song.**

**They were easy tasks, I felt they were adapted to what we know and what we have learned in class so far. A skill that I could continue to reinforce was my pronunciation.**

English translation

### Attitudes to speaking activities

The attitude that students had towards speaking activities also changed; they found it interesting to be able to recreate scenes from a movie or to talk about a video they had watched.

**I feel that, when I learn or practise something because I know that I am going to use it or apply it somewhere, it makes more sense to learn it or practise it. Many times we do homework and we do nothing with it, but preparing for a presentation or to share our opinions about something has helped me improve and it makes me want to keep doing homework.**

(Student comment)

I noticed their efforts to imitate the actors' pronunciation and intonation, and how these kinds of activities gave them more confidence and motivation to speak in class because they had had time to prepare beforehand. When presenting their poster or dialogues in pairs, the vast majority of students wanted to do it because they wanted the effort they had put in to be recognised.

### Grammar worksheets

Interestingly, students' opinions about the grammar worksheets were less positive now. When asked if they thought these were better than dynamic and interactive activities, 19 disagreed (15 'slightly' and four 'completely').

And finally, when Alejandra looked at the records she had kept in her journal, she was delighted to note that every student had completed every homework task correctly and on time.

### What Alejandra learnt

As a result of the positive outcomes of this experience, Alejandra primarily plans to be much more reflective about her teaching in general – to take the time to reflect on whether the strategies she's implementing are truly effective for her students. With regards to homework, she has witnessed how managing this effectively can greatly benefit her students' learning and consequently, she plans to focus much more on planning and designing effective homework tasks through which students can feel more

and more motivated to practise English at home.

### Reflections on EAR

This was Alejandra's first experience of EAR and she now recognises the importance of reflecting on her teaching and how this can lead to significant changes in her students' learning. The experience also helped her to get over her reluctance to research and changed her perspective on it completely, helping her to realise that research doesn't need to be complicated and extremely time-consuming. In fact, she really enjoyed the process of collecting and analysing the information and learnt how important it is for teachers to know their students' thoughts and use these to implement actions to benefit their learning.

Sometimes I guess I forget how important it is for me to consider my students, their opinions and contributions, and that I actually need their help to teach them well and cater to their needs, because after all, they are the reason I teach and the main characters in the classroom. Overall, this experience established the foundation for me to make classroom research a habit as I have been able to witness the great difference that it truly makes.

Through this experience I learnt that homework can play a really important role in students' learning of English. The changes I applied helped me to understand that homework must be appealing to students, not a burden as it used to be in my class. After making the changes, I noticed a great difference in my students' attitudes when they started to notice that it was actually having an impact on their learning and was challenging them to take the time and the effort to practise. It stopped being something they had to do and started being something they really looked forward to. They stopped feeling overwhelmed by how difficult and time-consuming it was and felt encouraged and motivated to do it.



### Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge all students and parents of this group in Cuautitlán Izcalli. Without your support and trust none of this could be possible. Also, I would like to thank my mentor and editors for their guidance and patience. Last but not least, I thank my family for always believing in me and my goals.

### Reflection

Alejandra learned the importance of being reflective about her teaching and evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies she uses in her classes. Moreover, she learned that research is a valuable tool to that end. She claims that doing EAR “established the foundation for me to make classroom research a habit”. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies you implement? How do you make sure you reflect on a regular basis about your teaching? Have you considered doing classroom research to achieve this? If so, what would you research?



# 7 Maximising students' engagement to improve their language skills

**Manuel Dario Acosta Martinez**

Amecameca de Juarez, State of Mexico



## Teaching context

Dario works at the Escuela Normal de Amecameca, which is located in the town of Amecameca de Juarez in the southeast of the State of Mexico. The Escuela Normal de Amecameca offers two educational programmes; the bachelor's degree for preschool education and the bachelor's degree in ELT for secondary school education. English courses are organised in terms of the students' English level rather than the programme the students belong to so it is possible to have students from both programmes on each course. This can become an issue in terms of students' interests, needs, the amount of time they are exposed to the language and even their motivation to learn.

The group Dario chose for this project consisted of 35 students (23 women and 12 men) from the two programmes and from different semesters but they were all at A2 level according to placement test results. Nevertheless, there were differences in terms of skills development; the seven students from the bachelor's degree for preschool education tended to need more support than the 28 from the bachelor's degree for secondary education when working with some tasks and activities.

## The focus of Dario's exploration

At the start of the project, Dario had been an English teacher for around 19 years and had always tried to reflect on his teaching to identify weaknesses and strengths and think of possible ways of improving. From experience he was aware that one of the main difficulties he had faced was gaining, and especially maintaining students' attention and interest.

Although there were signs during his lessons that everything was going well, Dario was also pretty sure there were things he wasn't aware of or considering. He felt that students expected more from him and he needed to find a way to 'listen', to give them an opportunity to express their needs and opinions. He welcomed the chance this EAR project would give him to get some insight into his students' perceptions and needs, and thereby make changes which could lead to increased interest, enthusiasm and motivation.

Dario decided to explore whether the strategies, activities and materials he was implementing in his lessons were interesting enough to promote participation and engagement, but he was also interested to know if that interest and engagement had a positive effect on learning and skills development. To this end, he thought of some questions which could help him gain a better insight into what was actually happening in his classroom:

1. What activities or strategies do I use to engage my students in class?
2. What activities do my students like to do during the lessons?
3. What do students think of my current activities and the resources I use?
4. To what extent do my students feel the activities I am using are helping them to improve?

## Exploration phase

Dario understood that if he wanted accurate and reliable information, he would need to collect data using different tools; he decided to use four: a student questionnaire and reflective writing, notes on lesson recordings and peer observations.

## Data collection tools

The *questionnaire* Dario designed explored the extent of his students' motivation, participation, interests and preferences – all in relation to the activities and resources he used. He also asked them to state the degree to which they felt they had improved their English level as a result of these classes.

Dario then asked his students to do a *reflective writing task* so that they could reflect on their learning and assess whether they were improving their skills with the activities which were being implemented in class, and also whether they considered those activities motivating. This writing was anonymous and students did it in Spanish.

## ANONYMOUS REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Write a short essay about your language learning experience during this course. Consider the following aspects:

- a. Explain how much you feel that you are making progress in developing your English skills from the classes.
- b. Reflect on the way in which the strategies and resources that the teacher currently uses in class have motivated or demotivated you, aroused your interest or not in learning the language.
- c. Describe those aspects of the class that you would keep, which you would change or which you would add to make you feel more interested or more motivated in class.

### Reflective writing task translated from Spanish

To observe and analyse student engagement for himself, Dario also *video-recorded five lessons*, which he later viewed and analysed. To focus, he came up with questions to reflect on. (In fact, doing this was particularly useful since he learnt many other things about his teaching that he was not aware of, e.g. his body language, gestures, talking time, etc.)

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- Which activities do students seem to participate in most? What is their participation like?
- What interaction patterns are in evidence in the lesson? When do students seem to be more motivated to work (in pairs, in groups of three, in teams of 4 or 5+)? How do I know? Describe/give details.
- At what moments of the lesson do students participate more? How do I know?

- What are the resources that seem to promote more participation/attract students' attention in class? How do I know? How do they use them?
- What language or skills work is evidenced in the lesson? Do students seem to be engaged (regarding participation and involvement) when doing that kind of (skill or language) work? Why? Describe.

### Questions used for reflection on video-recordings

Finally, Dario decided to invite five different colleagues to come and peer observe some of his lessons (five different lessons in total) since he felt it would be useful to gain others' perspectives in addition to his own. The aims of these observations were to a) identify which activities and resources students engaged with most/seemed most enthusiastic about; b) identify which interaction patterns students seemed to prefer; c) identify the resources they found the most interesting; and d) identify which skills or language areas engaged them most.

## Some mixed and unexpected findings

After five lessons, Dario analysed the data he had gathered from his four research tools, and he found that what he learned from his students' responses probably provided the most reliable information because they were anonymous and his students weren't afraid to be honest and express negative opinions.

Generally, Dario was happy to discover that most students (around 30) felt motivated during his lessons. However, 15 thought the activities and resources were not very interactive, interesting or motivating.

## Activities, materials and resources

Dario discovered from his notes on lesson recordings that the activities and strategies he had been implementing to engage his students in class were mainly speaking activities such as short conversations and mini-tasks where learners had to talk about a

specific topic or issue. Students felt happy working with those speaking activities and expressed their desire to continue working with them; nevertheless, around a quarter of the students did ask for more variety and creativity in the design of those activities.

Twelve students also reported being interested when working with listening activities such as songs and videos, but again they wanted more variety. Nine students also wanted to play fun language learning games – something Dario had not included in his lessons. In short, students expressed the same opinions about most of the activities, materials and resources used – a lack of creativity and innovation and interaction.

In terms of the resources which the teacher uses, I believe they are adequate and interesting, but I believe they could be more entertaining, motivating, creative and interactive...

**Extract from student's reflective writing translated from Spanish**

### Interaction patterns

Students' responses about interaction patterns supported findings from the peer observations and Dario's video recording notes; students enjoyed working in pairs or teams, but showed greater enthusiasm when participating in mingle activities – they were very enthusiastic when speaking with different partners and sharing their opinions on a range of topics.

Students both enjoy pair work and mingling but seem to enjoy more the latter one. Some students express some signs of involvement when mingling – gestures, laughs, smiles.

**Peer observation comment**

### Skills development

Regarding skills development, Dario became aware that he hadn't achieved a good balance. Most students (23) thought the activities were useful for developing their listening and speaking skills, but there were six students who expressed a lack of improvement in areas such as reading, writing and grammar.

### Something unexpected

And finally, Dario came across an unexpected finding in his students' questionnaire responses; he was completely unaware that some of his students felt unnoticed and had few opportunities to speak or get feedback as a result of being part of an overcrowded classroom.

Maybe you see that there are many of us and it is difficult to participate in the class when you so have many classmates.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

We are many and sometimes there is not the personalised attention that we need in certain areas.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

### Time for action

Dario thought about what he had learned from his exploration and based on his analysis of the feedback, he came up with an action plan designed to increase students' interest and promote their participation and enthusiasm in class.

First, he designed different activities based on songs and sitcoms but introduced a **variety** – not just gap-fill exercises or watching without doing anything. Instead he designed integrated-skills activities; for example, after watching a sitcom, students were given scenes and asked to describe them, or after listening to a song, students sang karaoke style or worked on apps or websites.



Students singing karaoke



Unscrambling scenes



Completing the lyrics of a song

Dario also introduced more **interactive activities** – games such as Pictionary or Charades; language competitions; using interactive websites and apps. These interactive activities were also designed to practise different skills and language.



Competition: Describing visuals



Basketball grammar game



Playing Charades to practise modals

Dario's third action was to design and implement activities where students could **mingle** and interact in different ways with different classmates.



Talking about musical preferences



Discussing trivia questions



Describing pictures

And finally, he implemented some strategies to improve his **monitoring and feedback**. Since he wasn't able to listen to and monitor all the students during the lesson, he asked them to record their conversations so he could listen after the class and provide feedback during the following lesson. This was sometimes done whole class using an error analysis strategy on the board – students identified and corrected the mistakes; at other times using peer-correction, and when students were unable to self-correct, he also provided explicit feedback.



Whole-class error analysis



Monitoring performance



Comparing answers in pairs

## Time to evaluate

After three weeks (eight lessons) it was time for Dario to evaluate the effects of his action plan using three of the same tools he had used during the exploration phase and a new one.

The **student questionnaire** focused on students' perceptions of all the activities implemented. Dario asked them to state how useful each activity had been in gaining and maintaining their interest; how effective each activity had been in helping them to develop and improve their language and skills; and to state which skill each activity had helped to develop the most. He also asked them to rank the activities in order of preference.

The **peer observations** (four this time) again focused on the extent of the students' participation and enthusiasm during the various activities, but also on the language work or skills which were being promoted during these activities and resources used. Dario was more interested this time to find out which activities and resources were most effective in generating interest and developing specific skills. He was also keen to know



**Focus group discussion**

how he was monitoring and giving feedback and how students were responding to this.

Dario also **video-recorded** all eight lessons and made notes, focusing on the effectiveness of the various activities and resources used. However, instead of reflective writing, this time he held a 20-minute **focus group** with nine students who had been randomly selected. This was done in Spanish and Dario was able to follow up on questionnaire responses and probe for further information where necessary. He also prepared tables of activities to help students remember what they had done during the lessons.

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. How motivated did you feel in the class through the song activities? Why?
2. How motivated did you feel in the class through the activities with TV series? Why?
3. Do you think that working with songs helped you improve your language skills? What skills? Why?
4. Do you think that working with TV series helped you improve your language skills? What skills? Why?
5. What is your opinion about the following activities (see table 1) in which you participated in class? Why? What was the activity that you liked the most?
6. Do you consider that these activities contributed to the development of your skills in the language? What skills? Why?
7. How attractive did you find the materials and resources (see table 2) used in the class? Why?
8. How productive or functional did you find the materials and resources used in class to improve your language skills? Why?
9. How effective did you find the different speaking activities (see table 3) that were carried out in pairs or small groups to improve your listening comprehension and oral expression? Why? Which one did you like the most?



10. Did you feel supported by the teacher during class? Which feedback and support strategy do you find most useful and why?

Table 1	Table 2	Table 3
Pictionary	Videos	Discussion in pairs (two circles)
Descriptions with cards	Songs	Discussions in pairs with post-it notes
Riddles	Printed visuals	Discussions with visuals
Basketball	PowerPoint visuals	Discussions with questions on PowerPoint
Kahoot! competition	Online games (Kahoot! lyrics training, etc.)	Discussions in threes with star scheme
Competitions with visuals	Vocabulary worksheets	Find someone who mingle
Faces and gestures	Flashcards	Discussions in teams with flashcards
Envelopes with pictures to order	PowerPoint presentations	
	Worksheets	

### Encouraging findings

Dario spent a lot of time analysing the data he collected and made some useful and interesting discoveries.

Dario discovered that students found **songs** and **sitcoms** very useful; 31 students 'liked' them and believed they had helped them to develop different skills and language (not only listening and speaking). They also added that these resources had helped them to learn some colloquial expressions, phrasal verbs and idioms, and had given them a better insight into cultural aspects of English. During the focus group, students also added that practising language when working with songs and sitcoms had motivated them.

I think songs were really nice and fun, I like music a lot so I get motivated when working with that. It's very nice when somebody plays a song and everybody gets together to sing it.



While we were watching the sitcom our listening was improving when trying to understand what they were saying, and when trying to unscramble the scenes of the sitcom we were improving our writing since we had to write them down and at the same time we were improving our grammar since we had to write them accurately. When we were watching the sitcoms we also improved our vocabulary since we learned some expressions native speakers use.

Dario was not surprised by this positive response since he had also observed how attentive, enthusiastic (smiling and laughing) and well students had participated during these activities.



All students were singing the songs, one student dared to go to the front of the class and sing with the microphone. All students clapped when he finished singing. Then, there was a second song and several students were asked to sing passing the microphone. Everyone seemed to be having fun, they all sang as a group.

Students watched a sitcom called 'Two and a half men'. This activity increased their interest during the lesson, they were very attentive, and they laughed a lot while watching it.

Dario also noticed that by incorporating **a variety of activities**, such as games and competitions (e.g. Charades, basketball grammar game, Pictionary, etc.) and using some websites or apps such as lyrics training or Kahoot!, he was able to break the routine, raise students' interest a bit more and achieve a better balance in terms of skills and language development. Students reported enjoying these activities; they felt they were learning while having fun.



**Students playing Pictionary**

Activities were quite entertaining and enjoyable; developing our communicative competence through games is something which motivates me to practise the language.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

All the activities in general were very productive because while we were playing we had the opportunity to learn and develop our knowledge of every topic in class, these activities helped us to get further practice on different topics.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

Students also added that playing games lessened their fear of speaking as they felt less worried about making mistakes and in the end 'it was just a game'.

Around 30 students reported that the **new materials and resources** implemented during the lessons helped them to develop their language skills and 26 students thought the materials were attractive and fun – some students even said they suited their learning preferences, styles or interests. Dario realised that by including a greater, well-designed variety of materials and resources in his class, he was able to create a livelier and more innovative environment than he could using traditional materials, such as worksheets and textbooks.

For each one of them helped us a lot to improve these skills since it is also attractive to work with materials that attract our attention and make us perform the knowledge acquired more.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

The data also showed that introducing more **mingle activities** succeeded in making the lessons **more interactive**; the fact that students were constantly moving and working with different partners increased their talking time and opportunities to learn from each other. Almost all of the students (33) mentioned the important role mingle

activities played in helping them to develop their speaking skills and more than half of the group (20 students) said that mingle activities helped them to improve their listening, pronunciation and vocabulary. Dario also noted in his journal how mingle activities promoted interaction.

Both mingling activities implemented during this lesson promoted student interaction, they were practising their speaking and listening carefully with their classmates ...



**Students' reactions after a mingle activity**

Another important finding was that ten students believed mingle activities created a more equitable (less threatening) environment, giving them the opportunity to talk to their peers (equals) and not someone with a higher level of English (like the teacher). Mingle activities also allowed them to get positive feedback and support from their classmates and encouraged those students who faced difficulties to use the language with more confidence; for example, their classmates helped them to pronounce certain words or express their ideas better.

These activities require the ability to speak, sometimes the same partners can help you to comfortably pronounce the words or to order the ideas, which helped me a lot.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

With these activities you practise pronunciation and dialogue coherence and you can correct grammatical errors through the observations that your classmates notice about you.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

A very positive finding was that students found **correcting their own or each other's mistakes** very useful – they considered this approach more meaningful since they could learn from those mistakes. They also appreciated that this was done as a whole class because it was less time-consuming and they felt less exposed – they felt making mistakes was OK and they were encouraged to 'lose the fear of speaking' and focus on improving their language. A good number of students (32) also agreed that they received appropriate and timely feedback.

It was easy to ask questions or doubts to the teacher since he had a positive attitude to help us. He did not provide us with the correct answer right away, which also helped us to think of the correct answer and in those cases where we were not able to come up with the correct answer, he helped us.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

One of the actions I consider very useful when we practised speaking, was that he made some comments and provided feedback as a whole class. I enjoyed a lot when he did that, because every student notices his/her mistakes and it prevents some others from making them in the future.

*(Student response translated from Spanish)*

Finally, Dario found that recording his lessons also helped greatly with **monitoring and feedback**. While he continued to monitor students' speaking during the activities, he found that with the recordings he had much more opportunity to listen to *all* of his students and provide feedback.

I consider the recordings are quite useful for monitoring and providing delayed feedback since it is impossible for teachers to hear all mistakes when students are speaking in pairs or small groups.

His students also noticed this and commented on it during the focus group.

We felt supported by the teacher, he was constantly monitoring the activities so we felt he was really listening to us instead of just listening to a couple of students so we felt more motivated to do it even better. We do not feel afraid of making mistakes, we felt encouraged to think of some things again and correct them again.

Overall, Dario was pleased with the impact of his actions since students' perceptions and attitudes had changed as a result.

### What Dario has learnt

From doing this research, there are many things Dario has learnt and he knows there are aspects of his teaching that will definitely change.

Teachers know or feel when students are enjoying their lesson, when they become interested, engaged or even motivated, but once teachers achieve that, it does not mean it will always be like that. Every lesson represents a challenge in terms of doing it better next time and that's what Dario learned; that's what he had to face every time he incorporated another song, another sitcom, another game, etc. He had to look for new and creative ways to present them, use them and engage students. For this reason, the project does not finish here – it is a good starting point in terms of exploring students' beliefs and perceptions and adapting teaching to their needs and interests, and as a consequence, increase the chances of learning taking place in the classroom.

Dario will definitely include more interactive resources and activities in his lessons, the kind that promote participation, interaction and enjoyment of the learning experience. Before doing this research, he thought he was already doing this, but he learnt there are ways to design and include more creative activities and resources to break the routine and make the lessons more fun.

He also learned that he needed to design activities that provide students with more possibilities to improve their language and skills in a more balanced way.

I learned that one of the most important things, perhaps the most important thing I can do as a teacher is to listen to my students, listen to their needs, their likes, their dislikes, their learning goals, etc. Once I listen to what my students really need and like, then, and only then, can I start planning a lesson because it might provide me with better chances to create a more meaningful experience for them.

Dario also now knows that in order to truly engage his students, he cannot depend only on what literature suggests or what he thinks will work based on his academic background or experience. He needs to start by exploring the situation – his learners' characteristics, their needs and interests, strengths and weaknesses, the possible causes of a problem or situation – and then, once he has done that, come up with more appropriate actions to address the situation or improve an aspect of his teaching.

### Final reflections

This research and the changes I implemented helped me to understand that when I analyse a situation or a problem in the classroom I cannot think of a single cause of the problem and a single solution to it; situations or problems in the classroom are multifactorial and I need to be able to analyse all the possible causes and look for appropriate solutions.

'Student engagement' does not only depend on organising games or using songs. My findings suggest that engagement involves designing and implementing activities and resources based on students' interests and needs such as games, competitions, outdoor activities, mingling activities, songs and sitcoms, but those activities and resources have to be varied, they have to be implemented creatively and if possible, innovatively.

Students also need to get a sense of achievement by participating in those activities, they need to feel they are practising and improving most of their skills, and last but not least, they need to feel that I am listening to them – they need to know that I am aware and interested in their progress and that I will provide the necessary feedback and support for them to improve.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my very great appreciation to Escuela Normal de Amecameca and the British Council for giving me the opportunity to work on this wonderful EAR project; Paula Rebolledo, Omar Rugerio and Deborah Bullock for their guidance and encouragement. I would also like to thank my students whose valuable participation made it possible to carry out this research and last, but not least, I wish to thank my family for their endless support throughout this process.

### Reflection

Dario learnt so much from undertaking this EAR project but the most important lesson was to listen to his students, listen to their needs, their likes, their dislikes, their learning goals, etc. And although he used a variety of tools, he states that he learnt a lot about his teaching from his own reflections on his video-recorded lessons. Have you ever recorded yourself teaching? Would you like to? What kind of questions could you write to focus your observations of yourself?



# 8

## Developing speaking through song-based activities

**Michel Marín Nájera**

Los Reyes Acaquilpan, La Paz, State of Mexico



## Teaching context

This EAR project was carried out at La Normal de Los Reyes Acaquilpan. Located in La Paz municipality, it is a school that trains teachers who are aiming to professionally develop at Elementary Schools in the State of Mexico. They come from low- and middle-class families and so were educated in the public school system. They generally have a very low level of English and because they learnt mainly through traditional methods, i.e. grammar, writing and repetition, their speaking skills are poorly developed. The 25 students Michel was teaching at the start of this project were aged 18 to 20 and were in their first year.

These students belong to a generation studying under the 'Mexican National English Strategy' started in 2018–2019. The main aim of this strategy is for learners to become bilingual by the time they graduate from elementary schools in 20 years' time. As a result, the programme at Normal Schools has been modified to train teachers so that they will have full command of English by the time they end their studies.



## Focus of the project

For the reasons mentioned above, and due to the importance of reaching the strategy objectives, Michel felt it was crucial to address the English-speaking level of his students. Initially he felt that technology could help with this and he had the idea of making use of a Voice Recording Diary app, however, he needed to check his assumptions and find out what his students thought about this.

## Exploratory phase

### Exploratory questions

To help him in his explorations, Michel came up with four questions to help focus his research:

1. Why do my students avoid participating in speaking activities?
2. What do my students think/feel about speaking in English?
3. What happens when I ask them to participate in speaking activities?
4. What strategies do I use to support speaking activities?

### Data collection tools

To help him collect useful data to answer these questions, Michel chose:

*Written Reflection Notes.* It is said that teaching is of little value if the teacher is not able to reflect on his own daily work and this is the main reason why Michel decided to note his reflections.

Then to reinforce his reflection notes, he also decided to *video record five lessons* so he could analyse them in more detail and compare them with his notes. The questions he used to guide the reflections were:

### Written reflection focus questions:

- What is my students' reaction when we do speaking activities?
- What happens when I ask them to participate in speaking activities?
- What strategies do I use to support speaking activities?
- Any other relevant observations?

*Questionnaires.* As Michel's group was quite large (25 students), he thought he could gather relevant information efficiently by using questionnaires since he was interested to know all his students' opinions. The



questionnaires were administered in the classroom in Spanish and focused on:

- how students felt when speaking English in different situations: in front of the class, alone with the teacher, in pairs, in teams with their friends, etc.;
- attitudes to speaking in English;
- how important they viewed developing this skill – the relevance to their personal and professional life; and
- opinions about resources and activities that could be used to practise speaking English.



*Focus Group Discussion.* Michel chose this method because he wanted to understand more fully what his students thought and experienced when trying to communicate orally in English. The focus group was organised with 14 randomly-chosen students. All the questions were asked in Spanish and it took place in the school auditorium. Some of the questions asked during the discussion were:

- How often do you like to participate in English speaking activities?
- How do you feel when you speak English in front of your classmates?
- What kind of speaking activities do you/would you enjoy?
- Do you feel more confident when different classmates hear you speaking English or when your teacher listens to you?
- Do you think that being able to speak English fluently is important for your career? Why?

## Some unexpected findings

### Activities and resources

As mentioned above, Michel's original idea for this project had been to introduce a Voice Recording Diary app to help students with speaking English. However, feedback from the questionnaires revealed that this was unappealing to students – they expressed a preference for songs and ludic activities. Rethinking this approach became even more critical after the focus group, when none of the students said they wanted to use a Voice Recording app. On the contrary, they thought this boring and tedious.

I would like to use songs, since they help you increase your vocabulary, and since we all sing at the same time, that would reduce my discomfort and motivate me to use English. I don't like the way my recorded voice sounds as much, so keeping a voice diary would not be so pleasant for me.

Michel was really surprised by this; considering their age, he thought that they would be keen to use technology and apps – perhaps technology was not the best choice after all! Michel realised he definitely needed to rethink his approach.

During the focus group discussion, students also stated that they liked some of the activities Michel had been implementing but there were some that were less appealing. For example, they enjoyed how he had used English songs to develop speaking but they did not like grammar-focused activities.

### Feeling and attitudes

From the questionnaire and focus group responses, Michel discovered that the most common feeling students experienced when participating in English was 'nervousness', which arose from two main causes: a) fear of ridicule and b) feeling unable to speak in English. However, despite the nervousness speaking generates, most of his students liked and wanted to participate in English because they believed that learning English would give them better job and travel opportunities.

He also learned that students felt frustrated when asked to speak alone in front of the whole group; they preferred working in pairs and small teams.

The majority of them also referred to previous experiences of learning English at Junior High and High School, and complained that teachers had not paid attention to correcting their pronunciation, or in some cases overcorrected their speaking. In fact, they made a point of stating that they did not like it when a teacher is strict and rigid in their approach, or when a teacher overcorrects as this intimidates them – what they would rather have was a supportive and flexible teacher. It was clear to Michel that these experiences had resulted in serious demotivation and even boredom.



Since I started studying English in high school, most of the teachers I've had have given me only grammar, translation and writing activities. That's why I don't like the subject of English. It's tedious and boring to me. I'd like to have more dynamic and interesting classes, where I really learn to speak it.

The truth is, I prefer not to speak English anymore because I think I was traumatised. It's horrible when teachers correct you for any mistakes you make speaking it. It feels even worse when it's in front of the whole class and all your classmates are watching you. I felt that some of my English teachers didn't really care if I learned to use the language.

## Participation

After watching the video recordings of his lessons and reflecting on his notes, it was extremely clear to Michel that the majority of his students avoided participating in speaking English. He observed that there was a certain little group that tended to monopolise, while the rest of the students only participated and spoke up when specifically asked to by him.

Michel reflected on his findings and wondered how he could address some of the issues he had uncovered.

Would applying ludic activities such as singing, dialogues and personal questions help students to overcome the nervousness they have when speaking in English? In what ways can I implement more pair and small group work to encourage all my students to participate?

How can I teach content related to job opportunities and travel?

In what ways can I apply more pair and small group work patterns and make all students participate?

## Action plan

Having reflected on the situation, Michel identified some areas to focus on and put together a three-point action plan based on the use of songs, which he implemented over the course of six lessons.

### 1. Vocabulary and pronunciation

To help students gain confidence in speaking and articulating in English, he felt that it could help to pre-teach vocabulary and practise the pronunciation of sounds which Spanish speakers find especially difficult because of the sound/spelling relationship, e.g. /i:/. He chose to use songs, since students had expressed a strong preference for this, and he created flashcards with the words from the songs which contained the same sounds, e.g. need, bleed, sheep, etc. He explained and demonstrated the sounds (two 'ees' together sound like this phonetic symbol /i:/) and then got them to

repeat. Later, they identified and underlined the words in the songs and read out the sentences in which they appeared.

## 2. Controlled and freer speaking practice

As mentioned above, feedback indicated that students would like to practise speaking through learning songs. Michel did some background reading and learnt that there are a lot of speaking practice activities which are derived from a song. First, he chose a song based on his students' needs and interests, most importantly a song which told a story. Then he got them to match pictures to the verses and explain/discuss their choices. After this they listened to the song and sang along as a kind of choral drill activity. After that they read the lyrics and looked at the pictures in small groups to understand and later narrate the story to the whole group. Finally, guided by questions, they expressed their personal opinions about the song in small groups.



## 3. Pairwork and small group work

Because findings showed the students were afraid of being made fun of when speaking English, and that they really didn't like having to speak alone in front of the whole group, Michel introduced more pairwork and small group work. He also believed this would build their confidence, especially if they could work with peers they had a good relationship with.

## Evaluating the action

To evaluate the impact of his actions, Michel used the same data collection tools as he had during the exploratory phase since his students were now familiar with them and they had provided him with useful data: **written reflection notes** based on **video recordings** of his lessons throughout the implementation period, a **questionnaire** and a **focus group** discussion with 15 students at the end. This time, however, questions focused on how the actions had impacted on feelings and attitudes to speaking English and behaviour.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Read the following questions carefully and answer to the best of your ability by choosing the answer that best suits your situation.

- How much has it helped you feel more confident speaking English, knowing and practising pronunciation patterns in the vocabulary of the songs seen in the last classes?
 

a) Quite a lot	c) Very little
b) Some	d) Nothing

2. How much has associating images with paragraphs of songs with a classmate prompted you to speak in English?
 

a) Quite a lot	c) Very little
b) Some	d) Nothing
  
3. How much has telling the story of the songs in teams motivated you to speak in English?
 

a) Quite a lot	c) Very little
b) Some	d) Nothing
  
4. How difficult has it been for you to tell your teammates your opinion, in English, about the songs?
 

a) Quite a lot	c) Very little
b) Some	d) Nothing

Do you consider it useful to use songs to develop speech in English? Why?

---

5. How much have the activities related to songs reduced your nervousness of speaking in English during the last classes?
 

a) Quite a lot	c) Very little
b) Some	d) Nothing
  
6. In general, do you consider that the strategies used during the last five classes have been...?
 

a) Very effective	c) A little effective
b) Moderately effective	d) Not effective

Have you felt more motivated to participate when using songs to learn English? Why?

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How would you describe your attitude when participating in English speaking activities when using songs?

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#### Student questionnaire translated from Spanish

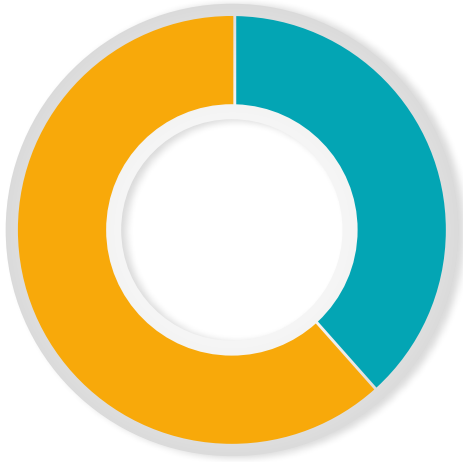
## Findings

### 1. Vocabulary and pronunciation

From his class video recordings and written reflection notes, Michel noted that most of the students were eager to know and repeat the sounds and words (represented by phonetic symbols) written on the whiteboard and the lyric worksheets. What is even more relevant is that 22 students could figure out the pronunciation of the rest of the words with the same sounds using the phonetic symbols.

Questionnaire response analysis showed that when vocabulary was pre-taught in the classroom using phonetic symbols, 23 students felt they had been able to improve their pronunciation, specifically of those new words introduced by the teacher, and 21 students felt they had acquired the pre-taught vocabulary better with the combined use of flashcards and phonetic symbols written on the board. What is more, all students felt more confident. During the focus group students also commented on the benefits of this approach.

How much did learning and practising pronunciation patterns of vocabulary in the songs help you to pronounce English more confidently ?



● a lot      ● a little  
● some      ● not at all

In the last 5 classes, yes, I participated more. With the classes I was able to learn new vocabulary. The strategy of using phonetic symbols especially helped me.

I participated a lot since I really liked the strategy – songs helps a lot because with songs you learn how to pronounce.

Michel also noted in his journal how relaxed the classroom atmosphere had become.

The tense atmosphere in class seems to have lowered down, which is deeply contributing to students' willingness to participate in the planned activities. Even some pupils who were always reluctant to say a word, are self-nominating to speak short phrases in English.

In short, the effect of these actions was effective in helping students to speak in English because knowing they were pronouncing correctly gave them confidence. I recognised the significance of this when I considered that unlike Spanish, English sound and spelling does not easily correspond. I also noted how students commented on enjoying knowing about and analysing different sounds and their phonemes, and how the flashcards appealed to the students' visual preferences, although perhaps I should have also introduced some TPR activities to cater to kinaesthetic preferences. What is more, I also expanded my own knowledge of using phonetic symbols in the classroom.

## 2. Controlled and freer speaking practice

From analysis of his class video recordings and reflection notes, 20 students participated enthusiastically in all of the song-related activities. Using songs proved effective in diminishing the nervousness associated with speaking in English for almost all of the students. Focus group discussion analysis confirmed this finding – all the students agreed that using songs had helped reduce their feelings of nervousness associated with speaking English because songs are something they all know and feel comfortable sharing information about. Questionnaire analysis also revealed that many students believed using songs had helped them to acquire new words, better pronunciation and ultimately greater confidence to speak in English.

**Commenting on the songs helped us to formulate sentences and check the grammar of each sentence. I think it was fundamental.**  
 (Student 3, translated from Spanish)

**I think it was very effective because the strategy – the activities and the type of songs – is designed for young people of our age so I think that we all felt very comfortable with both the activities and the songs.**  
 (Student 4, translated from Spanish)

Students reported that the use of current popular songs awakened their interest as they identified with the times they are living in. And from the video recordings Michel also noticed how using modern popular songs, which students are familiar with, was key to catching their attention and enhancing participation. In fact, when he chose a song that students weren't familiar with, the impact was not the same:



The difference between choosing a song which is appealing and better known by students and one that they are not so familiar with was patently obvious today. It took more time for students to get engaged with the song 'Hotel California' by The Eagles, than with a more modern song like 'Photograph' by Ed Sheeran which was used in the first session.

The majority of students also agreed that explaining the story of the song in front of the whole group was much easier in small groups than doing it individually. They also reported that working in small groups promoted peer correction in a fun, and non-threatening way. Michel also felt that he too had taken on a much more supportive role in helping students to clarify doubts and that he had corrected errors in a much more positive way.

Choosing modern pop songs was key to the students' acceptance and success of the action as they were familiar with the lyrics and the rhythm. When I paused to consider how children naturally learn their L1 – repeating words spoken by others, internalising these and then using them independently – I could understand more clearly why this approach had been successful.



### 3. Pairwork and small group work

When Michel analysed his notes and video recordings, he observed that his students showed much more confidence speaking English when paired or grouped with close classmates. This was backed up by findings from the questionnaire analysis, where 20 students were convinced that working with their close peers had helped to build their confidence to participate in the speaking activities.

**I did not participate very frequently, but I was less nervous as a result of working as a team with my classmates.**

(Student 5, translated from Spanish)

**I felt less nervous, mainly due to the activity, as they were pop songs that everyone knew, I think that with this activity you can feel identified with your classmates, because you know that they also like that type of music..**

(Student 6, translated from Spanish)

Students expressed how working in such a friendly environment can help them drastically reduce the amount of nervousness that speaking in English generates. Many of them even started practising peer correction in a non-threatening way.

My attitude and posture was also crucial in assuming a supportive rather than authoritative role. During the focus group discussion, students expressed that by being a more flexible teacher, which for them was more empathic and understanding of their language limitations and errors, they felt more confident to dare to communicate in English. They also praised the fact that I did not overcorrect their mistakes and I corrected them in a friendlier way.

## Learning and future actions

Based on what he learned from this experience, Michel plans to modify or reinforce some aspects of his daily teaching.

1. Clearly, speaking English generates a lot of nervousness and being an inflexible, overcorrecting and strict teacher is a deterrent for students seeking to develop this competency.

**For my part, yes, because before I was very nervous to speak in front of all the people and even more so in English, for fear of being wrong, but I think you have given us the confidence not to get frustrated when it comes to speaking.**

(Student 7, translated from Spanish)

I will consequently act as an even more flexible, supportive and amusing teacher who does not overcorrect students but uses self- and peer-correction, which are friendlier methods of helping students to improve the accuracy of their English speaking.

2. The phonetic chart is a tool which benefits students' pronunciation by giving them confidence that they are correctly articulating sounds and words.

I will use it more.

3. Motivation is important in second language learning, and this can be enhanced by implementing activities which are relevant and appealing to students. Song-related activities definitely proved this.

I will subsequently plan more classes in which songs are included.

4. Interaction patterns are key to creating a safer, friendlier and more relaxing atmosphere in the classroom. Pair and small group work diminish fear, tension and reluctance to participate. As human beings, we love public approval as much as we hate public ridicule, but the video-recorded classes and all the instruments used to collect data, showed how students gain confidence when participating along with other classmates. What is even more interesting is that in pairs and small groups, peer correction occurs in a fun and relaxed way and this is reflected into the general class atmosphere.

I will continue to use pair and group work.

## Reflections on EAR

Participating in the Champion Teachers Programme was a very enriching experience because I could further my knowledge of research methods. I had never done EAR, only qualitative research, but it is now my favourite approach because it is dynamic, enjoyable and fully practical. EAR enabled me to even be an objective criticiser of myself and reflect on the improvement of my own classes. To end, I can add that nobody knows your students and their preferences better than you. It is key to listen and be aware of your students' needs because that increases interest and if your students are motivated, you can gain their attention and collaboration, which is almost impossible if they are not.

### Acknowledgements

I feel deeply glad with God, The British Council, and the Normales authorities from the State of Mexico for this great opportunity to improve my teaching practice by letting me be part of the "Champion Teachers Programme". Thank you very much!

### Reflection

Michel found this EAR approach to classroom investigation enjoyable and practical as it helped him to be objective and reflective. What do you think? Does this approach appeal to you? Would you like to try it? What aspects of your teaching would you like to explore together with your students?









## Teaching context

Gabriela works at the Escuela Normal #1 de Nezahualcoyotl in the State of Mexico, which is located in the multicultural city Nezahualcoyotl. For this project she was teaching English to a group of 20 pre-service teachers aged 19 to 22 in their 3rd semester. They were in their second year of the bachelor in Elementary Education and their programme included six hours of English classes per week. The students had worked separately according to language level in their first year but during the 2019–2020 year, the school administration decided to form a multilevel group with peers at levels A1, A2 and B1. Gabriela labelled these Blues (A1), Reds (A2) and Greens (B1) and the group consisted of 10 Blues, 6 Reds and 4 Greens.

## The main focus

Due to the fact that they were in a multilevel group, Gabriela found that the students were reluctant to work together as they saw no way to continue developing their language skills at their corresponding level. She had already suggested to them that projects, in which they all had to participate, could be a solution but not all of them were enthusiastic about working collaboratively. There were also complaints about how equitable the work was going to be and some negative attitudes and behaviour, e.g. ridiculing the lower level students on their pronunciation.



It was quite a challenge and sometimes a bit frustrating because I spent a lot of time trying to motivate the students as well as dealing with misbehaviour instead of teaching English.

## The exploration

### Exploration questions

To try to understand more deeply what the students' opinions were about working together and in an effort to get them to team up, Gabriela focused her exploration on four questions:

1. What do my students say about working in a multilevel group?
2. What kind of support do my students think they need when working with classmates who have a different language level?
3. What kind of activities do all my students, no matter their level, prefer doing together?
4. How often do I plan activities for students to work together in groups with different levels?

After setting these questions Gabriela began thinking about how to search for answers. Having already implemented two different class projects where learners had had to work together, Gabriela felt she should start by exploring her students' opinions about these, and perhaps group these opinions according to level. But first she needed to decide on how she was going to gather these opinions, so she looked into different methods.



### Methods used to explore the questions

First, she organised the *focus group* in which eight students with different language levels participated. The aim of this was to explore what they thought about

working in a mixed-level group, the kind of support they needed and the kind of activities they would like to work on with their classmates. However, and even though she had originally thought that students would be keen to share their opinions during a focus group meeting, it turned out that they didn't feel comfortable enough so this method didn't provide enough information. As a result, she subsequently decided on a *reflective writing task* and a *student questionnaire* to get her students' views.

Then, Gabriela felt she would like another English teacher to *peer observe* the moments during the lessons in which

the students were working in mixed-level groups and to observe what they were doing while collaborating on a group task. She also asked this observer to note how the students supported each other and how and when she provided support to the students from the different levels. In total, there were three observations.

Gabriela then designed a *reflective writing task* that was differentiated according to the levels. Lower levels (Blues and Reds) worked together on a scaffolded task in both English and Spanish while B1 students (Greens) answered open questions in English.

### REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR **BLUES** AND **REDS**

This is an individual writing but Blues and Reds can work together helping each other to write your opinions about working with classmates with different levels of language. Ask a Green classmate to help you when needed.

This year in my English class I'm working with classmates with different levels of language than mine.

My English level is \_\_\_\_\_. What I like the most about working like this \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

Something I don't like is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

The activities I prefer doing with my classmates are \_\_\_\_\_.

With my Blue classmates I have learnt \_\_\_\_\_.

With my Red classmates I have learnt \_\_\_\_\_.

With my Green classmates I have learnt \_\_\_\_\_.

In (class or activity) \_\_\_\_\_ I liked/ didn't like \_\_\_\_\_.

When I need help I \_\_\_\_\_.

I think the teacher helps me \_\_\_\_\_.

If the teacher helps me I can \_\_\_\_\_.

Working this way makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_.

THIS FORMAT IS FOR STUDENTS FROM LEVELS A1 AND A2 WORKING WITH THE SUPPORT OF STUDENTS FROM B1 LEVEL.

### REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR GREENS (B1 LEVEL)

Write about an activity in which you worked with classmates with different levels of language.

Describe:

- The good and the bad things you have experienced.
- How did you feel?
- The activities you prefer doing with your classmates with different language levels.
- What did you learn?
- How did the teacher help you?
- What else could the teacher do to improve the class?

Tick off the topics as you write about each of them.

Finally, Gabriela also designed the *student questionnaire*. This was written in Spanish for the lower levels (Blues and Reds) and in English for Greens. The questionnaire focused on the activities they preferred to work on collaboratively, what they learned from these and why they liked them. In order to triangulate the information she was trying to elicit, she was sure to include questions contained in other tools too, e.g.

**Q12 in questionnaire:** When I work with peers of different language levels I require support from the teacher in (you can select more than one option)... *(translated from Spanish)*

**Reflective writing (B1):** How did the teacher help you?

**Reflective writing (A1-A2):** I think the teacher helps me...

**Peer Observation:** How does the teacher provide support or what does the teacher do while students work together?

### Unexpected findings from the exploration

When Gabriela began to analyse the data from the different collection tools, she found that she was able to get some useful information from each of them. These three methods gave her sufficient data to draw some conclusions about how her students felt and behaved during mixed-level activities. Basically, there were three main unexpected findings resulting from her analysis.

#### Working in multilevel groups

Firstly, students said they liked working with classmates with different language levels, which was quite a surprise because she really believed, and wrongly assumed, that they didn't like working together at all! Additionally, their responses indicated that they recognised the benefits of working in a multilevel group explaining that they could learn from each other, reinforce each other's knowledge and help and support each other, no matter what the level. In fact, 18 of the 20 students noted that they learn and reinforce their learning by working together in this way.

**We are going to improve our language level, together.**

*(Blue student response, translated from Spanish)*

Nine of the ten Blues said they enjoyed learning from others and that they felt supported.

**What I like the most about working like this is that when doubts arise I feel confident to ask them what is the right way and they help me.**

(Blue student response, translated from Spanish)

Five of the six Reds noted advantages such as working collaboratively, learning to listen to others, learning vocabulary and having peer support.

**With classmates it is easier to learn new things or remember them and thus complement each other and give each other feedback.**

(Red student response, translated from Spanish)

And surprisingly, all the Greens reported that this way of working gave them lots of opportunities to reinforce previous learning (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation).

**It pleases me that not only they learn from me, but I from them.**

(Green student response, translated from Spanish)

Feedback from the peer observation also corroborated that the students were working collaboratively and properly in their groups.



10 Oct: The Blue and Green Ss are writing a dialogue. Some write and others give ideas. Meanwhile the Red Ss practice the conversation. Later on, the 3 levels work together sharing information, writing questions and their answers.

17 Oct: They help each other and discuss their point of view in Spanish, but work on the task in English.



21 Oct: You can see how the Blue Ss ask the Red or the Green Ss when they are not sure about the structure to write a question or its answer.

## Working as a team

What students didn't like, however, was the way they worked together. They felt that they needed to improve their teamworking skills and organisation so that all the members felt a sense of responsibility for the tasks or projects they were collaborating on. As the observer commented:

**Both Red and Blue Ss participate but most times they wait for the Green Ss to tell them what or how to do it. The Green ss seem to be the leaders and organize the team.**

**...sometimes I dislike working with my classmates with different levels of language because they say that my level is higher so I should do more work...**

(Green student response, translated from Spanish)

Five of the Blues said that some classmates were not responsible enough with their part of the teamwork.

**I don't like the lack of organisation and attention to work. Sometimes participation and willingness to work is not the same for everyone and a few of us do most of it.**

(Blue student response, translated from Spanish)

Three of the Reds agreed:

**Some colleagues do not carry out their activities correctly or on time, damaging the team's work.**

(Red student response, translated from Spanish)

**Sometimes I don't feel comfortable working in projects because not everyone works with the same commitment. But other times I feel really satisfied with my achievements.**

(Red student response, translated from Spanish)

## Project work

What is more, rather than complain or respond negatively to questions about project work activities, students acknowledged that they had benefited from the projects because they involved language and skills work. Indeed, these were the activities they liked the most because they had opportunities to work with their classmates and share different knowledge. In the reflective writing task, 18 students said they are able to learn vocabulary from each other; 14 said their peers help them with speaking and pronunciation. And this finding was corroborated in the questionnaire responses: 12 mentioned improvements in speaking and 10, vocabulary.

## Support

Gabriela was also surprised to find that students at all three levels reported needing more support from the teacher. While Gabriela had assigned the B1-level students (Greens) as monitors in the mixed-level groups so that they could support the others, she was surprised to learn that all of the Greens claimed she was not paying enough attention to them; that they also needed support from the teacher. The lower-level students also said that to improve their learning they needed more support from the monitors, *and* the teacher.

**The teacher pays more attention to the students in the lower levels assuming that we can work on our own and help our classmates.**

(Green student response, translated from Spanish)

**Questions cannot be answered instantly and afterwards I no longer remember what I had doubts about. More attention is needed from the teacher.**

(Blue student response, translated from Spanish)

While Gabriela's aim had been to teach students that the teacher's role could be 'guide' rather than 'provider of knowledge', during this exploratory phase, students struggled to get the idea.

As a result of all this feedback, Gabriela had a lot to think about in order to come up with an action plan that would make mixed-level group work more effective.

## Action plan

Having reflected on her three main findings, Gabriela concluded that since students had indicated that they liked working in multilevel groups and that they benefited from this, she should continue with project work. However, she would introduce specific defined roles and responsibilities, and ensure all students received the support they needed.

She designed a special project – 'International food festival' – and organised students into small mixed-level teams of three to four members. Each team contained one Green (B1) or two Red (A2) students and each was assigned a monitor (regardless of his/her language level, this person was responsible enough to be the team leader). Each of the other members of each group was also assigned a specific responsibility and language task:

**Blue:** Vocabulary (kitchenware, countries, nationalities, numbers and ingredients);

**Red:** Cooking verbs, kitchenware and ingredients;

**Green:** Instructions, connectors, sequencers, history of the dish and putting all together.

At the beginning of each session, Gabriela gathered the monitors together and gave them instructions on how to guide their teams. Then at the end of the class, the teams were asked to give a short presentation of what they had been doing, for example, vocabulary connected with kitchenware, ingredients, or cooking verbs. This presentation served as practice for the final project.

During each of the 12 sessions, students employed several resources to scaffold and guide their work for the final presentation. These included videos, graphic organisers and the pre-teaching of vocabulary.



## SESSION 4

### Computer lab

Sit in teams (G;R;B) copy the graphic organisers A B  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iGYNNWnsp>  
[https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hora\\_del\\_t%C3%A9](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hora_del_t%C3%A9)

Look for History of British food read the subtitles  
 get the gist of them  
<https://www.thespruceeats.com/food-and-cooking-of-england-435476>

Look for “afternoon tea” under Traditions & Favourite dishes  
 Read for gist  
 scroll down to “Traditional afternoon Tea Recipes”  
 scroll down to 5 “How to make the perfect cup of tea” traditional food from (country) BLUE / RED  
 history of (nationality) food GREEN  
 food with history GREEN  
 food from (country) BLUE / RED

Go to: Wikipedia  
 Decide a country, search for a dish, focus on:  
 BLUE ingredients and measurements  
 RED procedures  
 GREEN history

Discuss and choose a country and its dish  
 Present your progress on a graphic organiser



Extract from session 4 of ‘International food festival’ project plan

## Evaluation of the action plan

To evaluate the impact of her actions, Gabriela decided to keep a **journal** from the start of the implementation so that she could reflect on her observations and also track her students’ commitment to their teams throughout. She also planned to use it to triangulate findings from other tools.

During the project, she also invited her colleague to **peer observe** her three times, focusing on how the students behaved in their teams, e.g. if they contributed, how they organised their work, who they got support from and how well the resources scaffolded their activities.

And, because the **reflective writing** had given her useful information during the exploratory phase, Gabriela decided to use it again but this time questions focused on the students’ perceptions about how their classmates’ and their own commitment and sense of responsibility had changed, and how well they were supported. Students did this at the end of the project after the final presentation and again, Greens completed it in English while Blues and Reds did it in Spanish.

### OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

1. Did the class include specific activities for the students of each language level? Were the students able to do them?

Blue	Red	Green

2. How did students, in heterogeneous teams, organise their work to present it?

Blue / task	Red / task	Green / task
In general		

3. To whom did the students resort for support? To the teacher or the team monitor?

Blue	Red	Green

4. What was the students' attitude towards and during the speaking practice?

Blue	Red	Green

5. Describe, based on the colour-coding, what each student did in the lesson regarding speaking, grammar or vocabulary.

Blue	Blue	Red	Green
Speaking			
Grammar			
Vocabulary			

6. What did students use (in terms of resources) when working together? How did they use them?

Blue	Red	Green

7. Were the graphic organisers a helpful tool for students to organise and present their work in a collaborative and equitable manner? How did they use this tool?

Blue	Red	Green

### REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR GREENS (B1 LEVEL)

Write about your experience working with classmates with different language levels in this last project (Flavours with history). Tell me about each topic and tick off the topics as you finish writing about each of them.

Describe:

- The areas of language in which you have improved the most. Grammar, speaking, vocabulary. Why?
- What do you think about your participation in the activities you had to do during the project? Did you participate more?
- Did you get support when needed? Who gave you more useful support?

Write a brief explanation about how these tools helped you to learn and practise English.

- Presentations
- Videos
- Graphic organisers
- Google translator
- Teamwork in small teams with classmates with different levels
- How did your participation change in each project? Was it better?

Finally, Gabriela also decided to try the **focus group** again. Although participation in the first focus group was not good, Gabriela felt that she should try this again as students had worked so enthusiastically to complete their projects, and she was pleased she did as this time students were much happier to share their opinions. In fact, when she told the group about the idea of having a focus group, too many students volunteered and those who were not chosen actually asked for permission to sit at the back of the room so they could watch and listen. Again Gabriela chose eight students from the three levels (two of these had participated in the first focus group). The meeting was organised at the end of the project, and after students had completed the reflective writing. This time questions focused on how beneficial students perceived the activities, the support materials, the collaborative way of working and the support. Gabriela also asked about any language improvements

they felt they had made and invited suggestions on how working in mixed-level groups could be improved further.

### Impact of the action

After analysing her data, Gabriela was able to organise her findings according to the three main areas of interest which had emerged during the exploratory phase: language improvement, support and teamworking.

### Language improvement

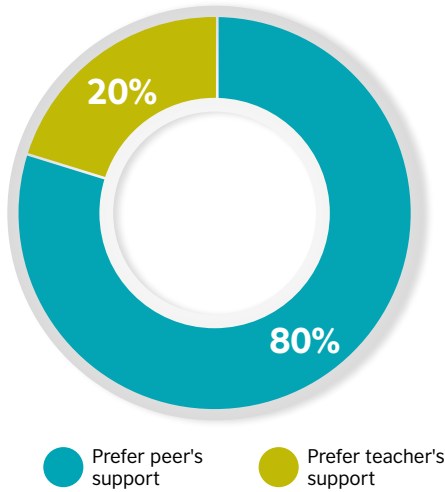
15 of the 20 students confirmed that they had enjoyed the project work but more importantly, they found it productive to work in small mixed-level groups.

They also reported that while they were working on the project or task together, they were able to improve their vocabulary, speaking and grammar. In fact, from

the reflective writing, Gabriela learned that all 18 felt they had improved vocabulary; 10 reported improved grammar and speaking skills; 16 said they felt more confident to participate and 14 said they had received more teacher support.

### Help and support

In looking at her students' feedback about support, Gabriela was interested to find that the vast majority (16) expressed a preference for peer support over teacher support (4).



**During this project I felt really supported mostly by my classmates who made observations and corrections to my work. I participated a lot helping my team and this allowed me to expand my vocabulary and improve speaking.**  
(Red student response, translated from Spanish)

**For example, if I don't know how to pronounce a word, I ask my classmates and they help me. If nobody knows, then I use Google translator.**  
(Blue student response, translated from Spanish)

**I need the teacher's help with grammar and speaking.**  
(Green student response, translated from Spanish)

**I like doing the projects as long as we work on a level, as in the last project, and that we have the support of the teacher.**  
(Green student response, translated from Spanish)

From her journal notes, Gabriela also noticed that whereas at the beginning of the project they had looked to her and employed various resources to scaffold their work, as the project progressed they became more autonomous, used the scaffolding resources less and resorted to monitors and classmates for support. Compared to how they had behaved and responded during the exploratory phase, Gabriela noted that during the Action phase a change had taken place – they were definitely more independent:

**When we have doubts the teacher supports us but we must also investigate, support each other and thus clear up doubts among the team members.**  
(Red student response, translated from Spanish)

**The teacher helps us when we have doubts, although she does not tell us the answer but leads us to think and solve it ourselves.**  
(Blue student response, translated from Spanish)

Her colleague also observed how students only resorted to the teacher for support during the first of the three lessons and then became more independent:

3.- To whom did the students resort to for support? To the teacher or the team's monitor?

	Blue	Red	Green
Team		Travis	Stann ✓
The vocabulary activity was done pretty much on their own with just teacher general guidance.			

Extract from peer observation form

**Even though the teacher monitors all the Ss' work, she didn't answer the questions right away but tells the Ss to ask a member of the team or a student with a higher level instead.**

(Peer observer comment)

**When Ss have doubts, she tells them to ask someone in their teams.**

(Peer observer comment)

**The teacher tells the Ss to discuss and look for solutions among themselves or see other teams' work.**

(Peer observer comment)

When students did resort to Gabriela for assistance, it was mainly to verify and/or corroborate information, e.g. check meaning in Spanish.

## Teamworking

In the reflective writing tasks, the students commented on the positive changes in teamworking; they reported that willingness to work with teammates at different levels, participation, and engagement had all improved. They added that it was also clear to all members of the team what they had to do and who was in charge of what. 18 mentioned their participation and engagement with teamwork had improved in the last project and commented on this:

**In order to participate more in this project, I have improved speaking and vocabulary. I felt much more involved since I corrected mistakes made by my classmates and that allowed me to expand my vocabulary and improve my pronunciation.**

(Red student response, translated from Spanish)

**I think that my participation in the team activities has been adequate according to my level, this has helped me to get more involved in working with my colleagues.**

(Blue student response, translated from Spanish)

**In this project the teams are more balanced and we improved speaking, grammar and vocabulary.**

(Green student response, translated from Spanish)

**In this project there was a lot of commitment from colleagues since the work was integrated at all levels so we all had to collaborate. Each level had the same degree of responsibility but with different objectives. This helped us a lot to practise the language.**

(Blue student response, translated from Spanish)

**The responsibilities in this last project were equitable and all were fulfilled and the commitment of the colleagues allowed us to take advantage of the project.**

(Red student response, translated from Spanish)

Gabriela's colleague agreed:

**Every colour has activities which at the end will help the team to complete the task. I saw during the session a very positive attitude and comfortable environment. The 3 colours were participating actively and seemed confident when speaking.**

In fact, their teamwork was efficient enough to be able to work independently of the teacher most of the time.

Students also maintained that working in small teams was a good method of exchanging information and that they were working even better since communication and organisation had improved. To Gabriela's surprise though, during the focus group meeting all eight focus group participants expressed the need for better organisation in the teams, more communication to help them to reach agreements, and the need for a leader for each team. This confused Gabriela as it conflicted with evidence from the reflective writing. In fact, she planned to investigate further but because of the impact of Covid-19, she wasn't able to.

Finally, students also reported finding the videos a useful tool as they provided enough information to guide their work. And, 11 of the 20 students thought that the short presentations had helped them to become more confident and better able to speak when they had to make their final presentations at the end of the project.



**Short presentations help us since we try not to learn by heart what we have to say but to know and understand what to say so that if we make a mistake in the presentation we can correct ourselves.**

(Green student response, translated from Spanish)

**Short presentations helped me lose my fear of speaking.**

(Blue student response, translated from Spanish)

**During my participation in the presentations, I became more and more involved, I lost the fear of speaking and improved the sentence structures.**

(Red student response, translated from Spanish)

## Conclusion

Generally Gabriela was pleased with the positive impact of her actions. However, from the focus group feedback, she recognises that to do project work effectively, better planning is needed to help students to communicate. Additionally, Gabriela's colleague had also pointed out another issue which Gabriela hadn't focused on – the amount of Spanish speaking among the students, and this is something else that she would like to look at in the future.

## What Gabriela learned from this experience

While teaching mixed-level groups might always be a challenge, Gabriela feels that designing a project in which each student, regardless of their language level, can work and develop language skills is worth trying, because organising them in small groups with monitors allows them to work more independently and helps them to increase their knowledge of the language. However, she will also continue to use resources to scaffold students' work because these help them to get the idea of what they have to do and also focus them on the final product. Additionally, to make teaching and learning more effective, Gabriela recognises that it's important to take her students' opinions into account in addition to reaching agreement about their work, its organisation and final outcomes.

At the beginning of the school year, Gabriela had been as discouraged as the students because she felt that working with a mixed-level group was like unravelling an entangled ball of string and she didn't know where to start. However, after learning to work systematically with short-term goals, results to analyse and specific actions, her ideas about dealing with puzzling situations in the classroom changed.

Now, I'm enthusiastic about academic challenges because I recognise EAR as a dependable and clear methodology to solve classroom dilemmas, no matter how complicated they seem to be. I have now proved that it does not work only for the improvement of language and skills, but also for the development of more committed students in terms of attitudes in the classroom. When the learners can understand their tasks and recognise that their participation is as important as learning from each other, they became more autonomous and supportive during teamwork.

Finally, she also learned that the students' perspectives give the teacher a more realistic view about what is happening in the classroom and that they can look for solutions together.

Maybe the most important learning I'm taking with me is that the teacher doesn't have the answers to everything that happens in the classroom – the students can and have to be part of the solution.

## Acknowledgements

EAR, a milestone in my ESL teaching. From all the people and moments treasured in my heart I want to thank God and my husband who have always been by my side, to my siblings from whom I get all my inspiration, and to my colleagues along my life from whom I have learned to be a better teacher.

## Reflection

Gabriela had originally decided to gather information through a focus group. She carried it out and found that students provided limited information. She then decided to use an alternative method in order to get the data she needed. This shows how flexible Gabriela was, how she was ready to modify her data collection methods in order to provide answers to her questions. This is very important during a research process. What other action could she have taken? What other methods do you think she could have used instead?





# 10 Developing listening comprehension skills

**Adriana Amelia (Mel)  
Buendía Camacho**

Toluca, State of Mexico



## Teaching context

Mel teaches at Escuela Normal No. 1 de Toluca in México. It is an urban school which offers two teaching majors: the Licenciatura en Primaria (for elementary) and the Licenciatura en Enseñanza del Inglés (for junior high). The school has around 250 students and the particular group Mel chose for this research consisted of eight female adults aged 20 to 22 years old, who were on the Major in English Language Teaching for Secondary Education (LESI) programme. They were the last cohort studying the curriculum of Plan 1999, in their third year and had an average language proficiency level of B1. The group received two 2-hour English lessons per week and at the time of this project, they were also undertaking one of the mandatory one-week teaching practices, consisting of nine lessons in their assigned schools.



## Why focus on listening comprehension skills?

Mel chose to explore listening comprehension skills because for many students this is not an easy skill to develop due to the fact that listening to English is not a regular practice in this part of the country. Although Toluca is an industrial city with global enterprises and factories, there is not much contact with the target language. Moreover, English is not a second language in Mexico so if students want to listen to something in English, they have to switch the TV audio settings and intentionally seek out music, podcasts, etc. For many students, exposure to English occurs only during English lessons.

Mel also noticed that this was her students' weakest skill. A couple of months previously, she had given them a Cambridge PET mock exam and noted that although the overall result was B1, the results for listening were lower than expected, at A2. She felt she needed to address this for two reasons: a) these students were future English teachers so they needed to develop

and improve all four skills in a balanced way; b) as part of their teacher education and work promotion requirements (commonly known as a 'plaza'), they had to show evidence of recognised certification at B2 level.

## Exploratory phase

### Exploratory questions

Once the topic was decided, Mel designed questions that would trigger the research and give her information about her learners. These were:

1. What are my objectives when doing listening tasks with my students?
2. What listening strategies do my students prefer?
3. What do my students think about the listening certification exercises and training?
4. What support do I give my students before and during listening activities?

### Exploration tools

Then, in order to find answers to her questions, Mel selected three different tools.

*Reflection Notes:* Mel decided to record her reflections in a journal, e.g. how the activities had worked, or little details that may easily have been overlooked.

A journal is a simple, yet powerful tool, because it is important as a reflective teacher to identify the things that go wrong in a lesson, as well as the successful actions.

*Student questionnaire:* She also opted for a student questionnaire to find out about her learners' listening habits and opinions. What she likes best about using questionnaires is:

We start by asking the things we do not know, rather than following impressions or even educated guesses. And applying a questionnaire is the best way to get answers. Sometimes it is difficult to get to the exact question you want, and the answers can be really surprising or frustrating.

In the questionnaire, Mel also asked questions that would identify the strategies her learners were familiar with, those they felt most comfortable with and those they felt they needed to practise and develop.

### STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Read each question carefully and provide your answer.

1. How do you feel regarding your listening skills? Tick one:

- Strong    
  Acceptable    
  Need to work on it    
  Poor

2. When answering a listening task, you usually (mark with a cross all that apply):

	YES	NO
a) Stay relaxed even if you don't understand everything		
b) Look for keywords or phrases		
c) Consider the context where the task is developed		
d) Translate to Spanish		
e) Get nervous when you don't understand something		
f) Try to understand every single word		

3. How do you consider your preparation for answering listening tasks?:

- Strong    
  Not so strong    
  Weak

4. Do you think you get enough listening preparation for your future certification?

- Yes    
  No

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

5. What listening strategies do you **know**? Mark with a cross all that apply.

	YES	NO
a) Prediction of content		
b) Listening for the whole idea (gist)		
c) Detection of signposts (keywords that give order, clarity or give examples)		
d) Listening for a specific kind of information and ignore the rest (detail)		
e) Inferring meaning (use clues and prior knowledge to work out the meaning)		

6. What listening strategy do you feel the **most comfortable** with? Mark with a cross all that apply.

	YES	NO
a) Prediction of content		
b) Listening for the whole idea (gist)		
c) Detection of signposts (keywords that give order, clarity or give examples)		
d) Listening for a specific kind of information and ignore the rest (detail)		
e) Inferring meaning (use clues and prior knowledge to work out the meaning)		
f) Try to understand every single word		

7. What strategies do you think you **need to develop** more? Mark with a cross all that apply.

	YES	NO
a) Prediction of content		
b) Listening for the whole idea (gist)		
c) Detection of signposts (keywords that give order, clarity or give examples)		
d) Listening for a specific kind of information and ignore the rest (detail)		
e) Inferring meaning (use clues and prior knowledge to work out the meaning)		

Thank you!

*Peer observation:* Mel also asked one of her colleagues to observe one of her lessons, and by following an Observation Protocol she designed, she was able to get information about the things she did during her lesson, the actions she could possibly improve and details about her lessons that can only be seen from the 'outside'.

### OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

1. How does the teacher prepare the learners for listening practice? Are the purpose and instructions stated before starting?
2. Does the teacher provide any tips or strategies before the listening practice? If so, are they clearly stated and appropriate to the task?
3. Is the task appropriate to the learners' level?
4. What type of listening task do you observe? What do the learners have to do?
5. Does the teacher provide any tips or strategies during the listening practice? If so, was the moment appropriate and helpful?

6. What does the teacher do when students are stuck in a particular exercise or question? Does the teacher provide the use of a strategy or guide towards a solution?
7. In what way does the teacher know that the students are completing the task?
8. How does the teacher provide feedback after the listening practice?
9. Please add any other comments that you consider relevant to this observation protocol.

## Encouraging findings

Mel was happy to discover that her objectives for the project matched her learners' opinions about their listening skills and strategies: seven of the eight students felt they needed to work on listening skills.

**This is a skill which I have more difficulties, so I need to do a lot of activities about listening to develop or improve it.**

**Because I don't practice and only do it in the school and weekends.**

Students also felt they needed an increased amount of listening practice in class in light of their goal of B2-level certification: the vast majority felt unprepared for the listening tasks and over half also felt that they did not get enough practice.

**I need to listen to more audios or real conversations, and have more input.**

**I need more practice and tips before listening.**

**The answers confuse me and I think in the answer for very long time.**

And the strategies which all students felt they needed to develop the most were inferring meaning, listening for gist and signposting. Added to the fact that half of them were unfamiliar with inferring meaning, Mel decided that this was the strategy that should be practised during the intervention week.

With respect to the support that Mel provided, although her learners considered this was sufficient, the feedback from her colleague revealed that this could be improved a) by making sure all students participated during the tasks and b) by giving more time and attention to vocabulary before listening.

**One student (L) maybe did not identify or know all the vocabulary she needs to answer or to apply the strategies, so maybe you need to work with her the understanding of the vocabulary or other doubts she could have.**

**It is helpful to write on the board the examples provided.**

**Monitor your SS more and you could see if they are having difficulties to solve the exercises.**

**Involve all the SS to participate (L&V did not participate).**

## Action

Mel reflected on her findings and thought about what improvements she could make:

What strategies can I use to help my students improve their listening performance? What do I need to add to my listening lessons to make them better?

After some thought, she came up with the following actions, which she would implement over the course of two weeks, i.e. four lessons.

1. Pre-teach some vocabulary before any listening activity, both to contextualise and to clarify anything that could cause students difficulty during the task.
2. Teach and practise the strategy inferring meaning with certification training exercises.
3. Explain with a simple PowerPoint the type of exercises they would face in a certification listening exam.
4. Apply a student participation technique, Card-O-Matic (<https://learn.teachingchannel.com/video/student-participation-tip>), to encourage all learners to participate in the revision of the listening activity.
5. Dedicate time during the lessons to listening activities: one for listening for detail (certification type gap-filling exercise); two for inferring meaning (certification type multiple-choice exercises). None of these practice exercises would count towards the learners' marks.

## Evaluation phase

### Evaluation tools

Mel decided that to gather data on the impact of her actions she would continue to reflect and make notes in her **journal**. This time she focused on her lesson plans, the use of the chart she had chosen to teach *inferring meaning*, the difficulty level of the audios, the attitude of the learners, and any change or action she considered important.

She also designed another **student questionnaire** to collect her students' opinions about the listening activities and their opinions about their own performance. This time she decided to do it online since time was very limited due to the teaching practice week, school events and winter holidays.

And finally, Mel decided to organise some **student interviews**. The aim was to get a summary of opinions about the exercises, how they felt about these, and most importantly, whether they perceived any change in their

listening comprehension skills. Mel chose to interview her students in pairs because she thought they would feel more relaxed and confident to express themselves with a friend, as opposed to just talking to the teacher. Another benefit was that some of them needed a little prompting from a classmate to share their opinions in an extended way. Mel recognised that it was important to keep these interviews as informal and relaxed as possible so she put on some calm background music and engaged in some chit-chat before starting with her questions. She also explained the reason for the interviews and told them they were free to answer in Spanish, which some did. Throughout the interviews she took care to show interest and smile, whatever the answer.

### STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you feel now about answering listening tasks? Do you still feel nervous or anxious? Why?
2. Did you find the explanation and chart to practise 'inference' helpful?  
Yes/No  
In what way?
3. Does being taught the vocabulary before listening to a text help you understand the text better?  
In what way?
4. How do you feel about practising only with certification type exercises? Do you find that material helpful and motivating?  
In what way?
5. How do you rate your performance when answering listening tasks?  
Strong / Not so strong / Weak  
Has this improved recently?  
In what way?

## Impact of the action

From the very beginning of this project, her learners had connected a lack of vocabulary with poor listening skills. They had reported ‘*so many unknown words*’ as a reason for not comprehending the audios they were exposed to. Interestingly, feedback after implementing the action revealed that the pre-teaching of vocabulary helped to activate previous knowledge and provide context for the listening so students were better prepared for the task. Additionally, a brief and straightforward explanation of words or phrases before listening made it possible for the learners to understand the content of the audio; the majority (7) of them reported being able to identify the words while listening and surf the task more easily.

As a teacher, this particular point was very interesting, because I noticed that although some words were new to the students, other words they already knew or their meanings were confused with other words due to fossilized mistakes, false cognates or L2 interference. Sometimes it was more a matter of clarifying vocabulary rather than teaching it.

By practising the *inferring meaning* strategy, learners became aware of factual information they already possessed (as well as the importance it has for strategies like this), and learned how to contrast, or cross-reference it with the information in the audio recording. The chart used for practising the strategy develops critical thinking in the sense of discriminating, organising and ranking information; most (7) of them considered the chart helpful in this matter.



The steps for inferring are not complex, and after some repetition, half (4) of the students were able to carry out this inferring process in a more instinctive way, having the opportunity to obtain more information from the audio recording.

The presentation of the different types of listening exercise in certification exams proved to be of some, but not high importance to the learners because the format was not new to them. Both questionnaire and interview feedback showed this to be ‘*not so important*’. Nonetheless, Mel still believes that understanding the purposes and challenges of each listening task offers the students the opportunity to focus attention on specific aspects of the language while on-task, to pinpoint weaknesses in their skill for future improvement, as well as to raise general awareness of their English listening level.



At the end of the implementation week in December, another Cambridge PET mock exam was held (this was not arranged by Mel to evaluate her actions; it had already been planned before the Champion Teachers programme began). All eight students took it and the results in the listening paper showed an improvement for each of them from either A1 to A2 or from B1 to B1+. From the results, it would appear that even in such a short time some improvement had occurred. Moreover, on the last day of the implementation stage,

three of the students sat for an APTIS certification exam. After the winter break, the results from this examination showed that these learners had reached the B2-level certification, which was one of Mel's main concerns at the beginning of this project.

## What Mel learned

In retrospect, and after having finished the research, Mel still thinks that listening is, for many English learners, the most difficult skill to improve. Learners' attitudes toward the skill is not a minor factor to consider either, so it is very important to provide students with the tools to help them improve and develop. Mel discovered that pre-teaching vocabulary can make a difference to the learners' performance and development of skills.

I remembered that little changes can make a big difference. A simple practice like pre-teaching vocabulary before a listening task is a great example. When learners are given the tools for successful practice, more than one element adds up, and a short list of phrases or words transforms into more confidence, activation of vocabulary, clarification of a concept, better overall performance during a listening, and a favourable attitude towards the task, or even English itself!

She also found that it was important to provide her students with a variety of strategies that they could apply to any receptive skills task and that as teachers we should not only teach the strategy that we like best, teach best or find easier to teach – students need to improve their English level, for many different reasons, and we should make sure we create the spaces for that to happen.

In my opinion, we teachers sometimes forget what we need to become good 'listeners', or we believe that the strategies come to us in some unconscious or magical way somewhere down

the English learning road. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is very important to teach the strategies that will help our students develop their comprehension skills. And the way to do that may be found in a graphic organiser, which looks more visual than auditory. In this very particular case, I learned how to use a chart that builds critical thinking but ended up developing a receptive skill. Everything adds up.

Finally, due to national requirements for the English teaching profession in Mel's teaching context, language proficiency certification has become an essential factor, so it is important for her to prepare her teacher trainees for this: *'Maybe moving from one level to another is not a small change, but it surely makes a big difference for them.'*

## Reflections on EAR

Being part of the Champion Teacher programme has taught Mel several things. First of all, she learned that research is not a horrible or boring thing to do. This was her first experience and she can say that it was enjoyable, most of the time. To participate in this EAR was interesting and brought the idea of education research much closer to her everyday context. She also really welcomed obtaining some positive results in a short time and the feeling of real achievement that provides.





During this research, I realised, yet again, that no matter how many years of teaching experience we have, there is always something that needs to be revisited, a skill that needs to be practised, a new purpose to work for, and a difference that needs to be made.

I enjoy well-structured processes for the guidelines and discipline they provide, and this project was no exception. Once I started developing my project, I noticed that there are many topics waiting to be investigated, and this EAR approach is something that could be taught to our trainee teachers, and current teachers, so they also become education researchers of English teaching in Mexico.

### Acknowledgements

I want to thank my mentor, teacher Olaf Morales, for his invaluable help, support and patience in this process; Paula Rebolledo PhD for her invitation and support during this project; my students, my colleagues and everyone at EN1TOL who made this possible.

### Reflection

At the end of the project Mel acknowledges that even though she has many years' experience of teaching, there is still 'a new purpose to work for and a difference that needs to be made'. Maybe you too have been teaching for many years. Do you think doing a project like this could prove helpful for your own development while at the same time benefiting your students? What skill or area of your teaching could you revisit?



# 11

## How can I promote meaningful writing?

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## Teaching context

Angélica has been teaching at Zumpango’s Escuela Normal for three semesters. Zumpango’s Escuela Normal is located in an urban community and has a very specific dynamic – students and staff enjoy a very close-knit relationship, which Angélica found quite surprising when she started working there. For this project she was teaching a group of 20 students (17 female and 3 male) in their late teens/early twenties who were studying on the 2018 Escuela Normal Programme (teacher training focused on pedagogy and curriculum) and working towards CEFR A2 level.

## Deciding on a focus

For Angélica, writing is one of the most complex skills one can develop in any language. She had observed that her students struggled with it, not only in the target language but also in their own language. Angélica herself has also struggled with it – constantly editing and re-editing and honestly suffering with any piece of writing she has had to produce. She therefore decided that she should try to understand the reality her students were facing regarding the development of their writing skills. On further reflection, she also recognised that it would be helpful to have a clear idea of what ‘meaningful writing’ meant since if writing in the classroom was meaningful, then perhaps students would be more interested and motivated to do it.



## Starting her research

To begin, Angélica outlined the information she would need to gain a better understanding of meaningful writing and her students’ difficulties. To do this she designed four tools to answer five key questions:

1. What do I mean by meaningful writing?
2. How do other people define meaningful writing?
3. What do my students like/dislike about the pieces of writing they have produced so far?
4. What do I do in class to promote meaningful writing activities?
5. How do my students express themselves through their pieces of writing?

Angélica started with understanding ‘meaningful writing’ and to get as many ideas as possible, she decided to consult four colleagues. In fact, to be sure that her own ideas (as an ESL teacher) weren’t too narrow or biased, she also consulted a Spanish teacher to get a broader notion. To gain this information, Angélica created a **teacher questionnaire**.

### QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEACHERS

**OBJECTIVE:** This questionnaire has been designed with the objective of getting fresh and new input into what meaningful writing is for you and how you promote it in your classes.

1. How do you know students have internalised a written task and expressed themselves through it?
2. How do you promote meaningful writing in your classes?
3. What characteristics should a piece of writing have when it is, in your opinion, meaningful?
4. What strategies or activities do you consider vital for students to create meaningful written tasks?

Then, since her focus was primarily her students, she also designed a **student questionnaire** to find out what they liked or disliked about the pieces of writing they had produced so far, the difficulties they faced, and the extent to which she was meeting their needs and preferences.

### STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Objective: This instrument aims to collect, from your viewpoint, how much (or how little) 'self-expression' through written practice you have in English classes.

1. How is the teacher providing you with an environment where it's possible to express yourself in class (written or orally in formal or informal situations)?
2. How are your interests considered by the teacher when assigning a written task?
3. What is the hardest part of writing for you? What activities/strategies do you need from your teacher to face it/them?
4. Rate these topics from one to five. **One** being the **least interesting** and **five** being **the most interesting**.

	Academic projects regarding your major in English
	You and your family/life experiences
	Leisure Activities (movies, board games, videogames TV shows etc.)
	Cultural aspects of the English language
	Common situations/people/your experience in your everyday life

Is there a topic you are interested in that was not mentioned above?

Write it here \_\_\_\_\_

5. Describe one thing you really liked 😊 and one thing you'd change 😞 about the written activities **done so far**.

Practice reports	Cultural fair project	Valentine's day letter project	Family and culture infographic	Digital book editor project
😊	😊	😊	😊	😊
😞	😞	😞	😞	😞

To further explore her students' views and feelings about writing and her teaching of it, she also organised a **focus group** in Spanish. For this she chose eight students (two who performed consistently well, four who performed averagely but with a very good attitude, and two who had failed in the past). The discussion was informal – Angélica started it off but then let the students take the lead.

Finally, Angélica kept a **journal** in order to compare her own thoughts and reflections with those of her colleagues and students. To focus her reflections, she wrote two objectives:

1. To identify what I consider 'meaningful writing' and how my idea is modified (or not) by this exploratory process before moving on to the second cycle of the research.
2. I need to become self-aware of the strategies (or lack of them!) I'm currently using to promote my students' writing beyond structure so that it is meaningful.

### What did Angélica find out?

Angélica managed to gather quite a lot of useful and interesting data from her four tools, which she then analysed to identify some answers to her questions.

#### What do I and my colleagues mean by 'meaningful' writing?

In answer to her first question, Angélica concluded from her journal notes that for a writing activity to be 'meaningful' it should:

- involve knowledge of the target language;
- be used/useful in 'real life' situations;
- involve students in the organisation and development of the task; and
- resonate with students' experiences.

According to the responses from the questionnaires applied to other teachers, all of them agree that in order for a written product to be meaningful, students' own experiences should be reflected in it, which would lead to Ss using L2 to express themselves in situations that they can experience in real life, so there's no point in asking them to produce a text of a topic they don't relate to or can't engage with in their everyday life. Something I had not considered but was mentioned by my colleagues was that Ss should be given the opportunity to actively participate not only in the development of the task, but in the design of it. So far I have given instructions regarding format, length, tenses needed, etc. while I should be setting such requirements up for "discussion" and include it as a part of the writing process.

Such initial assumptions were also confirmed by her colleagues in the sense that the written tasks should centre on students' interests to enhance motivation and the finished product. They also mentioned that a 'meaningful' written product should:

- demonstrate proficiency of the target language;
- be a 'real life' product;
- fulfil the task by 'solving' a cognitive challenge; and
- enable students to express themselves in the L2.

#### What do my students like/dislike about the pieces of writing they have produced so far?

From the student questionnaire responses, Angélica discovered that her students seemed to enjoy writing activities and were engaged in the process. Ten students reported enjoying academic writing projects (report writing practice); five enjoyed writing about their own experiences, families and interests; four preferred written tasks about leisure activities/cultural aspects of the language and only one preferred written tasks related to everyday life.



### What do students find difficult?

Angélica identified two main issues in the student questionnaire responses:

1. Lexis: Students mentioned feeling frustrated due to not being able to express themselves well.

**Well, it's always difficult for me to complete texts either with verbs or words, I try but it is difficult and I really don't know what to do about this problem.**

(Student response)

2. Verbs: Students reported having problems with auxiliary verbs, the structure of certain questions or conjugating verbs. They could manage these when doing grammatical exercises, but got confused when producing texts.

**The most difficult thing is to know the auxiliaries of the verbs according to their time. I believe that the activities that I would need to obtain from the teacher would be to write much more and make more presentations.**

(Student response)

### What does Angélica do to promote meaningful writing activities?

As for Angélica's approach to writing, all students felt they were able to express themselves through the writing done in class:

**The activities carried out in class allow us to socialise with our classmates, in addition this happens through activities so that we can develop grammar skills, the teacher's assistance is also notable.**

(Student response)

**Yes, the classes are very didactic where we express ourselves orally and in writing in all kinds of situations.**

(Student response)

**The teacher listens to us, lets us express ourselves orally to each other, just as we carry out work where we can express ourselves in writing, for example the digital practice book.**

(Student response)

However, the tasks were still teacher-centred; although they could choose how to present their text, they hadn't been allowed to determine the method of evaluation or how it should be shared with the rest of the school.

From questionnaire and focus group responses and informal chats, students also suggested that after completing writing projects, these should be presented and displayed so that others could read and appreciate them, thereby enhancing the affective filter and motivating students to better themselves.

**I liked knowing the gastronomy of several countries, but I did not like the number of visitors we had.**

(Student response)

**I really liked it, there should be more fairs, but also invite more people to get to know our work.**

(Student response)

In addition, Angélica was made aware that her own beliefs, such as avoiding explicit focus on grammar or drilling, might be getting in the way of students achieving their full potential when writing. She had to concede that techniques such as repetition or explicit grammar explanations were necessary for students to better express themselves in writing.

**The auxiliaries and the translation of some words are difficult for me since sometimes the translation changes, I would like the teacher to give us more activities on that.**

(Student response)

**Auxiliaries, verbs in the past. You can help us by providing more activities related to that or related games.**

(Student response)

Another discovery she made was that her preference for collaborative work was prejudicial to her students' progress because the stronger students tended to have control over the tasks.

When observing students working in teams, I noticed that sometimes the strongest student takes the lead regarding the usage of the language, while some students, who need to work harder to produce, focus on the creative aspect of the product. This situation leads me to believe I have overused teamwork in my lessons and students are finding comfort zones I have not been paying attention to, therefore some of them are not improving in the use of the language.

(Journal extract)

### Time for reflection and action

Once she had a broader view of what was happening in class during written tasks, Angélica reflected and asked herself the following questions to help her come up with an action plan.

How can I enable my students to design and structure their own writing tasks? What techniques/activities am I going to use to provide more structure for pre- and while-writing tasks? Which tools (if any) do my students need to improve their vocabulary while writing? To what extent is collaborative work still beneficial to students during writing?

### Action plan

Angélica designed four writing tasks, to be carried out one per week. These tasks took into consideration her students' interests and preferred topics reported during her exploration. Additionally, students were provided with a 'menu' of formats so they could choose how to present their written products.

Week <sup>4</sup>	Product	Format options
1	My experience teaching for the first time.	Journal Essay Brochure Timeline
2	Culture around the world.	Project Infographic Brochure
3	Christmas wishes.	E-cards Cards Spheres Letter
4	Christmas jingles.	Infographic Project Brochure Poster

Angélica also introduced two pre-writing activities per task: one with an explicit grammar focus and another to present and practise specific vocabulary. The while-writing activities were done individually, and two post-writing activities were designed to promote peer-evaluation and presentation of the products to a bigger audience.





**Peer evaluation – product 1**

The **peer observations** were carried out by two colleagues – one Spanish teacher working at the same school (this was a live observation) and another English teacher who worked at a different Escuela Normal (this was a video-recorded observation). Angélica prepared some questions for her colleagues which focused on a) the extent to which the techniques/activities implemented provided students with more grammatical structures and more specific vocabulary and b) whether the students were given enough tools to assess their own progress.

### Evaluating the effects of the action

In order to evaluate the effects of her action plan, Angélica again kept a journal and used a student questionnaire but also decided on peer observation.

The **student questionnaire** was in English and asked students to rate a) the pre-writing activities and b) the presentation and feedback methods introduced:

Product	Presentation and feedback	Rate	Reason
My experience teaching for the first time	Product will be displayed & comments from the whole group will be made using post-its		
Culture around the world	Presentations will be done online and comments will be added via <i>Facebook/Google classroom</i>		
Christmas wishes	Products will be exchanged throughout the school Peer correction will be done with classmates		
Christmas jingles info graphic	Christmas Festival Rubric will be completed via Google docs		

Rate the presentation and feedback given to your products: **1** being the **one which helped you the least** and **4** being the **one that helped you the most**. Explain why you liked/didn't like each of them.

#### Section 2 of the student questionnaire

To focus her reflections in her **journal**, Angélica came up with a different set of questions:

### JOURNAL GUIDELINES

**Objective:** This instrument has the objective of observing and assessing class to class the effects of the actions I implemented.

- How are my students reacting to more structure, grammar and vocabulary activities?
- How are my students managing to assess each other?
- How do my students respond to displaying their written products?
- How does my school respond to the display of my students' products?
- How do my students perform while writing individually? How do they interact with one another, if they do?
- What am I learning from applying these modifications?

## What did Angélica find?

### Opinions about pre-writing activities

After implementing the action plan, Angélica was pleased to learn that students found pre-writing activities interesting: 12 preferred ludic activities in which they needed to physically perform, such as running games, rather than answer exercises. Six preferred activities ‘on paper’ such as word searches, matching activities and crosswords, and two felt they were not very relevant.



Responses also showed that the students felt less frustrated when trying to express their ideas in the target language because the word lists and grammatical formulas helped them. However, one of her colleagues observed that she should be less ambitious with vocabulary since sometimes what she introduced was irrelevant to the task.

**The amount of lexis included on your pre-writing activity proved to be overwhelming for your students, and they didn't even include all elements taught. You should consider being less ambitious and narrowing down the information provided to your Ss.**

(Extract from peer observation)

### Opinions about the writing formats

When choosing formats for their products, students enjoyed the idea of being able to actively participate in the ‘design’ of the task, but some students felt the options provided in the format menu were repetitive, i.e. brochures, essays and infographics were suggested more than once.

**Sometimes I feel that even though they are fun, we tend to repeat the types of texts. Almost every semester we have done infographics & brochures. The teacher could vary more.**

(Student response)

Students were also unsure about the possibility of using different formats for some tasks, so they got together and all decided to use the same formats for task 1 (a timeline) and task 4 (an infographic). This could have been because of their low English level; they might not have felt comfortable experimenting with the target language. On reflection Angélica felt this step should have been introduced to students more carefully and slowly and with more support.

### Opinions about working alone and collaboratively

Seven students enjoyed working individually on the while-writing activities and felt comfortable solving the lexical problems they faced during the development of the written product, but ten didn't. They also reported feeling more relaxed working with their peers. Three said they didn't think it made any difference whether they worked alone or together other than the latter was ‘more fun’.

Angélica, on the other hand, observed that students were as engaged when working alone as they were working together, but that they still preferred to check their work with each other despite having word lists and grammatical formulas at their disposal. She did note though that ‘weaker’ students referred to the pre-writing support tools more. Another important observation in this area was that collaboration did motivate them to produce better texts.

When having students working individually I feel that I miss the buzz that occurs when students are discussing and organising themselves in their teams. I noticed E, F, A and Am seem to work happily whether they are in teams or not, but after a few minutes, and because sometimes I was attending another student, they tend to

look to their partners to provide feedback. When observing the feedback they needed I noticed it referred to both language content and wanting opinions regarding the “beauty” of their products.

(Journal extract)

### Opinions about peer evaluation

Peer evaluation proved to be a very valuable tool – it really motivated students and engaged them in the writing process. The prospect of being evaluated by their peers, enhanced students’ interest in the task and made them more aware of what they were producing.



Peer feedback on post-its

Students seemed to enjoy providing feedback to each other, they liked the idea of it being their classmates and not me who rated their products. They made an effort to make the feedback clear and accessible, and sometimes referred to the author to check the understanding or any questions they might have with the writing product being evaluated. Students even asked for more time since they hadn’t been able to finish evaluating all the products and some of them congratulated each other on their products after reviewing them.

(Journal extract)

However, Angélica feels that there is room for improvement here since the rubrics she provided were very simple and focused students’ attention on presentation rather than content.

### Opinions about presentations

Finally, nine students enjoyed ‘My experience teaching for the first time’ best (the use of post-its and displaying work on the walls of the room). Five preferred ‘Christmas wishes’ (students enjoyed giving and receiving Christmas messages in English). Four liked ‘Culture around the world’ best (they felt it was more practical to share their products online). And just two liked working with ‘Christmas jingles’ because they felt the appreciation demonstrated by peers didn’t warrant the effort and time they had put into their infographics.



## Some conclusions

Angélica believes that issues discovered during the exploratory phase were addressed during the implementation of the action plan although not all actions worked as she would have expected. She feels that her students' transition towards agency in the learning process needs to be carried out slowly and be better supported. For example, perhaps the format menu should have been planned better and she should have provided more guidance and assistance when students were choosing the formats and designing the products. Maybe she should have provided a model, or rather than giving them a menu, she could have given them a list of possible formats and discussed their uses and features.

## What has Angélica learnt?

By taking part in this EAR project, Angélica has come to understand that it is very important to consider the affective filter when working towards meaningful writing products; even though she was taking into

account her students' experiences and needs, she had not considered aspects such as peer validation and displaying students' work, which proved key in raising motivation and interest.

Looking back, Angélica also feels that she was getting too comfortable in her 'teaching ways' and that she needed to look to her students' needs more and consider including other activities such as explicit grammar exercises.

Looking forward, Angélica recognises that she needs to learn how to deal better with unexpected situations, such as those that arose during the presentations, and think of these as challenges rather than defeats. And, for this presentation stage to produce better results, she needs to plan better – unfortunately, in this case her students' work was not given sufficient attention because the display coincided with another event at the school. And, finally:

I have come to understand my students' needs in relation to their writing skills development a little bit better. I have faced my own beliefs regarding English language teaching and I have started on the path towards improving my teaching skills. But, what I consider the most valuable learning from this experience is a broader, more human view of my students and their needs, an improved sense of commitment from observing them facing the 'unknown' with such a positive attitude, and an even bigger sense of responsibility for my own betterment as an English teacher. I strongly recommend teachers who are willing and eager to face themselves and improve their teaching skills to enrol in an EAR programme like this.

**Acknowledgements**  
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**Reflection**

Angélica found it useful to consult her colleagues during this project – what they understood by 'meaningful' writing and how they approached writing tasks. Moreover, she also invited two to peer observe her – live and using video. Do you discuss classroom issues with your colleagues? Have you ever used peer observation to gain insights into your teaching? Would you like to? Is there someone you work with who could become 'a critical friend' and help you explore issues in your classroom?





# 12

## Pragmatics instruction in the training of English teachers

**Guillermina Guadarrama Valdés**

Tenancingo, State of Mexico



## Teaching context

Guillermina teaches Pragmatics to undergraduate students at the Normal of Tenancingo. In 2019, the Normal of Tenancingo had 217 matriculated students and Guillermina's class of 14 students was in their third semester. Her students came from Tenancingo and the surrounding rural municipalities and communities, and most of them were at CEFR A1 or A2 level with a couple at B1. The Normales aim to provide students with the competencies needed to teach. With the intention of improving and adapting teacher training in Mexico to current needs, in 2018 there was a national modification of syllabuses. This naturally involved changes and additions to the courses, one of which was Pragmatics. For Guillermina, teaching Pragmatics and achieving the new syllabus aims without enough bibliographical material proved a challenge.



Pragmatics studies how language is affected by the context in which it is used, how words can express different ideas, and how saying something means doing something, i.e. when we speak our language serves different functions, e.g. inviting, suggesting, giving opinions, etc. In this sense, the students' level of English posed a serious problem; the purpose of the Pragmatics course is to interpret intentions of communicative interactions in English through the analysis of extralinguistic elements of oral or written texts, taking into account a variety of expressions and registers which may be unavailable to low-level learners.

## A worrying situation

The difficulties arose during the first lessons. Students who are used to relying on the literal translation of words were unable to analyse the context of the communicative act – the roles of the participants, their intentions, their

intonation, etc. It was evident that students were having a hard time trying to understand the texts and the lessons became overwhelming. Guillermina was really worried about the results she was getting and the students' difficulties in comprehending the topics. This issue required her immediate attention to help them notice how contextual factors would enable them to perform communicative functions appropriately. She knew she had to move away from a theoretical approach and instead focus on practical aspects of the theory.

## Exploration

After some reflection Guillermina came up with four exploratory questions to focus her study:

1. What are my expectations when teaching Pragmatics to future English teachers?
2. What activities do I do in class to raise students' awareness of Pragmatics in English (e.g. implied meaning, intention, sarcasm)?
3. What do my students think about learning Pragmatics?
4. What do my students prefer in terms of resources and materials to learn Pragmatics?

## Exploration tools

In deciding how to obtain useful answers to her questions, Guillermina's main aim was to get a more objective perspective of what was going on with her students, so she designed a *questionnaire* with eight questions to elicit opinions about Pragmatics – their understanding of the subject, the activities Guillermina used, their resource preferences and suggestions. This was written in English and consisted mainly of multiple-choice questions.





In addition, she organised a *focus group* with eight students selected at random so that she could follow up on responses to the questionnaire. The discussion was led in Spanish in order to allow students to convey their ideas and opinions more easily. To focus the discussion, she formulated five questions.



### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Do you consider you are learning about Pragmatics in my class? What have you learned?
2. How would you describe the learning of Pragmatics (in my class)? Is it difficult, easy, interesting, boring or any other? Why?
3. What materials or resources used in class have been more interesting and useful for you (to learn or reinforce your learning of Pragmatics in English)?
4. What materials would you like to use more (often) in class? Why?
5. Do you consider that you can apply Pragmatics in your life as a student or teacher? How (important is it)? How will you apply it?

And finally, to clarify her own expectations and to understand how her teaching contributed to or interfered with her students' learning, Guillermina kept a *journal* of her reflections throughout all six 100-minute sessions. After each lesson she would note her observations and thoughts guided by questions she had prepared:

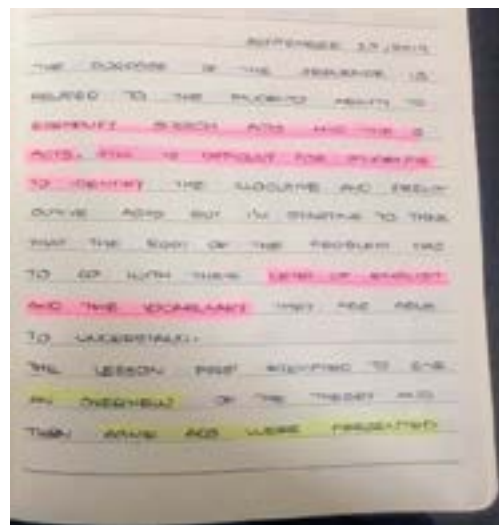
### REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What was the objective of the lesson? To what extent do I think it was achieved?
- How did I teach the content in this lesson? Was it more theoretical or practical? Was it the way I expected?
- What activities did I implement in class to raise students' awareness of Pragmatics in English? How did the students react to them?
- How did students perform the exercises (regarding awareness of Pragmatics) of the lesson? Was their performance what I expected from them?

### Findings

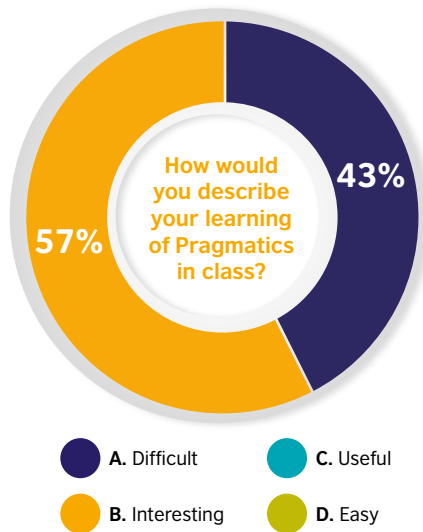
Guillermina analysed her findings from these three tools and found that they had supplied useful data that gave her a better understanding of the situation.

**Guillermina's expectations.** Noting her reflections in her journal enabled Guillermina to clarify her expectations; what she wanted was to teach Pragmatics in a simple and practical way so that her students would understand and be able to explain and exemplify intentions of communication in English.



Extract from journal

**Students’ opinions about Pragmatics.** Guillermina’s assumption that students did not find Pragmatics interesting was incorrect. To her surprise, in the questionnaire they stated they felt the opposite: over half thought Pragmatics was interesting and important; the rest considered it difficult and demanding, but not boring. During the focus group discussion, they also reported finding it relevant to communicating in English and to teaching English.



**Preferred resources and activities.** Questionnaire responses showed that students expressed a preference for movies (7 of the 14 students chose this resource as useful); videos (7 perceived them as appropriate); songs (10 considered these helpful) and comics (7 learners were of the opinion that these would prove valuable). Students also thought that to gain a better understanding and awareness of Pragmatics, practical exercises (10 students), teacher presentations (all 14), and researching on the Internet (8 students) would prove most useful. These findings were endorsed during the focus group meeting, when students also suggested that images would prove useful, i.e. the combination of words and images can help with understanding the communicative context.

Images help us a lot because they represent the example and we can base our interpretation on the context observed.

After reflecting on these findings, it was clear to Guillermina that she needed to take advantage of her students’ interest in the subject by focusing on actively engaging them in real use of the language to raise their awareness; use resources such as videos, images, practical exercises, graphic organisers, comic strips, summaries and Internet searches; and finally, introduce songs since students had stated that they really enjoyed learning with music. With a sigh of relief, Guillermina then asked herself:

What activities can I design to help students put Pragmatics into practice after understanding, explaining and exemplifying concepts in practical and simple ways using the resources they prefer?

**Time for action**

Guillermina gave this some thought and decided to implement three specific actions over the course of the six, 100-minute sessions.

**Pre-teaching vocabulary.** To promote students’ understanding of oral or written texts (after raising interest and identifying previous knowledge), Guillermina decided to pre-teach a maximum of seven key words that students would need for the Pragmatics focus of the lesson. The presentation of this vocabulary included the use of flashcards and PowerPoint presentations with a selection of images carefully chosen to convey a clear idea of the meaning of the words.



**Exemplifying concepts.** In her presentations of concepts, she introduced a written or oral example (short dialogues mainly) using either a comic strip, a

short video, a song or an image so that students could identify the examples. She also designed exercises to guide them towards understanding the key ideas of the theories. For example, they identified the relevant answer according to the needs of the speaker when studying Relevance theory. When studying Politeness theory, students identified the positive or negative strategies the speaker was using in a clip from the movie *Notting Hill* and then came up with examples, i.e. they applied the concept by creating their own dialogue or written text.

**Practical application.** Finally, to encourage students to put Pragmatics into action, Guillermina got students to create their own written or spoken productions, in which they showed their abilities to perform language functions in social interactions. Afterwards, students shared their productions and the rest of the class commented on them.



## Time to evaluate

To evaluate the impact of these actions, Guillermina decided to use the same three instruments that she had found so useful during the exploratory phase: a questionnaire, a focus group and her own reflections.

## Evaluation tools

The reason she used a *questionnaire* again was to compare how students felt about Pragmatics after the implementation with how they felt before. Again, the questionnaire was written in English and consisted mainly of multiple-choice questions. Guillermina administered this via Google Forms.



Guillermina then organised the *focus group* to follow up on responses, as she had done for the exploratory phase. This time six students were randomly selected to take part in the discussion

Questions focused on how useful or helpful students had found the activities and material resources for their understanding of Pragmatics, and how capable or confident they felt when producing their own examples and contextualisation.

And finally, Guillermina continued to note her reflections in her *journal* after each lesson throughout the course of the implementation period, paying particular attention to the impact of the actions she introduced. This time she colour coded her notes in relation to her questions to make analysis easier.

### STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear student, this questionnaire aims to obtain your opinion regarding the effectiveness of the changes implemented in the Pragmatics subject. Your participation is highly appreciated.

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Tick one of the following options.

1. The presentation of vocabulary was useful to facilitate the comprehension of the texts (examples) presented in class.

- Always   
  Often   
  Sometimes   
  Rarely   
  Never

2. The resources (flashcards, PowerPoint presentations, board) used to present the vocabulary were clear enough to facilitate the comprehension of the texts (examples) presented in class.

- Always   
  Often   
  Sometimes   
  Rarely   
  Never

3. Regarding the resources the teacher used to present the examples of Pragmatic concepts (images, short videos, songs, comic strips), they were:

- Extremely important   
  Very important   
  Moderately important  
 Slightly important   
 Not at all important

4. The presentation of example texts was useful to facilitate the comprehension of the Pragmatic concepts studied.

- Always   
  Often   
  Sometimes   
  Rarely   
  Never

5. Complete the chart about the resources used in Pragmatics classes.

Tick according to their usefulness to present the Pragmatic concepts in everyday life.

	Not useful at all	Moderately useful	Very useful
Images			
Short videos			
Songs			
Comics			

6. Regarding your performance while you produced your examples, you are:

- Completely satisfied   
  Very satisfied   
  Moderately satisfied  
 Slightly satisfied   
 Not at all satisfied

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

7. What kind of resources did you find more practical to create examples about Pragmatics? Order them from 1 (the lowest score) to 4 (the highest score).

- Short videos   
  Images   
  Comic strips   
  Dialogues

8. Regarding the Pragmatic theories, how much do you consider you comprehended?

- I'm still confused    
  I have partially understood    
  I have fully understood

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

9. Regarding your consciousness of Pragmatic theories' application in everyday life, now you are:

- Very conscious    
  Moderately conscious    
  Slightly conscious

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

### REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- How did the pre-taught vocabulary help students understand the text(s) and enhance their performance in this class (of Pragmatics)?
- Were the activities useful to facilitate students' understanding and application of Pragmatics theories in practical activities? In what way? What did I notice about this?
- What material was used in the class? How was the material used in terms of providing awareness of Pragmatics and, more importantly, the application of Pragmatics in practical activities/tasks? What effect did it seem to have?
- How did the exercises of today's class or activities contribute to the practical use of Pragmatics? How do I know?

of vocabulary clear enough and 'always' useful to understanding the theories presented. The other three students thought it was 'often' or 'sometimes' useful – so this was a positive outcome. Guillermina had also noted in her journal how useful this strategy was:



*The vocabulary was useful because they wrote it down and when they needed to recall the meaning, students consulted their notes and used the words.*

### Exemplifying concepts

The examples Guillermina had used to exemplify theories had also proved useful – 'always' or 'often'; students found all the resources useful, but particularly the images and short videos. They thought Guillermina's choice of images had effectively supported understanding in combination with the dialogues.

When asked to what extent they had understood the concepts from the examples taken from everyday life, the majority (12) had 'understood' but two were 'still confused'. During the focus group meeting, one student mentioned that this confusion could be due to individual learning differences or different ways of thinking.

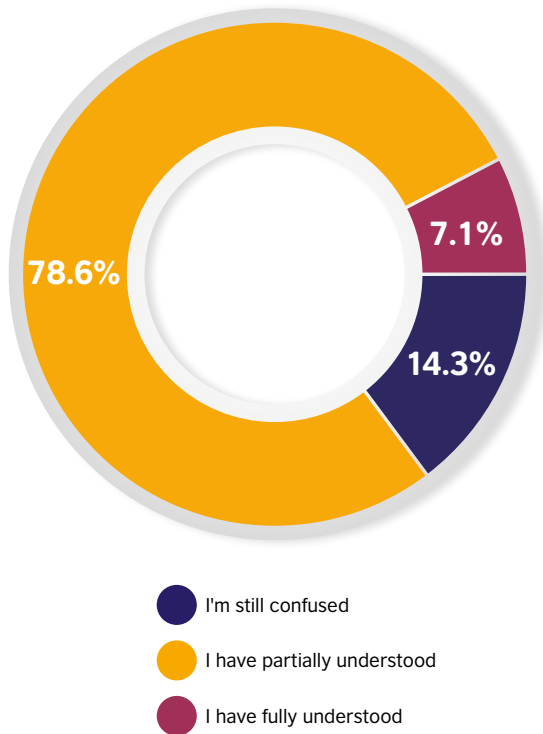
### What Guillermina discovered

At the end of the implementation period, Guillermina analysed and organised her findings and was pleased to find that she had a lot of useful data from which she could draw some conclusions.

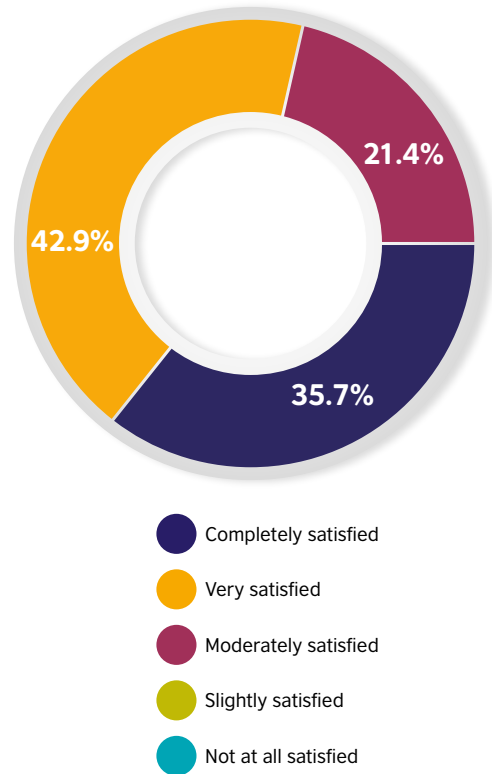
### Pre-teaching vocabulary

Firstly, Guillermina was reassured to discover that 11 of the 14 students considered the presentation

**8. Regarding the Pragmatics' theories studied, how much do you consider you have comprehended?**  
14 respuestas

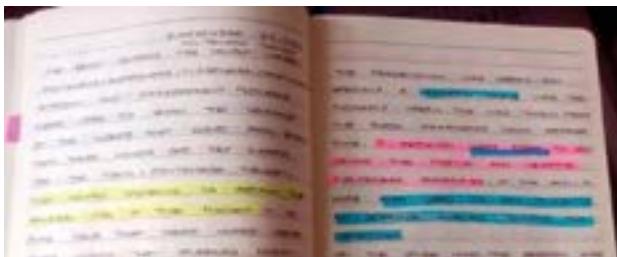


**6. Regarding your performance while you produced your examples, you are:**  
14 respuestas



Students *had* found the examples 'always' or 'often' helpful though, and her journal notes corroborated this. Overall then, Guillermina felt that the practical changes she had implemented in her presentation of concepts had proved fairly successful in helping the majority of students to understand, explain and exemplify these.

a pity. One student said s/he had not understood very well; another said s/he had not understood the previous examples, and another stated that it was difficult to use the language to achieve some purposes.



Pages from Guillermina's journal

**How aware had students become of Pragmatics?**

Finally, at the start of this project, one of Guillermina's key questions was: *What activities do I do in class to raise students' awareness of Pragmatics in English?* And by 'awareness', she meant knowing that Pragmatics exist and understanding how we convey meaning and decode apparent ambiguities and intentions. Guillermina was very curious to find out just how 'aware' her students were now following the changes she had made, and she was very satisfied to discover that 13 of her 14 students responded 'moderately aware' (10 students) or 'very aware' (3 students). Guillermina was very encouraged by this finding: in fact, these results gave her great satisfaction and she felt motivated to continue improving communication with students about their learning.

**Practical application**

When asked about their performance during the production stages, five students were completely satisfied with their performance, six were very satisfied and three were moderately satisfied. Unfortunately, they were not all satisfied and Guillermina felt that was

## Conclusion

Considering the students' responses and thinking back to the situation before the exploration, the changes in my teaching approach were positive. Focusing on the application of Pragmatics in everyday communication and interaction supported by the use of images, short videos, songs and comic strips was effective for most students. I achieved my purpose, I mean they were generally able to understand and apply knowledge appropriately to new situations, for instance when asking a favour, giving commands, greeting each other and so on. However, two students still faced some difficulties – even when they thought they had understood, when they were asked to produce an example, they couldn't do it.

## Final reflections

When Guillermina looks back to the first lessons with this group, before she undertook this research, she remembers how her students relied so much on the translation of words and were able to understand just the literal meaning of expressions at best; they didn't analyse the context of the communicative act – the roles of the participants, their intentions and so on. However, after exploring that situation, analysing the issue and implementing changes, her students were able to take note of contextual factors during communicative acts, and explain and exemplify different intentions of everyday speech acts using a range of expressions. But to achieve this, she had to ask them directly what they thought, what their preferences were, what difficulties they faced and what they needed. Exploratory Action Research has taught her that she needs to do that.

From now on I will take into account first-hand information about my students from them, and not rely on only my observations. Taking this kind of evidence into account provides valuable information that benefits their learning and my teaching.

To conclude, I feel that EAR is a reliable and appropriate methodology for teachers looking to find answers to the questions, challenges and puzzles they face in everyday classroom situations.

## Acknowledgements

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## Reflection

Guillermina noticed problems at an early stage when teaching this group of students. She knew the situation needed to be addressed rapidly and determined that focusing her research on this situation would allow her to address it in a more informed way. She basically focused on asking questions rather than suggesting answers. How do you approach solving problems in your teaching? Have you collected data in some way in order to do this? What issues that you currently have could be addressed through research?

