

Champion Teachers Mexico II: Stories of Exploratory Action Research

Edited by Paula Rebolledo and Deborah Bullock





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Champion Teachers Mexico II: Stories of Exploratory Action Research

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FOREWORD

This book follows on from the success of the first publication: *Champion Teachers Mexico: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* (British Council, 2019). https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Pub_Champ_Ts_Mexico_final.pdf. The second cohort of teachers, working in public schools throughout Mexico, proved as extraordinary as the first. This second group of teachers in the public education system has once again gained insights into their classrooms under the guidance of experts in the field and by reporting them in a systematic way, their experiences will be of great interest to anyone connected with the profession, and as such these ground-breaking, dedicated professionals 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 (EAR) to a group of Chilean teachers of English. EAR is a process through which teachers discover what works or doesn’t work in their classroom by undertaking research among their students. This process helps teachers understand why what they do is successful, or not, and 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 Mexico benefitting particularly by adapting the by now well-established methodology to its own particular context, with the benefit of the experience of the first successful cohort.

This second cohort of Champion Teachers in Mexico have researched everything from story reading to team competitions, from peer assessment to cultural-

based activities. Their whole-hearted commitment to the programme has enabled them to implement change in the classroom based on a professional, academic approach that suits their context and challenges. Informed and empowered teachers foster children’s creative, critical and innovative minds, ultimately helping to improve the quality of national education and contribute to a prosperous, open and democratic society. In this second edition of the programme, three Champion Teachers from the first cohort became mentors in training, making good use of their increased awareness and confidence to coach others in EAR.

We would like to express our appreciation for all the partners and stakeholders who have helped make the programme and its second edition the success it’s been. These include Dr Paula Rebolledo, senior mentor, trainer, and co-author, with Dr Richard Smith, of *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (British Council, 2018), the Ministry of Education in Mexico, headteachers, and of course the teachers themselves.

I am sure you will find the nine accounts selected for this publication extremely useful as a means of understanding both EAR and the challenges teachers face every day. I hope you will also be inspired to undertake Exploratory Action Research in your own classroom.

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

Liliana Sánchez,
Head of Basic Education, British Council Mexico

INTRODUCTION

Paula Rebolledo and Deborah Bullock

The current publication presents the research narratives of nine Mexican teachers illustrating their professional journeys to become teacher-researchers. These teachers, along with fourteen others, took part in the Champion Teachers Programme, which promotes the professional development of teachers of English as a foreign language by guiding and supporting them in carrying out their own classroom research projects.

Since its birth in Chile¹ in 2013 the programme has expanded to support teachers' research endeavors in Peru, Colombia, Uruguay and Mexico. From these experiences, four publications with stories have been produced to disseminate the work of participating teachers in Chile, Peru and Mexico² along with the

*Handbook of Exploratory Action Research*³, which sought to lay out the foundations of the approach used and provide practical guidance to those interested in carrying out their research projects autonomously and to those interested in supporting teachers in this process.

Champion Teachers Mexico

English teachers in Mexico have reported having limited opportunities for professional development. The training initiatives offered are usually short (in the form of workshops) and not related to English language teaching and learning. Instances where teachers can reflect about their teaching are scarce and chances for them to study their own practice are practically



Figure 1. Teachers participating in the initial workshop (August 2019)

1. For information about the origins of the programme, see Smith, R., Connelly, T. & Rebolledo, P. (2014). Teacher-research as CPD: a project with Chilean secondary school teachers in Hayes, D. (ed.) *Innovations in the Continuing Professional Development of English Language Teachers*. London: The British Council, pp. 111–128.
2. The three publications showcasing the work of Champion Teachers in Chile, Peru and Mexico are *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research*, edited by Paula Rebolledo, Richard Smith and Deborah Bullock published in 2016, *Champion Teachers Peru: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* edited by Paula Rebolledo, Deborah Bullock and Richard Smith published in 2018 and *Champion Teachers Mexico: Stories of Exploratory Action Research*, edited by Paula Rebolledo and Deborah Bullock published in 2019.
3. Smith, R. & Rebolledo, P. (2018). *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research*. London: British Council.

Month	EAR stage	Activity
September	Planning to explore	Narrowing research questions/Designing tools
October	Exploring	Applying tools
	Analysing and reflecting	Analysing data
November	Planning to explore	Analysing data/Designing action plan
	Acting	Implementing action plan
December	Observing	Implementing/Evaluating action plan
January	Reflecting	Conclusions/Final Report

Figure 2. Programme calendar

non-existent. To address such need, in 2018, the British Council Mexico Launched the Champion Teachers Programme to provide a professional development alternative to teachers working in the state system in elementary and secondary schools in Mexico. A selected edition of stories from the first cohort was published in 2019 containing nine stories from teachers working in various regions of Mexico.

The second cohort of the programme, to which the stories contained in this book belong, was launched in 2019. The process started with an initial call for volunteer participation where teachers express their intention to be part of the programme and commit to go through its different stages following the steps of Exploratory

Action Research according to the programme calendar (see programme calendar above). Then, all selected candidates joined for a two-day workshop in August 2019 to have an introductory session to exploratory action research and start drafting the project by choosing a topic and drafting their research questions.

After the initial workshop, teachers met with their mentors and discussed their research in online meetings. The whole mentoring process stretched over 5 months. In February, the closing workshop involved teachers presenting their projects to their peers and writing the final written report with the support of their mentors and their colleagues' feedback.



Figure 3. Teacher presenting at the final workshop (February 2020)

An important development of the Champion Teachers Programme in its second cohort was the inclusion of Mexican mentors. In the first cohort, experienced mentors from Chile supported their Mexican colleagues, but given the experience gained, five teachers were selected due to their personal attributes, dedication, and overall performance in the programme to become mentors for their peers. These selected mentors took a six-week course consisting of webinars and online tasks to prepare themselves to become mentors for the programme. The course was carried out before the start of the programme and it included topics such as how to organise a mentoring meeting, how to build rapport with mentees and others related to the process of exploratory action research such as the definition of

exploratory research questions and the design of tools for exploration. Mentors then supported their mentees through online bi-weekly meetings when they discussed the different stages of the research process according to the programme calendar.

The stories

The nine stories included in this publication were selected and edited from the narratives teachers wrote at the end of the CT programme in 2019. These teachers work in rural, semi-rural and urban elementary and middle schools teaching learners from a range of socio-economic backgrounds in diverse contexts and regions of Mexico (see map below indicating where Champion Teachers are based in Mexico).



Figure 4. Map showing the location of Champion Teachers Mexico 2019

- | | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Durango | 5. Jalisco | 9. Guanajuato | 13. Nuevo León |
| 2. Ciudad de México | 6. Puebla | 10. Aguascalientes | 14. Guerrero |
| 3. Sonora | 7. Chihuahua | 11. Estado de México | 15. Yucatán |
| 4. Chiapas | 8. Nayarit | 12. Baja California | |

Each of the nine stories is focused on a different issue. Two focus on promoting participation: one through the use of competitive team activities, the other through the use of letter tiles. Two address issues of classroom management: giving instructions so students know what to do, and achieving the right L1/L2 balance with low-level learners. There is a story about learners using rubrics to evaluate their peers, and another related to getting learners to review and reflect. Two stories

focus on developing language: one questions the effectiveness of worksheets in teaching vocabulary, and the other seeks to evaluate the use of the teacher’s own videos in presenting vocabulary and grammar. And finally, one story examines the value of culturally based activities with learners who feel little connection to either English or the countries in which it’s spoken (see the full list of topics chosen by all teachers who participated in the Programme in the table below).

	Name	Main topic	Level	Location
1	Alejandra Castillo Rodríguez	Cultural-based activities	Secondary	Durango
2	Karla De la Rocha Cardoza	Use of L1	Secondary	Durango
3	Rosa Nelly Flores Ortigón	Instructions	Elementary	Nuevo León
4	Katirian González Alonso	Speaking	Elementary	Ciudad de México
5	Ilse León Lizarrága	Vocabulary worksheets	Elementary	Sonora
6	Aquiles Marcial Santos	Motivation	Secondary	Chiapas
7	Diana Márquez Lozornio	Participation	Secondary	Jalisco
8	Andrea Martínez Sandoval	Peer assessment	Elementary	Estado de México
9	Rosa Guadalupe Maza Pola	Vocabulary	Elementary	Chiapas
10	Marií Merino Cid	Story reading	Elementary	Puebla
11	María Myrna Morales Fierros	Team competitions	Elementary	Chihuahua
12	Silvia Moreno Villalbazo	Motivation	Secondary	Nayarit
13	Rebeca Navarro Rodriguez	Homework	Elementary	Guanajuato
14	Rosalio Ovalle	Speaking	Elementary	Aguascalientes
15	Alfredo Patiño Martinez	Use of own videos	Secondary	Estado de México
16	Juan José Pérez Rivero	Writing	Secondary	Ciudad de México
17	Norma Ponce De León Espinoza	Teaching different subjects	Secondary	Baja California
18	Lauro Rodríguez Chapa	Vocabulary	Secondary	Nuevo León
19	Lourdes Sánchez	Team competitions	Elementary	Guerrero
20	Tania Sandoval Cordero	Listening	Secondary	Puebla
21	Juan Serna Servín	Parts of speech	Secondary	Nuevo León
22	Karen Tun Díaz	Participation	Elementary	Yucatán
23	Veronica Vilchis	Closure	Elementary	Estado de México

Figure 5. Champion Teachers Mexico 2019 projects

In each case, teachers chose topics to further understand an issue or a situation which they felt could somehow be improved. And after exploring these issues or situations, they then came up with an action plan based on their understandings. Some of these actions were simple adjustments, some involved introducing new techniques or strategies, others required innovation and creativity, such as making home-videos, creating an activity or designing a worksheet or rubric. Whatever the actions, each teacher then goes on to detail how they evaluated these interventions and the extent of their impact.

What is also interesting about this collection is the range of methods used to collect data: student questionnaires (paper and online Google forms), peer observations (live and remote), interviews with colleagues, focus groups, reflection journals (paper, video and digital), lesson plan and materials analysis and video analysis are all used and a range of examples of these tools are included in the stories.

In short, the stories illustrate how teachers are able to look to their learners, their colleagues and themselves to identify and better understand what is happening in their classrooms, reflect and act on the information they obtain, and introduce changes that benefit their learners while developing and growing professionally. The stories exemplify the positive impact that EAR can have, and it is our hope that this collection inspires you to take a positive look at the situations that arise in your classroom and begin an exploration of your own.

The first story is by Lourdes Sánchez who was teaching elementary learners in particularly difficult circumstances. The focus of Lourdes' investigation emerged from a 'success experience' – her learners' positive response to competitive activities, which she decided to examine more closely. As a result of her investigation, Lourdes was able to implement changes that had a positive effect on all her learners – impacting the motivation and participation of not only 'strong' students, but also those less confident or capable. Lourdes concludes her story with the realisation that it is important to make classroom decisions based on evidence, not only her own perceptions.

The second story comes from Ilse A. León Lizárraga, a teacher of a mixed-level and mixed-age group studying English in a poorly resourced elementary school in a deprived urban area. However, despite these challenges, Ilse faced few difficulties since her learners were all at a basic level of English. What Ilse explored was whether the simple worksheets she used to complement the textbook were effective. Her investigation revealed various issues which she was able to address, and as a result, she was able to design worksheets with a clear aim, which contained more appropriate and useful exercises, and which proved more effective in promoting learning. In her final reflections, Ilse acknowledges the usefulness of exploring an issue before taking action, and recognises that although it is easy to continue using the same strategy, it is better to know whether it's effective or not.

In chapter three, Andrea Martínez Sandoval outlines her investigation into the use of rubrics to support peer evaluation of speaking. Andrea had noticed a few issues with the use of these assessment tools so she was interested to explore them, but also what her students thought about using them. Her findings revealed that although her learners liked using them, there were some features that they found complicated and confusing. As a result of her research, Andrea was able to design a more appropriate tool, which her learners found simpler and more enjoyable to use. Reflecting on her experiences at the end of the project, Andrea concludes that her students are her most important resource. By looking to them and listening to their needs and opinions, she was able to come up with her own ideas and solutions and develop as a teacher.

The fourth story by Karla Alejandra De la Rocha Cardoza explores the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. Alejandra faced a dilemma many English language teachers face: should she use Spanish (L1) due to the very low level of the students or English (L2) because they need to learn? Although Alejandra assumed her students understood nothing in English, she decided to find out if this was true and also to explore how she could address the challenge she was facing. What she discovered enabled her to implement three key strategies resulting in a good L1/L2 balance in the classroom; the predominant language

was English but students were not overwhelmed. Alejandra's experience of EAR has opened her eyes to a new way to approach any puzzling situation in her classroom, and she feels that the patience and hard work required are worth it.

María Myrna Morales Fierros focuses her investigation on her use of letter tiles. Myrna liked using letter tiles and had been using them for some time with different groups to motivate students and promote whole class participation. However, what she wanted to know was whether her students felt the same. What she discovered surprised her – while her students did enjoy using letter tiles, they did not feel comfortable with the way Myrna was using them. Myrna's findings caused her to change her approach and realise just how important it is to stop and ask students what they think and how they feel about activities which are such a central part of her routine.

Rosa Nelly Flores Ortegon describes how she explored and addressed problems she was having with instruction-giving. Rosa Nelly's learners never seemed to understand what they were supposed to do, a situation many teachers can identify with. However, by collecting information from a number of sources, Rosa Nelly was able to identify effective strategies she could implement to improve the situation. Rosa Nelly learned a lot from her experience of EAR, but perhaps most importantly: although others can make suggestions on how you should solve issues in your classroom, until you explore and ask your learners, you cannot be sure of what will work.

The next story by Alfredo Patiño Martínez relates his experience and evaluation of creating and using his own videos to teach vocabulary and grammar. Alfredo started creating videos as a resource for students to use before lessons to prepare them for the language input. However, when he found that they weren't watching them, he decided to use them in the classroom. Although he found the approach interesting, he was keen to know what his students thought and that became the focus of his investigation. What he discovered was that while his students valued his videos, there were improvements

he could make, so he did. Alfredo ends his story fully recognising that 'listening to his students' had proved crucial; he was amazed at how much information they had given him! And he is inspired to continue researching his classroom.

In chapter eight, Verónica Vilchis' focus emerged from a puzzling situation – her students couldn't remember what they had learned in previous lessons and she was spending too much time re-teaching content. Verónica's initial exploration confirmed that the problem lay in her failure to review, and more specifically how she managed the closing activities. As a result of her findings, Verónica successfully implemented new activities which addressed the problem, motivated her learners and helped them to remember what they'd learnt. Verónica concludes her story with the realisation that self-awareness through being more reflective will now be her goal to becoming a better teacher.

The final story in this collection comes from Alejandra Castillo Rodríguez, who for some time has been introducing the culture of English-speaking countries into her lessons, to involve her students with a language they feel they have no connection with and countries they can never imagine visiting. Although Alejandra felt students enjoyed these activities, she wanted to know more – what did they think about them and what, if anything, were they getting out of them? Her investigation revealed that not only did students enjoy and value this focus on culture, but that it contributed to and enhanced their learning of English – they wanted more. Her challenge then was to find a way to respond to these needs and preferences without neglecting the requirements of the curriculum, which she finally managed to do. Alejandra concludes her story by acknowledging that the shortest route to approaching any improvement in teaching is by taking an EAR approach.

Note on permissions

The stories in this publication are based on oral presentations from posters and written narratives submitted as final reports to the programme in February 2020. After a selection process, the stories selected

were re-written in the third person to make them more accessible to a wider readership. In the editing process, we requested teachers to clarify or add any missing information and ultimately to provide their approval. All photographs included here have been supplied by teachers and they have followed British Council protocols. In the cases where permission could not be gained, students' faces have not been shown.

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Figure 6. Second cohort of Champion Teachers Mexico (February 2020)

1

How do competitive activities affect student participation?

Lourdes Sánchez Cuadros

Iguala de la Independencia, Guerrero, Mexico



A challenging teaching context

Lourdes teaches English at the Ruffo Figueroa elementary public school, which is located in the historic city of Iguala, in the state of Guerrero in southwest Mexico. At the time of this project she was teaching grades 3 to 6 but decided to focus on a 5th grade group with 17 students aged 10 to 11 at beginner (A1) level. In Grades 3 and 4 these students had only had one hour of English per week, but in line with the Programa Nacional de Inglés (ProNI), in Grade 5 this increased to three 50-minute lessons per week.

Lourdes was teaching in particularly difficult circumstances. In 2017 an earthquake had damaged the school building, and since that time she and other teachers had been teaching their students outside in a basketball court with no dividing walls. With no walls to display visual aids or project videos, and no possibility of playing music to facilitate the learning of English, together with the constant noise and disruptions coming from other classes, her students understandably became distracted and teaching and learning was a constant challenge. However, Lourdes believes that ‘where there is a will, there is a way’ so she came up with some strategies to make the space more like a classroom. She put up a whiteboard, arranged chairs strategically, and used the ‘lunch space’ area to carry out ludic learning activities before break time.



A ‘success’ experience

Lourdes’ motivation for doing this research emerged from a ‘success’ experience. One day she put her students into teams and got them to see which team could memorise the most new words. She couldn’t believe how competitive

they became – they were shouting out the words as soon as she showed the flashcards; they were excited, animated and participating. She wanted to explore further: were they all keen to participate and compete? How did they feel and respond if they lost? Did they like competing in teams? Or pairs or individually? She needed to know how they felt about such activities, what their preferences were, whether such activities could improve learning, improve their English language skills.

How do competitive activities affect my students’ participation?

The answers would tell her if she should continue to implement competitive activities, so to focus more and to get a deeper understanding, she came up with three exploratory research questions (ERQs):

ERQ1. What are my perceptions of my students’ participation in competitive activities?

ERQ2. How do my students feel when they participate in competitive activities?

ERQ3. What do my students do/how do they behave during competitive activities?

Looking for answers

To collect answers to her three questions, Lourdes used three data collection methods:

Journal. To find answers to ERQ1, Lourdes wrote reflective notes after each lesson (four lessons in total) to record what she had observed in relation to her students’ participation – whether they were paying attention, raising their hands to answer, working collaboratively during the activities, etc.

Questionnaire. To gain insight into ERQ2, she designed a questionnaire with multiple-choice and open-ended questions to give her students the opportunity to

freely express their opinions and feelings. This was administered in Spanish and anonymously.

Peer observation. Finally, to answer ERQ3, she asked an English teacher from a different school to observe two lessons. Even though she was keeping a record of her own observations, Lourdes recognised that she needed a second pair of eyes to observe what she might not or could not see. For this she created eight focus questions.



PEER OBSERVATION (Exploration)

Instructions: Observe carefully the English class and answer the guiding questions below to describe and give clear ideas of what the students do when competing in learning activities during the English class.

1. Describe the students' attitude when they start competing in an activity.
2. How is the students' interaction when competing in an activity, either in pairs, individually or in teams?
3. In what type of class arrangement do the children seem more actively involved (paying attention, raising hands to participate, working collaboratively)?
 - a) When children compete individually.
 - b) When children compete in pairs.
 - c) When children compete in teams.
 - d) When children compete as a whole class against the teacher.

Write additional observations.

4. Describe the students' attitude when the whole class competes against the teacher.
5. How do the students react when they win?
6. How do students behave when they lose?
7. What do my students do when they compete in an activity?
8. Look at the diagram and mark the students who participate either by raising their hands to give answers, or working collaboratively in order to win.



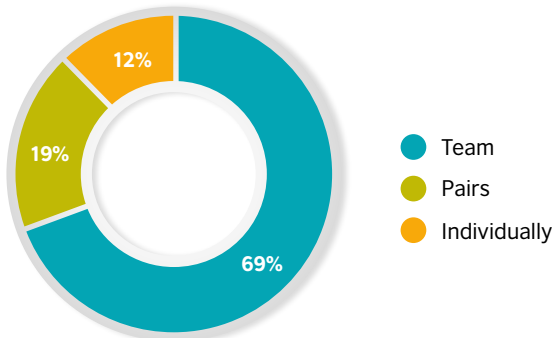
What Lourdes discovered

After collecting the data, Lourdes analysed and organised it to find answers to her questions.

ERQ2. How do my students feel when they participate in competitive activities?

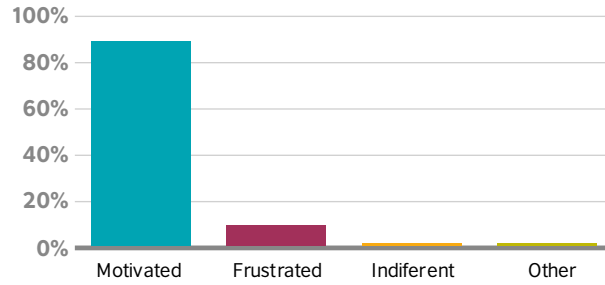
From the questionnaire responses, Lourdes found that students preferred to compete in teams – 11 students preferred competing in teams because they said they could help each other. However, three preferred working in pairs since they felt they could reach their goals better, and two preferred competing individually because they said sometimes their classmates talked and laughed a lot.

If you had the opportunity to participate in a learning contest, in which of the following would you like to participate?



In response to how they felt about competing, the vast majority of students felt motivated because it was ‘fun’ and they learned more easily when the lesson was exciting. Feedback from the peer observations confirmed this, and Lourdes also discovered that students disliked competing individually.

How do you feel when participating in competitive activities during the English class?



2. How is the student's interaction when competing in an activity, either in pairs, individually or teams?
When they compete individually, they get nervous and stutter a lot, they also lose confidence. When they compete in teams, they all participate and get excited. When they're all against the teacher everyone is excited and getting out the answers.

Extract from peer observation notes

ERQ1. What are my perceptions of my students' participation in competitive activities?

From her own observations, Lourdes discovered that students participated most when they competed all at the same time.

Journal entry

The students paid attention when everybody was involved but when the contest included only a few students then the rest started talking to their classmates, not paying attention to the activity and some made angry and despaired faces insisting on participating. They were saying the correct answers quietly even though it was not their turn.

And again, her colleague's feedback confirmed this:

2. How is the student's interaction when competing in an activity, either in pairs, individually or teams?
They love competition so they really try hard to get the correct answer and win. All the students want to participate - when a pair goes to the front to face off another pair they play "rock, paper scissors" to decide who goes first. When the teacher is about to choose another pair to participate everyone raises their hand.

Extract from peer observation notes

ERQ3. What do my students do/how do they behave during competitive activities?

Observations showed that the majority of students were actively involved constantly whether they worked in teams, pairs or as a whole class against the teacher. They also supported each other and behaved with respect towards their opponents.

7. What do my students do when they compete in an activity?
 They all want to play and participate. They're full of energy and excitement. Everyone wants to go to the front and be asked questions. Overall they seem to enjoy the competition activities. They are also very careful with the point tracking. (They don't want a single point to be lost). They also let the teacher know if there's any cheaters.

5. How do the students act when they win in a competition?
 They were full of joy and very enthusiastic. They ~~not~~ celebrated and ~~or~~ but showed good sportsmanship towards the losing teams.

Extract from peer observation notes

Action plan

Now that Lourdes had some answers to her questions, she spent some time reflecting on these in order to come up with an action plan to improve her students' participation further.

To this end, she came up with the idea of 'team challenges'.

Team challenges

Lourdes introduced a series of team challenges, (e.g. reading comprehension races, ordering words to make sentences, and matching verbs to images), which she implemented at the start and end of six subsequent lessons.

She decided to organise these challenges by getting teams to compete in relays so that a) all her students would feel included in the activity and b) each student's answer would count and contribute to the final team score.

For each activity, she formed four teams and arranged them in lines. The first students from each team ran to the first station, completed the challenge and ran back to tag the next teammate in line. Then the second in line ran to the second station to complete their challenge, run back and tag the next student, and so on until all the challenges were completed.

Now I know that my students like competitive activities and participate more when they are all involved at the same time in teams, what kind of activities or competitions can I use?



Once they had finished, the teams grouped together and waited for Lourdes' feedback and announcement of the winning team.



What was the impact of the team challenges?

To evaluate the impact of her actions, Lourdes decided to use the same methods as she had during the exploratory phase since they had given her such useful information – *journal* (reflections on six lessons this time), *questionnaire* and *peer observations* (two) –

but this time the questions were focused on evaluating the effectiveness of the team challenges. For example, with the peer observations, in addition to focusing on participation, collaboration and behaviour, she was also interested in getting feedback on waiting time and how that affected students' participation and involvement.

PEER OBSERVATION (Evaluation)

Instructions: Observe carefully the English class and answer the guiding questions below to describe and give clear ideas of what the students do when competing in learning activities during the English class.

1. Were there any students left aside by their teammates during the competitive activities? If so, how many?
2. How did the students organise their teams in order to complete the series of challenges? (Did they distribute the tasks among the members, how did they do it? Did the team members compare and check their answers before handing them in to the teacher?)
Write additional observations.
3. How did the students behave when they were competing in relays? (Did the students look for help in order to pass to the next phase? How did the team members help their partners when needed? Did any students stop participating?)
4. How was the students' participation when competing in relays or completing a series of challenges in teams?
5. How did students behave when competing in relays or completing a series of challenges in teams?
6. How much time did the students need to wait in order to participate in the competitive activities?

Positive outcomes
Improved participation

Lourdes was happy to observe that completing challenges in teams raised most of her students' participation levels.

Journal entry

Since the very beginning the students know what's coming so they attentive, paying attention, following the teacher's instructions and trying to learn the new vocabulary or materials they will need in order to play the relays or solve the challenges. During the competition in teams to solve the challenges, the ss got together and share comments and suggestions about what could be the correct answers.

Indeed, her colleague observed that wait time had been reduced to a matter of seconds:

6. How much time did the students need to wait in order to participate in the competition activities?
The second student to participate waited an average 4 seconds. The last student to participate waited 15 seconds to participate.

Extract from peer observation notes

Lourdes was also impressed by how attentive her students were when she announced the answers – none of the students lost interest even if they had made mistakes or failed to win – they kept trying, an observation confirmed by her colleague:

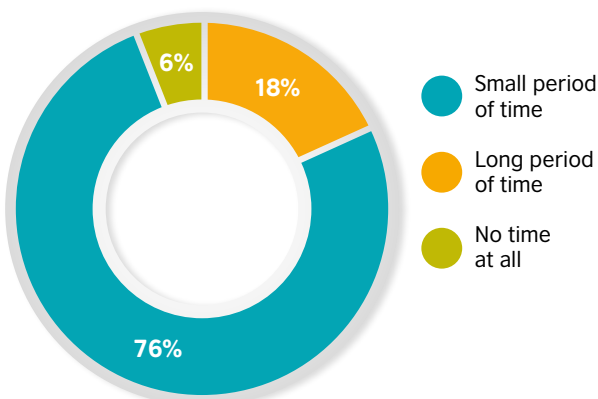
3. How did the students act when they were competing in relays? (Did the students look for help in order to pass to the next phase? How did the team members help their partners when needed? Did any students stop participating?)
Everyone answered their own challenge and didn't look for help. The team members helped by cheering them on while they were participating. After they finished the teacher checked their answers aloud and the students cheered when she said they got it right. When the student got the wrong answer they just nodded and kept playing.

Extract from peer observation notes

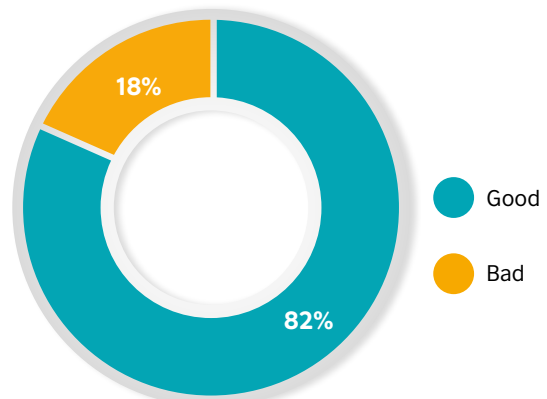
And finally, Lourdes was also encouraged to learn that the majority of her students (14) felt that their teammates participated well during the activities. Only three responded negatively: two said their team members were distracted; one reported a teammate not getting along with him/her. Her colleague also observed an incidence of negative behaviour, and as a result of this feedback, Lourdes realised that she should have set some ground rules on respect and tolerance when introducing the challenges.

This increase in participation was also due to the fact that students were spending much less time waiting for their turn – 14 of her 17 students reported having to wait little or no time to participate in the challenge.

How long should you wait your turn to participate in the learning competitions?



How do you consider your teammates' participation during the competition activities?



there were 2 students that complained to the teacher because one of their teammates called them slow. However,

Extract from peer observation notes

Improved collaboration and peer support

Introducing team challenges in the form of relays had proved very effective in ensuring that each student’s answer counted and contributed to the final team score, which was Lourdes’ aim. However, another positive outcome of this strategy was that students became more collaborative, supportive and united during the challenges, as her colleague noted:

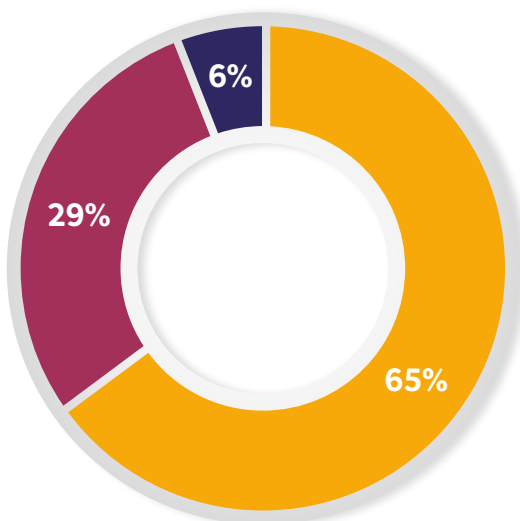
Students’ responses to the questionnaire also indicated that the majority (11) helped and supported their team members ‘a lot’, and when asked how, they added: ‘by studying’, ‘paying attention’ and ‘explaining the correct answers’. Lourdes also observed from her journal notes that at the beginning of each relay challenge, the teams spent time organising themselves by sharing suggestions and strategies.

4. How was the students’ participation when competing either in relays or completing a series of challenges in teams?

Everyones participation was key for each team. If one student was stuck the rest could not continue so cheering them on was a sign of unity. They helped each other when they could and didn't get mad when they didn't finish first.

Extract from peer observation notes

When the relays and the resolution of challenges are carried out, how do you help the members of your team to win the competition?



- Participate a lot
- Participate a little
- Do not participate

Journal entry

At the end of each relay the students are discussing who is going to be first and last while the teacher is giving feedback on their opponents’ answers.

What Lourdes learnt

Over the course of the project Lourdes felt that she had made improvements to the way she taught her Grade 5 students. She found that by organising competitive activities she was able to motivate not only the 'strong' students, but also those less confident or capable, to participate. She also learned that it wasn't necessary to award prizes to the winners; that it was enough just to win – that was reward in itself.

Lourdes also felt more empathetic toward her students' opinions, preferences and feelings by taking the time to ask how they liked to work in the English class and then taking their wishes into consideration when lesson planning.

There are, however, a couple of things related to the research process that she feels she could have done differently, for example:

- including fewer and only absolutely necessary open-ended questions in the student questionnaire to make it easier for the students to complete; and
- explaining exactly what she required from her colleague during the peer observations with a model or sample to elicit only observations and avoid opinions.

And finally ...

I learned that as teachers, we can always improve our practices even though we think our students are learning. Also, through this experience I got to confirm that students learn when they're having fun and feel they matter to us.

Lourdes' reflections about EAR

Before she knew about exploratory action research, Lourdes used to make decisions based on her own assumptions and perceptions. Now, she has experienced

the results of making decisions based on evidence – not only her own perceptions but also her students' preferences, opinions and interests, and her colleague's account of what was really happening in her classroom.

I have gained experience in further exploring successful teaching practices or particular issues in my context, my classroom and with my students. I can say I am not the same vulnerable teacher I used to be. I have become a champion teacher, who makes informed decisions and has the power to change my reality and improve my teaching as well as my students' learning.

I feel very happy about what I have achieved thanks to my mentor's advice and all my efforts to succeed in this journey. I am glad that I was accepted by the British Council to be part of this programme and my students are the ones that have benefited the most from my research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the support of my Principal Pablo Hernández, Ms Virginia Nava, the observer Jorge Rosales and my students who helped me carry out this research project. I also extend my deep gratitude to Paula Rebolledo, one of the creators of the Exploratory Action Research approach.

Reflection

Lourdes learnt a lot by taking the time to ask her students how they liked to work in the English class. Do you do this? How do you know what your students' interests, preferences and feelings are about the activities you use? Could you use a questionnaire as Lourdes did to find out? What other method or tool could you use to ask them?

2 Using worksheets to teach vocabulary

Ilse A. León Lizárraga

Hermosillo, Sonora



A challenging context

Ilse teaches English at Magisterio II, a poorly resourced primary school located in the south-west of the city, Hermosillo, in the north-western state of Sonora. The school is located in a particularly poor area of the city where there is a lot of violence and drug-related activity. At the time of this project, Ilse taught only one group, Grade 1A, since she was studying for a master's degree.



Grade 1A consisted of a group of 18 students (nine boys and nine girls) aged five to eleven. The reason for this wide age range was due to the fact that some of the children had been taken out of school, sometimes for years due to parental drug abuse, kidnapping, custody battles, etc., and when they returned they were put into Grade 1 to catch up on what they had missed. However, despite the differences in age, there were few difficulties since they were all at beginner level (they knew some colours, numbers and a few words in English) although some were not able to read well. Ilse taught them three times a week for 50 minutes and found them keen to learn.

What Ilse wanted to know

Ilse found that the instructions and exercises in the textbook and workbook were quite complicated for her students due to their level of English, so she usually used simple worksheets to complement the book. She had done this with all her classes, regularly, and so she thought it would be useful to explore how effective these were and whether her students found them helpful.

To focus her exploration, Ilse came up with four questions:

- Q1 What are my objectives when using worksheets every day in my English classes?
- Q2 What do my students think about using worksheets?
- Q3 What type of activities are in the worksheets that I usually use?
- Q4 How effective are the worksheets in complementing the book?

And to find answers to these, she decided to analyse some lesson plans, keep a journal and informally interview her students.

Lesson plan analysis

Ilse decided to analyse three lesson plans in relation to her four questions. To make this easy for herself, she decided to highlight the information using four different colours, so for example, if she were to find any information that gave her answers to Q1, she would use green, and so on.

Define my purposes when using worksheets.

How many worksheets do I plan to use for this lesson?

In which moments of the class do I plan to use the worksheets?

How much time do I plan to dedicate to each worksheet?

Ilse's colour coding for her lesson plan analysis

Reflective journal

Ilse also decided that it would be a good idea to reflect on each of these three lessons immediately afterward and note down answers to some questions she had prepared. Again, she thought that using different colours would help her to identify answers to these questions.

How did I choose today's worksheets?

Did I have to modify or adapt the worksheets? Why did I think it was/wasn't necessary to modify or adapt the worksheets?

Did I use all the worksheets I planned to during the class? If not, how many did I use? Why did/didn't I use all the worksheets I planned to during the class?

Was the time dedicated to each worksheet enough? Why? If not, why not?

Why do I think today's worksheets were successful (or unsuccessful)?

Ilse's colour coding for her journal notes

Interviews

To get information from her students, Ilse thought it would be most appropriate to interview them orally in Spanish and informally because of their English and literacy levels. She prepared a script and decided to interview all 18 of them one by one in Spanish a separate room. She also decided to audio-record their answers so that she could listen to them in more detail later. Ilse's reasons for interviewing this way was that she wanted to avoid distractions, but more importantly, she didn't want students to be influenced by others' answers. She felt that there was more chance of them answering honestly if she asked them individually. In fact, on the day of the interview, just 12 students were interviewed as six were absent. (Attendance was an ongoing issue and Ilse never had a full class of 18 anyway.)

During the English classes we have worked with worksheets and I'm going to ask you some questions to find out what you think about these worksheets. So what am I going to ask you?
[If they don't know how to answer, I'll explain once more].

[Questions]

- What do you think when you are doing the worksheets that I give you? And why do you think that?
- Why do you think we use worksheets?
- How do you complete the worksheets we use?
- And how do you feel when you finish all the worksheets we use? Why do you feel that way?

Okay, thank you very much, you can go back to your place/room.

Interview script
(translated from Spanish)

Answers to Ilse's questions

Q1. What are my objectives when using worksheets every day in my English classes?

Ilse found that her main reason for using worksheets was to teach students vocabulary, which was a surprise since she had thought that she was using them to practise writing and speaking. However, when she looked at her lesson plan analyses and her journal notes, she noticed that she had asked students to:

- identify the rooms of a house and trace the names of the rooms;
- identify the furniture that belongs to each room and that which does not belong and write the words; and
- identify the chores they can do in the different rooms of the house.

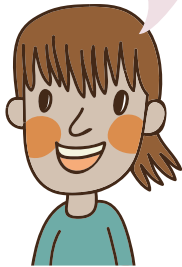
Q2. What do my students think about using worksheets?

Ilse had already suspected that her students liked using worksheets and their responses confirmed this – all of them said they enjoyed doing them. However, they weren't all clear about why they were using them – seven thought they were for learning English while five thought they were for colouring, drawing and writing.

To learn English.



To colour, draw and write.



Q3. What type of activities are in the worksheets that I usually use?

From her notes, Ilse identified different types of activities:

- students cut, glue and colour;
- students trace the name of a room, cross out the object that doesn't belong in it and then write the furniture word that does belong; and
- trace and write.

but she also noted that the most frequent instruction was 'Colour!' and that colouring took up a lot of the time.

color. The time wasn't enough only three ss completely finished the work. The other thirteen ss did cut and glue the furnitures in their right room but didn't color it.

Journal extract (3rd October)

Q4. How effective are the worksheets in complementing the book?

From her lesson plan analyses and journal notes, Ilse found evidence that the worksheets were effective in helping students to remember vocabulary, although not all students and not all of the words.

Journal entry

Before starting the class, I asked students guided questions to check if they remembered the vocabulary we practised in the worksheets during the last class. Ss were able to identify some

vocabulary like kitchen and bathroom, sofa, TV, lamp and toilet.

Images help Ss to remember vocabulary – when I showed Ss the drawing or picture and asked, 'What is this?' they answered correctly for most of the images.

Using the vocabulary, Ss were excited when I showed and explained the pictures and while they were working on it, I noticed that images help ss remember information.

Journal extract (11th October)

Ilse drew three conclusions from her findings, which she could reflect on and act on:

I need to find a way to help students realise that we are doing these worksheet exercises to learn English vocabulary and since images are helpful in learning vocabulary, I need to use more images.

I need to include different activities in the worksheets or use different strategies to teach vocabulary apart from getting students to 'colour'.

What could Ilse change?

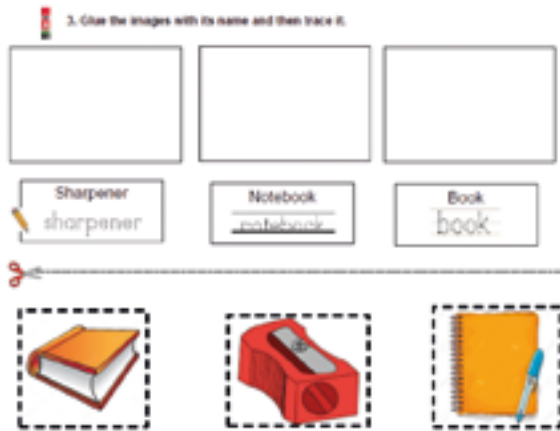
Taking into consideration the information Ilse got from her exploration, she looked at the topics in the book, e.g. classroom objects, animals, numbers and colours, and designed and created new worksheets in colour (so students didn't need to spend time colouring). All the worksheets followed the same format and included the same three different matching activities focused on ten words:

1. Students choose the correct word (from two) to match to the image;



Example of activity 1

2. Students cut out and glue the image next to the correct word;
3. Students then trace the word that matches the image.



Example of activities 2 and 3

Ilse used these worksheets during the development stage of every lesson for a period of two weeks.



Were the changes effective?

To evaluate the impact of these actions, at the end of the two weeks, Ilse again used lesson plan analysis to know how much time she allowed students to complete the activities, how instructions were managed, and to check if the size of the images was appropriate to the tasks.

In her reflective journal, which she completed after every lesson, she focused on:

- the words students remembered the most;
- the difficulties students faced when completing the worksheets;
- if the time given was enough; and
- if she thought the worksheets were successful.

And, at the end of the first and second week of using the new worksheets, she interviewed the students again in Spanish and asked them:

- Which worksheet was your favourite?
- Was it easy or difficult to do the worksheets?
- Did you understand the instructions?
- Which exercise type did you prefer?
- Do you think the worksheets help you to learn vocabulary in English?
- Would you like to continue using worksheets?

Interview questions
(translated from Spanish)

What Ilse discovered

From her journal notes, Ilse realised that at the start of each lesson, she asked students a series of questions to check how well they had remembered the words, and she found that they had learned between three and five each time, which was very encouraging.

Ss remembered the words: dog, donkey,
 cow, horse, pig, cat, chickens and duck.
 The matching exercise was a little bit
 difficult because some Ss don't know
 how to read yet. Ss also had some
 trouble at choosing the right word
 from two options.
 The time given was enough, Ss finished
 on time because they were familiar with
 the instructions.
 When we checked the answer Ss
 had most of them correct. Ss also

Journal extract (13th January)

She also observed that since the format of each worksheet was the same, students quickly got used to the format so she didn't need to spend time repeating instructions and students didn't take too much time completing them. In fact, all her students said they could easily understand the instructions when asked. However, some students faced difficulties with matching words because they were still learning to read.

② Ss now are familiar with
 the pattern of the instructions
 in the worksheets so that
 helped them to answer them
 faster.
 ③ The size of images and letters
 were appropriate.

Extract from final lesson plan notes

During the interviews, it was clear that all students were completely aware that the worksheets were designed to help them learn vocabulary in English and they said they enjoyed doing all of the activity types.

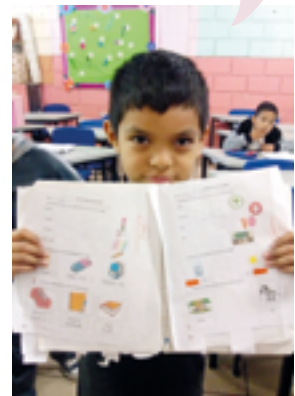
The majority of students said their favourite was the 'cut, glue and trace' activity because they liked cutting and thought it was fun. Those who could read preferred matching words and pictures.

Moreover, the vast majority said they preferred the new worksheets, although not surprisingly, those who were still learning to read preferred the previous worksheets because they were easier i.e. they only had to colour.



They're colourful and pretty!

They have animals and school objects I like.



What Ilse learned

Ilse feels it was really useful to explore the situation at the start of her research because it helped her to become aware of why she was using worksheets, and once she understood that, she realised that there was too much 'colouring' and that she hadn't thought about the number of words she was teaching and practising. Besides that, she wasn't paying much attention when choosing worksheets either. Her findings made her more conscious of all these things.

I need to be more careful when teaching new vocabulary and not introduce too many words, just 3 or 5, and I need to be careful when selecting or making worksheets too!

She also discovered that routine and patterns work. Using the same worksheet format over and over again saves both her and her students time and makes it easier for them to 'get on with their work' and learn. And asking students their opinions about activities is a good way to know if they are effective.

Sometimes it's easy to carry on using the same strategy and assume students like it without knowing if it's effective, or not.

Final reflections

Doing this Exploratory Action Research gave Ilse the opportunity to examine her teaching – her beliefs, approach, strategies, and so on. It also gave her the chance to find out what her students thought about a particular approach or activity, and to use that information when making decisions on whether or not to make changes or improvements.

I will definitely continue using this approach, not only to be a better teacher but to give my students an opportunity to express their thoughts and take these into consideration.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the British Council for giving me the opportunity to be part of this project. I must also thank my mentor Martha de la Cruz for her time and guidance. Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to the principal of the school, Erika Gutiérrez, the teacher of the group, Jaqueline Quijano, and to all the students who participated.

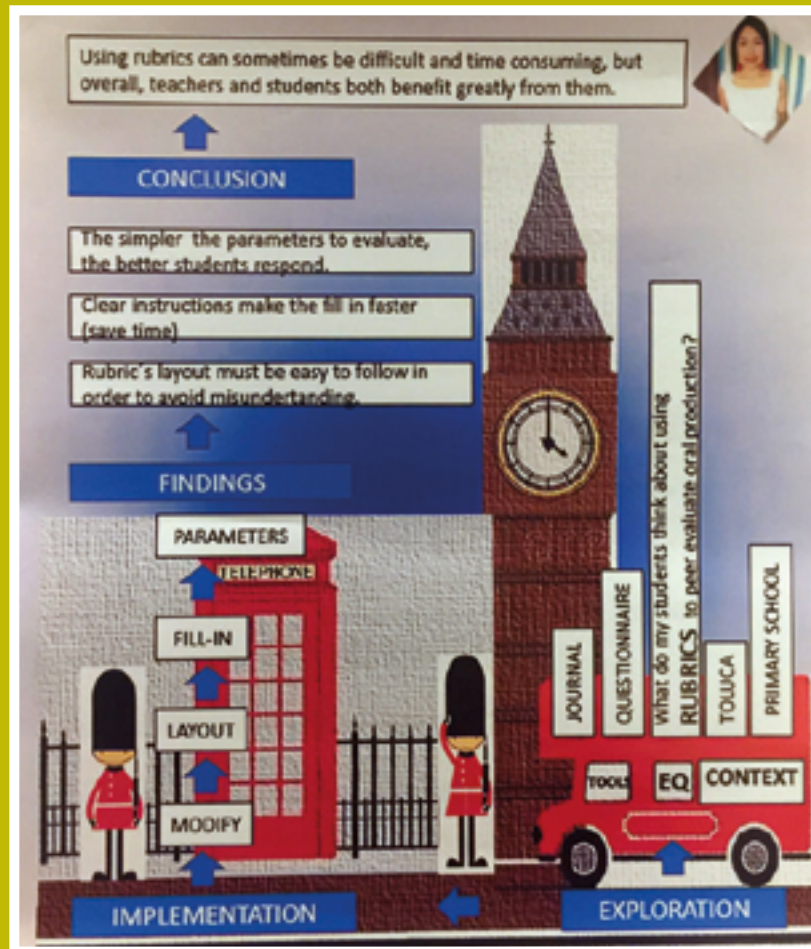
Reflection

"Sometimes it's easy to carry on using the same strategy and assume students like it without knowing if it's effective, or not." Doing this project gave Ilse the opportunity to examine her use of worksheets and make changes or improvements. Most teachers tend to have their favourite strategies and resources but are they effective? Could they be improved? What are your 'favourites'? Are they as effective as they could be? How do you know? What could you do to find out?

3 Using rubrics to peer evaluate oral production

Andrea Martínez Sandoval

Toluca, State of Mexico



Teaching context

Andrea teaches English at two primary schools in Toluca city. For this project she decided to focus on her Grade 6A class, a group of 35 students – 18 girls and 17 boys aged 12. They had two 50-minute lessons per week and were at CEFR A2 level. The students participated well and were energetic and attentive during the English classes.



Why focus on rubrics?

Andrea chose to focus on the use of rubrics to support peer evaluation of oral production. She had already used rubrics the previous year but had noticed that some of her students did not fill in all the spaces on the forms,

i.e. they had not fully evaluated their partners, so she was interested to know what her students thought about using rubrics during peer evaluation of speaking.

Exploring the issue

Based on the context and the topic, Andrea formulated three exploratory research questions:

1. Why is it important to me to use rubrics to peer evaluate oral production?
2. What do my students think about the format of the rubric?
3. What do my students think about using rubrics to peer evaluate oral production?

And in order to collect her initial data she opted to use a student questionnaire, a journal and material analysis.

Student questionnaire

For the questionnaire, Andrea created five questions to find out students' feelings and opinions about using rubrics in class. This was originally written and answered in Spanish. The questionnaire was anonymous in order to obtain honest and accurate information.

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Complete the following questionnaire by choosing the option that you consider best.

1. How do you feel when you are evaluating your partner when speaking English?
 - a) comfortable
 - b) confident
 - c) nervous
 - d) confused
 - e) other _____
2. Why do you think you feel this way?
 - a) Because the rubric helps me evaluate my classmates.
 - b) Because I like to evaluate my classmates.
 - c) Because I feel that I am not evaluating my classmates well.
 - d) Because the rubric is complicated.
 - e) Other: _____

3. What do you think of the use of rubrics to evaluate your classmates during oral activities? You can choose more than one option.

a) They are necessary.
 b) They are important.
 c) They are unnecessary.
 d) They are a waste of time.
 e) Other: _____

4. Do you think that the design of the rubric is...?

a) clear b) easy to complete c) difficult to follow d) confusing to use
 Why? _____

5. Would you like to continue evaluating your classmates using rubrics?

a) Yes b) No
 Why? _____

Journal

Since Andrea wanted to reflect further about why she thought rubrics were so important, she decided to note down her thoughts and observations in a journal. She created two questions to guide her and answered these at the end of a lesson in which students peer evaluated their classmates’ oral presentations:

- Why is it important to me to use rubrics during peer evaluation of speaking?
- What do I notice when students are peer evaluating?

Materials analysis

Andrea also thought it would be useful to analyse her students’ peer evaluation forms in order to find out if students were filling them in correctly and/or they were only partially completing them.



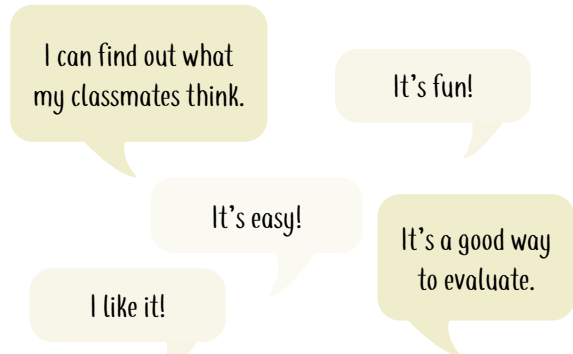
What Andrea found

How did students feel about peer evaluation?

Responses from the questionnaires showed that most students felt ‘comfortable’ or ‘confident’ when evaluating their peers (20), but some felt ‘nervous’ (9) or ‘confused’ (4). Those who answered positively explained that ‘the rubric helped’ or that they ‘enjoyed’ peer evaluation. Less positive feelings were related to thinking they were not good at evaluating or the rubric being ‘complicated’.

Opinions about the rubric

The vast majority of students considered the use of rubrics ‘necessary’ and ‘important’; and the format ‘clear’ or ‘easy to complete’. However, six could not see the point of them, and five found them ‘confusing’. In response to whether they would like to continue using them, the vast majority replied, ‘Yes’ because:



The six who said ‘No’ gave no explanations.

Why is the use of rubrics important to Andrea?

Andrea reflected on this and noted some ideas in her journal:

Journal entry

I strongly believe rubrics can be a great help to both teachers and students at the moment of evaluation ... I believe it is better when they feel active participants and their role is as important as their performance when presenting their oral projects.



After analysing and reflecting on her findings, Andrea concluded that she should continue to use rubrics during peer evaluation but that she would need to make some changes:

I want all students to feel part of the evaluation process. I have to ensure that the aspects to evaluate are clearer. I will re-design the layout of the rubric so it is clearer.

Three actions

Based on her findings, Andrea decided that she should design her own rubric for her students, and focus on three different aspects:

1. the design of the layout of the rubric;
2. the fill-in (how to complete it);
3. the inclusion of scores for each criteria.

Andrea designed a new rubric with a new layout and a simple format which included a set of instructions at the start as well as eight criteria. She also added a scoring system (excellent = 5; good = 3; needs improvement = 1) so that students could give a total score at the end.

What did Andrea notice during peer evaluation?

From her journal notes, Andrea noticed how active students became while evaluating the oral presentations, although some had questions about how to fill in the rubric correctly. For some of the students the criteria to evaluate was not clear enough and they felt left behind during the evaluation process.

Journal entry

When students were peer evaluating I observed how they paid more attention to their classmates' presentations. They seemed to be more concentrated on the task and also the rest of students tried to do their best.

Students used the new rubric to evaluate two speaking tasks. The first task focused on using possessive pronouns to introduce family members; during the week they worked on creating a mini-album which they then presented. The second task focused on talking about abilities (can/can't), and for this task students created a mind map and illustrated it with diverse examples.



PRESENTATION RUBRIC

INSTRUCTIONS:
Listen carefully to the presentation and color the best option, then complete the score.

Presenter: _____

CRITERIA	EXCELLENT (5)	GOOD (4)	NEED IMPROVEMENT (3)	SCORE
1- Student spoke clear and loud enough.	😊	😊	😊	○
2- Student spoke at a good pace.	😊	😊	😊	○
3- Student had a proper intonation.	😊	😊	😊	○
4- Student looked at the audience.	😊	😊	😊	○
5- Student gave clear examples using the appropriate grammar structure.	😊	😊	😊	○
6- Student used pictures, drawings or props to present the vocabulary.	😊	😊	😊	○
7- Student had a good posture and demonstrated enthusiasm.	😊	😊	😊	○
8- Student used the vocabulary given to cover the topic.	😊	😊	😊	○
TOTAL:				

Teacher: _____

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Andrea's new rubric



What was the outcome of these improvements?

To evaluate her actions, Andrea used the same tools as she did during the exploratory phase:

A student questionnaire to gather students' feelings and opinions on using the new format. She administered this at the end of the implementation period and in the same way as she had during the exploratory phase – in Spanish and anonymously.

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Complete the following questionnaire by choosing the option that you consider best.

- How do you feel about using this new rubric format to evaluate your peers?
 - more comfortable
 - confident
 - nervous
 - confused
 - other _____
- Do you consider that the design of the new rubric is?
 - clearer
 - easier to complete
 - more difficult to follow
 - more confusing when using it
 Why? _____
- Do you consider that the design of the new rubric is?
 - Simpler using faces and scores.
 - More complete using faces and scores.
 - More complicated to fill in and evaluate at the same time.
 - More difficult when evaluating and filling in the score.
- Do you think that the number of evaluation criteria is enough?
 - Yes
 - No
 Why? _____
- Would you like to continue evaluating your classmates using rubrics at the end of each oral product?
 - Yes
 - No
 Why? _____

A journal to continue noting her reflections about the students' reactions and her thoughts about the implementation of the new rubric. This time she created three focus questions and made notes during and after two separate lessons:

1. What do I notice when students are peer evaluating using the new format?
2. How do I feel using the new rubrics for peer evaluation in my English class?
3. In what ways is the new format effective when peer evaluating?

Material analysis to compare and contrast how students used the original and new rubric. At the end of this implementation phase, Andrea checked whether the students had fully filled in all parts of the new rubric or whether they had left some empty spaces (as they had done with the original). She was pleased to see that this time, however, the evaluations were complete.

Some positive results

How students responded to the new rubric

Results from the questionnaire showed that students' opinions about the new rubric were positive. 16 students said they felt 'more comfortable' evaluating their peers using the new format and 13 reported feeling 'more confident'. Additionally, 16 students said the new format was simpler because it was faster to complete, which was interesting as the original rubric had only four criteria while the new one had eight. Even so, the vast majority of students (28) felt that eight was the right number because including both faces and scores was the best way to relate meaning. And finally, almost all of them (30) agreed that they would like to continue to evaluate their classmates using this new format.

I feel better doing it.

I can evaluate well.

It's fun and more comfortable.

It's better for giving our opinions.

In what ways was the new format effective?

After comparing how her students filled in the new rubric with how they had completed the original one, Andrea noticed that the changes had had a positive impact since the evaluations were more fully completed.



→ Students use both images and formats criteria to understand the concepts better.
 → Students move to an specific place in the patio to evaluate. It causes a better concentration as they focus on the evaluation process.
 → Students underline the key concepts.
 → At this activity takes 15' I monitor and observe the process is working well.

Extract from journal – 13th January

Andrea reflected on how differently her students behaved when using the new rubric. In the past, she had found that many students came to her asking for clarification on how to use the rubric and she had spent a lot of time explaining and helping them. However, with the new rubric, this pattern of behaviour stopped; students started working more independently and more quickly.



- What do I notice when students are peer evaluating using the new format?
They ~~for~~ are getting used to the new format. Students complete the format faster without asking for clarification. Once they know who is going to be the ..
- How do I feel using the new rubrics format for peer evaluation in my English class?
I feel more confident this time. I can leave students complete the format in a ~~to~~ less controlled environment.
- In what ways is the new format effective when peer evaluating?
→ Students like the format more. They told me: Miss this format is better.

Extract from journal – 21th January

What Andrea learned

Before doing this exploratory action research, Andrea assumed that rubrics were important for peer evaluation, although her reasons were not completely clear, even to herself. However, during the exploratory phase of the project, she was able to identify some aspects of her approach that needed to change if she was to use rubrics effectively in the classroom. After implementing some changes, she came to understand that although using rubrics can sometimes be difficult and time-consuming, on the whole teachers and students can both benefit greatly from them. However:

- The layout must be easy to follow to avoid confusion and misunderstandings;
- The instructions must be clear so students can fill them in faster, which saves time;
- The simpler the criteria to evaluate, the better the students respond.

Additionally, Andrea now understands the importance of self-reflection and taking into account students' feedback because their opinions play an important part in the development of better teaching practice.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my special thanks to the Principal of my school, Blanca Yuri Marcial Pedroza, as well as the home room teacher, Maria Guadalupe López Flores, who gave me the opportunity to do this wonderful project with her group. It helped me to learn about so many things and I am really thankful to them.

Reflection

Before doing this EAR project, Andrea thought that research involved searching the Internet and looking for recommendations from well-renowned and experienced ELT authors, but she learnt that by listening to her students' needs and opinions she was able to come up with her own ideas and solutions. What do you tend to do when you face a classroom problem? Could you do what Andrea did – explore the situation and come up with your own ideas? Would you like to try? What would be the focus of your mini-project?

I always thought that research involved searching the Internet and looking for recommendations from well-renowned and experienced ELT authors to find answers to problems that take place in my classroom. But this time I looked to my students – listened to their needs and opinions – and came up with my own ideas and solutions.

My students will always be the most important resource I have in my school, and listening and acting based on my findings are the key to evolving and improving as an English teacher.

4 The use of L1 in the L2 classroom

Karla Alejandra De la Rocha Cardoza

Lerdo, Durango, Mexico



Teaching context

“Teaching English as an L2 is always a challenge. Whenever you walk in a new classroom, there is the certainty that those things that once worked, might not and, most importantly, that every day is a new opportunity to improve your teaching practice.”

This is what Alejandra thought after working several years in the city, but when she was assigned a new job in a rural school outside Durango, she found that teaching English as an L2 became harder than ever.

Students in this area do not have contact with the language until they begin middle school – the first level of education in Mexico where English is mandatory. Consequently, Alejandra faced a dilemma:

Should I use Spanish (L1) due to the very low level of the students or English (L2) because they need to learn?

At the school, Alejandra is in charge of 12 groups from three different grades – around 400 students in all, but for this project she decided to work with a group of 27 students in Grade 1, section C; a group that consisted of 11 girls and 16 boys, all of them between 11 and 12



years old. As the majority of the students in this group were boys, the energy level was always very high; they were very active and constantly playing around in the classroom and speaking louder than necessary. Even worse, they were not that interested in learning English and frequently complained about not understanding anything Alejandra said in the L2. In short, they were struggling to adapt to their first year of English lessons and Alejandra decided that this class could probably benefit most from her exploratory action research.

What Alejandra wanted to explore

What Alejandra found was that she was conducting her lessons mainly in Spanish; she had tried to include more English but always ended up frustrated because her students simply could not understand. She noticed that she was not even able to get their attention or get them on task if she used English as they couldn't understand basic instructions. Well, she assumed they understood nothing in English, but realised she needed to explore the situation further to find out exactly what was happening and also to address this challenging situation.

Alejandra's exploration

To guide her exploration, she formulated four questions:

1. What are my objectives when using Spanish in the L2 classroom?
2. How often do I use L1 and L2 in the classroom?
3. When and why are my colleagues using L1 in the classroom?
4. What do my students feel about me using L1/L2 in the classroom?

To find answers, she designed three tools to help her analyse the situation from different perspectives.

Peer observation. Alejandra video-recorded three separate lessons and shared these with three of her peers (one each) via Google Drive along with an observation tool written in English. The observation tool consisted of four questions focused on when and why Alejandra used L1 or L2 during the lesson.

Observation Tool

The objective of this tool is to describe the teacher's teaching practice and help awake self-awareness about the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. Please be as objective and impartial as possible, always keeping in mind this is not a tool to evaluate, but help the teacher see and register what happens in the classroom.

1. Describe in what situations the T uses the L1.
2. Describe in what situations the T uses the L2.
3. In what part of the class is the T using L1/L2? E.g. At the beginning, in the explanation.
4. What language is the T using most of the time and what is the reason?

Thank you for your help and collaboration.

Student questionnaire. Alejandra designed the questionnaire to get information from her students' perspective. She included four multiple-choice questions asking her students to identify when she used Spanish and when she used English, e.g. to greet them or start the lesson. She also included two open questions to find out how they felt when she spoke to them in Spanish and English. This was written in Spanish and administered at the end of the exploratory phase.

Journal. To help her reflect on her use of L1 and L2, Alejandra completed a digital journal after each of the video-recorded lessons. During her reflections she focused on:

- her use of L1 and L2
- her reasons for using L1 or L2
- her objectives for using L1 or L2
- her feelings when using L1 and L2.

Surprising findings

What Alejandra found surprised her.

Before analysing the data, she had believed that she was only using Spanish to check her students' understanding and clarify instructions. What she found was that while this was true, she was also using Spanish to repeat whatever she had said in English – translating herself, and in fact, overusing Spanish.

1. Describe in what situations the T uses the L1.

T used Spanish to explain to students different situations in order to make the introduction of the topic, then she used Spanish to talk with some students about their behaviour, and a little bit more to explain the topic of the class using some examples, and to make sure instructions were clear.

Extract from peer observation feedback

She also discovered that she used Spanish more than she used English – all three of her peers observed the predominance of Spanish, and the main reasons were to get students' attention or manage behaviour, and to check understanding. Alejandra's own reflections supported these findings and she had noted how 'worried' she was about overusing Spanish.

4. What language is the T using most of the time and what is the reason?

Spanish, to explain situations in order to start the class and activate previous knowledge, and she also used it to check understanding about the topic and instructions.

Extract from peer observation feedback

Surprisingly, her students recognised her use of Spanish as a key strategy in ensuring they understood the themes and instructions, but they also believed that the use of English was necessary to promote learning.

Hmm, my students appreciate my use of L1 but expect me to use L2 in order for them to learn the language – interesting!

This understanding served as a strong foundation for Alejandra to use English more and reduce her use of Spanish; she could think about how to apply strategies to achieve this.

Time for action

After some reflection on these findings, Alejandra came up with an action plan that included three actions to reduce the use of L1 in the L2 classroom.

1. Using flashcards

Alejandra decided that she could get students' attention and manage behaviour by using flashcards with pictures and English phrases. If students were misbehaving, she could call out their names, show the flashcard and get them to stop. For example, *Pick up the trash!* or *Sit down properly!* always using English as she showed the pictures so students understood what she was saying.



2. Using visual aids

Additionally, to reduce her use of L1 when giving instructions, Alejandra decided to use visual aids to illustrate actions. She would hold the visual and say the

instruction in English, emphasizing the word that was being shown. The visual aids included a picture and a phrase or word, e.g. a picture of a girl drawing a flower using a pen and the word 'Draw'.



3. Using instruction-checking questions

Immediately after giving instructions with the help of the visual aids, Alejandra asked instruction-checking questions (ICQs) to check the students knew what to do, e.g. *What are you going to do? How many words are you going to write? Are you going to use your book or your notebook?* Etc.

Alejandra implemented these actions over the course of nine lessons.



Were Alejandra's actions effective?

At the end of the implementation phase, Alejandra again used **peer observations**, **student questionnaires** and her **journal reflections** to find out whether her use of L1 and L2 had changed as planned, and also whether the actions and changes had proved effective. Each was administered in the same way as for the exploratory phase.

Observation Tool

The objective of this tool is to illustrate the teacher's perception of the intervention she is applying in her teaching practice, and to help her assess how effective it has been. Please be as objective and impartial as possible, always keeping in mind this is not a tool to evaluate, but to help the teacher see and register what happens in the classroom.

1. Describe in what situations the T uses the L1.
2. Describe in what situations the T uses the L2.
3. What strategies does the T use to gain the students' attention? And to give instructions?
4. Do the strategies contribute to the use of less L1 in the classroom, and when are the strategies being used?
5. Are students responding to the T's calls for attention and instructions in the L2?

Thank you for your help and collaboration.

Some positive results

Using flashcards

Students' responses to the questionnaire revealed that they had noticed a change in how Alejandra gained their attention and managed behaviour; although they felt Alejandra still used Spanish at times, they also noted her use of English had increased. Her peers also commented on the impact of the flashcards – what they noted was how students seemed more focused, although they also noticed that she resorted to Spanish with one or two students in particular when they misbehaved.

Most of the students looked more focused when T showed the flashcards. It seemed that it was easier for them to learn vocabulary. They also showed more confidence about the activity after seeing the images.

(Peer observer 1)

T held up the flashcards, and some Ss got the meaning of the sentences/instructions right away. In some other cases, Ss struggled a bit, but mostly because they were not really paying attention.

(Peer observer 2)

Moreover, from her journal notes, Alejandra noted that incidents of misbehaviour decreased and that if she needed to 'tell off' particular students, they more clearly understood why, even in English, and seemed comfortable with the strategy.



Journal entry

What I noticed since the very beginning of applying the tools is that Ss feel comfortable with the instructions and flashcards, even when I did not show the cards, they have begun to understand why I was calling their attention.

Using visual aids

Alejandra noticed that the use of visual aids to help students understand the instructions had been effective in supporting understanding and that this had also helped them to understand the vocabulary related to instructions faster.



Journal entry

...compared with the first lessons, there has been an enormous development of their comprehension. Some ss even asked me to show them the visual aid and then understood what I was asking them to do.

Her students agreed – all of them indicated that when she gave instructions using the visual aids, it was easier for them to know what to do. And her colleagues also observed how students began working on the tasks immediately.

Using instruction-checking questions

Furthermore, all her students agreed that the instruction-checking questions helped them to clarify any remaining doubts about the activities. Feedback from her colleagues supported this finding. They agreed that the questions proved useful but commented that students answered these in Spanish. Alejandra felt that this was to be expected due to their level of English, but also thought this may be an interesting puzzle to address in a future exploration. Alejandra’s peers also noted that she used key words in English to guide understanding and that she only resorted to L1 with students who had not heard the instructions because they weren’t listening or misbehaving. Overall then, Alejandra could conclude that English had become the predominant language being used to give instructions and explain activities.



Overall, Alejandra felt that she had achieved a good L1/L2 balance; the changes had resulted in a classroom where the predominant language was English without overwhelming students. In fact, during the final lessons, students successfully understood written and spoken instructions even before she showed the visual aids and flashcards, which suggests they had already acquired the vocabulary related to the most common instructions and misbehaviour.

Journal entry

When analysing today’s class, I noticed with satisfaction how far my students have come. I barely use the L1 compared with the exploratory stage, and I believe the transition has been so smooth that the Ss haven’t even noticed it or, rather, they might have noticed it, but it is not complicated, thanks to the tools.

Nevertheless, she recognised that even though these strategies had helped most of her students, there were still two who continued to seek support in Spanish.

What Alejandra learned

Now that I’ve finished this research project, it’s hard to believe how much learning my students were missing out on because of my misconceptions of their needs and wants. Assuming my students can’t understand the L2 should not be reason enough for me not to try out new ways to teach it.

During the exploratory stage of this research, it was the first time Alejandra had got to know what her students felt and thought about her lessons, and what they expected from her. Until that point, she was not aware that getting their attention or managing their behaviour took up a significant part of the lesson or that they were experiencing an English class where the predominant language was Spanish. However, once she had the information from her exploration and began implementing the changes, she noticed how much easier it was for her students to understand and, in a matter of weeks, the class transitioned from a predominantly Spanish-speaking one to an English-speaking one, without any complaints from the students.

Reflections on EAR

Alejandra has learned about a new way to approach any situation that makes her feel puzzled or conflicted in the classroom. She realises that it isn't only her opinion that is important, but that it's also necessary to take into account her students' and her colleagues' thoughts and ideas before making decisions about what to do or change.

Being part of the Champion Teachers Programme has been extremely fulfilling both personally and professionally. One more time I have proved to myself that things worth learning always require patience and hard work, and that most of the time the limits are in one's mind. Doing this research helped me see my students' learning experience, and my teaching practice, as something that can be improved. Moreover, I would like to acknowledge that innovation and change in the classroom are always welcome, and – more importantly – necessary to help reduce the challenges we as teachers encounter. Thanks to Exploratory Action Research, I have now learned about a feasible way to make this happen.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the British Council for having pioneered this amazing programme in Mexico and given teachers the opportunity to learn and improve. Moreover, I appreciate the effort you made for opening this channel so that we – teachers who have been part of Champion Teachers – can share our experience and learning with the rest of our community.

Reflection

The dilemma of how much L1 should be used in the classroom is one that many teachers face, but by carrying out this EAR project, Alejandra was quickly able to achieve a good balance and transform her class from a predominantly Spanish-speaking one to an English-speaking one, without any complaints from the students. For Alejandra, this was the first time she had actively sought to find out what her students felt and thought about her lessons, and what they expected from her, and she was surprised by what she found. Do you face a similar dilemma in your teaching? What have you done to try to understand and solve it? Could you carry out a small research project, like Alejandra, to help you with this?

5

Using letter tiles

María Myrna Morales Fierros

Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico



Teaching context

The school where Myrna did her research is located in the border town of Cd. Juarez, Chihuahua. It is a private, bilingual school where students take classes half of the day in Spanish and half of the day in English, even in middle school they still have three English subjects per grade. Myrna teaches grammar to middle school students in Grades 2 and 3 and for this project, she decided to work with a third grade group of 22 students – 13 boys and nine girls aged 14 to 15. The students were a strong B1/B2 level according to proficiency tests applied at the beginning of the school year, and they were used to working at a faster pace than students of their age at regular public schools. Myrna saw them almost every day because they had four 50-minute lessons with her per week.



Choosing a focus

For this EAR project, Myrna decided to focus on letter tile activities because she had found them to be a useful resource over the course of the past year. Her previous students had seemed to enjoy the activities and had been eager to participate in them; immediately they had come into class, they'd started setting up their letter tiles. Myrna had also seen an improvement in their test results.

The main reason Myrna started to use letter tile activities was to promote whole group participation and keep students motivated:

We teachers very often see that when we are brainstorming or reviewing the lesson, there are only a couple of students that want to participate (usually the same ones). They blurt out the answer and they take away the opportunity from other students to even try and participate. In order to avoid that, all students had to answer my questions using their letter tiles, and the first to answer correctly could win stickers or participation points that would eventually count toward their grade in the form of bonus points.

Myrna describes letter tiles and how she uses them...

For those of you not familiar with letter tiles, let me explain:

Each student has a set of about 36 cards (one per letter but two for vowels and the most commonly used consonants).

During activities, I give students a series of questions related to grammar concepts or the spelling of words (e.g. What are the plural subject pronouns?) or I dictate the spelling words, but instead of the students answering out loud, they form the answer using their letter tiles. (This means I can have the whole class working on an answer at the same time and not just a couple of students yelling the answer before anybody else gets a chance to participate.)

Working with letter tiles is really easy because you can incorporate them into your daily warm-up routine and the material needed isn't costly (just a couple of colour pages or construction paper and markers), although it does take a little practice for students to get used to a) not saying the answer, but writing it with their letter tiles, and b) handling their letter tiles quickly.

These activities can be done inside or outside the classroom, and students can play individually, in pairs or in teams.



Exploring the situation

Myrna liked using letter tiles very much but she wondered if her students felt the same way. In fact, even though she thought they were useful, she did wonder if her previous students had felt the same, and she was unsure if letter tile activities were a hit with this new group of Grade 3 students. So, her first exploratory question was: *What do my students think about using letter tiles?*

And because she wanted to know how her students felt about the competitive element, her second question was: *How do students feel when they don't win in the letter tile activities?*

Myrna was also aware that other teachers in the school used letter tiles so she decided to find out their opinions: *What do my colleagues think about using letter tiles?*

And her final question was reflective: *Why is using letter tiles important to me?*

Looking for answers

To find answers to these exploratory questions, Myrna decided on four different methods.

Peer observations. Myrna knew that when she carried out letter tile activities, it could get a bit hectic; she was aware that she moved around the classroom a lot, or on some days the hall or basketball courts, so it was hard for her to observe everything that went on. For this reason she invited two English teachers to come and observe to give a fuller description of what happened. For this she provided them with a series of questions to use as a guide.

Peer interviews. Myrna also interviewed a couple of teachers—a former co-worker and a colleague from ProNI (Programa Nacional de Inglés). Her questions focused on why they used letter tiles, what they had found easy/difficult about using them, and any positive or negative effects on student learning and development.

Student questionnaire. To get feedback from her students, Myrna designed a questionnaire consisting of ten questions (multiple-choice and open) written entirely in English although students were told they could answer in either English or Spanish. Myrna suspected that the information obtained from this would prove most valuable.



Students working with their letter tiles: building sentences, answering grammar questions, and creating vocabulary crossword puzzles.

Dear third graders,

Please answer the following questions. Your answers will help me in my research project.

Thank you for your help.

1. How do you feel about using letter tiles in class?
 - I like it very much.
 - I like it.
 - It is the same to me.
 - I don't like it at all.Why? _____
2. How do you feel when you win in the letter tile activities?
 - motivated
 - happy
 - uninterested
 - embarrassed
3. How do you feel when you don't win in the letter tile activities?
 - embarrassed
 - disappointed
 - motivated
 - challenged
4. How do you prefer to work with letter tiles?
 - individually
 - in pairs
 - in teamsWhy? _____
5. What do you prefer when we use letter tiles?
 - The teacher assigns the pair/team.
 - Students can choose their pair/team.Why? _____
6. What is the best thing about working with letter tiles? _____
7. What is the worst thing about working with letter tiles? _____
8. Do you think working with letter tiles helps you in your English classes?
 - Yes.
 - No.Why? _____
9. How often should we use letter tiles in class?
 - once a week
 - twice a week
 - other? _____
10. Can you give me any ideas on how we could use letter tiles in class?

Student questionnaire

Journal. Myrna also needed to explore her own perspective. She really wanted to know how this group of students responded to the letter tile activities and whether they were really worth the trouble or not. Over the course of eight lessons she noted her reflections in a journal.

Some surprises

At the end of her exploration, Myrna found that much of the data confirmed her expectations but there were also some surprises.

Questionnaire responses

A considerable amount of information was obtained from the student questionnaire responses, and as Myrna had anticipated and hoped, the majority of students (18) said they liked working with letter tiles; only four students said that it made no difference to them or the way they learned. Almost all of them (20) also believed that the letter tile activities helped them do better in class and that practising with them made them feel more confident about what they had learned. In addition, 19 mentioned that they preferred working in teams since they could learn from their teammates and the chances of winning were higher.



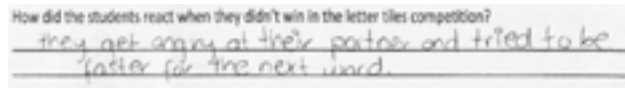
Students working with their letter tiles – working with verbs

However, while most of the students said working with letter tiles was fun, a break from doing the usual stuff, a good way to earn bonus points and helpful in improving academically in class, they felt the way they were conducted caused them stress; more than half mentioned the word 'stressful' in their responses. And because the time and/or opportunities to win were limited, some students also lost motivation.

Regarding how they felt when they didn't win, eight students reported feeling 'disappointed' and one felt 'embarrassed' but surprisingly, nine felt 'challenged' to keep trying and four felt 'motivated' (one student didn't answer the question).

Peer feedback

Myrna found that her colleagues' responses to the interview questions very much echoed her students'. Both of the teachers interviewed felt that the letter tile activities helped students academically and boosted the students' confidence in class but added that since they are competitive, they can also prove stressful for those students who are struggling academically, to the point of even refusing to participate. The two teachers that observed her classes also noticed that when students didn't win, they would pressure their teammates to try and do better in the next activity.



Extract from peer observation form

1. Have you noticed any effect positive or negative, on your students' academic development linked to the use of letter tiles in your class?

I think that it's positive because they, well, my students that are kinesthetic and visual get more attracted to see the words or to move the letters, so they can form the words.

And I think that for the ones that have a little bit of trouble identifying letters, even reading in upper grades, I think that activity is a little bit stressful.

Comment from the interview with the Peinado- cycle 1 teacher at ProNI

Journal reflections

When reviewing her notes, Myrna also noticed that although most of the students participated in the letter tile activities and displayed a positive attitude, there were times when not all students were involved. When she asked them about this, they responded:

What's the point of stressing to do the activities if we are not going to win because other teams have better players?



Students working with their letter tiles – relay spelling race

Action plan

After carefully analysing of all the information she had collected, Myrna realised that she needed to create a more positive experience for the students when using letter tiles and make sure that the experience wasn't stressful.

How can I promote a positive learning environment during the letter tile activities?

After thinking about it for some time, she was aware that there were two main adjustments to be made:

1. First of all, she decided that the letter tile activities would be organised in teams since most of the students preferred working that way.
2. Secondly, the activities would be designed as a series of tasks to be completed correctly within a set time. This way all teams could win points depending on how many tasks they successfully completed. (One of the reasons students felt stressed was because in order to win they had to be the first to answer

correctly, which meant that besides knowing the correct answer they also had to be really fast with the letter tiles.)

To be continued ...

Unfortunately, Myrna was unable to implement her action plan due to a medical emergency that kept her away from school for three weeks. However, even though the letter tile project is not yet finished, Myrna still intends to implement the changes she has described and she *does* believe that there will be a difference in how students feel about the letter tile activities.

What Myrna learnt

As a teacher, Myrna planned her lessons trying to keep most, if not all, of her students in mind, but she seldom stopped to ask students what they thought or felt about how these lessons were carried out. When she introduced competition, she needed to consider that while it made things fun and engaging for some, others felt overwhelmed by the rush of needing to win. This is something she will keep in mind from now on.

What Myrna was not expecting, and it surprised her in a very positive way, was the way students and parents responded to being involved in this project. All of the parents authorised their child's participation and the students took it really seriously. They answered the questionnaire thoughtfully and gave some interesting suggestions on how to improve the activities themselves. Best of all, this encouraged them to voice their opinions more often and opened the door to a more effective communication channel between themselves and Myrna.

Something Myrna would change in future explorations would be her choice of peer observers. For this project she chose a couple of co-workers, but she now thinks it would have been best to invite someone who was not so close to her or her work in order to get more objective information.

Myrna's reflections on the challenges of EAR

The process of becoming a Champion Teacher was challenging to say the least. At first, I thought it was going to be very easy to carry out the investigation, but it wasn't. I had a lot to learn! 'Patience' for one! I wanted to rush into the 'doing' without really taking the time to analyse and reflect. The data analysis stage was the hardest for me because it was very difficult to remain objective and stick to hard facts rather than my assumptions.

I do want to explore other issues that I've noticed now that I pay more attention to what is going on around me. I am now a Champion Teacher so there may be a researcher in me after all.

Acknowledgements

I am really thankful to my mentor, Elizabeth Espinoza, for keeping me sane because she was able to guide my progress by making me question myself and stay focused. I must admit there were times when I thought about giving up, but she motivated me to keep going.

Reflection

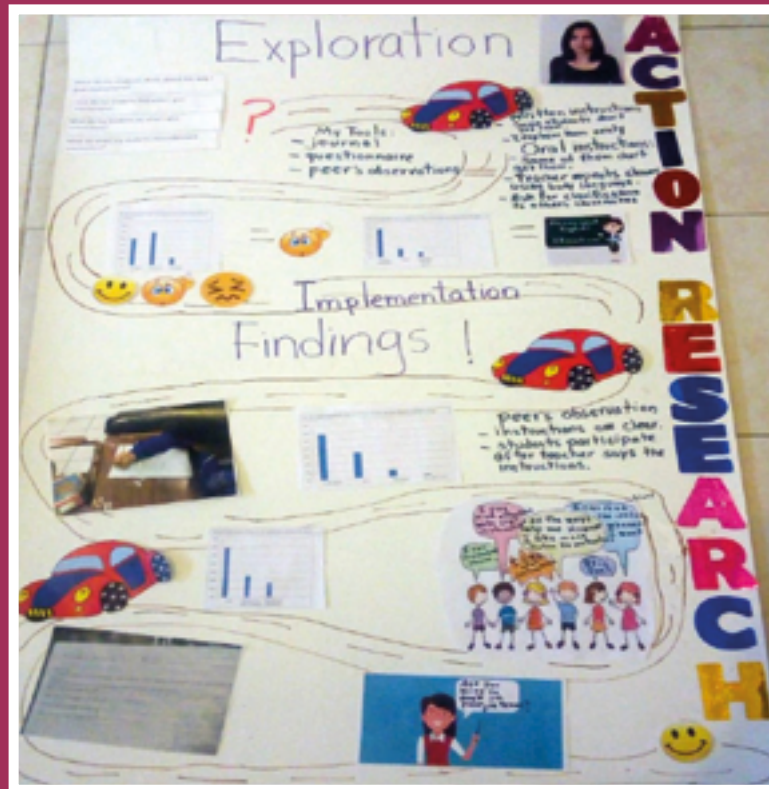
Myrna had become used to using letter tiles and assumed her learners liked using them but she hadn't stopped to ask students what they thought or felt about using them. When she did, she was surprised by their response. Are there activities or resources that you tend to use habitually? Do you know what your learners think about these? How would you find out?

6

Giving instructions

Rosa Nelly Flores Ortegon

Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico



Teaching context

Rosa Nelly teaches English at a public sector primary school, Prof Luis Tijerina Almaguer, in an urban area in the south of the city of Monterrey in the state of Nuevo León. She teaches Grades 4, 5 and 6, but for this project she decided to focus on a Grade 6 class of 27 students (13 girls and 14 boys) aged 11 to 12. The children came from a middle-class background and had been studying English since Grade 1. The class was mixed-level since some were taking private English classes after school or came from private primary schools where they were more exposed to English; others used to have English classes after school, but stopped; and most had never had after-school English classes. Additionally, while their general attitude to learning was good, some were more enthusiastic about English than others but they all liked English songs and video games so that helped them to want to know more about English.

Focus of the research

Rosa Nelly decided to focus on instruction-giving. She was becoming frustrated because it seemed her students never understood what they were supposed to do. She thought about this and wondered whether it was because she gave instructions orally – perhaps she needed to find a different way to help them understand. She decided to explore further.

Exploring the problem

After some reflection, Rosa Nelly came up with four exploratory questions to focus her investigation:

- What do my students think about the way I give instructions?
- How do my students feel when I give instructions?
- What do my students do when I give instructions?
- What do I do when my students misunderstand instructions?

To find answers to these, she designed a **student questionnaire**. She tried to make this as simple as possible and included emoticons to make it attractive and easy to understand. Questions were written in Spanish and English.



EXPLORATION QUESTIONNAIRE

1. ¿Cómo te sientes cuando la maestra te da instrucciones en Inglés?
(How do you feel when the teacher gives you instructions in English?)
 - 😊 a) excelente (*excellent*)
 - 😞 b) confundido (*confused*)
 - 😡 c) frustrado (*frustrated*)
2. ¿Qué tan claras son las instrucciones de la maestra?
(How clear are the teachers' instructions?)
 - 😊 a) muy claras (*very clear*)
 - 😊 b) claras (*clear*)
 - 😞 c) nada claras (*not at all clear*)

3. ¿Qué haces cuando no entiendes las instrucciones de la maestra?
(*What do you do when you don't understand the teacher's instructions?*)
 - a) Preguntas al maestro que te aclare las instrucciones. (*Ask the teacher for clarification.*)
 - b) Preguntas a un compañero que es lo que dijo la maestra. (*Ask a classmate what the teacher said.*)
 - c) No hago nada porque no entiendo nada. (*I don't do anything because I don't understand anything.*)

4. ¿Qué piensas que puede ser útil para entender mejor las instrucciones en clase de Inglés?
(*What do you think could be useful to better understand the instructions in English class?*)
 - a) escribir las instrucciones en el pizarrón (*write the instructions on the board*)
 - b) usar imágenes (*use images*)
 - c) repetir después de la maestra las instrucciones con mímica (*repeat the instructions after the teacher, miming*)

Rosa Nelly also decided to keep a **reflection journal** so she could reflect on how students reacted to oral and written instructions and if there were any differences. She also made notes on what happened when students misunderstood.

And finally, Rosa Nelly invited three colleagues to **peer observe** three separate lessons. Questions she asked them focused on the same areas as her journal – reactions to oral and written instructions and what happened when students misunderstood – but Rosa Nelly felt that it would be useful to have others' perspectives to compare with her own observations.

What Rosa Nelly found

Observations

From her journal notes, Rosa Nelly realised that there were real problems with instructions because students kept coming to her to ask what to do or they asked their classmates for clarification. Rosa Nelly found this frustrating because she put time and effort into preparing and planning her lessons and having to explain over and over what to do was disappointing and disruptive. She did notice, however, that students seemed to respond better to written instructions than oral:

Journal entry

I think that the oral instructions are hard to understand for my students because I have to repeat the instructions several times with movements so that they can understand a few more. Even some students have asked me to say the instructions in Spanish... When I give written instructions, I feel that my students understand the instructions more. In one of my classes a student asked me for written instructions.

Rosa Nelly's colleagues' observations supported these findings; they also noted how Rosa Nelly had to constantly repeat instructions and explain in different ways – repeating more slowly, using actions or mime, writing them on the board and reading them out or repeating orally until everyone understood.

She misunderstands the instructions but she explained writing on the board. She moves her hands and gives more examples.

Student responses

Surprisingly, the majority of Rosa Nelly's students thought her instructions were 'clear' or 'very clear'; only two students chose the 'not at all clear' option. However, when asked about how they feel when they hear instructions, half responded 'confused' 🤔 and two students said 'frustrated'. 😡 This didn't surprise Rosa Nelly – she'd also noted in her journal that the classroom atmosphere was restless, she could feel the confusion and as a consequence, there was a lack of engagement. She also noticed how this led to many being unable to finish activities because they had spent too much time thinking about what they should be doing.

Interestingly, before she had the data, Rosa Nelly had already started thinking about how to address this problem, and had more or less decided to use actions and movements to support her oral or written instructions and get her students to mimic her. However, that is not what her students thought would help – 19 students believed that instructions should be written on the board and six felt she should use images; only two students were in favour of 'repeating the instructions after the teacher, miming'. Rosa Nelly was very surprised because she thought written instructions were boring and that moving and miming would be much more fun

for them, but it turned out that the reason they were restless wasn't because they were bored, but rather because they didn't know what to do.

Action plan

Rosa Nelly thought about her findings and came up with a planned approach to instruction-giving to address the issues she had discovered. She decided to give oral instructions followed by instruction-checking questions (ICQs), to write instructions on the board and hand out instructions for each activity on pieces of paper. She implemented these strategies over the course of six weeks.




Evaluating the impact of the actions

To evaluate the impact of her actions, Rosa Nelly used the same instruments: a **student questionnaire**, her **reflection journal** and **peer observations**. This time she also focused her own and the peer observations on how students responded to the instructions and sought for evidence that they had understood what to do.





The student questionnaire again focused on students' feelings but also sought to find out which instruction-giving method worked best for them. This was administered at the end of the implementation period.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

1. ¿Últimamente como te sientes cuando la maestra te explica las instrucciones?
(How do you feel when the teacher explains the instructions now?)

-  a) excelente (*excellent*)
-  b) confundido (*confused*)
-  c) frustrado (*frustrated*)

2. ¿Puedes entender mejor las instrucciones con la nueva forma que la maestra está utilizando?
(Do you understand the instructions better now?)

-  a) totalmente de acuerdo (*totally agree*)
-  b) de acuerdo (*agree*)
-  c) medianamente de acuerdo (*moderately agree*)
-  d) nada de acuerdo (*disagree*)

3. ¿Cuál de las instrucciones te ayuda a entender mejor la clase?

(Which instructions help you to understand better?)

a) orales (oral)

b) escritas en el pizarrón (written on the board)

c) escritas en una hoja (written on a piece of paper)

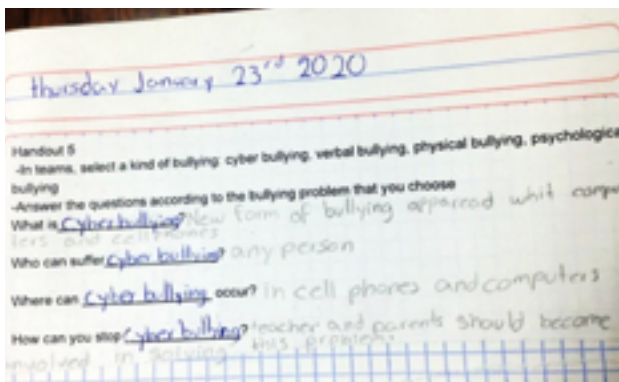
¿Por qué? (Why?) _____

What Rosa Nelly discovered

Observations

From her journal reflections, Rosa Nelly noted that the restlessness and misbehaviour became less. She felt the students seemed concentrated on what they were doing and they were able to finish their work in the time. The lesson ran more smoothly and they stopped repeatedly asking, 'What should we do?' Sometimes she needed to give examples, but nobody said they didn't understand.

Rosa Nelly also noted that when the instructions were written on the board, students began to think and reflect on the way they would work, e.g. if the instruction was, 'Work in pairs', they immediately started looking for a partner. Having the instructions on pieces of paper was useful too because they could refer to them often and check whenever they wanted. Where possible, the students stuck the instructions in their notebooks and did the activity below the written instructions.



Rosa Nelly's colleagues also observed that the instructions were clearer and more concise and that the students were able to finish the activities:

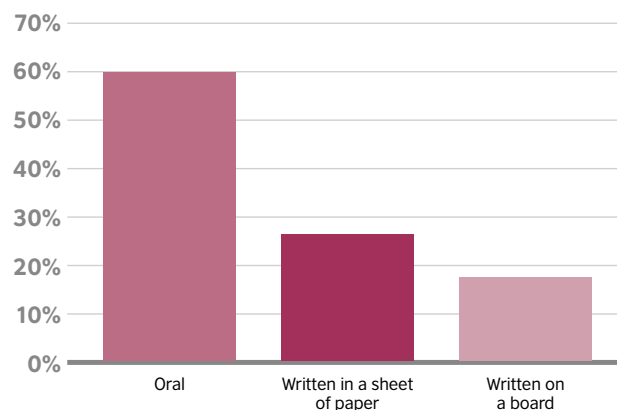
The students are happy to follow the teacher's instructions. The teacher is kind and motivates the students to take advantage of the time, doing the activities.

Student responses

Student responses were positive and encouraging. All of the students either 'totally agreed', 'agreed' or 'moderately agreed' that the new ways of giving instructions were better – not one 'disagreed'!

As to which method of instruction-giving they found the most helpful, there were some surprises. During the exploratory phase, the majority of Rosa Nelly's students had indicated that they preferred instructions to be written on the board, but now the majority said that oral instructions were most helpful, and while some found the pieces of paper useful, only two now preferred instructions on the board.

Which instruction helps you to understand better the class?



The situation had definitely changed and when Rosa Nelly thought about it she wondered whether it was because of the ICQs, which she had noticed they were eager to answer, especially multiple-choice questions like, 'Are you going to work in teams, pairs or individually?' Students gave various reasons for their preferences, and their reasons for choosing oral questions did seem to indicate that the introduction of ICQs had made this method fun.

Oral instructions are fun!

All the instructions are useful, but I like more the oral instructions.

I like the instructions written in a piece of paper because I can check them all the time.

If I have the instructions on a piece of paper in my notebook, I will not forget them.

Honestly, I liked all the ways the teacher gave instructions and all the ways of giving instructions helped me to understand but I prefer the oral way with the questions.

I like the written instructions on the board because I can see them.

What Rosa Nelly learned

Rosa Nelly will continue to give instructions orally and use ICQs along with written instructions because these methods worked for her and her students.

What I learned from this experience is that EAR is a useful way to know what works and what doesn't work for me and my students. Colleagues can suggest strategies to try to solve issues in your classroom but you don't really know for sure if they will work until you explore and ask your students. I learned to take my students' opinions into account and to rely on data and evidence, and not just adopt some strategy because it seemed 'nice'.

Rosa Nelly also realised the importance of teamwork when it is done properly – her students, her colleagues, her tutor – all their feedback helped her to reflect on and improve an important aspect of her teaching practice.

Final reflections

Rosa Nelly learned that with a few simple changes she could make a big difference in her class.

I feel excellent with the results obtained because I improved my teaching practice and my students improved the process of learning a second language. I have learned how to carry out exploratory action research and I have no doubts about using this research approach to explore other issues that may arise in my classes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my special thanks of gratitude to my family, especially my husband and daughters who always supported me in this research; all the staff of the primary school, Prof Luis Tijerina Almaguer, and all the staff of British Council, especially the editors of the Champion Teacher Project and my mentor in this project, Regina Corona.

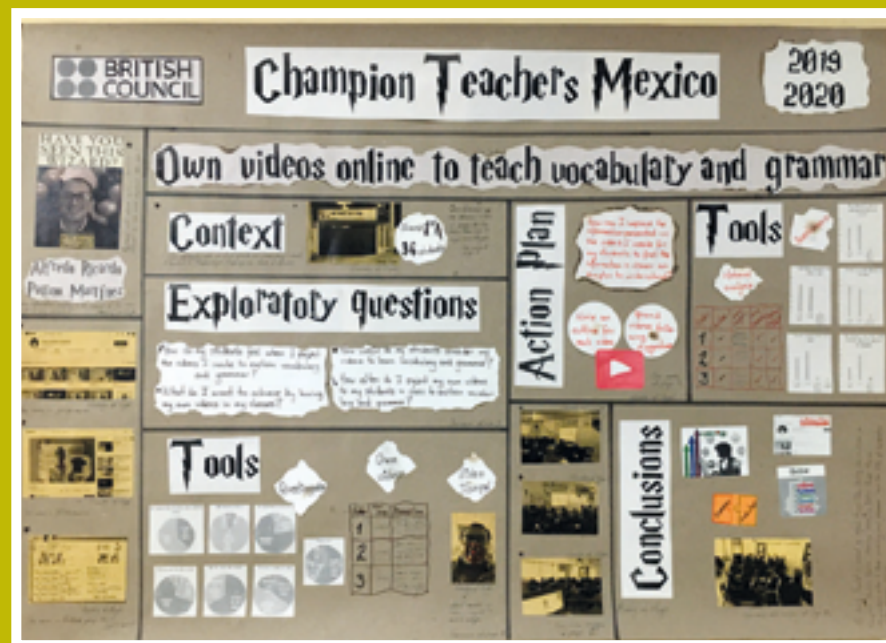
Reflection

Rosa Nelly knew she had a problem with giving instructions and thought she had the solution until she asked her students what they thought. She finally realised that only by taking her students' opinions into account and relying on data and evidence, could she make effective changes; "not just adopt some strategy because it seemed 'nice'." On what basis do you make changes to the way you teach? Do you tend to adopt strategies that seem 'nice' or 'fun'? How could you collect evidence to support the changes you make to your classroom teaching?

7 Using my own videos to teach vocabulary and grammar

Alfredo Patiño Martínez

Tlapanaloya, Tequixquiac, State of Mexico



Teaching context

Alfredo teaches the morning shift at Secondary School Number 0303, Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, which is located in Tlapanaloya, a town in the municipality of Tequixquiac. Alfredo taught English to first, second, and third Grade students but for this project he chose to focus on his Grade 1A class, a group of 36 students (16 boys and 20 girls) aged 11 to 12 years. At the start of the school year these students were CEFR A1 level and they had three one-hour lessons per week. Generally, Alfredo found his students to be enthusiastic and eager to learn English and they always seemed keen at the start of lessons.

Alfredo's area of interest

For about a year, Alfredo had been interested in the idea of the flipped classroom. He understands this as:

'The teacher records or chooses videos online which students watch at home before the lesson. Then during the next lesson the teacher links the video content with challenging activities to review the information in the video and ask questions.'



However, when he tried this with his students, he found that they weren't watching the videos he created, so he decided to show these in the classroom at the start of a new topic instead. He looked at the upcoming topics and then created and edited videos of himself presenting the topics using his smartphone and a small whiteboard that he had at home. Although he thought it was an

interesting approach, he didn't know how effective it was. To find out if he needed to change or improve anything about the way he presented the topics, he thought the best judges would be his students and that they could give him the information he needed to adapt and improve his videos.

Exploring some concerns

Having thought about the context and the topic, Alfredo formulated four exploratory questions to address his concerns about the creation and use of his videos in the classroom.

1. How do my students feel when I project the videos I create to explain vocabulary and grammar?
2. What do I want to achieve by using my own videos?
3. How useful do my students consider my videos in learning vocabulary and grammar?
4. How often do I project my own videos to my students in class to explain vocabulary and grammar?

He used three methods to get the data: a *questionnaire*, a *video journal* and his own *videos analysis*.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of six multiple-choice questions designed to get opinions on:

- feelings about the videos, e.g. likes, dislikes, etc.
- the number of videos, e.g. not enough, too many, etc.
- the amount of time spent on watching them, e.g. too long, enough, too short, etc.
- how easy it is to understand the explanations in them, e.g. understand easily, understand little, etc.
- the content (vocabulary and grammar), e.g. too much, not enough etc.
- how useful they were.

And he included two open questions to get:

- ideas on other ways that class videos could help them; and
- suggestions for improving the videos.

The questionnaire was written in Spanish so students could easily understand and they answered in Spanish too.

Video journal

After four separate lessons, Alfredo video-recorded his reflections, which he later transcribed, using his smartphone. He focused his reflections by answering the following three questions:

- Why do I use videos to explain content?
- How often do I project my own videos in class to explain vocabulary and grammar?
- What do I want to achieve by using my own videos?



Video analysis

Alfredo analysed three separate videos he had created and used during the lessons using a chart.

Video	How long	How I presented the content
Video 1 'How are you?'	2:04	
Video 2 'My classroom'	2:26	
Video 3 'Bilingual dictionary'	3:55	

Some useful data

Alfredo found that he was able to get the data he needed to answer his exploratory questions.

1. How do my students feel when I project the videos I create to explain vocabulary and grammar?

In answer to this question, all Alfredo's students reported liking the videos because they were 'interesting' and helped them 'learn English better'. They also said that his explanations were fairly easy to understand although some thought he should present 'more specific information' (11), 'explain more clearly and slowly' (7), 'use more Spanish' (4) and 'more images' (4).

2. What do I want to achieve by using my own videos?

Alfredo noted from his video journals that he used videos because he wanted his students to get information in a different way, not only from his 'live' explanations at the front of the class, and he felt that he could be more specific with the vocabulary and grammar he wanted to focus on.

Extract from video journal

I focus on the info that I want my students to learn when I record myself. I try to explain easily and in English and Spanish because in the class most of the time I speak English.

3. How useful do my students consider my videos in learning vocabulary and grammar?

The majority of Alfredo's students considered that the videos helped them to remember the information presented, which in turn helped them to complete classroom tasks. Others reported 'learning more generally', 'learning words', 'pronouncing words' and 'exams'.

Extract from video journal

My students told me that some of them watched the video again at home to remember the info and practise vocabulary.

4. How often do I project my own videos to my students in class to explain vocabulary and grammar?

Alfredo noticed that he projected each video twice at the beginning of the lesson when he introduced new content. From the questionnaire responses, he learned that the vast majority felt this was enough and that the number of videos and time spent watching them was about right.

Overall, then, Alfredo felt that his students appreciated the videos he created and found them useful. However, he needed to follow up on some of their suggestions – speaking more slowly and clearly, using more Spanish and more images.

Alfredo’s action plan

After reflecting on the data collected, Alfredo came up with a question to guide his action plan:

How can I improve the information presented in the videos I create for my students so that the information is clearer and simpler to understand?

Taking into consideration his students’ suggestions and their level of English, Alfredo decided to continue creating videos of the same length but make improvements by implementing two actions:

1. Write an outline for each new video to plan and organise his ideas before recording himself;

Video	Clothes	Topic	Clothes and determiners
Objective	Students will be able to describe what others are wearing		
Audience	1st grade students of Mexican Secondary school		
Key words	Vocabulary of clothes Present Continuous (wearing) This, that, these, those		
Call to action	Ss will understand the topic in the video to answer activities in the English classroom.		

OUTLINE

Content	English	Spanish
Welcome	Welcome to Aula E . A channel created for your English classes in the Secondary School. And today I will talk about ‘Clothes’.	Bienvenido a Aula E . Un canal creado para tus clases de inglés en la Secundaria. El día de hoy hablaré del tema ‘La ropa’.
Vocab	First, I check vocabulary. Listen and say. – (shirt, T-shirt, socks, shoes, shorts, hat, skirt, vest, gloves, jacket, belt, scarf, dress, pants, pyjamas, jeans)	Primero revisaremos el vocabulario. Escucha y repite. – (camisa, playera, calcetines, zapatos, short, sombrero, falda, chaleco, guantes, chamarra, cinturón, bufanda, vestido, pantalón de vestir, pijama, jeans)
Grammar	Then, I continue with this grammar point. What are you wearing? – I’m wearing blue jeans. What is she wearing? – She’s wearing a red dress.	Continuamos con el siguiente aspecto de gramática. ¿Qué estás vistiendo? – Yo estoy vistiendo jeans azules. ¿Qué está usando ella? – Ella está usando un vestido rojo.

Extract from video plan

2. Include more images, explain more slowly and use simpler explanations and more Spanish where necessary.



Alfredo implemented this plan with three videos that he created over the course of six lessons. He played each video twice at the start of the lesson to introduce the new topic; during the first viewing students listened, during the second viewing they listened and took notes.

How effective were Alfredo's changes?

After implementing his action plan, Alfredo set out to evaluate the impact of the new videos he had recorded for his students. He used two methods – a *questionnaire* and *analysis of the three videos* he had created.

Again, the questionnaire was in Spanish and included five multiple-choice questions to find out to what extent his students agreed that the changes had been effective.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. The teacher uses more Spanish in the explanation given in the video.

- I really like this
- I like this
- I don't like this
- I don't like this at all

2. The information presented in the video is clearer to understand.

- strongly agree
- agree
- neither agree nor disagree
- disagree
- strongly disagree

3. The images used in the explanation of the video are useful to me to better understand the grammar and vocabulary presented.

- strongly agree
- agree
- neither agree nor disagree
- disagree
- strongly disagree

4. Now the teacher explains more slowly and this makes the information clearer to understand.

- strongly agree
- agree
- neither agree nor disagree
- disagree
- strongly disagree

5. The changes made to the videos have made them more effective for my learning English.

- strongly agree
- agree
- neither agree nor disagree
- disagree
- strongly disagree

As before, Alfredo also used a chart to analyse his videos to help him focus on his actions.

VIDEO ANALYSIS

Video	How many images did I include in the explanation in the video?	In what moments of the videos did I use Spanish?	What aspects of the outline I created are presented in the videos?
Video 1 My family			
Video 2 My house			
Video 3 My clothes			

Some encouraging results

Alfredo's *analysis of his videos* showed him that he had used more images during the creation of his videos.

Video 1 My family	I used 4 images during the video to explain family members and some adjectives, like old, young, tall, short, big, and small. The first image is big and the rest are small. They are all the time on the board.
Video 2 My house	I used 2 images, the first one with parts of the house, and the second one with prepositions. The two images are big and they are all the time on the board.
Video 3 My clothes	I used 15 flashcards and showed each one for a couple of seconds. To give examples I used 4 of the same flashcards used during the vocabulary presentation.

Extract from the video analysis

When Alfredo analysed the use of images during his videos, he observed that although the images were big and colourful, he needed to zoom in to make them more attractive to his students.



He also noted that he had used Spanish more often:

In what moments of the videos did I use Spanish?
I repeated in Spanish after I said a sentence in English to clarify information throughout the whole video.

Extract from the video analysis

From responses to the *questionnaire*, Alfredo discovered that of the 36 students:

- 34 liked the fact that he used more Spanish (although one student didn't like this at all).
- 33 agreed that the videos were clearer to understand.
- 34 felt the images he used were helpful.
- 32 agreed that he spoke more slowly and this was helpful.
- 32 agreed that the changes had made learning more effective.

Overall, Alfredo came to the conclusion that he had implemented the actions and that the students had responded well to these. He also understood how 'listening to his students' had played a very important part in this improvement and mini-success.



What Alfredo learned

Alfredo learned that working with his students is the best way to improve his teaching; he understood that his teenagers hold the key to the data he needs to adapt, modify or implement changes in his classroom, and to evaluate the impact of those changes.

Alfredo also learned at the start of the project that there were some aspects of his video-recordings that he could improve. So, over the course of this research, he learned how to do this during the editing process, e.g. how he spoke, especially the rhythm of his speech, his use of Spanish after explaining in English, or the benefits of zooming in with small images. Looking back, he feels that he made an effort to take on board his students' suggestions concerning these details when he recorded the new videos for the action stage of his research. And he feels that he will continue to consult his students when it comes to video-recording.

From taking part in this EAR project, he learned how his teaching approach could change if he listened to his students and that he could make modifications and incorporate technology to make his lessons more appealing to them. Although Alfredo found the project difficult to finish due to time constraints, particularly the time it took to create and edit his videos, it was the best experience he has ever had and he is inspired to continue to research more in the future.

I never thought that with this kind of research I would have got so much information to improve my performance as a teacher.

Acknowledgements

I was glad to participate in this challenge. I learnt another way to improve my performance and how I was able to get data from my students and change or modify my teaching. These goals were completed for my family, co-workers and, also, my students. Thank you!

Reflection

Alfredo learned that working with his students is the best way to improve his teaching; he understood that his teenagers hold the key to the data he needs to adapt, modify or implement changes in his classroom, and to evaluate the impact of those changes. Do you work with teenagers? Do you also find that some of them are reluctant to speak out in class? How could you 'listen' more to your students to find out what they think and make mini-improvements to your teaching?

8

Closing activities

Verónica Vilchis

Buenvista, Jilotepec, Mexico



Teaching context

Verónica teaches at an elementary school, Emiliano Zapata 15EPR4515W, which is located in a rural area surrounded by farms and corn fields in Buenavista, a Municipality of Jilotepec in the State of Mexico. The class Verónica chose to work with during this project was Grade 6B, a group of 20 students made up of 11 girls and 9 boys aged 11–12. They had already been studying English for five years but their English level was still basic and Verónica saw them three times a week for 45 minutes on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays.



A puzzling situation

Verónica noticed that her students were facing difficulties in remembering what they had learned in previous lessons and that she was spending too much time re-teaching content. Where there was progress, it was slow and her students didn't seem to be reflecting on or reviewing their learning so she asked them about it. They told her that they didn't have time to review their notes at home – it should be in class time. Verónica thought about this and realised that this was not only happening with her 6B class, but also with other groups – their 'knowledge was somehow hidden in their minds' and she needed to do something about it. That's when she started to think more about her closing activities.

Working in an elementary school is not an easy job, I am running from one classroom to another, from one group to the next, so the part of the lesson that gets the least attention is the closing – in this part of the lesson I usually set the homework and leave the classroom as quickly as possible to teach my next group.

She thought more and realised that closing activities are probably more important than warm-up activities, because they help to 'ground knowledge' in students' minds.

Every single class I have to struggle with students' low participation during closing activities. I feel upset and frustrated because I am the kind of teacher that plays, sings, tries different activities or materials to help students learn but my efforts aren't having the results I expect.

She decided to investigate further.

Unravelling the puzzle

Verónica came up with four research questions to guide her investigation:

1. What are my objectives when doing closing activities?
2. How do I promote reflection in my students during the closing activities?
3. What do my students think about closing activities?
4. What do my students do during closing activities?

In addition to looking into her own and her colleagues' perceptions, Verónica felt it was crucial to understand her students' perceptions, opinions and experience to unravel the problem that she could see but not really understand.

After having a clear idea of what she wanted to explore, Verónica then needed to think about how to get relevant, factual information. She decided on a *student questionnaire*, *peer observation* and a *reflective journal* – with these three tools she would be able to obtain information from the main actors involved in this puzzle; her students and herself as their teacher.

Student questionnaire. To find answers to Q3, Verónica designed a simple questionnaire which included five questions (four multiple-choice and one open) to explore students' feelings, opinions and perceptions about closing activities. Because her students' level

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

The following observation protocol is aimed to get data and is not an evaluation of the teacher; constructive feedback is not required from the observer.

Instructions: Write notes according to the observation based on students' behaviour during the class.

1. What activities do students do during the closing activity?
2. How do students behave during closing activities?
3. What does the teacher do to encourage students to participate during closing activities?
4. How do students show learning evidence during the closing activities? (product of the activity)
5. How does the teacher support students' reflection during closing activities?

Note: please avoid giving any kind of improvement suggestions.



of English was very basic and to avoid confusion, she administered this in Spanish, and anonymously to elicit honest answers.

Peer observation. To get data for Q2 and Q4, Verónica decided on peer observation. Having different points of view is always good when exploring a problem so Verónica invited three teachers to observe her separately on different days but with the same group, 6B. She prepared some questions for them focusing on what happened during the closing activity and only facts i.e. recording what they saw but not offering opinions or suggestions for improvement as Verónica's main goal was to understand the problem, not look for a solution at this stage.

Reflective journal. To answer Q1 and Q2, Verónica reflected on the closing activities over the course of six lessons focusing on her own and her students' perceptions, attitudes and behaviour. She also made a point of reflecting on how students applied their learning during the closing activities.

Food for thought

What Verónica discovered from her exploration gave her a lot to think about.

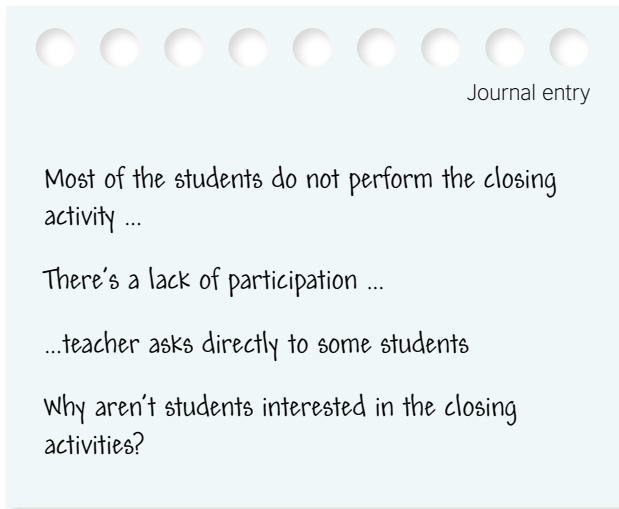
What are Verónica's objectives and how does she promote reflection?

From her journal notes, Verónica found that her main aim was to reinforce students' knowledge. However, feedback from the peer observations indicated that the aim was not always clear or linked to the activity:

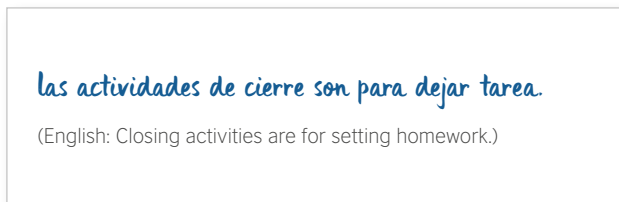
Teacher Verónica shows always almost the same idea in her objective for the closing activities; it's too general and cannot be reliable. In some lessons there is no connection between the objective and the activity.

Extract from peer observation notes

Moreover, Verónica's method of asking direct open questions and nominating students was encouraging only some students to reflect on their learning; data from the observers revealed that the majority of students were left out since if they were not nominated to answer, they did not think and reflect. Verónica also noted frequently in her journal that something was wrong:



However, it was a response to the questionnaire that most grabbed Verónica's attention:



This made her realise that she wasn't actually promoting reflection at all during closing activities, but rather using that time to set homework.

What do her students think about closing activities?

A positive finding was that all Verónica's students considered closing activities important. However, half of the group were not comfortable during these activities, due to either boredom (6) or feeling confused about what they should be doing (4).

With regard to the types of closing activities they found most helpful for revision and reflection, the majority (15) chose games, which was not surprising, although it was interesting to note that five students preferred written questions to oral and felt it was important to write notes on what they had learned. Another important and surprising finding was that only four students preferred working in teams; half of the group (10) preferred working in pairs and six preferred to work alone.

Action plan

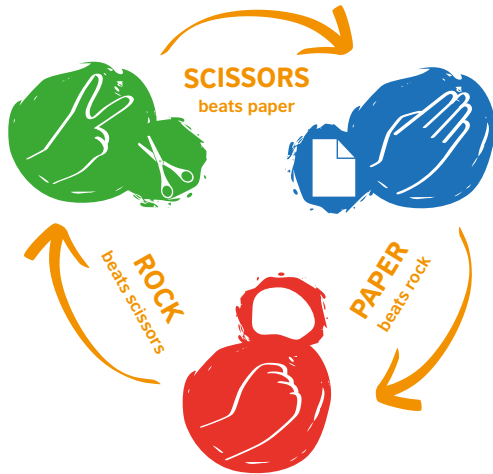
Verónica reflected on the findings from her exploration in order to come up with an action plan. She decided to introduce two main activities to address what she had discovered as problem areas.

1. Thinking dice

Students work in pairs (different pairs each lesson) and sit face to face. To decide which student speaks first, they play 'rock, paper, scissors'. Then they get a dice (the 'thinking dice') and a card with six reflection questions on it (e.g. 'Tell me a new word.' 'What was the lesson about?'). Students take turns to ask and answer the questions on the card. The question depends on the number rolled with the dice, e.g. if they roll a six, they ask and answer question six. To end, students compare their answers as a whole group.



1. 'Rock paper scissors' is often used as a fair choosing method between two people, similar to tossing a coin. Each player forms one of three shapes with an outstretched hand at exactly the same time. (See diagram for shapes and information on winning.)



2. Learning journals

Students spend five minutes at the end of the lesson individually writing in their personal learning journal. They should include: the date, topic, short sentences about what they did in class, what they learnt, what they liked and what challenges they faced.

Date	Topic	I already knew	I learned	I enjoyed the most	I don't like so much
18-11-20	Spanish lesson	to talk	to talk to people	to talk to people	to talk to people
19-11-20	Spanish lesson	to talk	to talk to people	to talk to people	to talk to people
20-11-20	Spanish lesson	to talk	to talk to people	to talk to people	to talk to people
21-11-20	Spanish lesson	to talk	to talk to people	to talk to people	to talk to people
22-11-20	Spanish lesson	to talk	to talk to people	to talk to people	to talk to people

Verónica believed that the 'thinking dice' would give students more opportunities to participate, especially if they worked in pairs; no students would be left out or become bored or confused. The 'learning journal' would cater to those who preferred working alone and those who felt the need to write down what they'd learned. With both activities students would have a specific task and role and hopefully this would promote greater engagement in addition to reflection.

Verónica implemented these activities over the course of six lessons, being careful to manage them in the same way each time.

What was the impact of Verónica's actions?

To evaluate the impact of these activities, Verónica again used a *student questionnaire*, *peer observation* and a *reflective journal* to gather data.

Reflective journal

This time Verónica focused on observations of her students' behaviour, attitudes and interaction during the two activities in addition to noting how they applied their learning.

Student questionnaire

The questions this time focused on students' opinions and experiences of the activities, how useful they found them and whether they had noticed any improvements in learning or progress by using them. There were seven questions and for each one students were asked to explain their answers. Again the questionnaire was administered in Spanish and anonymously.



Peer observations

The observations came from three different teachers of English who wrote notes in answer to five questions. These observations took place during the final three lessons when students were more familiar with the new activities.

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Answer the following questions, your answers will not be penalised or considered in your evaluation, the information you will provide is valuable. Thanks for your support.

1. To what extent did the recent closing activities enhance your learning of English? Why? _____	A lot	A little	Not at all
2. To what extent did pair work allow you to reflect on what you learned in class? Why? _____	Always	Sometimes	Never
3. Were the tools useful for you to reflect on your learning (dice and journal)? Why? _____	A lot	A little	Not at all
4. Did the dice help you to identify your learning progress, weaknesses or strengths? Why? _____	A lot	A little	Not at all
5. Did the learning journal help you to identify your learning progress, weaknesses or strengths? Why? _____	A lot	A little	Not at all
6. Which tool makes it easier for you to reflect on what you learned? Why? _____	Dice	Journal	
7. Would you like to continue using either or both tools for reflection? Why? _____	Dice	Journal	

Student questionnaire (translated from Spanish)

Some positive findings

Increased motivation

Feedback from journal reflection notes and the peer observations showed that overall students were more motivated to participate in the closing activities.

In fact, as soon as they heard the words 'Reflection time!' they rearranged their chairs and got out their dice

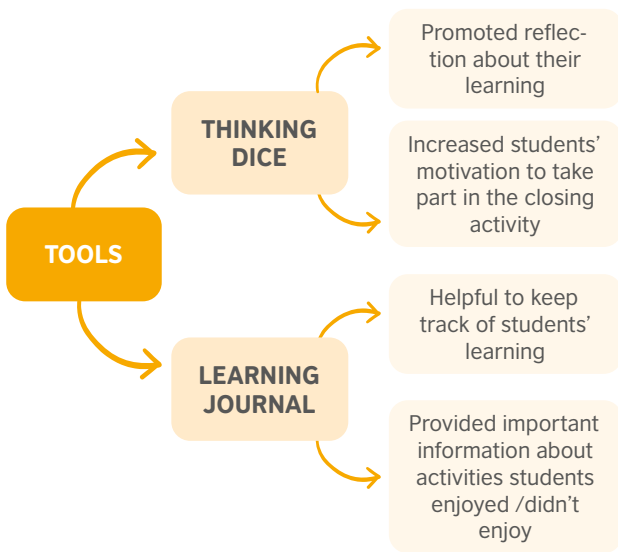
and learning journals. Moreover, most of the students were involved and focused; when Verónica asked them questions about the content from the previous lesson, most got out their journals and raised their hands to share something they'd learnt.

Some benefits

For Verónica, both tools proved practical and efficient in promoting reflection. The majority of students (15) also considered the activities helpful in reflecting about their learning. Half found the thinking dice most helpful, while half believed the reflection journal was best, but they stated that both activities helped them to keep a track of their learning by sharing with others and noting down what they had learned.



observation also noted by her colleague. And during the ‘thinking dice’ activity, she realised that students were very keen to share their learning experiences by asking and answering the questions on the cards, and that they were speaking more confidently, mostly in Spanish but also using a few words in English.



Benefits of the closing activities

Me ayudaron a recordar lo que aprendí.
 (English: They helped me remember what I learned.)

Although shy students found pair work challenging when they weren't partnered with their close friends, Verónica noticed that students were happy to support classmates who had difficulty in remembering something, an

Conclusion

Verónica was generally pleased with her findings and felt that she had achieved some success with her closing activities. As a result, she intends to continue to design closing activities for all her classes to encourage them to reflect on their learning. She also has plans on how to improve the two activities she implemented during this project.

What Verónica learnt

Verónica learned a lot during this time about teaching and learning:

- Nominating a few students and asking them direct questions didn't work; it took away the chance for all her students to reflect.
- Getting students to work in different pairs was helpful because when one found it difficult to answer a question or gave an incorrect example, their partner could correct them or explain.
- Although the learning journal wasn't as much fun as the dice activity, having relevant information written down made it easier for students to remember what they'd learned and recap at the end and start of classes.

- Having two different activities catered to different needs and personalities: shy students could feel confident when working alone on their learning journal; outgoing students could express themselves during the pair work; stronger students could support those having difficulty, etc.



- Learning journals are not only useful to students but also teachers; Verónica was able to see what activities students enjoyed, what was challenging, and have a better idea of how much was understood and change her plans if necessary.
- Closing activities do not need to be long to be meaningful; the last ten minutes of the class (five for 'thinking dice' and five for the journal) was enough to 'ground their knowledge' and stop it from flying away in the air.
- Simple actions can bring positive changes. The actions Verónica implemented were so simple but beneficial to both her and her students.

Telling you about my personal experiences during this long but amazing journey, has made me realise how my relationship with my Kiddos has improved so much, and how they have more confidence to talk and express themselves – we became closer and this has helped us to work better together in class.

Final reflections

Verónica used to think that research was something done by specialists, e.g. scientists, doctors, etc. not her! But now she knows she can research too, although it's not an easy process. She had to learn to listen to her students, to accept others' points of view, and adapt her teaching style to her students' needs and preferences. Verónica used to plan what she assumed was suitable or best for most of her students, but pausing to reflect showed her that her assumptions were wrong; she had to get feedback from her students to understand the real situation. She realised how important it was not to assume that she knew her students, but to give them a voice in clear and honest communication – that would bring better results.

During this amazing adventure Verónica learned how important it is to take at least five minutes in her day to think back to what happened during the lesson, so that she can collect, record and analyse the most relevant events. To develop this kind of self-awareness by being more reflective will from now on be one of her goals in order to somehow become a better teacher.

After completing this EAR project I felt exhausted, but at the same time motivated to try new things in my teaching practice. Now I have a bigger commitment to my students, my job, and my colleagues – and to sharing my experiences and motivating them to take the risk of learning, and enjoying it, as I have.

Acknowledgements

I am so thankful for being part of this project where hopefully my findings and actions might help teachers that need ideas about how to close their classes. I really appreciate the support of the British Council team and my mentor who kept me strong during this research; their great commitment enabled me to complete my first exploratory action research project. Thanks to everyone involved.

Reflection

Verónica learned how important it is to take at least five minutes to think back to what happened during her lesson, so that she could collect, record and analyse the most relevant events. She then used a journal to note down her reflections. Have you ever used a journal? Would you like to try? Which class would you start with?

9

Culturally based activities in the English classroom

Alejandra Castillo Rodríguez
Cuencamé, Durango, Mexico



Teaching context

Alejandra teaches English at a semi-rural secondary school, Severino Cenicerós, in Cuencamé, Durango. From 21 groups she selected to undertake this research project with a Grade 2D group, which she taught three times a week for 50 minutes. The group consisted of 38 students aged 13 to 14. 21 were girls and 17 were boys, and all of them had a beginner level of English according to the diagnostic test taken at the beginning of the school year. The group was committed. Students were mostly willing to learn new things and even if their level of English was not as expected, they tried hard to practise new vocabulary and phrases in English. What is more, most of their parents took an interest in their education and supported activities intended to improve their learning. On the other hand, the students' low socio-economic status limited their chances to access different resources, such as the Internet, and it was difficult for them to explore the world outside their community and encounter other cultures.

Focus of the research

Some time previous to the start of this project, after hearing students complain for years that they would never use English because they would never visit any English-speaking country or any other country, Alejandra started to consider introducing the culture of English-speaking countries into her lessons.

Could I bring aspects of other countries into my class so students can live the experience of visiting them?

She decided, yes, culture was the answer, and ever since she has used short, culturally based activities to involve students in aspects such as holidays, celebrations, traditions or daily routines from other English-speaking countries. She has even planned Easter-egg hunts, pumpkin-carving activities and adapted Shakespeare play readings.

However, because she also had to cover the curriculum, she couldn't spend more than about 20 minutes on such activities. As a result, she was only able to introduce around five to seven items of vocabulary and had no time to review this or reinforce it later. Nevertheless, she wanted to know how her students felt about these culturally based activities and what they were getting out of them, if anything. What Alejandra really wanted to explore was how effective culturally based activities were in involving students, who feel they have nothing in common with the language, in English language learning. Here is where her exploration began.

Alejandra's exploration

To guide her through the exploratory phase, Alejandra formulated three research questions:

1. What are my expectations when doing culturally based activities?
2. How do my students feel about culturally based activities?
3. What do I teach when delivering a cultural class?

These questions also helped in the selection of her exploratory tools: a *digital journal*, a *student questionnaire*, a *recorded lesson observation* and a *lesson plan analysis*.

Digital journal

First, Alejandra focused on collecting information from her own perspective. She formulated three questions to help her reflect on her feelings, the cultural content and her explanations of it.

1. How did I feel today while teaching the culturally based lesson?
2. Which content of the culturally based lesson did I spend more time explaining? How did I explain?
3. What kind of information did I give/teach for the culturally based activity?

She noted her answers to these questions digitally using Word and immediately at the end of two separate lessons.

Student questionnaire

She then designed a questionnaire. This contained seven multiple-choice questions, each with a space for students to justify their answers. For each question there were four options plus 'other' in case students had a different answer, and students could select more than one option. Questions focused on feelings, attitudes, preferences, suggestions for improvement, and what students found easy or difficult and useful. The questionnaires were printed and administered anonymously in Spanish to obtain as much honest information as possible.



QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire aims to find out your opinion about culturally based activities and your experience with them. The information you provide will serve to guide your teacher in exploring the culturally based activities used in class.

Instructions: Select the options that you think are appropriate to answer each question according to your opinion. More than one option can be selected. Justify your answers.

1. How do you feel about participating in activities based on the culture of English-speaking countries?
 a) excited b) confused c) bored d) interested e) other _____
 Why? _____
2. How would you describe your experience of knowing cultural aspects of other (English-speaking) countries?
 a) nice b) confusing c) interesting d) boring e) other _____
 Why? _____
3. What are your favourite cultural activities? Why?
 a) games b) rally c) staging d) oral presentations e) other _____
 Why? _____
4. What aspects of the culturally based activities in the classroom could be improved?
 a) vocabulary b) duration c) content d) frequency e) other _____
 Why? _____
5. How would you describe your attitude towards the activities carried out in the culture classes?
 a) indifferent b) positive c) negative d) confident e) other _____
 Why? _____
6. What aspects do you consider to be easier to learn with these types of activities?
 a) vocabulary b) cultural facts c) pronunciation d) common phrases of the language
 e) other _____
 Why? _____
7. In what situations do you think the knowledge gained during culturally based activities would be useful?
 a) visit another country b) learn more about the language c) value other cultures d) no situation
 e) other _____
 Why? _____

Recorded lesson observation

The lesson observation would give Alejandra a different perspective to her own. Because of the difficulties involved in having another teacher present in the classroom observing in real time, Alejandra video-recorded a lesson and sent this together with the observation guide to an English teacher from another school with instructions to give detailed answers to eight questions. These focused on the type of activity and resources used, the cultural content and how Alejandra managed the different stages of the activity. The observer then returned the completed form by email.

Lesson plan analysis

Alejandra decided to analyse a lesson plan to collect detailed information on what she did during culturally based activities. She focused on three areas: a) the types of activities, b) the cultural content and c) the resources she used. Using a digital lesson plan document, she identified the three areas by highlighting each in a different colour.

Lesson Plan (Categories to focus on)

1. Type of activities used to deliver the cultural class

2. Cultural Contents

3. Resources used to deliver the lesson

Lesson plan colour coding scheme

Some answers

After collecting data from all four tools, Alejandra analysed, organised and reflected on the information she had obtained and found some answers to her questions.

Alejandra's expectations when doing culturally based activities and what she teaches

Alejandra found that her main expectation was to introduce some cultural content into the English class through different activities so that her students could

learn English while coming into contact with the culture of other countries. Additionally, Alejandra realised that she used cultural content to teach useful vocabulary and expressions.

How students feel about culturally based activities

From the questionnaire responses, Alejandra found that culturally based activities did have a positive impact on her students. Most of them were interested in these types of activities and described their experiences as 'pleasant', 'interesting' and 'useful in improving certain aspects when learning English'. Some of them also mentioned that their desire to know more about cultures in other countries had increased after participating in culturally based activities. Additionally, they identified the main area of improvement from such activities as 'everyday, common language expressions'.

And it was not only students who considered these activities interesting; the peer observer also noted students' lively engagement in the topic and confirmed that everyday common language expressions seemed to be the most relevant content, which made Alejandra think this could be the reason why students considered this their main area of improvement.

However, there were also findings which led Alejandra to realise that there were three areas to work on:

1. Students wanted Alejandra to spend more time on culturally based activities; while 17 felt that more time should be spent on each activity, 10 felt there should be more activities and that these should be more frequent.
2. Students also felt they needed more vocabulary to fully participate in the culturally based activities; half (18) expressed a desire to improve their vocabulary. Some of them also added comments about how having more words to express their ideas would improve their participation.
3. Students felt the need to review and consolidate the vocabulary and useful expressions learned during

the culturally based activities. Alejandra agreed; when analysing her lesson plan and journal entries, she discovered that the type of activities used to deliver and practise the vocabulary and useful expressions, as well as the time assigned to that, was insufficient.

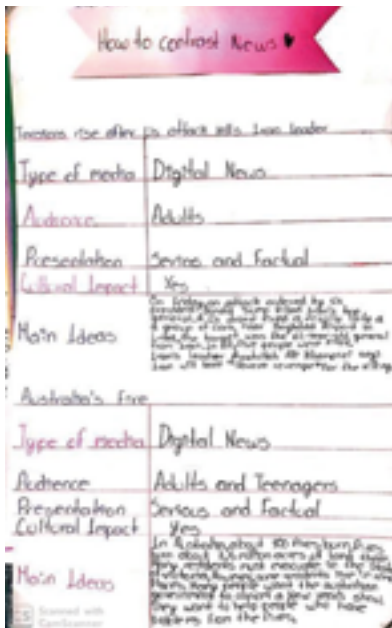
Three actions

After considering the findings from the exploration phase, Alejandra reflected so that she could come up with a plan to address what she had discovered during her exploration:

How can I increase the amount of time, vocabulary and useful expressions in culturally based activities?

And she finally came up with three actions:

1. To design four culturally based lessons that complemented the English curriculum. This way Alejandra could devote more time to the culturally based content while not neglecting the demands of the curriculum. The topics she identified as appropriate and fitting were: US attacks Iran, Australia’s fires, and Reading and contrasting news from different media. She focused on this over the course of three weeks: for one lesson in week 1, two in week 2 and one in week 3.



2. To add three more words/phrases to the usual five–seven items. This would give students a larger vocabulary repertoire to use during the activities. These words were introduced at the beginning of each lesson and reviewed in the middle and at the end, as well as at the start of the next lesson. Alejandra decided on these vocabulary items during planning.

3. To stick flashcards with the vocabulary and useful expressions from the culturally based activities on the walls. Alejandra thought it would help students express their ideas more easily during the lessons if the words and phrases were on display for reference. Either she or a student would stick these up right after introducing them and they remained there for as long as the students needed them, not only for that particular lesson.



Alejandra’s evaluation

At the end of the three-week implementation period it was time for Alejandra to evaluate the impact of her actions.

Alejandra had again decided to keep a **digital journal**, and immediately after each of the four lessons she noted her observations. This time she focused her reflections on the way she integrated the culturally based content into the curriculum, the vocabulary she introduced and the impact of using flashcards and devoting more time to cultural content.

She also **analysed her lesson plans** during this period. This time she focused on four specific areas: the types of activities used to present and practise the vocabulary, the strategies used to integrate cultural and curriculum content, the quantity of new vocabulary and the time given to the activities and content. Alejandra selected these areas as a result of her exploratory findings: her students were especially keen to spend more time on cultural content and had requested an increased focus on vocabulary building.

Lesson Plan Analysis (Categories to focus on)

1. Type of activities used to deliver vocabulary and language expressions
2. Activities and strategies to match cultural contents and curricula
3. Amount of vocabulary and expressions aimed to be taught in each lesson
4. Time designed for the cultural based activity

Lesson 2

Intro routine

Lead in: T shows a picture with the word fire and the students say what they think that word means. 3 min T leads the discussion about fires. After that, T shows the heading of the news article "Fires in Australia". Ss say what they know about the topic. 5 min

Main activity: Ss play a matching game where they guess the meaning of each word from the vocabulary 5 min (burn, acres, land, residents, evacuate, firefighters, remote, safe) selecting the correct picture T sticks the flashcards on the wall. 2 min After that, T and Ss read the news and select main ideas as they are reading and write them down in their notebooks. 15 min

Wrap up: Ss say what they could do to help people from Australia or how would they like to help if they could. 5 min

Lesson plan showing colour coding

Finally, she designed a **student questionnaire** formatted and administered in the same manner as the exploratory questionnaire, but this time consisting of eight questions and focused on feelings about the activities, opinions about the changes implemented, to what extent the increase in vocabulary and time had proved useful, and how confident they had felt using the new vocabulary. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the intervention.

Alejandra decided against using **peer observation** again because once students had realised the class was being recorded, they had tended to act differently – they were either shy or distracted. Also, it had not proved to be as informative as other methods.

Some useful information

Even though Alejandra reduced the number of tools to evaluate her actions, the information she obtained was very useful and allowed her to identify three main findings.

Increased time spent on culturally based activities

The analysis of the lesson plans and journal entries revealed that by matching cultural topics with the curriculum, Alejandra had managed to increase the amount of time spent on culturally based activities without neglecting curriculum content. Time spent on these activities rose from 15 to 20 minutes per lesson to the entire lesson (50 minutes). Additionally, rather than introducing the activities sporadically (as she had previously), she had introduced them consistently over the course of three weeks and achieved a sense of continuity.

Her students noted this change and almost all of them (34) were happy with the increase in number of lessons and the increased time within lessons (36) dedicated to cultural topics. In fact, some students remarked that having more time enabled them to complete the activities without rushing, and gave them more opportunity to learn interesting facts about other cultures.



Increased vocabulary input

Alejandra also observed that by including more new vocabulary each lesson, her students participated more during the culturally based activities. This finding was supported by responses to the questionnaire; almost all students (34) considered the introduction of more new vocabulary useful, and more importantly, the majority (25) felt confident using it and that they had improved in this area (27). What was especially good to learn was that the students had enjoyed these activities more (27), and found them more interesting (11). Some students even mentioned that the changes had enabled them to participate in the activities with more confidence.

Use of flashcards

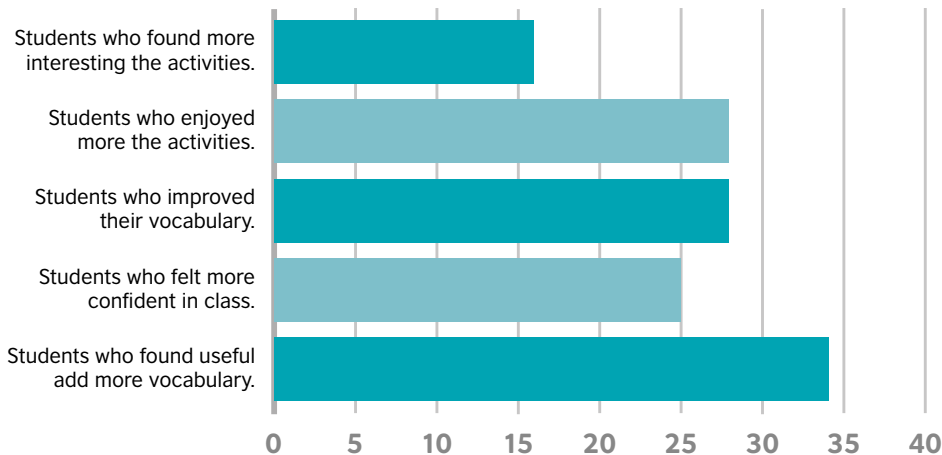
Finally, from her journal notes Alejandra observed that having flashcards on the wall during the lesson had proved very useful; these visual aids had reduced

the time she spent on clarifying misunderstandings in addition to providing more opportunities for reviewing and reinforcing meaning. Student responses confirmed this finding with all but one (37) stating that they found these 'very useful' or 'useful'.

What Alejandra learned

Alejandra feels that what she has learned from this EAR project is significant to her teaching practice. By exploring, she was made aware of issues with time and vocabulary – aspects she had not considered, or misunderstood. Similarly, during the action phase she learned that she should use a variety of strategies, not only the same ones, the ones she was comfortable with. She learned how important visual aids are, especially with low-levels students, as a means of support and reinforcement. She also learned how she could combine

Effects of Increasing Vocabulary Input



different content, i.e. culture and the curriculum, to meet differing needs – it wasn't impossible, she just had to think outside the box!

Looking back, even though Alejandra did her best throughout the process, she feels that she would like to have been more reflective and exact when formulating her original research questions. Moreover, she wishes she had been more careful in selecting a) who should observe her lesson and b) the questions she provided, because the information obtained from this tool is useful only if the observer provides full answers to the right questions. Not having this valuable feedback limited analysis of the situation and her choice of possible actions.

Finally, Alejandra's experience of integrating culture with the curriculum was a positive discovery, and she will continue to do this and increase students' exposure to cultural content because culture, after all, is an important part of learning a new language.

Final reflections

For Alejandra, the experience of carrying out this EAR project has been revealing:

More than once I had to face my own ideas and assumptions and recognise they were not fully correct. I found it difficult to change some aspects of my teaching but I needed to, to improve and become more effective. Observing how my students were performing and making modifications and improvements as a result of my research, helped me to realise that I am here for them and any changes I decide to make should focus on them and their learning, not my expectations or assumptions.

She also really appreciated the opportunity to work with a mentor – someone to help her at each stage of the process – and knowing she was not alone. Having others involved during the project was very useful because she could consider their points of view before just jumping in and making modifications to her practice. She feels that there should be more opportunities for teachers to work like this, sharing problems and working together to find possible solutions.

What is probably more important, is that Alejandra learned there is no magical solution to the problems teachers face:

No single strategy will be the ultimate answer to the issues we face as teachers. Exploring, analysing, proposing actions, evaluating them and making modifications is the shortest route to approaching any improvement in our teaching.

Acknowledgements

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

Reflection

Alejandra came to realise that “no single strategy will be the ultimate answer to the issues we face as teachers. Exploring, analysing, proposing actions, evaluating them and making modifications is the shortest route to approaching any improvement in our teaching.” By exploring she was made aware of aspects of her teaching she had either not considered or misunderstood. Have you ever explored your teaching in a similar way? If you have, in what way did that exploration contribute to you teaching? If you haven't, what aspect of your teaching would you like to explore?

This book – in continuation with a previous collection of stories from Mexican teachers (Rebolledo and Bullock, 2019) – presents the research narratives of nine teachers illustrating their professional journeys to become teacher-researchers. These teachers, along with fourteen others, took part in the Champion Teachers Programme which promotes the professional development of teachers of English as a foreign language by guiding and supporting them in carrying out their own classroom research projects.

The teachers whose stories are included here, work in rural, semi-rural and urban elementary and secondary schools teaching learners from a range of socio-economic backgrounds in diverse contexts and regions of Mexico.

The stories exemplify the positive impact that EAR can have as they illustrate how teachers are able to look to their learners, their colleagues and themselves to identify and better understand what is happening in their classrooms and introduce changes that benefit their learners while developing and growing professionally.



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