

Champion Teachers: stories of exploratory action research

Edited by Paula Rebolledo, Richard Smith and Deborah Bullock



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Foreword

Tom Connelly

Manager, Champion Teachers Project (2013–15)





The origins of this book can be traced back to two swelteringly hot days in January 2013, when 80 English teachers, mainly from secondary schools, gathered in the basement of a Santiago hotel (with intermittent air conditioning). They had come to find out more about action research and were curious to know if it could make a difference to their lives as teachers. For some, the so-called ‘Champion Teachers Project’ which ensued would literally revolutionise how they thought, felt and experienced teaching forever.

Their guide and mentor Richard Smith had expressed enormous enthusiasm for the project right from the start. It was, in Richard’s view, ‘an unprecedented teacher-research opportunity’ in terms of scale and focus on secondary teachers, and his excitement and belief in the project’s importance were infectious. My abiding memory of those two days is of two things that Richard emphasised concerning action research by practising teachers: that engaging in a process of *exploration* facilitates discovering how what we do in the classroom works or doesn’t work, and more importantly *why*; and also (perhaps as a result of this first aspect) it enables us to become more reflective and critically-oriented and become teachers who in Richard’s words do not just ‘blindly accept whatever “experts” try to sell them’ – this, as a result of going through a fundamentally bottom-up process of discovery unique to themselves and their learners. I also remember the way Richard began to call this process ‘exploratory action research’ (EAR) as the follow-up plans to the January 2013 workshop unfolded.

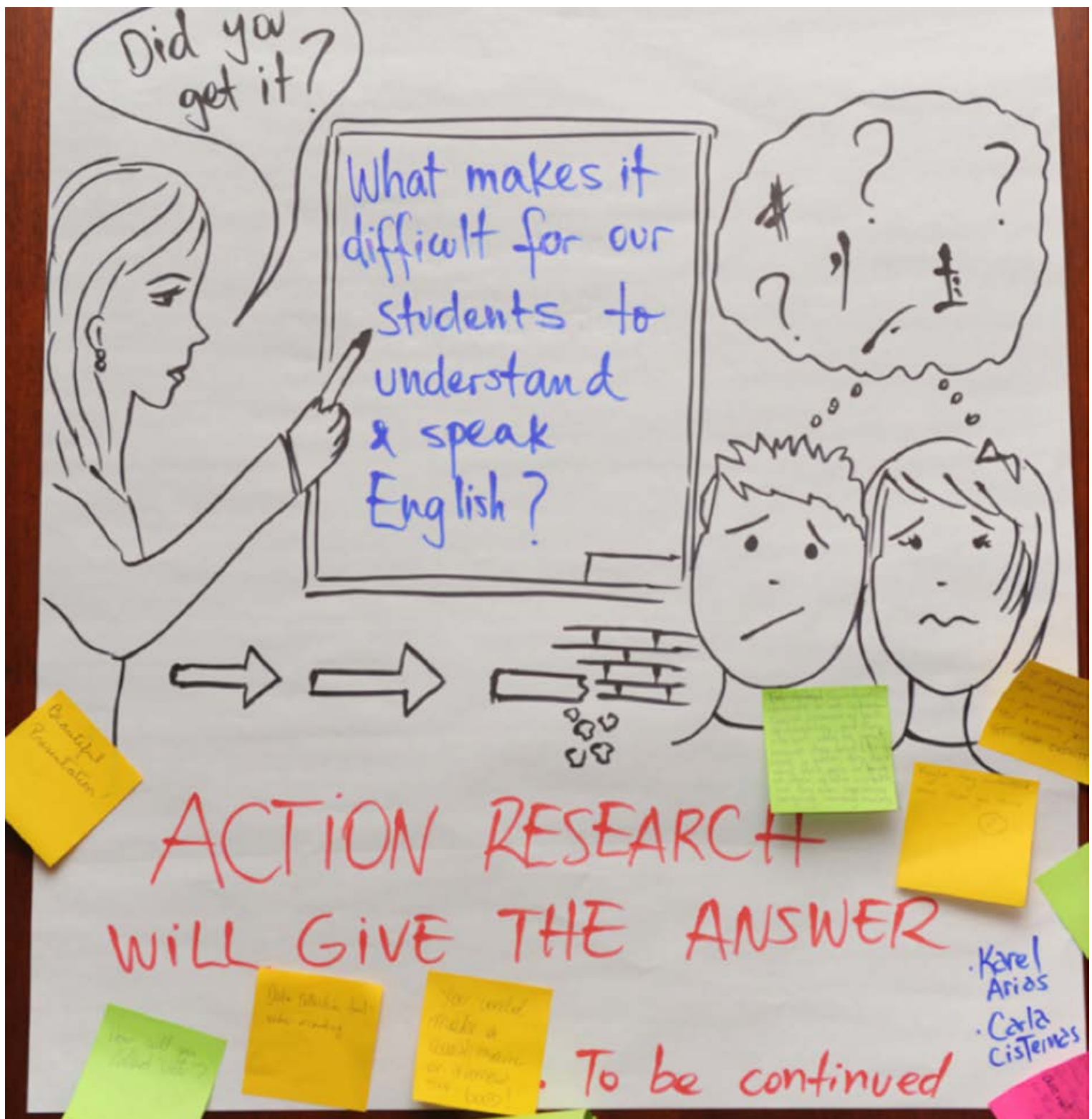
Now, three years on, in 2016, we have seen three cohorts of Chilean English teachers go through the same process. In my view, two further key factors have helped to assure the relative success and continuity of the Champion Teachers Project: the involvement of the Chilean Ministry of Education in publicising and administering the project nationally (among the 150+ English teacher networks that have been established), and the participation and guidance of Paula Rebolledo, whose knowledge, experience, dedication and above all, *passion* in her role as Senior Mentor in the project have been an inspiration to all involved. It was Paula who insisted that a teacher who participated and shone in the first cohort should be given the opportunity to mentor teachers in the second cohort. The wisdom of this recommendation soon became clear to me when I realised that this new mentor (whose own story of teacher-research comes first in this collection) not only clearly understood the context of the teachers she was mentoring, but was able to relate the value of the *process* to her mentees far more effectively because of having first made the EAR journey herself. There really is no more effective form of bottom-up teacher CPD than this, I believe.

I’m sure you will find this book both interesting and practical. For those interested in knowing more about Exploratory Action Research, the stories here should prove very illuminating. I believe you will find both the concept and potential of EAR very appealing, regardless of your context.

Workshop to launch the Champion Teachers project, January 2013 (seated at front, left to right: Tom Connelly, Paula Rebolledo and Richard Smith)

Introduction

Paula Rebolledo, Richard Smith and Deborah Bullock



Difficult teaching circumstances

The teachers whose stories are described in this publication are unarguably ‘Champion Teachers’, not only because of the degree of professional growth they have demonstrated but also because of the working conditions they face, which might be imagined to make this sort of development unachievable.

All are secondary school teachers working in public (also called ‘municipal’) or subsidised schools in Chile (the latter are publicly subsidised but privately run). Even though the meaning of ‘difficult circumstances’ varies from country to country, English teachers in Chile would argue that their working conditions are far from ideal; they usually teach over 33 hours weekly to classes with 40 students on average, and to four to eight different levels in the same week. These conditions conspire against dedicated planning, personalised assessment, creativity and reflection. In less obvious ways, too, the teaching profession is regarded poorly within Chilean society, which makes it difficult for teachers to get their voices heard. Finally, as in many places, the hierarchical social structure in Chile makes for a situation where in-service training initiatives are usually proposed and defined by educational authorities without much consideration of how teachers, as professionals, could regulate their own learning and development (Rebolledo 2013).

The Champion Teachers project

The Champion Teachers project began in 2013 as a British Council / Ministry of Education initiative (originally conceived by Tom Connelly) to provide an alternative to the top-down tradition in in-service teacher education in Chile. Unlike previous initiatives, the project aimed at the promotion of continuing professional development (CPD) by advocating autonomy, reflection and empowerment and allowing English teachers to explore their own contexts and practices in order to better understand their work and promote their students’ learning.

The project began with an initial workshop in January 2013 which attracted the voluntary participation of 80 teachers, and this was followed by a year of mentoring support for the 40–50 who expressed willingness to actually embark on a project. Most of these teachers gave final reports on their projects to one another at a final, follow-up workshop in January 2014.

The role of mentors during the first year had been to provide advice on research procedures within a dialogic relationship, mainly via email-based communications. An even more humanistic kind of relationship between new teachers and mentors was achieved via skype and phone conversations during the second year, which itself began



with workshops for English Teacher Network participants in five locations the length of Chile. These workshops were organised by the English Opens Doors Program of the Ministry of Education, which was by this point becoming more involved in the initiative. From Year 2 onwards, mentors who were experienced secondary school teachers and former Champion Teachers themselves were preferred to university-based teachers. This change was intended to bring about greater sustainability of the project and came also in response to participant feedback (see Smith, Connelly and Rebolledo 2014 for more on how lessons were drawn from the first year to inform the second year with new participants).

The changes in the project from one year to the next reveal its ‘process-based’ nature – it was adjusted continuously, based on feedback, teachers’ needs and considerations relating to sustainability. During the third year (2015–16, not represented in this volume), the mentor–teacher relationship was further strengthened, and additional guidance was provided regarding data analysis procedures, which had proved particularly challenging for teachers. As we write this Introduction (in February 2016), the project is about to enter its fourth year, starting with a one-day workshop for 100 teachers to be led by Paula Rebolledo and Richard Smith in Santiago on 18th March.

The innovative nature of the project can be seen also in two further areas: firstly in the *type* of teacher-research promoted, which started to be called ‘exploratory action research’, and in the means for dissemination employed (among which we count this publication). Further information about these two aspects of the project is provided below.

Exploratory action research

The overall approach was deliberately practical, jargon-free and flexible, thus responding to teachers’ dispositions and working conditions in this context. As part of this, there was an overall emphasis on initial exploration for *understanding*,



and the adjective ‘exploratory’ started to be placed consistently before ‘action research’ when the approach was being discussed with teachers. Teachers were encouraged *not* to immediately plan an intervention as in some forms of action research. Instead, the desirability of an exploratory first phase was strongly emphasised which would involve extensively clarifying the existing situation – the nature of a given ‘problem’ or other kind of issue – before any action for change was conceived or undertaken (see Smith 2015 for further explanations).

Researching in order to understand a given situation was, then, seen as key – as an important preliminary to new action, but also, potentially, as a sufficient end in itself. Thus, in the overall work plan which has been suggested to teachers each year, an initial exploratory phase can be followed either by a new intervention or by a further exploration. As things have turned out, most teachers have chosen to take some kind of new action at the mid-point, inspired as they have been in many cases by the ideas for change suggested to them by their own students.

At the same time, teachers’ final reflections have also shown how simply consulting students about important issues (that is, exploring them *with* students) has *in itself* helped to ameliorate an initially problematic situation. We feel that this sufficiently validates the emphasis in this project on *exploration*, not just imposing outside-in or top-down ‘solutions’ on students with no prior consultation.

Innovative sharing

Another innovative feature of the project has been the way pressure to ‘write up’ findings has been bypassed. Although the initial expectation of all concerned had been that an academic-style report would need to be an outcome, in fact a quite different form of reporting evolved towards the end of the first year. A decision was taken to focus on sharing among a relatively small group of teachers via poster and oral presentation rather than attempting to reach a wider readership via written reports. This was partly in the interests of the teachers concerned gaining immediate

benefit in the form of feedback rather than spending considerable time crafting a written report nobody may ever read. Thus, in the case of the first (2013–14) cohort, teachers were asked to create a poster of their research journey, then come together at a final project workshop where they practised in pairs and groups of four before presenting their posters orally to a larger group.



Cohort 2 participants instead had the opportunity to prepare together for and then present their research at a conference.

Some teachers have subsequently presented their research to other teachers just beginning their journey within the Champion Teachers project or at other workshops and conferences.



At the same time, in anticipation that a written account may be of use at some point, teachers were asked to record their final oral reports using mobile phones. They were then given time to transcribe the recordings and rewrite the transcripts on the basis of feedback from other participants in the wider group.

With the addition of photographs and other materials, these recordings and writings connected with the final presentations of Champion Teacher cohorts 1 and 2 form the basis for the stories included in the present collection.

This book and its purpose

The primary purpose of the present book is to provide examples to other teachers of what an exploratory action research project can involve.¹ The nine stories included here also serve to show others in Chile and beyond what some of the Champion Teachers have managed to accomplish in spite of their difficult working conditions.



In line with these purposes we have taken several decisions which need to be explained, since the outcome does not take the form of conventional (academic-style or first-person) research-reporting. Instead, our main concern has been to achieve a reader-friendly form of presentation which will be inviting rather than off-putting to other teachers.

For this reason we have aimed for a relatively informal style of writing and a welcoming use of visuals (we know as teachers that visuals support understanding; they can also break written texts into manageable chunks and add colour and individuality). The first of these goals has been partly achieved by making the transcript of an oral presentation the basis of initial writing (see above). This practice, derived from the Champion Teachers project, influenced a previous collection of teacher-research reports (not itself connected with the Champion Teachers project), namely *Teachers Research!* (Bullock and Smith 2015). However, while that publication achieved a relatively colourful and informal impression, we have set out to innovate even further in the present book. In addition to using photographs and colour, in this publication we have added other less conventional visual features such as speech and think bubbles, and drawings.

The use of these visual features arose largely from our decision to present the stories as third-person accounts. This decision was made to avoid placing an added burden on teachers while providing them with the opportunity to

disseminate their work further (although encouragement to others to engage in teacher-research, not dissemination of findings *per se*, is our main goal). Third-person writing has also enabled us to maintain a consistent tone throughout the collection. An alternative would have been for us to ‘ghost-write’ first person accounts, that is edit them to sound as if they had been fully authored by teachers themselves. However, we decided from the outset that for us to write as if in the first person would have been both inauthentic and patronising.

We should stress, however, that the stories and the photographs are the teachers’ own, and the editing process merely served to help us achieve a consistently informal tone and produce accounts which are clear and reader-friendly. In line with this intention it seemed natural to add speech and think bubbles, stick figures and, on one occasion, even emoticons, not just for innovative effect but to highlight key points of the teachers’ accounts, and to reflect something of the researchers’ personalities. Thus, even though these are third-person accounts, we hope that the voices of the teachers concerned and the ‘reality’ of the situations they describe come through. Overall, we hope we have succeeded in making this collection even more accessible and appealing than *Teachers Research!* (Bullock and Smith 2015) while remaining true to the experiences of the teachers involved.

The stories

On, then, to the stories... Rather than telling you everything you’re about to read, we thought we would just give some tasters of the kind of people you’re going to meet, based on a combination of Paula’s memories (as the editor most involved on a day-to-day basis with the teachers in the project) and Deborah’s notes on how she tried to convey something of their individuality (as editor most involved with the presentation of the stories):

The first story belongs to Andrea Robles López. Andrea has played an important role in the sustainability of the project since she was a very committed teacher-researcher in the first cohort and later became the first peer-mentor, for a number of teachers, in the second cohort. In her research story, Andrea describes how her project started from a puzzled feeling about the closings of her lessons. As Deborah notes, ‘Andrea sounded happy and surprised with the positive results and then disappointed, and at times uncertain, hence the use of emoticons originally’.

¹ A *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (Rebolledo and Smith, in process) is being produced to accompany these stories, and will, we hope, provide extensive practical support for teachers interested in trying out exploratory action research for themselves, and/or for teacher educators interested in introducing teachers to this approach.

Mauro Sáez Mejías (Chapter 2) was a teacher from the second cohort who also started his exploratory action research from a puzzle – this time, about classroom layout. Deborah noted the ‘great little pictures from his poster of pairs and groups’ and felt it was appropriate to zoom in on them in the visual presentation of his story.

Camila Villalobos Meneses (Chapter 3) was unable to attend the final cohort 1 presentations (hence there is no picture of a poster to introduce her story) but she did supply a written draft. Deborah notes ‘I thought it was interesting that when she formulated questions she thought about *who* would answer them, hence the little table; and the sense of warmth for her students that comes through in the text and in the photos inspired me to use the colour purple’.

For another teacher from cohort 1, Javier Ávalos Varela (Chapter 4), motivation and participation were also the most important issue, and building a safe environment was key. For Deborah, it was Javier’s humour that stood out, ‘hence trying to capture that lovely interaction between Javier and his student through an illustration’.

From Chapter 5 (Daniela Gajardo González, cohort 1) onwards, projects are mainly based on language skills, with speaking seeming to be a common concern for several teachers. Both Daniela and a teacher from cohort 2, Teresa Ríos Hoyos (Chapter 6), focus on exploring reasons for reluctance to speak in class, while Esteban López Mejías (Chapter 7, cohort 1) focuses more on exploring students’ actual abilities and implementing a possible solution he has read about. They all use their own imagery and have their own ways of tackling issues, however – for Daniela the image of ‘a long journey’ is central; Teresa’s notebook is an important starting-point, and Esteban begins with the striking image of ‘building a castle without any stones’.

Continuing the focus on language skills to the end, the collection concludes with a colourful story relating to low participation in listening skills (Chapter 8: Lorena Muñoz Huenchullanca, cohort 2) and an account of upgrading writing skills (Chapter 9: Leyla Nuñez Aguilera, also cohort 2). The last story ends with Leyla looking forward to implementing changes based on her enhanced awareness of student needs, and with her own words, ‘I heard my students. I saw myself’, which seem to encapsulate the Champion Teacher project’s core value of exploration as a preliminary to action but also as an end in itself.

Note on permissions

All the teachers have seen and approved the final versions of their stories, and are happy for them to be included in this collection. In all but two cases written permission was gained from both students and parents for use of the photographs of students that teachers supplied. In the two cases where permission could not be gained (as teachers had moved to a new school), students’ faces have not been shown. Teachers’ real names have been used but not the names of the schools they were working in.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of the project mentors to date: Anne Westmacott, Catherine Thomas, Kevin Towl, Andrea Robles López, Lorena Muñoz Huenchullanca, and Claudia Bustos Moraga. We also thank the British Council Chile (in particular, Andrew Chadwick, Tom Connelly and Deborah Sepulveda) and the English Opens Doors Program of the Ministry of Education Chile (especially Alicia Páez, Ricardo Contreras and Isabel González) for their support. Finally, a particular word of thanks to Ellen Darling (British Council EnglishAgenda website manager) for enabling these stories to be edited and disseminated in book form, and to D8 for the visual design.

Most importantly, we would like to thank the teachers represented here and all other participants in the Chilean Champion Teachers programme. Their dedication, encouragement and passion for teaching have been an inspiration!

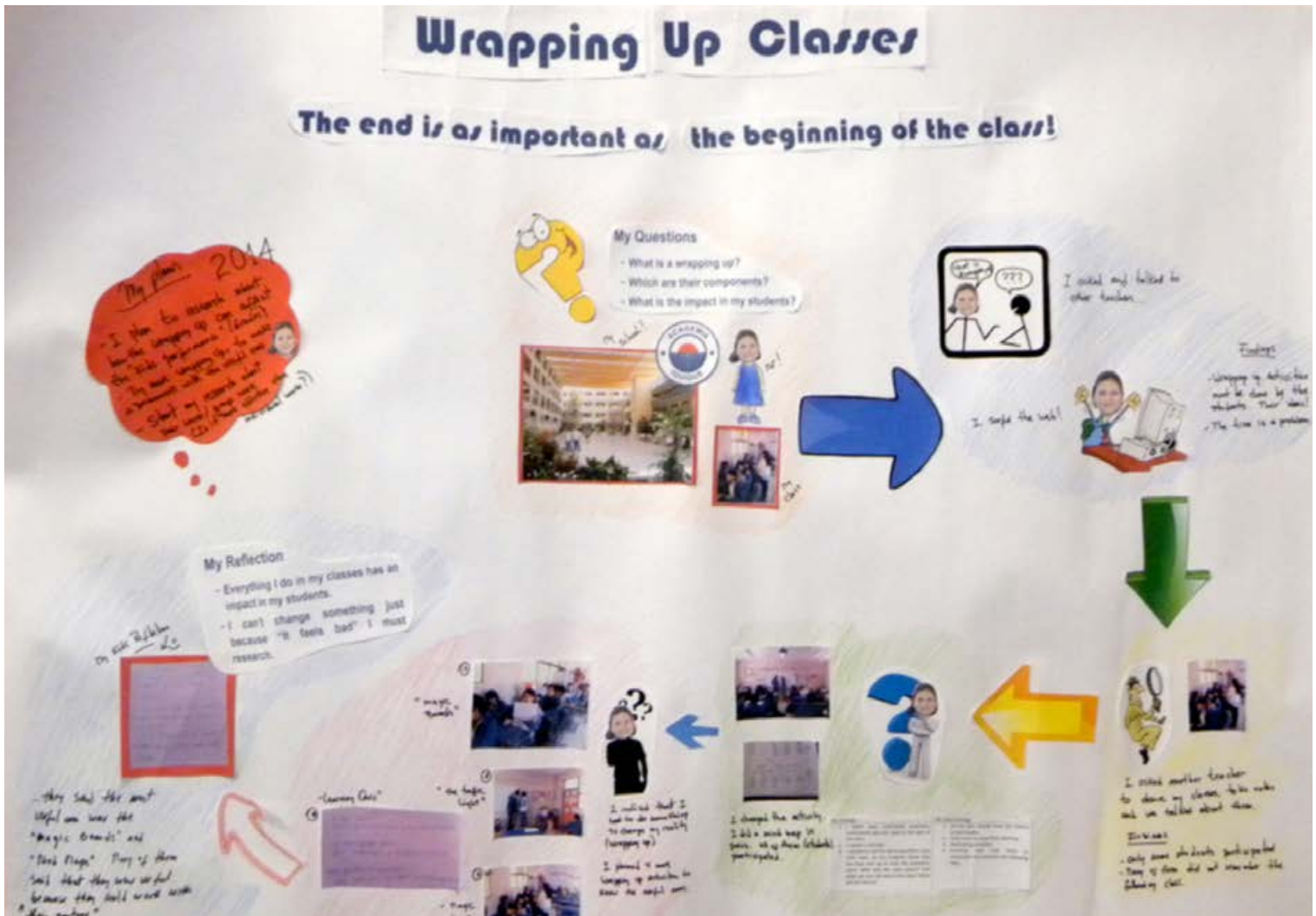
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1

Wrapping up classes

Andrea Robles López
Iquique, Chile





Andrea Robles López teaches English to 11th grade students (15-year-olds) in a large secondary school in Iquique, with more than 1,700 students and average class sizes of 36. Expectations are high and students who do not perform well or achieve good results are actually asked to leave. For this reason Andrea does not face the problems more typically encountered in a secondary school context – poor grades, lack of motivation, or unwillingness to participate. She does, however, reflect on her teaching, try out new ideas and think about what she can do better, and there was one question in particular which was puzzling her.

The puzzle

It started with a feeling, just a feeling, at the end of the lesson – the wrapping up, or closure, was weak. While she put a lot of effort into planning the warm up and main activities, she felt the end of the lesson, where students reflect on what they have actually learnt, was neither engaging nor effective.

First steps

To find out if she was right, if the wrapping up really was weak, she decided to do some research. There were three questions she wanted answers to:

1. What is wrapping up?
2. What are the characteristics of wrapping up?
3. How do my students react in this part of the lesson?

The first step was to think about these questions, try to answer them on her own and make a few notes. Then, she asked a few colleagues what they thought, and if they had any problems during this stage of the lesson. Finally, she went online to get more information and came across an article written by another teacher, on www.busyteacher.org. The conclusion she came to was that wrapping up should be done by the students themselves and the teacher's role is not to lead, but to facilitate and guide. This was reassuring because it confirmed what she herself had suspected from the start. She also realised that it is important to allow sufficient time, that the activity needs to be centred on the learning objectives, and it needs to be student-centred.

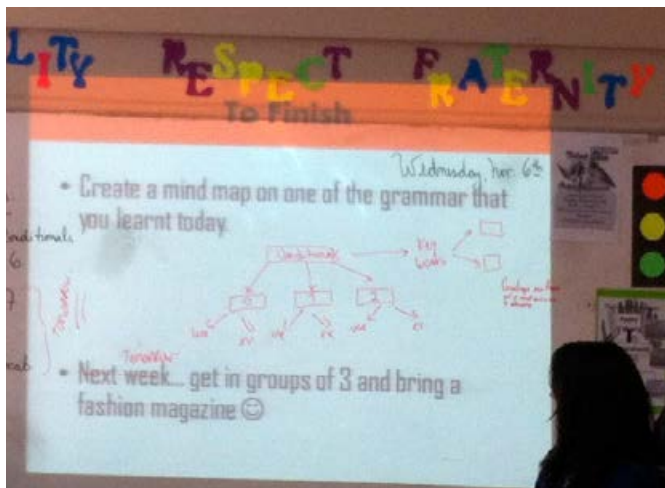
Her next step was to observe the classroom reality, so she invited a colleague to come and take notes on what happened in the final stages of the lessons. What he noticed was that she tended to ask general questions such as 'What did we learn today?', 'What did we do?' or 'What can you remember?', and while a few students made an effort to answer, the majority were paying no attention and busy packing up their things getting ready to leave the room. The very next lesson, she asked them to write about what they had done in the previous lesson, in Spanish so they could fully express themselves, and this is what she found:

- 23 did not remember
- 3 did not answer
- 8 answered correctly.

That was it – something clicked! Everything added up and what she had felt was right – the closing stage was simply not working. She now had evidence that there really was a problem and something had to be done to change the situation.

She sat down and compared what was happening with what should be happening:

My closings	My ideal closings
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I asked general questions and did not nominate who should answer. 2. The wrapping up took five minutes. 3. I tended to use the same questions at the end of every lesson, and this signalled that the class was about to end. 4. My questions were: What was the lesson about? What can you tell me about this lesson? What did you learn? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All the students need the opportunity to participate – I need to nominate. 2. Students should show what they have learnt. 3. Activities should be engaging and of more than five minutes. 4. Activities need to help them to remember the content at the start of the following lesson.



Time for action

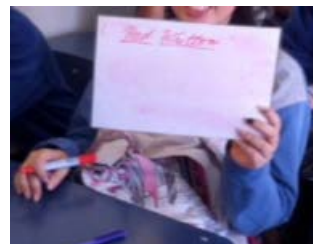
The first thing she did was to think of activities that worked for her when she was a student, and decided to try mind mapping.

The students worked in pairs for ten minutes to create a mind map. Then one pair shared their ideas on the board while other pairs contributed suggestions. At the start of the next class when she asked her students to recount what they had learnt during the previous class, most of them could recall!

So, some weeks later she repeated the activity and invited her colleague to come and observe again. What he noticed was a huge change – motivated students and all of them engaged and collaborating! And, in the following lesson, when she asked what they had learnt, she found most of them could remember.

She could now link new content to previous learning to make everything more meaningful! Encouraged, she sat down and asked herself, 'What next? What can I do now?'

She tried four more activities:



1. Using mini-whiteboards

Mini whiteboards can be easily made out of paper and plastic. Students can write answers on these with a marker, erase the answers and write on them again.

Andrea asked questions and the students worked in pairs, laughed and shouted their answers – they loved it! And, in the next lesson, most of them remembered what they had done.



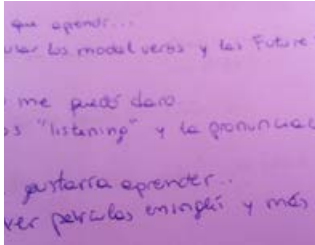
2. Traffic lights

Andrea made a set of traffic lights out of cardboard. She then asked the students to write what they had learnt in the previous lesson in the green light; what they had learnt in this lesson in the

yellow light; and what they wanted to learn in the next lesson in the red light. Andrea really liked it because it was unusual and it covered all the lesson stages (warm up in the green and closing with the yellow) but to her surprise, the students did not respond well – only a few participated and in the following lesson many of them couldn't remember the content.

3. The magic bag

Andrea took a simple paper bag and called it 'the magic bag'. She asked the students to take some magic powder out of the bag, make a ball with their knowledge and then throw the ball and say what they had learnt. It was fun and the students clearly enjoyed the activity but the following lesson only 20 remembered what they had learned, so she was not convinced it was a useful activity.



4. Learning quiz

This was done in Spanish. Andrea asked her students to write what they learned, what was not clear, and suggestions for the following lesson. She enjoyed reading their

comments, and some of their suggestions were very useful. She also found that in the following lesson they could easily remember previous content.

Student feedback

Andrea continued to use these activities for a couple of months and at the end of that time she asked her students for feedback in Spanish. She told them to choose two activities and explain which were the most useful in terms of:

- having a clear overview of what the lesson was about
- having the chance to reflect on what they did
- helping them to remember when asked during the following class.

This is what they thought:

- 20 said the mind mapping was the most useful activity because it helped them to organise their learning and get an overview of the lesson.
- 15 said using the mini whiteboard was helpful because it enabled them to review the content in a fun way; and they had to work with a classmate, which was useful.
- 10 of them chose the learning quiz because they could reflect on their learning and it was nice to make suggestions to the teacher for the following class; it was also nice to see that the teacher took these on board!
- The other two activities – the magic bag and traffic lights – were only chosen by one or two students.

What was especially notable was that the students appreciated the opportunity to work with a partner and share ideas with their classmates.

Reflections

The research opened Andrea's eyes to what she needed to do more effectively but she admits that it was no easy task to undertake because it took time, and courage to get started. However, once she'd started, it was difficult to stop because there were always questions to find answers to. What she found crucial was the support of her mentor – there were many things she took for granted but her mentor helped her to stop, reflect, and refocus in order to learn more about the exploratory process rather than simply trying to find a solution to a problem.

What she learnt is that it is very important to centre on her students – their learning preferences, their needs, their interests, their background and not rely on what she, as a teacher, felt comfortable with or had been doing for years:

'If you are an experienced teacher and you think that you have nothing to learn from your colleagues and from your students, you are wrong.'

She also understood that, as a teacher, it is very important to be reflective – to have the capacity to think critically about her teaching practice. She started her research journey with a feeling that something was not right, had the chance to stop and think why she felt that, proved that there was a problem and took action to change her reality. Some things worked, others didn't, but at the end of the day she realised her students' learning depends on her own.

What next?

Andrea has now started thinking about her new goals. Her journey isn't over – she wants to create more wrapping up activities and possibly make a list of the most successful ones to give to other teachers who have run out of ideas. She would also like to find out if using the activities that her students find most useful will result in better learning and better grades. And finally, she wants to follow up on her discovery that her students preferred some activities because they had the chance to work with their classmates to share their knowledge, ideas, feelings and needs. This discovery has given her an open window through which to explore how her students learn best. Something she is quite sure about is that this is the beginning of more research projects to come...

'My research journey started with a feeling, just a feeling that something wasn't right. Going from that feeling to asking why, and finding out what works is the key.'

2

Seating arrangements and groupings

Mauro Sáez Mejías
Valparaíso, Chile





Mauro Sáez Mejías is a teacher who welcomes new and interesting ideas and trying them out in the classroom. He teaches English in a school in Valparaíso, Chile which is one of the top municipal secondary schools in the region. The school aims to provide students with the skills and abilities they need for employability. Mauro teaches English to students in grades 9 to 12 (15- to 18-year-olds). Class sizes are large (35–40 students) and the majority come from backgrounds where access to technology and the English language is poor. For the purposes of this study, Mauro focused on two classes – one grade 9 and one grade 10 (15- to 16-year-olds).

lack of space. Mauro also involves his students in individual desk-work, but he noticed that even during the simplest tasks, they communicated their ideas with a classmate. He began to question whether individual work was effective, and moreover whether the seating arrangement in the classroom was conducive to his learners' apparent need to communicate with each other. He wondered how his learners felt about this too – did they like working this way? He decided to investigate. He would find out how his students preferred to learn and consider whether the seating arrangement in the classroom facilitated this.

Exploratory questions

To this end he came up with three exploratory questions:

How do my students behave when they are sitting individually?

How does the seating arrangement affect individual work?

How do students feel about individual work?

Traditional classroom set-up

The main approach to teaching and learning at Mauro's school is teacher-led from the front and involves students doing a lot of individual desk-work. Individual desks are arranged in rows facing the teacher at the front of the room, and it is quite difficult to rearrange the layout due to



Data collection

Observations

To collect his initial data Mauro asked a colleague to observe three lessons with three different classes - one where learners were working individually, another where they were involved in collaborative pair work, and yet another where they were working in groups. What he asked his colleague to focus on was the behaviour of the students during the lesson. At the same time, Mauro also reflected on what was happening during the lessons in terms of what *he* was doing and how his students were responding. And to gain yet further insight, he also video recorded one of his lessons, observed himself and his students, and made notes.

Questionnaires

To collect data from the students Mauro created three questionnaires – one to be completed after individual work, one after pair work, and one after group work (see Appendix). He then analysed the responses and identified the most frequent.

What Mauro discovered

Sharing with peers

From the observations, Mauro discovered that students focused and worked well on the individual tasks. Interestingly though, if they had a question or doubt, they instinctively looked to a classmate to clarify and only turned to the teacher for help if they couldn't get clarification or answers from their peers. From this observation it seemed to Mauro that it was natural for his students to consult with each other and he wondered if they actually preferred working with peers to working alone. He consulted with colleagues about this, and found that they too had observed similar patterns of behaviour during their lessons.



Student responses to the questionnaire indicated that in fact they do prefer to work with their classmates, but surprisingly, not in groups. The main reason given was that not all members of the group participated or contributed – they sat back and let the others do all the work.

A few students stated that they prefer to work on their own but the majority believed that pair work is the best in terms of working more productively and comfortably. Mauro also felt pair work was most beneficial - because students were helping and supporting each other, he could focus more on those students who needed the most support.

Not everybody works when we are in groups.



I feel more comfortable working in pairs. I can work with who I want and we can divide the tasks.



Time for action!

Pair work

Having discovered that his students preferred working in pairs, Mauro asked the school authorities for permission to change the classroom seating arrangement to facilitate this way of working.

Pairing the students was a little difficult because Mauro needed to take into account emotional and disciplinary factors. Fortunately he knew his students well enough to pair them according to needs, ability and compatibility. He also set about creating a new set of unit activities that involved collaborative work. He then implemented the change for a week – the last part of the course leading up to the final exam.



Impact on student work

Students engaged positively with the pair work activities. They appreciated the opportunities to sit with someone they got on well with and who could help or support them, and they appeared more receptive to what was being taught.

The final exam results were impressive – although 4 per cent did not meet the standard of 4.0, over 95 per cent achieved grades 4.0 to 7.0. The results obtained in the final external exam were also good (more than 90 per cent passed). While these results cannot be solely attributed to pair work, Mauro believes that discipline, uptake and rapport did improve with the introduction of pair work.

A learning experience

Mauro believes this action research experience helped him to realise that it is important to take his students' opinions into account when planning and managing classroom activities. He understands the importance of creating a comfortable learning environment and being flexible enough to respond to his learners' needs and preferences.

As a result of this experience Mauro also plans to include pair work activities from the beginning of the course next academic year. In fact, he will also encourage his colleagues to try having their students work in pairs as the experience turned out to be so productive, not only in academic terms, but also with respect to students' attitudes to each other and to learning.

Mauro now strongly believes that:

'Action research is important because education needs teachers who innovate, who have good ideas, who are aware of their students' needs and are willing to change their approach. It is also important because it lights a spark in the darkness of the system; it lights a spark in the mentality of the people who do not want to change; and it lights a spark in the school by making people believe that they own the changes that can be made in any learning environment.'

Appendix

Perceptions Questionnaire

Name:

Grade:

Date: 14 December 2014

Cuando trabajo en grupo (*When I work in a group*):

Lo mejor de trabajar en grupo es ... [*The best thing about working in groups is ...*]

Lo peor de trabajar en grupo es ... [*The worst thing about working in groups is ...*]

Cuando trabajo en grupo me siento ... [*When I work in a group I feel ...*]

Cuando trabajo en grupo siento que el profesor ... [*When I work in a group I feel that the teacher ...*]

Me encanta trabajar en parejas cuando ... [*I like working in pairs when ...*]

Cuando trabajo solo (*When I work alone*):

Lo mejor de trabajar solo es ... [*The best thing about working alone is ...*]

Lo peor de trabajar solo es ... [*The worst thing about working alone is ...*]

Cuando trabajo en grupo me siento ... [*When I work in a group I feel ...*]

Cuando trabajo solo siento que el profesor ... [*When I work in a group I feel that the teacher ...*]

Me encanta trabajar solo cuando ... [*I like working alone when ...*]

¿Qué prefieren? Trabajar en grupo o solo. Justifique su respuesta. [*What do you prefer? Working in a group or alone? Explain your answer.*]

Perceptions Questionnaire

Name:

Grade:

Date: 12 December 2014

Cuando trabajo en parejas (*When I work in pairs*):

Lo mejor de trabajar en parejas es... [*The best thing about working in pairs is ...*]

Lo peor de trabajar en parejas es... [*The worst thing about working in pairs is ...*]

Cuando trabajo en parejas me siento ... [*When I work in pairs I feel ...*]

Cuando trabajo en parejas siento que el profesor... [*When I work in pairs I feel that the teacher ...*]

Prefiero trabajar en parejas cuando... [*I prefer working in pairs when ...*]

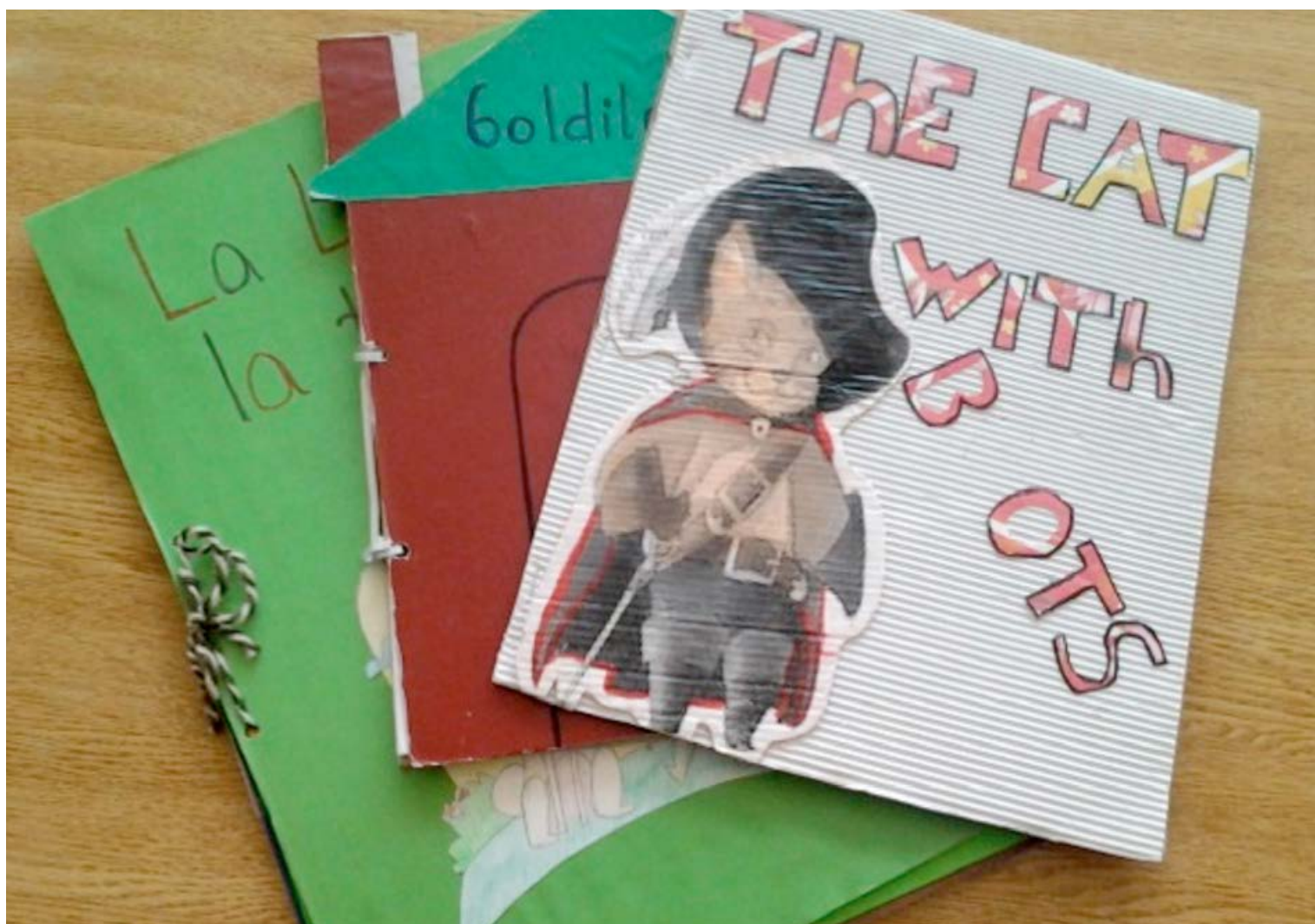
Considerando que han enfrentado diferentes cambios en los puestos en relación al trabajo individual o en grupos: ¿Qué prefieren? Trabajar en grupo, solo o en parejas. Justifique su respuesta.

[*Considering the different ways you have worked: What do you prefer? Working in a group, alone or in pairs? Explain your answer.*]

3

Improving participation and inclusion

Camila Villalobos Meneses
Chiloé Island, Chile





Camila Villalobos Meneses is an English teacher working in a school on Chiloé Island. She teaches students from grades 5 to 8 (10 to 14 years of age) and there are an average of 28 students in each class. In each class five or six of the students attend as a result of PIE (Programa de Integración Escolar). PIE is an inclusion strategy introduced by the Ministry of Education, which seeks to improve the participation and achievement of every student, especially those with special educational needs. The majority of these students come from rural areas and other islands close to Chiloé, and when they join Camila's classes, many have either never studied English as a subject before or have failed to achieve the expected standard. While attending the school, most live with foster families or at the local boarding school, and return home at weekends to visit their families.

For Camila, inclusivity is important and she was keen to help all her students achieve, but she was aware that these students did not participate to the same extent as others and did not appear to be as motivated to learn. She tried various strategies, such as letting them sit with their friends, and making herself more approachable by using a softer tone of voice or encouraging gestures. She also invited them to ask questions, nominated them to answer and personalised the lessons more, but all to no avail.



Getting to the root of the problem

Camila was at a loss as to what to do and she decided that before trying anything else, she needed to look into the issue more carefully. She formulated five exploratory questions to find answers to:

Questions	Who will answer?
1. How do these students feel about their English classes?	PIE students
2. How do I encourage these students to participate?	Camila
3. What do I do to motivate these students?	Camila
4. What are my fellow teachers' perceptions of these students' motivation in their classes?	Fellow teachers
5. What can I do to improve their motivation and participation in my lessons?	Camila

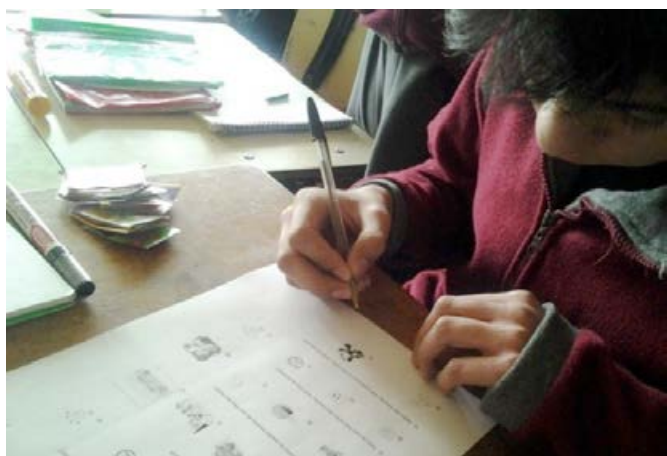
Different perspectives

To gain as much understanding of the issue as possible, Camila decided to try and see the situation from different perspectives, so she created three different questionnaires. The first was designed for her students to complete anonymously; the second for her colleagues; and the third she completed herself from her own observations and critical reflections.

Student questionnaire

The questionnaire she asked this small group of students in each of her grade 7 and 8 classes to complete consisted of five multiple-choice questions (see Appendix for the full questionnaire and choice of responses):

- How do you feel in English lessons?
- How would you like to work in English lessons?
- What kind of activities in English lessons do you like the most?
- How do you feel when the teacher asks you something?
- When the teacher asks questions to the class, what do you do?



Later, when she had looked at the completed student questionnaires, she arranged two **focus groups** to follow up on some of the responses. The focus groups consisted of 4 to 5 students from different classes, were very informal and took place during the breaks.

Fellow teacher questionnaire

The questionnaire she gave to colleagues consisted of just one question. Some teachers provided written answers, others oral answers.

¿Cómo es tu percepción de la motivación y la participación de los estudiantes pertenecientes al PIE en tus clases?

[What is your perception of PIE students' motivation in your classes?]

Personal observations and reflections

The questions Camila asked herself to think about and make notes on were:

- How do I ask students to participate in my English classes?
- How do I organise the classroom?
- Where and how do I organise PIE students in the classroom?
- How do I motivate PIE students inside the classroom?
- If students make a mistake, what do I do as a teacher?
- What kind of language do I use with PIE students? Is it different compared with the language I use with the rest of the class?

What Camila unearthed

Gaining different perspectives was useful as the responses unearthed different findings.

How the students feel

The students' responses revealed that most of them felt nervous in English classes [I c)]. They also indicated that they preferred working in groups [II d)] and liked activities which involved hands-on or creative work [III d)]. When asked questions in front of the class they either felt nervous or confused [IV c) and d)] and when probed further about this during the focus group, they explained that it made them feel awkward. They also mentioned that they didn't like to be treated differently from the others – although they recognised that the teacher was only trying to encourage them in a positive way, they disliked it.

What Camila realised

Actually, Camila herself had noticed that she was paying more attention to these students than the others in the class, and not only that, she was much more lenient with them, which they also disliked. She also realised that in her efforts to get them to participate more, she tended to nominate them to answer whole-class questions, which had only served to make them feel uncomfortable.

Another important observation she made was that as a result of allowing them to sit wherever they liked, there was now a clear division between them and the rest of the class. She was shocked and concerned that she had promoted this segregation even though her intentions had been good.

Fellow teachers' observations

An interesting finding from her colleagues' reports was that PIE students participated well in subjects such as arts, music, technology and physical education. However, history, maths, language, science and English teachers all faced the same issue as Camila – the students did not appear motivated, and did not participate well in the lessons.

Time for action

Camila now had answers to four of her exploratory questions. It was time to consider her fifth and final question – What can I do to improve their motivation and participation in my lessons? – in light of what she had discovered. She came up with three action points, which she implemented immediately.

Integrate

The first thing she did was to regroup the students and rearrange the furniture. She created small groups of four to five students ensuring that each group included a PIE student.



Increase participation

Next, instead of nominating individual students to answer her questions, she nominated groups to discuss, agree and answer.



Introduce more interactive and fun activities

Finally, she introduced more interactive activities at the start, in the middle and at the end of the lessons. These included using a ball to review vocabulary, miming, memory games, project work, and group competitions.

Camila continued to observe and critically reflect on her own practice, and was particularly interested to note the impact of the few changes she had introduced.



Time to re-evaluate

One week later she administered the same student questionnaire again to find out if the PIE students felt any differently about their English classes. She also organised focus groups to dig deeper as she had done following the first questionnaire.

How the students feel now

When Camila analysed the students' responses, she was happy to find some very important changes. The first and foremost finding was that the students felt happier, and less nervous. Her own observations supported this finding, and she could even say that they appeared more motivated. They were also participating more actively during the lessons and starting to ask when they were unsure of something. Camila noticed that they were creating new bonds with classmates outside the PIE group too, and not only in the classroom but also outside.



Camila was especially happy with their comments during the focus group interviews. They reported that they felt 'heard', that they had a voice and their opinions had been listened to. For the first time, someone had asked them how they felt and what they wanted in the classroom

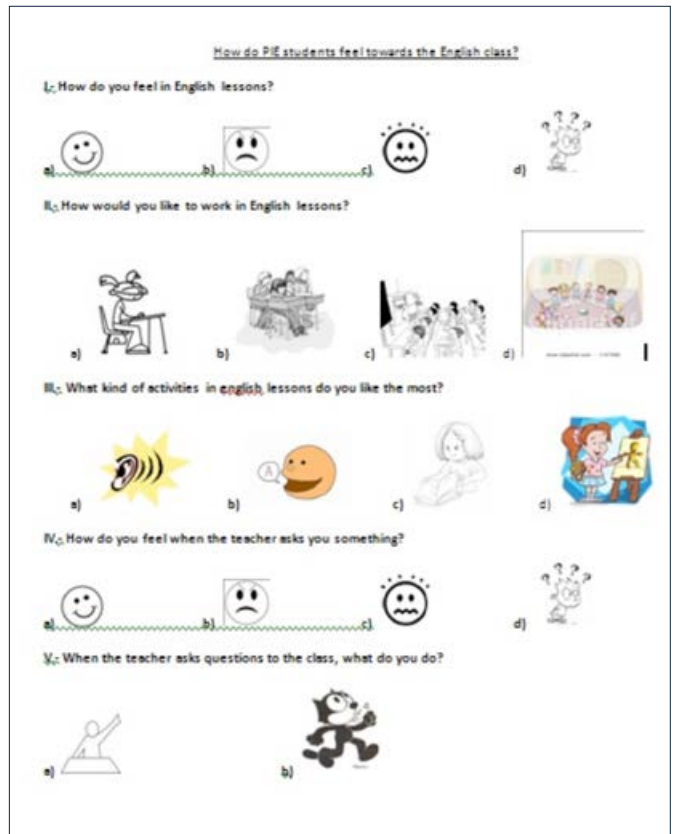
Reflections

Camila feels she has learned valuable lessons from undertaking this research project. She recognises how easy it is to forget that students are human beings with opinions and feelings, just as teachers are. Therefore, instead of trying to guess what is going on, it is better to ask them and find out. If there is a problem, as teachers it is natural to question the content or activities we use, but the first focus needs to be the needs and interests of the learners.

Her previous experience with PIE students had led Camila to believe that she should treat them differently because they need special attention, but she now realises that that is not inclusion. Inclusion in the classroom is making each student feel equal to their classmates.

This experience also highlighted for Camila the importance of collaborative work, not only for learners, but also for teachers. She feels that, too often, she and her colleagues are wrapped up in their own concerns. They focus on the negative aspects of their students and complain about their faults instead of enquiring and discussing what is going on in each other's classrooms:

'We need to stop focusing on our concerns and pay more attention to our students' concerns. As a result of this project, I feel that I am more empathetic. We forget that we were students too, and that we also had fears and doubts.'



4

Motivation for self-confidence in English

Javier Ávalos Varela
Santiago, Chile





Javier Ávalos Varela teaches English to students aged between 16 and 60 in a municipal school in Santiago. For various reasons these learners had been unable to complete their mainstream education when they were younger, but they are now looking to improve their skills. In one particular class of seven students, the language level of the learners was very low, and many of them had never attended English classes before. Not surprisingly, they lacked confidence, were unusually quiet and afraid to either speak or write. They appeared to be completely daunted by the language.

How do you feel about learning English?

Javier sat down and talked with his students. He asked them how they felt about learning English and noted their replies. Some appeared motivated and believed it would be useful for them – they also thought that it wouldn't be too difficult and that sometimes it's just a matter of being lazy. But others saw little point in learning and believed English was a very hard language to learn.

I don't understand English.

I get frustrated because I don't know anything.

English is a very hard language.

I feel ashamed in English because I think that I do it wrongly.

I don't care about English – it's useless!

We are in Chile and we speak in Spanish.

After this initial informal enquiry, Javier decided to create a questionnaire to dig deeper. He suspected that there were a lot of negative attitudes or feelings toward learning English, but he wanted to be sure and collect some evidence before deciding what to do next.

The first questionnaire

Results

The results confirmed Javier's suspicions and initial impressions. The responses gaining more than 50% agreement are highlighted in bold in the table below.

Almost all of the students felt nervous, frustrated and embarrassed, and they were clearly concerned about their pronunciation.

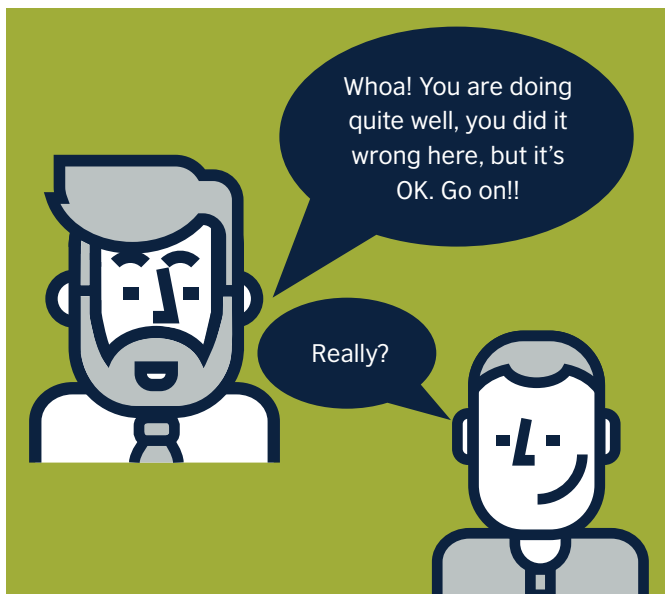
Statements	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree
Inglés es un idioma muy difícil. <i>[English is a very difficult language.]</i>	3	2	2
Me pongo nervioso cada vez que tengo clases de Inglés. <i>[I feel nervous whenever I have English class.]</i>	6		1
Inglés me frustra porque no sé nada. <i>[English frustrates me because I don't know anything.]</i>	5	1	1
Me siento imposibilitado de aprender inglés. <i>[I think it's impossible for me to learn English.]</i>	2	2	3
Siento que tardaré mucho tiempo en aprender inglés. <i>[I think English will take a long time to learn.]</i>	3		4
Yo puedo aprender inglés pero siento que es difícil. <i>[I can learn English but I think it's difficult.]</i>	4	2	1
Me siento motivado debido a mis notas en inglés. <i>[I feel motivated because of my marks in English.]</i>	4	2	1
No aprendo inglés por flojera. <i>[I don't learn English because I'm lazy.]</i>	3	1	3
Me siento avergonzado en inglés porque pienso que me puedo equivocar. <i>[I feel ashamed in English because I think I can be wrong.]</i>	3	2	2
Me da vergüenza preguntar en inglés. <i>[I'm embarrassed to ask about English.]</i>	5		2
Creo que puedo aprender inglés pero no confío en mí. <i>[I think I can learn English but I lack confidence in myself.]</i>	3	3	1
Creo que puedo aprender inglés. <i>[I believe I can learn English.]</i>	4	2	1
Entiendo las palabras pero no sé cómo pronunciarlas. <i>[I understand the words but I don't know how to pronounce them.]</i>	6	1	
Me aterra inglés porque no sé cómo pronunciar. <i>[English terrifies me because I don't know how to pronounce it.]</i>	3	2	2

Action

Javier realised that he could not approach this class of learners in the same way he did with other classes. He knew that building their confidence and creating a warm and positive classroom atmosphere was crucial and a first priority. Unless they could relax and enjoy the lessons, they would not be able to learn English.

He made a point of starting the lessons with an ice-breaker or telling a joke, or chatting and laughing about funny things that had happened at their places of work or home, etc. Then, when they felt more comfortable and relaxed he would give a simple overview of what they were going to do that day.

He used very basic examples to explain concepts and related content to their lives to make it meaningful. If they worked on exercises, he would move around the room and give individual attention. During feedback, he would give lots of praise and encouragement and tell the students to make corrections themselves. They started to smile and little by little their confidence grew.



But even though they were becoming more motivated and confident, they were easily tired as the lessons were in the evening at the end of a busy day's work. Javier realised he needed to take that into account. In fact, he realised that he needed to pay attention all the time to how they were feeling, how they reacted and how they behaved. He started to observe more carefully and think about what he could do in response.

Making signs

One activity which was particularly successful was 'making signs'. Javier knew that his students would be familiar with lots of different signs as they all used public transport and went shopping and there were lots of signs in all these places in both Spanish and English. He knew that even if they didn't understand all the words, they would recognise the icons or symbols and get the gist. So he gathered cardboard, markers, glue, etc. and got his learners to create signs that they could find in supermarkets, shopping centres, and on the metro, etc.



This activity also helped his students to understand how context can support meaning and that English can be relevant to their daily lives.

Some improvement

As time went on, more students joined the class, participation increased and the students' marks improved too.

The second questionnaire

Javier decided to administer the questionnaire again.

Results

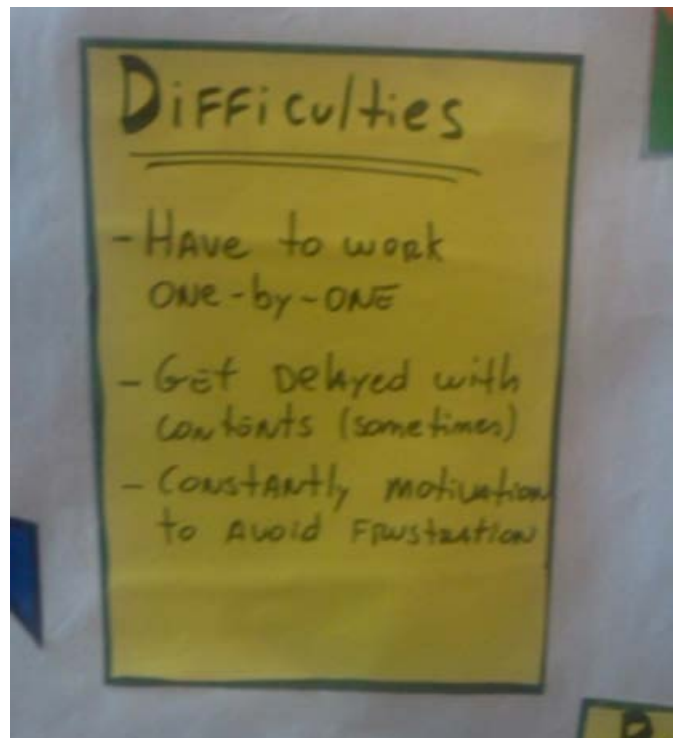
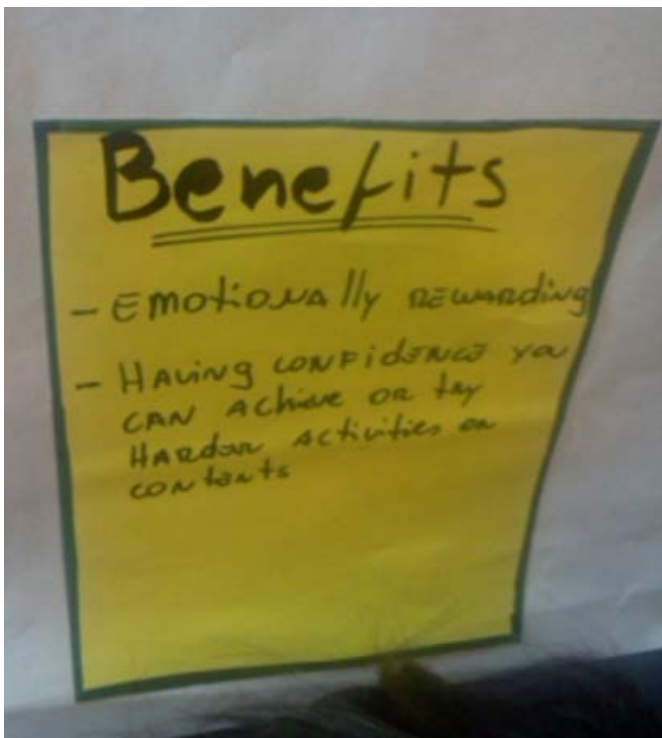
The results were encouraging. Although there was still more to do, a greater proportion of students seemed to choose positive responses (again, the responses gaining more than 50 per cent agreement are highlighted in the table below).

Statements	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree
Inglés es un idioma muy difícil. <i>[English is a very difficult language.]</i>	9	3	11
Me pongo nervioso cada vez que tengo clases de Inglés. <i>[I feel nervous whenever I have English class.]</i>	5	4	14
Inglés me frustra porque no sé nada. <i>[English frustrates me because I don't know anything.]</i>	6	4	13
Me siento imposibilitado de aprender inglés. <i>[I think it's impossible for me to learn English.]</i>	4	4	15
Siento que tardaré mucho tiempo en aprender inglés. <i>[I think English will take a long time to learn.]</i>	3	6	14
Yo puedo aprender inglés pero siento que es difícil. <i>[I can learn English but I think it's difficult.]</i>	17	2	4
Me siento motivado debido a mis notas en inglés. <i>[I feel motivated because of my marks in English.]</i>	13	5	5
No aprendo inglés por flojera. <i>[I don't learn English because I'm lazy.]</i>	6	2	15
Me siento avergonzado en inglés porque pienso que me puedo equivocar. <i>[I feel ashamed in English because I think I can be wrong.]</i>	8	4	11
Me da vergüenza preguntar en inglés. <i>[I'm embarrassed to ask about English.]</i>	6	4	13
Creo que puedo aprender inglés pero no confío en mí. <i>[I think I can learn English but I lack confidence in myself.]</i>	11	1	11
Creo que puedo aprender inglés. <i>[I believe I can learn English.]</i>	19	1	3
Entiendo las palabras pero no sé cómo pronunciarlas. <i>[I understand the words but I don't know how to pronounce them.]</i>	12	7	4
Me aterra inglés porque no sé cómo pronunciar. <i>[English terrifies me because I don't know how to pronounce it.]</i>	7	5	11

Reflections

As teachers, we are always busy preparing materials, planning, doing administrative tasks and so on, so at the beginning Javier was very doubtful about doing research because he wasn't sure if it would work or not. But he decided to give it a try and trust in himself and his students and he realised that, if he failed, it would be OK because he would learn from it anyway. Looking back, he feels that it was a great experience working with these students and they did their best not only to help him do this project, but also during the lessons. Admittedly, it took a lot of time and effort to keep going because of all the stress that a teacher has to deal with, but it helped to make his job more fulfilling and he feels the results and the rewards he got from the experience are priceless. It was his first experience teaching a group like this and he learned that it is not enough to go in and just teach English:

'These students really need to feel that someone believes in them and that they can achieve their goals... I can say that this project has benefited me in so many ways. It has helped me to improve my teaching skills, but also to develop a better relationship with my students, and colleagues.'



5

Encouraging students to speak in English

Daniela Gajardo González
Yungay, Chile





Daniela Gajardo González teaches English to 7th grade (13-year-old) students in a school located in a rural area in the Bío Bío Region. There are 38 students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in her class and they study English five hours per week. They are intelligent and affectionate children, eager and willing to learn new things and always full of energy. However, even though they would happily do anything Daniela asked of them, she noticed that they were reluctant to speak in English and often responded to her questions in Spanish. She became concerned about this and decided to look into her students' feelings about using English.

Focusing the issue

After some reflection, she came up with three questions to focus her research:

1. How do my students feel when they are speaking in English?
2. Why are they so reluctant to speak in English?
3. What opportunities do they have to speak in English in the course of a lesson?

Why do you speak Spanish?

In her search for answers, Daniela decided to observe her students' behaviour and make notes. She wanted to know how they responded to different techniques and activities, and thought this would help her reflect on her teaching approach too.

An important lesson

The first thing she observed was that they always responded to questions in Spanish, so she set up a discussion activity to find out why.

Why don't you try to answer me in English, even when you have the skills and enough key words to do it?

Their answer was very surprising!

Every time we answer you in Spanish, you assume we don't understand the question or can't express ourselves in English, so you explain everything to us in Spanish, and then we just get used to having everything explained in Spanish.

And at that moment Daniela had already learned her first lesson:

I should never underestimate my students. They have acquired the skills they need but if I don't allow them to use them, they won't try at all!

From that point on she made a commitment to her students to speak only in English, and to encourage them to try to do the same.

How do you feel?

To find out how the students feel when they speak English, Daniela gave them a questionnaire in Spanish (see Appendix) and asked them to describe their feelings. Almost 80% of them wrote that most of the time they felt nervous, insecure, not confident, afraid of making mistakes and even frustrated (the Appendix contains more detailed results).

Why?

Sadly, it turned out that this was because every time they tried, the rest of the class would laugh, make fun, or just not pay attention. So, they were not able to take advantage of the opportunities they had to speak English because they were inhibited or worse, intimidated.

Do you want to speak English?

Daniela then looked into whether her students wanted to speak English and discovered that they were, in fact, highly motivated. They liked the idea that they would be able to go abroad to English-speaking countries, communicate with native speakers and learn about their culture. They also pointed out that English is useful for understanding video games and songs, and getting a good job. Some even said that it made them feel more intelligent and important.

After Daniela had all the information she needed, she and her students were all ready to get involved in making some changes to their lessons. The learners even suggested some interesting and relevant activities to improve their speaking skills such as games, debates, drama or role play, using songs and movies. As Daniela put it:

'We were headed on a long journey, and everyone was on board the train ready to begin.'



The journey

There were two main areas that they should work on: creating a safe and positive learning environment; and introducing a variety of classroom activities to encourage and develop speaking.

Create a safe and positive learning environment

The first and most important challenge was to tackle the main reason Daniela's students did not dare to speak English – inhibition or fear of being laughed at. Daniela set about helping her students to show respect and empathy, and creating an atmosphere that would encourage the development of self-esteem and confidence. Her aim was to create a safe and positive learning environment and build trust. To accomplish this, she introduced a *monthly strategic change of seats* and selection of a *student of the month*. Each month she seated a less confident student with a different 'tutor' (a more confident student who was also more confident in English). Each Monday she also asked the students at the end of the back row to move to the front row, thereby rotating learners so all of them could enjoy sitting at the front at least twice a month. A *student of the month* was selected by all the teachers who taught this class, not only Daniela, and was awarded on the basis of behaviour: participation, effort, positive contributions to the class dynamic, and helpfulness. The award gave the students something to aim for but also enabled them to be

recognised and rewarded by their peers, teachers and parents.

Students demonstrating unacceptable behaviour or difficulties with learning were not ignored. *Student and parent meetings* were introduced to deal with issues such as bullying, a reluctance to speak, worryingly low self-esteem, and difficulties with learning. In addition, every time there was a problem with relationships between learners, *class discussions* were held. The chairs would be placed in a circle, the situation discussed and possible solutions put forward. Throughout the school year the *school counsellor, head teacher and psychologist* also worked with the students to develop different strategies to promote respect and tolerance.

Increase the number and variety of opportunities to speak English

The second major area for change was to increase the opportunities for students to speak English, and introduce a greater variety of speaking activities.

Daniela started by introducing more *pair and group work*. By encouraging learners to speak with their peers in this way, rather than in front of the whole group, she hoped they would not be so anxious, or afraid of making mistakes. And, if they did make mistakes they could correct themselves with the help of their partners.



She also found ways to increase individual participation. She made *coloured wooden sticks with students' names written on them* and would randomly pick them out to give each student at least one opportunity to speak in English at some point during the 90-minute lesson.

To check learners understood without reverting to Spanish, she used *instruction checking questions (ICQs)* and *concept checking questions (CCQs)* and learners answered these using their mini-whiteboards.

She also incorporated *continuous assessment*. At the end of each term each student was assigned a mark (*formative*

assessment) based on class work completed. Doing this not only motivated the learners to complete the class work, but also allowed Daniela to continually check their understanding of the content.

Increasing the variety of oral activities was difficult to achieve at the start but became easier with time. In the middle of each unit, Daniela got pairs to create and perform *dialogues and role-plays*. Volunteers performed these in pairs and by doing so gained some extra points which counted toward their assessments. To begin with they were shy and hesitant, but after the first pair performed theirs, most of the others also wanted to give it a go, and by the end of the year 90 per cent of the class was eagerly participating.

Since students had shown a keen interest in *songs*, Daniela decided to use a song every two weeks. She got them to listen, sing and complete a worksheet. The first time, it didn't go well at all because they were all too shy to sing, but she persevered and as they gained in confidence, they lost their inhibitions and began to enjoy themselves. She also tried using *movies* at the end of each term, but this didn't work out as expected, because there was not enough time to watch and discuss them.

One achievement Daniela is proud to report is gaining third place in the regional Public Speaking Contest, a competition organised by the Ministry of Education and part of its 'English Opens Doors' programme. As a result of this achievement, the school introduced a motivation plan for 7th and 8th grade students with the aim of preparing them for future competitions. In this contest, Daniela's class delivered oral reports on the topic of 'professions'. To prepare, they worked in small groups, chose a profession and prepared an oral report about it. The results were mixed because even though 34 per cent of her students achieved the standardised mark, they didn't do their best and demonstrated that they didn't have the necessary skills to perform well. In contrast, the other 66 per cent performed outstandingly, especially a small group of five who had been the shyest and most reluctant to speak. This group was so highly motivated to do their best that they outshone all the others.

Some of the other activities she introduced successfully were: oral quizzes, pair and group discussions, and speaking games.



Looking back

Looking back on their long and meaningful journey, Daniela feels that she has learned many valuable lessons, and two in particular. Firstly, it is a mistake to underestimate her students and their abilities. And secondly, she should always do her best as a teacher to create a safe and positive atmosphere that allows learners to work with confidence, and actively participate in their own learning.

Undertaking this research project helped her to reflect on her teaching approach and techniques, which she confesses is sometimes so difficult to do, but she was able to bring about a change in her students' learning and her own. She would recommend this experience to all teachers seeking to bring about a change for the better, and willing to embark on their own exciting journeys:

'Research is a wonderful tool and opportunity to begin that change we so desperately need.'

Appendix

Questionnaire and results

1. Do you like or enjoy speaking in English in class?

Yes, I do: 20 students (53%)

More or less: 13 students (34%)

No, I don't: 5 students (13%)

a) Some of the most common positive reasons they mentioned about speaking in English were:

- Students feel more intelligent.
- They can learn it very fast.
- Students can manage to express the language orally in a better way than in writing.
- They feel comfortable speaking English.
- Students develop speaking and body language skills.

b) Some of the most common answers they mention about not speaking in English were:

- When a student speaks in class, the others laugh and make fun at the one who is speaking when he/she does not pronounce correctly. Apart from that, a big number of the students don't pay attention when somebody else is speaking in front of the class.
- Some students feel uncomfortable, because they do not speak the language well, do not use accurate pronunciation, or do not understand the unit contents.
- A small group thinks the language is not interesting at all.
- There are some of them who don't understand 'anything' in English or it is very hard for them to comprehend the language.
- They feel nervous and insecure when speaking in English, and they do not like to be pushed to speak it in public.
- One of them needs more practice.

2. Is it important to you to speak in English?

Yes, it is: 30 students (79%)

Not sure: 3 students (8%)

No, it isn't: 5 students (13%)

Continued overleaf

3. Would you like to speak English in the future?

Yes, I would: 32 students (79%)

Not sure: 3 students (8%)

No, I wouldn't: 3 students (8%)

a) Most of the benefits students consider they will acquire when learning English are:

- The highest percentage of the students think the language is useful because they can communicate with native speakers; learn about their culture and go abroad to English speaking countries.
- In most jobs it is compulsory to speak English.
- Students can understand video games.
- They feel that learning English makes them feel important and intelligent.
- They can communicate more fluently.
- Some of the students would like to travel around the world.
- Two of the students are interested in studying a professional career related to the language.
- They are aware that English is compulsory in most university programs.

b) The reasons of students who are not interested in learning the language were:

- They believe it is a boring language, and they are not aware of the importance and the benefits they can get from learning the language.

4. In class, what is the percentage you understand from it?

Percentage	Students	Analysis
100%	3	Children who understand more than 50 per cent of the class said that they could not always understand each word from the class. However, they could understand the main and secondary ideas in order to develop a high level of understanding, and that was enough for them to comprehend the class.
90%	8	
80%	6	
70%	2	
60%	3	
50%	5	
40%	7	Students who do not understand the whole class argue that the lack of discipline of the class distracts them from paying attention and concentrating properly.
30%	1	
20%	1	
10%	1	
0%	1	

5. How do you feel at the moment of speaking English or performing oral activities in class?

15 students (40%):

This group of students feels comfortable, relaxed and fine when they speak English in class. They feel that performing oral activities in classes will help them to develop accurate speaking skills.

23 students (60%):

These students feel nervous, insecure, and not confident because they do not have a proper or accurate command of the language; its pronunciation and grammar structures. Most of them said they get nervous, lack confidence and feel embarrassed when speaking because they are afraid of making mistakes, and hearing their classmates laugh at their errors.

Among the answers, a few students said that when they know the correct answers, they feel great, but when the answers are wrong they feel frustrated.

Finally, only one of them said he does not like oral quizzes or tests because he is not sure about his pronunciation.

6. What kinds of activities do you like or would like to do in English classes?

Most of the answers to this question were focused on doing more practical, funnier and group activities in classes. Some of the proposed activities were (by order of preference):

- **songs, games, karaoke, movies, oral exercises, acting, puzzles and jigsaws, Pictionary, group contests, spelling, debates and repeating and learning words pronunciation.**

Apart from that, some students proposed more hours of English classes and an English workshop after school.

7. Do you have enough opportunities to speak and practice English in class?

Yes, there are: 31 students (82%)

Sometimes: 3 students (8%)

No, there aren't: 4 students (10%)

a) The students also mentioned that:

- They do have lots of opportunities; nevertheless they do not take advantage of them because they feel that their English level is not as good as they want it to be.
- They also feel afraid and embarrassed to participate because their classmates make fun and laugh at their pronunciation.
- Some of them said that when they understand the topic or main idea they participate actively, however when they are not sure of the answers or activities they prefer not to do it. And they only answer when they are asked to do it, but not voluntarily.
- A few students try to speak to their classmates too, in order to practice their speaking skills more.

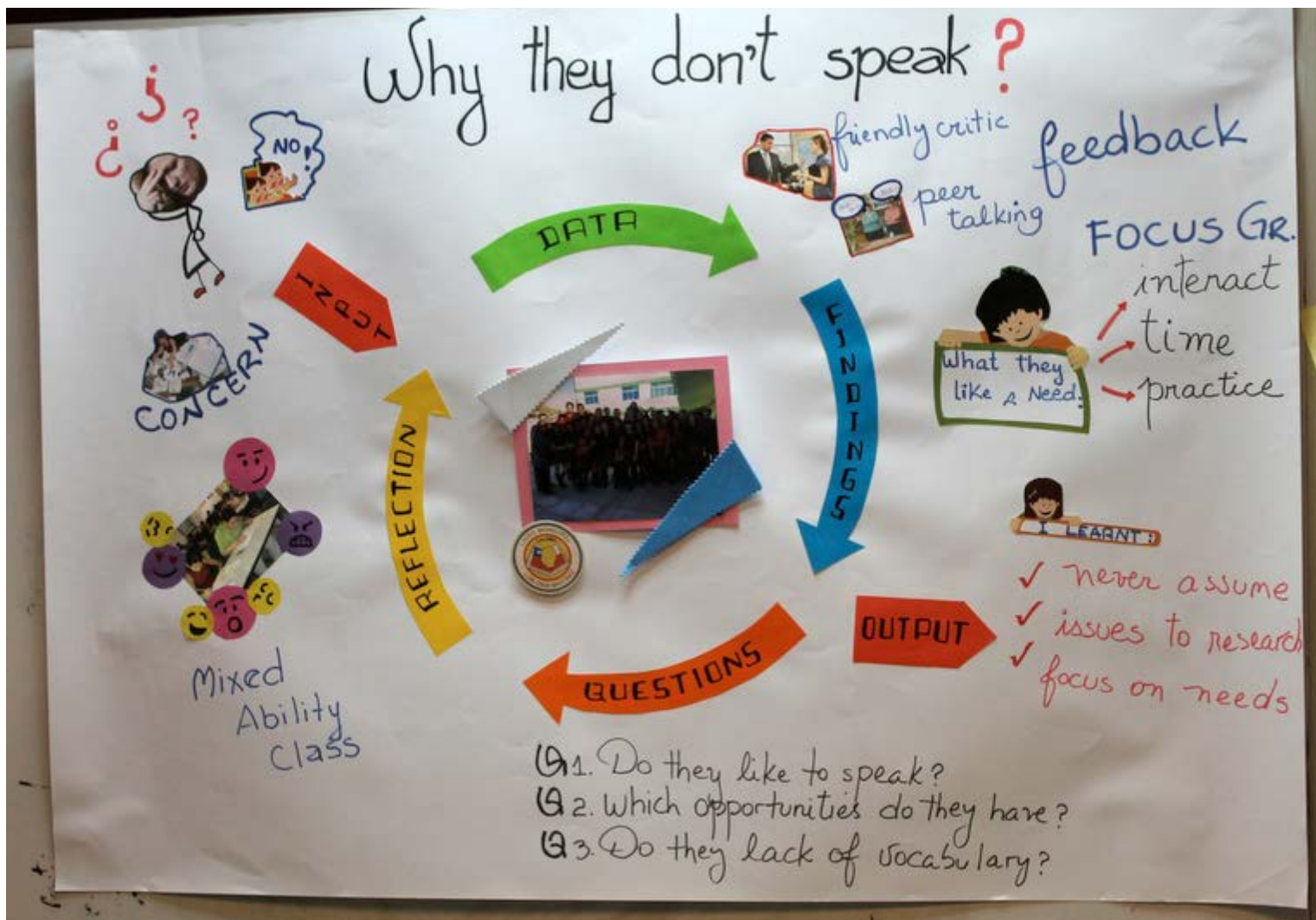
b) The students mentioned:

- Sometimes they do not want to participate because more advanced students or the ones who have a higher level of the language do not let the others participate.
- Two of the students said they do not have opportunities because they do not speak in English at all.
- Three of the students said that they do not participate as much as they would like to, in order to give the opportunities to the rest of their classmates.

6

Why don't my students speak in English?

Teresa Ríos Hoyos
Calama, Chile





Teresa Ríos teaches English to 9th grade students (15-year-olds) in a municipal secondary school in the urban area of Calama in the north of Chile. There are 44 students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in her class, and since students begin learning English in grade 5 or 7 (at 10 or 12 years old), Teresa's learners have had at least two years of English study. However, because English is not spoken at home, they have no opportunities to practise speaking.

Teresa believes that it is very important for learners to use the language they are learning, and although her students can read and write simple texts, they are very reluctant to speak. The national curriculum in Chile puts a lot of emphasis on speaking too, and Teresa needs to ensure that her students develop oral skills to the required standard.

While Teresa recognises that speaking is probably the most difficult skill to develop, she needed to know why her students didn't speak in English, and what was hindering them. She wondered if this reluctance was due to a lack of vocabulary, i.e. they simply didn't have the words they needed to communicate or express what they wanted to say. But she couldn't be sure, so she decided to investigate.



Initial questions

After some reflection, she came up with three initial questions:

- Why is it that my students do not speak English in class?
- Do my students like speaking English?
- What opportunities do they have to speak in English in class?

Who to ask?

Having formulated her questions, Teresa considered who she should ask and how. She decided to consult a couple of colleagues and her students.

Consulting colleagues

Her first idea was to ask two colleagues what kind of activities they use to encourage their students to speak more freely in the lessons.

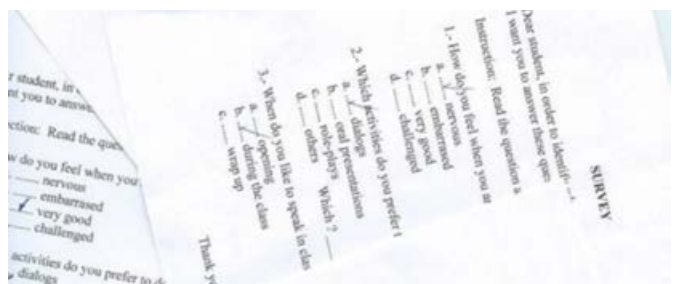
What strategies do you use in class to get students to speak more freely?

Consulting students

She then prepared a short questionnaire for her students. This consisted of three multiple-choice questions to find out:

- how they feel when they speak English (nervous, embarrassed, very good, challenged?)
- which speaking activities they prefer (dialogues, presentations, role-plays, other?)
- when they like to practise speaking (at the start, during, or at the end of the lesson?).

After the students had completed the questionnaires, she also chatted informally with them about the activities they liked or didn't like, and what they particularly enjoyed.



A critical-friendly visit

Finally, she invited a fellow teacher to observe her teaching a lesson. To guide and focus the observation, she prepared a form with four questions:

- Do they like to speak English?
- Do I give them opportunities to do it?
- Can you observe that the aim of the activities is for them to practise orally?
- How much time of the class do I devote to oral practice?

And at the bottom she created a space for suggestions.

What were the answers?

Colleagues' response

In response to her question to her two colleagues, both said they used 'dialogues'.

What strategies do you use in class to get students to speak more freely?

Dialogues – guided ones first, and then personalise them.

Me too!

Students' responses

Interestingly, the students also chose 'dialogues' and 'role-plays' as their preferred speaking activities; in short, they enjoyed interacting with their peers. In response to 'other', two students mentioned 'songs' and one student expressed an interest in 'tourism'. Calama is frequently visited by tourists and during conversation following the completion of the questionnaires, the students said they would like to learn how to speak with tourists. For example, they would like to be able to give them directions or explain which places to visit in the city.

The reason they were not so keen on giving presentations was because they felt nervous speaking in front of the class. In fact, most students reported feeling either 'nervous' or

'embarrassed' (7) when called on to speak in English. Two felt 'challenged' while just three felt 'very good'.

All of the students also indicated that they wanted to speak more and 'during the class' and not only at the start or the end.

Fellow teacher's observations

Teresa's fellow teacher felt that the students enjoyed speaking English when they had the opportunity, but thought that Teresa could provide more opportunities by asking them to work with different partners, not only one.

1- Do they like to speak in English?
they don't look afraid enjoy

2- Do I give them opportunities to do it? Ajustad's al rol.
They're describing the picture position to

3- Can you observe that the aim of the activities is for them to practice orally?
sure, intending info.

4- How much time of the class do I devote for oral practice?
half of it, some with problems. vocab. prob.

Suggestions:
change partner from time to time next class
pair - same person diff. part

* everybody is working
* 3 minutes ok.

Teresa reflected on all the answers and concluded that she was not giving her learners enough opportunities to practise speaking. One speaking activity per lesson or once a week was not enough.

Action plan

Teresa put together an action plan based on what she had learnt.

My future planning must include lots of oral work, dialogues, descriptions and particularly pair and group work so they have the chance to interact. I need to include role plays more often where students have the chance to interact with each other. From this experience I will make some important changes: I have to provide more speaking activities and I will also start working in groups because working in a group will give them more opportunities to use the language with different classmates.

What has Teresa learned?

Teresa set out thinking that the students had a problem, that maybe they lacked vocabulary and that was why they didn't speak in English. She realises now that she needs to look at what *she* is doing. Her students weren't speaking because she wasn't giving them enough opportunities.

She has also learned that she can't just assume that she knows what her students need to learn or lack. Instead, it's necessary to explore classroom issues. This process of formulating questions and finding answers can be used to explore anything that's not working, and also lead to better teaching and learning.

'With this exploratory process I discovered that I was expecting something from my students but I was not giving them something they needed first. I think when you 'see' something wrong in class, you should stop, reflect on that issue, collect data, analyse it and action plan accordingly.'

7

English communication in the classroom

Esteban López Silva
Santiago, Chile





Esteban López Silva teaches in a municipal school in Santiago. Students begin learning English in grade 5 (10 years old) and Esteban teaches grades 5–8 (10 to 14-year-olds). He decided to conduct his research with a group of 24 grade 7 learners (13-year-olds). These learners studied English with him three hours per week and during that time one hour was dedicated to using the textbook and two hours were spent on developing speaking and writing skills.

Despite having studied English in grades 5 and 6, the level of the students was very low. Apart from those learners who knew a little English from watching TV shows or playing video games, most only knew basic greetings such as ‘My name is....’. He felt as if he had been asked to build a castle without any stones – and there was no foundation to build on.



Initial questions

He needed to find out just how much language his learners could understand and produce, and came up with three exploratory questions:

- What is the proficiency level of the students’ listening comprehension?
- What is the proficiency level of the students’ writing?
- What is the proficiency level of the students’ speaking?

Diagnostic test

To find out, Esteban developed a diagnostic test, since the Ministry of Education (Mineduc) does not provide one for English. The same test was conducted twice – once in writing and once orally – on different days. Students were asked to give a little information about themselves, e.g. their name, age, and where they are from. The aim was to measure their ability to share basic personal information in writing and speaking, although the oral interview also aimed to assess listening comprehension and to what extent the learners were able to respond spontaneously.



About myself

This is Stephen, and he wants to know more about you. Can you answer his questions?

‘Hi! What is your name?’

‘How old are you?’

‘Me too! Where are you from?’

‘I’m from New York! Do you like English?’

‘That is great! Nice to meet you!’

Diagnostic test

The average score was 35 out of 70, but more than 80 per cent of the learners were not able to use simple grammatical structures, and 20 per cent of the written texts were incomprehensible. Their language level was clearly far below the Mineduc standard for this grade. Surprisingly, almost 50 per cent of the students could express information about themselves orally using basic language, but the language used was still below standard. For example, 11 students were only capable of giving their name and age. Although Esteban found the results quite shocking, he was encouraged by the fact that his students did have a little language knowledge.

Now that Esteban had the answers to his three exploratory questions, he could devise a strategy which would help him to achieve his goal of raising the level of these grade 7 learners nearer to Mineduc’s expected standard.

Deciding on an approach

Input-based instruction (IBI)

He decided to look into input-based instruction and discovered that according to Ellis (2006), language acquisition is driven by input rather than output. He read more and focused on two 'noticing' techniques of form-focused instruction – enhanced, and structured input (Lightbown and Spada, 1990). He understood that enhanced input consists of oral and written examples in which the target structure has been highlighted in some way, or given emphasis. Structured input, however, pushes learners to depend on form to get meaning and requires that they demonstrate the structure has been processed with an example. As Esteban's main focus was to develop both oral and written skills, he planned activities and exercises using a combination of these two awareness-raising techniques, which he thought could be effective with low-proficiency learners.

The intervention

The intervention consisted of many enhanced input examples (spoken and written) and also structured input demonstrations from the students. For example, when Esteban taught 'will' (simple future), he didn't start by saying, *Today we are going to learn the simple future*, he gave a lot of examples, highlighted the target structure and got students to create their own sentences to demonstrate that they could use it. He did, however, find it difficult at times to make the learning process meaningful. He observed that with this approach students were less involved than when they discovered rules for themselves. He also felt that an input-based strategy sometimes seemed overwhelming to these learners who had so little language. And he was concerned that the students still did not produce as much spontaneous speech as he had expected. Two new questions arose in Esteban's mind.

New questions

To answer these questions, Esteban observed his students for two weeks. He noticed that around two-thirds (16 students) were paying attention when either he or their classmates were speaking in English, but the others (8

students) were busy chatting, drawing or doing homework related to other subjects. He talked to these 8 students and asked them why they didn't pay attention. The most common response was that they didn't understand what was being said, but some also explained that they weren't really motivated to learn English and couldn't see the point as they didn't need it or use it outside the classroom. To address this issue, Esteban started to use more images in his *Prezi* presentations when introducing lesson content, and this seemed to capture the students' attention.

Was input-based instruction (IBI) working?

Esteban continued to combine enhanced and structured IBI, and introduced 'listen-and-do' activities. For example, if he asked students about the weather, and they answered in Spanish, he said the English word and mimed it (if it was hot he would wipe his forehead with the back of his hand), so even if they couldn't remember the word, they could respond with the corresponding mime. Students were now more used to the 'only-in-English' classes, and language learning and production were more evident as they were better able to understand and answer his questions during the lessons. IBI seemed to be working, as learners were identifying the new structures, understanding how to apply them, and sometimes producing examples, which was encouraging even though IBI does not push for language production at an early stage. However, some learners felt that the process wasn't meaningful enough. They still asked themselves why they were learning English and although some students found IBI easy to follow, they felt it was sometimes repetitive.

Re-test

One month later Esteban noticed that although speaking continued to develop at a fairly slow rate, the students' writing and listening proficiency seemed to be improving. He decided to administer the written diagnostic test again. This time the average score was 56 out of 70, a noticeable improvement. It seemed to Esteban that IBI could be an appropriate strategy to use in low-level English classrooms as it provides the learners with the necessary input and focus on form that they need, in addition to giving them support in producing language if they wish to do so.

More questions

Esteban continued to focus on developing speaking but a new concern arose. He noticed that even though he provided a lot of examples and modelling of target structures, learners were reverting to L1 patterns. For example, they would use the auxiliary verb 'do' after the subject when formulating questions, e.g. *You do like football?* He wondered to what extent the learners' L1 was affecting their English speaking, and formulated two new questions:

What are the students doing when I'm speaking?

What are they doing when their classmates are speaking?

How much does L1 interfere in L2 acquisition in beginner to low-level learners?

How does this L1 intrusion affect L2 production?

He felt that after two months of mixed input-based instruction, students should be better able to differentiate between L1 and L2. Students had been given a lot of models of the target language in the belief that this would give them sufficient support to produce language orally. However, due to the nature of the approach, he felt it was necessary to check how much input had actually been processed by the students.

Progress test

In order to measure this, Esteban conducted a written test. Students were asked to describe how they spend their weekends and their plans for the coming weekend. The results provided by this test indicated that the input-based instruction strategy was proving effective. Esteban noted that 87 per cent (20 students) met the standard required (mark 4.5) while 13 per cent (3 students) did not (see Table). Marks were based on criteria according to school regulations and based on the Ministry of Education's guidance.

Student Number	Mark
1	3.4
2	5.2
3	7.0
4	5.0
5	5.0
6	7.0
7	6.4
8	6.6
9	6.8
10	7.0
11	6.5
12	5.9
13	5.3
14	5.5
15	A
16	4.6
17	M
18	3.9
19	3.7
20	5.8
21	4.8
22	M
23	4.9
24	5.7
25	6.2

Table: 7th grade English Test Marks. A = Absent; M = Moved away from school.

What accounts for the difference in marks?

When looking at the results of this test, Esteban noticed fewer instances of L1 interference in the texts scoring above 6.0 and he was curious to find out what those high achievers do differently. He asked them how they interacted with English outside the classroom. It turned out that the high achievers generally spent at least one hour a day at home interacting with English – listening to music or playing video games, whereas the low achievers reported that their only interaction with the English language was at school – they did not watch, listen to or access any English language source at home.

Increase exposure to English

Esteban knew that exposure to English is important, but this finding motivated him to find ways of increasing his learners' access to the language not only in the classroom, but also in the school. He started by putting up English signs in different rooms. Then he arranged for two native speakers to speak with his students during break times. They also volunteered to assist learners during the lessons. Being 'forced' to rely on English seemed to lessen the need for L1 and translation.

Conclusions

To Esteban's surprise, ten months after starting his research journey, the low achievers in his class began to produce more written and oral language, while the others consolidated and polished what they already knew. He believes that by providing as much input as possible – both inside and outside the English classroom – it is possible to develop the speaking skills of even the lowest level learners. He found input-based instruction to be useful in his context where there was little previous knowledge of the language, although he would stress that oral skills take the longest to develop and improve. Esteban thinks this could be related to access to English, and believes that it is essential to take into account the context inside and outside the school, and not just what is done in the classroom.

Reflections

For Esteban, this research journey was just the start. Reading about and implementing IBI has motivated him to delve deeper into other methods and approaches to teaching English as a second language to build on what he already knows and discover what he is not aware of. He would also like to do more research into the impact and importance of English in the context of Chile's educational system.

References

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- Lightbown, P. & N. Spada. 1990. 'Focus-on-form and corrective feedback in Communicative Language Teaching'. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 12/4: 429–448.

8

Improving listening skills

Lorena Muñoz Huenchullanca
Osorno, Chile





Lorena Muñoz Huenchullanca teaches English to students in grades 9 to 11 (15–17-year-olds) in a secondary school in Osorno. There are on average 38 students in each class and most of them live in Osorno although a few come from other towns. The students in Lorena's grade 9 classes mainly come from low socio-economic backgrounds. They are well-behaved, respectful, and friendly and they try their best to complete the tasks they are given. However, Lorena noticed that during listening activities, they were not participating or volunteering answers, and their listening skills were not developing well either.

Questions

Lorena formulated four questions for the exploratory phase of her investigation:

- In which listening activities do my students listen better?
- How is listening presented during the lesson?
- What kind of information are my students able to identify from the listening text?
- How does the length of the listening text affect students' performance?

Collecting data

Questionnaire

To collect information from her students, Lorena created a questionnaire which consisted of three multiple-choice questions.

The first concerned the course book audio topics, the second asked which activities they preferred, and the third was related to the clarity of her instructions. Lorena dictated the questions to the students and explained that they needed to respond honestly as she would use the answers to improve the lessons. 76 students from two grade nine classes completed the questionnaire anonymously.



1. ¿Qué piensas acerca de los temas de la de audio?
[What do you think about the audio topics?]



- a) muy interesante [very interesting]
- b) interesante [interesting]
- c) regularmente interesante [interesting enough]
- d) para nada interesante [not interesting at all]

2. ¿Qué actividades les gustan más?
[Which activities do you like best?]

- a) canciones [songs]
- b) actividades del libro [activities from the course book]
- c) películas [films]

3. ¿Qué tan claras son las instrucciones de la profesora?
[How clear are the teacher's instructions?]

- a) muy claras [very clear]
- b) claras [clear]
- c) regularmente claras [clear enough]
- d) para nada claras [not at all clear]



Focus groups

To find out what they found difficult or easy during listening activities, Lorena arranged two 30-minute focus groups, each with twenty students. She asked them how they felt about the instructions, the topics and the activities. She asked why they were not answering and what the problem was. However, they simply replied that she was a good teacher and they were lazy students. So she assured them that they would not hurt her feelings, that she was keen to improve the lessons and wanted them to do better during the listening activities.



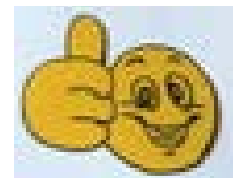
Observation

Lorena also invited a final year pedagogy student to come and observe a listening lesson. She asked him to focus on her instructions and the students' behaviour as they listened to the audio, and make notes.



What Lorena discovered

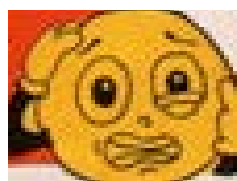
When Lorena analysed the questionnaire responses, she was surprised to learn that most students found the audio topics **'interesting'**. She also discovered that **'songs'** was the favourite activity. And few students had problems understanding and following Lorena's instructions – they were mostly **'clear'**.



Questionnaire results table

	Very interesting	Interesting	Not interesting enough	Not interesting at all
1. What do you think about the audio topics?	26	28	14	8
	Songs	Activities from the course book	Films	
2. Which activities do you like best?	48	1	27	
	Very clear	Clear	Clear enough	Not clear at all
3. How clear are the teacher's instructions?	35	31	10	0

While the responses to the questionnaire were encouraging, they did not explain why the students didn't do the listening activities or why they weren't doing well. What the students said during the focus group shed more light on the issue.



During the focus group interviews the students explained why they started talking or checking their mobile phones during listening activities. Basically, it was because the recordings were too long and

they felt frustrated. Songs, on the other hand, are quite short so it is easier to focus and complete the tasks. They explained how much they enjoyed listening to songs and doing the activities Lorena prepared to go with them.

The recordings are too long!

We can't finish the tasks.

We get frustrated.

We like songs best.

We find something else to do.

The pedagogy student who observed Lorena's lesson confirmed her students' responses. He also added that Lorena gave clear instructions and checked the students understood them, and observed that students listened and demonstrated that they knew what to do. Lorena concluded that the issue was not related to her instructions nor the audio topics, it was connected to the length of the audio recordings.



Implementing changes

In response to the findings, especially the student feedback from the focus group, Lorena realised that she would need to break audio recordings down into sections and create activities for each section. She introduced a variety of activity types such as ordering or sequencing tasks, gap-fill tasks, crossing out the incorrect answer or underlining the correct word.


After two weeks the difference in student behaviour was noticeable. The students were now *doing* the activities and completing the handouts. They were also raising their hands, keen to share the answers.

Collecting more data

But Lorena wanted to be sure that the changes really had had an impact on the students. To confirm what she was observing in class, she conducted another survey. Unfortunately, due to pressures of time, she was only able to carry out the survey with one class this time.

Second questionnaire

Lorena explained to her students that now that she had made some changes to the way she did listening tasks, she would like to conduct another survey to find out their opinions.

1. Trabajar los audios del texto de estudio como canciones permite que pueda contestar las actividades de mejor forma. *[Working with audio texts such as songs means I can do the activities better.]*

 - a) Totalmente de acuerdo *[totally agree]*
 - b) De acuerdo *[agree]*
 - c) Medianamente de acuerdo *[somewhat agree]*
 - d) No estoy de acuerdo *[don't agree]*
2. Puedo identificar información general del texto. *[I can identify general information from the text].*
 - a) Totalmente de acuerdo *[totally agree]*
 - b) De acuerdo *[agree]*
 - c) Medianamente de acuerdo *[somewhat agree]*
 - d) No estoy de acuerdo *[don't agree]*
3. Puedo identificar información específica del texto. *[I can identify specific information from the text].*
 - a) Totalmente de acuerdo *[totally agree]*
 - b) De acuerdo *[agree]*
 - c) Medianamente de acuerdo *[somewhat agree]*
 - d) No estoy de acuerdo *[don't agree]*

4. Puedo inferir información del texto *[I can infer information from the text].*
 - a) Totalmente de acuerdo *[totally agree]*
 - b) De acuerdo *[agree]*
 - c) Medianamente de acuerdo *[somewhat agree]*
 - d) No estoy de acuerdo *[don't agree]*
5. ¿Cuáles de las actividades realizadas en clases te ayudaron a escuchar mejor? *[Which of the activities done during the lessons help you to listen better?]*
 - a) Marcar con una cruz *[Mark with a cross]*
 - b) Subrayar *[Underline]*
 - c) Completar *[Complete]*
 - d) Ordenar *[Order]*
 - e) Marcar con un tick *[Tick]*



Second focus group

She also conducted focus groups again with the same students. This time she focused on reasons for their answers to question five in the questionnaire, and why they liked these activities.

Second observation

And finally, she asked the pedagogy student to observe her class again. This time she asked him to focus on student participation and engagement in the lesson.

What Lorena discovered this time

The second questionnaire revealed that students were able to identify information from the listening texts and that the activities they liked the most were underlining the correct word, crossing out the odd one out and filling in the gaps. They still found it too difficult to order the information because 'sometimes the audio was too fast'.

Second questionnaire results table

Questions	Totally agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Don't Agree	
1. Working with audio texts such as songs means I can do the activities better.	26	9	1	0	
2. I can identify general information from the text.	20	12	4	0	
3. I can identify specific information from the text.	15	19	2	0	
4. I can infer information from the text.	6	14	8	8	
	Mark with a cross	Underline	Complete	Order	Tick
5. Which of the activities done during the lessons help you to listen better?	10	15	6	1	3

During the focus group they explained that the new strategies helped them to feel more motivated and successful because they were able to complete the tasks. Moreover, they felt that they were completing the tasks well, much better than before.

The pedagogy student also reported that the students were more focused on the activities and were not distracted or playing with their phones. He also noted that all students took part in the activities, and that on average between 15 and 20 students put up their hands to answer questions.

Reflections

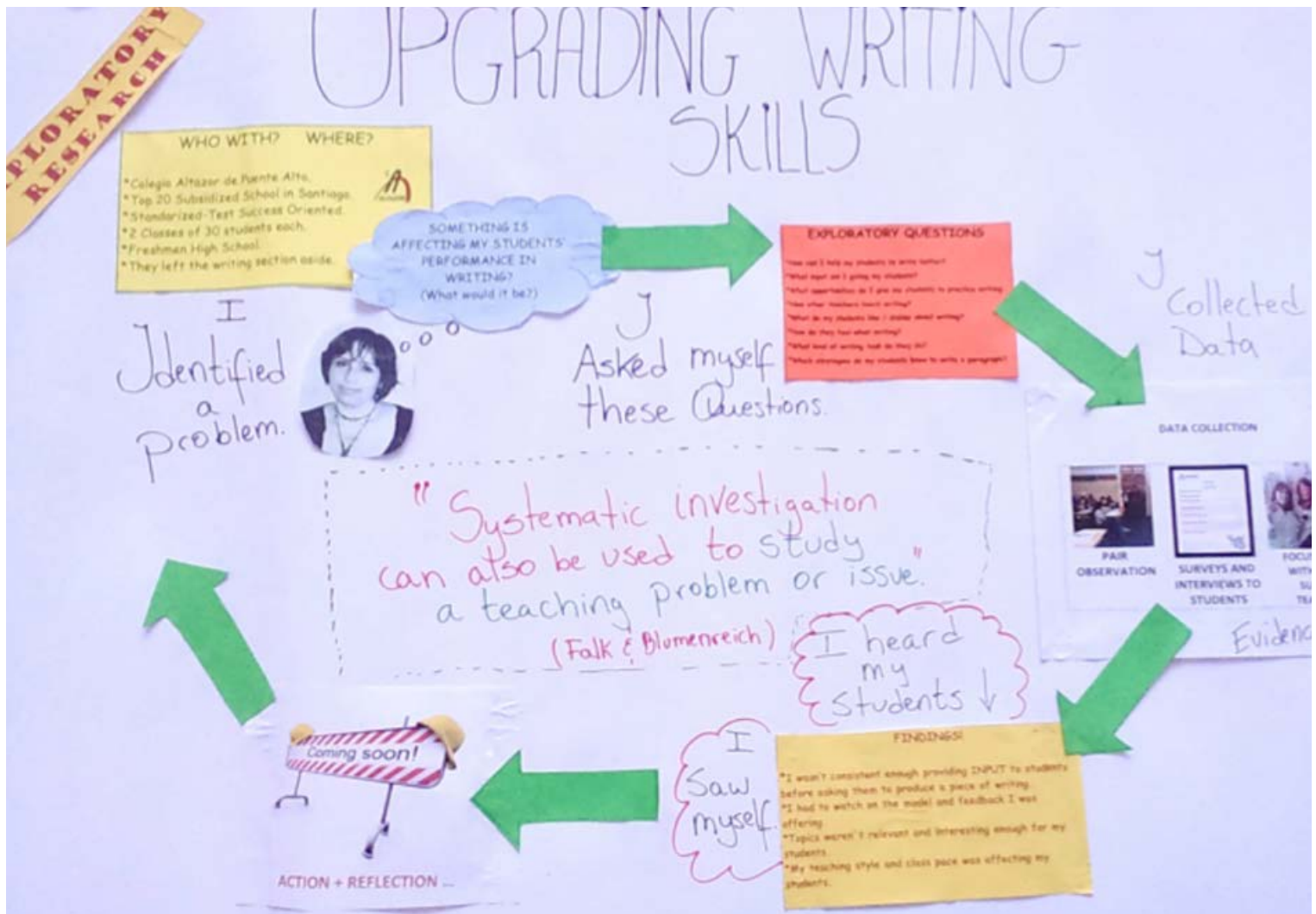
Looking back on her first research experience, Lorena feels that it was extremely useful in improving her teaching approach, and her students' listening skills. Because different strategies were implemented on the basis of *their* needs, they were able to focus and participate more fully. Lorena acknowledges that the changes were implemented over a fairly short time, but she saw enough positive changes to motivate her to continue working in this way:

'From now on the way I teach listening will be different and according to what the group requires, and I have realised that with a simple action I can change and improve what I am doing in the classroom.'

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Upgrading writing skills

Leyla Núñez Aguilera
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Leyla Núñez Aguilera teaches English to grade nine students (14-to 15-year-olds) in a subsidized school located in Puente Alto, Santiago, Chile. Most students at this school come from upper middle class families while others from lower socio-economic backgrounds gain entry via scholarships. Consequently, Leyla's class comprises learners with diverse needs and mixed language and ability levels. Although class sizes are large – up to 35 students – classrooms are well-equipped with overhead projectors, audio systems, internet connection and interactive boards. Students also have access to a large library, study room, auditorium, and so on.

Before working in this school, Leyla had been teaching English as a foreign language for over 18 years, so she had a lot of experience in teaching and evaluating writing. However, she had never really stopped to consider why all her students didn't achieve all the learning objectives. She had developed an approach to teaching writing which she was comfortable with, and which worked well enough. At this school, though, achievement levels were very important, and there was a strong focus on attaining top results in the Ministry of Education's national exams, SIMCE (Education Quality Measurement System), which for English appeared to be based on the Cambridge Key English Test (KET).

Students are exposed to constant evaluations aimed at recording their progress in the four skills, and it was from the results of these tests that Leyla realised many students 'lost' points in the writing section. Even worse, most focused on other sections, leaving writing until the end and didn't bother to complete it. In fact, when she thought about it, she had noticed the same issue in other schools but had not felt the same urgency to do something about it. Leyla had always believed she was doing a great job as an English teacher but now she began to question this – 'there was something either they or I was doing wrong or failing to do'.

Something is affecting my students' writing. What would it be?

Exploratory questions

Having identified the problem, Leyla came up with a series of questions to seek answers to:

- How do other teachers teach writing?
- What kind of writing tasks do they do?
- What strategies do my students use to write a paragraph?
- How do they feel when writing?
- What do my students like / dislike about writing?
- What input am I giving my students?
- What opportunities do I give my students to practise writing
- How can I help my students to write better?

Data collection

Leyla started by **chatting informally** with nine other subject teachers. She wanted to find out how they teach writing.



Then she devised a **questionnaire** for her students to complete:

ENGLISH SURVEY

SUBJECT: WRITING

You don't need to write your name.

Answer the following questions.

What do you like writing about?

What do you dislike writing about?

What do you feel when writing in English?

What kind of texts do you write better?

What would you like to write about

Thanks!

Next she asked her coordinator to **observe** her teaching.

And after the lesson, she led a **plenary discussion** with her students to find out whether the lesson had been helpful, in other words, whether they felt better able to write now.

And finally, she **interviewed** the students whose grades were lower because she felt they could offer further insights.

Findings

Leyla now had plenty of evidence to analyse and think about. She returned to her exploratory questions and searched for answers.

How do other teachers teach writing?

What kind of writing tasks do they do?

Which strategies do my students use to write a paragraph?

What her colleagues reported

Leyla was curious to know how other teachers approached writing and what kind of texts her students wrote (in Spanish) in other subjects. From informally chatting with her colleagues Leyla learned that students wrote mainly essays and reports, and that most of them did in fact do the writing they were asked to do. However, they were only able to write isolated or connected sentences, and did not understand how to organise ideas in paragraphs.

What was a revelation though, was that none of subject teachers was teaching how to write – only the English and Spanish teachers were doing this. So, it turned out that students were being asked to write texts which they may not even know *how* to structure. What Leyla was doing was step by step following the models suggested by the text book aimed at training students to pass an examination – she wasn't taking student needs or other subjects into account. Meanwhile, the other subject teachers were assigning writing tasks with no guidance at all.

What do my students like / dislike about writing?

How do they feel when writing?

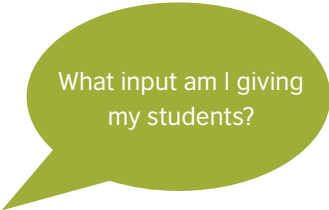
What her students reported

Leyla also wanted to find out how her students felt about writing and what they liked and didn't like about it. Responses to the questionnaire were very honest and indicated that the writing topics were either not interesting or irrelevant. When she reflected on this Leyla realized that in fact some of the topics were not age-appropriate or relevant, e.g. asking them to write a CV when they were only 14 years old and had no immediate plans to look for a job. They also claimed that they were sometimes asked to write about things they knew little about, which made them feel bored and frustrated.

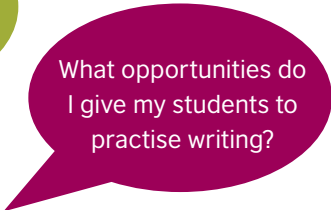
Leyla also discovered that most of them felt frustrated because she went through the content too fast and they felt they didn't have enough time to process the information she was giving them. Most of them also said they spent too much time trying to understand the vocabulary or expressions they needed to complete the task. Many claimed that they needed more support, feedback and practice.

During the plenary discussion it became clear that the students wanted and needed more opportunities to practise writing and one 45-minute lesson per week was simply not enough. Somehow Leyla would have to give them practice at other times during the week.

During the interview, the lower level learners also complained about feeling frustrated, mainly because they could see the more advanced learners working faster and they felt that they were forever trying to catch up. They also claimed they needed much more support.



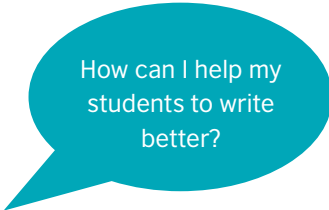
What input am I giving my students?



What opportunities do I give my students to practise writing?

What her coordinator reported

Leyla's coordinator reported a lot of positive aspects about the lesson – Leyla followed clear stages and communicated input clearly. However, he observed that Leyla was not giving enough feedback to the students – they were receiving feedback only once the task was finished in the form of a grade and a few comments on what they should improve. During the writing process there was no feedback at all, and therefore no opportunity for the students to develop and improve their work. Leyla realised that by giving a model ('I do') and then asking the students to write ('you do'), she was skipping the practice ('we do') stage of the process.



How can I help my students to write better?

Conclusions and plan

In relation to Leyla's ultimate question and goal – *How could she help her students to write better?* – she realised that she needed to:

1. Consider her students' age and interests when choosing topics

Leyla realised she needed to focus on writing tasks which her students would find interesting, relevant and useful.

Suggestions they had made during the plenary discussion included emails and letters to friends, and biographies of famous people.

2. Consider the quality of the input she gives and the feedback she provides while they are writing

Leyla understood that she would need to scaffold writing by preparing shorter activities, paying attention to the input, and gradually supporting her students until they are able to write independently. She would also need to provide much more feedback *during* the writing process.

3. Respect the learners' pace so they can complete the task successfully before moving on to another

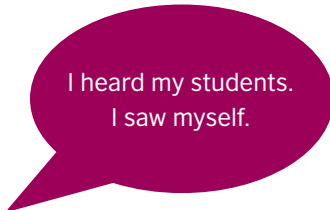
Leyla appreciated that it would be necessary to take into account the needs of the lower level learners more. During the plenary discussion and the interview, that particular group of students made it clear that they could not cope and became frustrated for two reasons: their lack of English, and the fast pace of the lessons.

4. Introduce more opportunities for practice

Leyla decided that instead of devoting one 45-minute lesson to writing, she would need to spend a part of every lesson developing writing skills and come up with fun ways to get them writing throughout the week.

Reflections

Looking back on this experience, Leyla feels that doing exploratory research helped her to be more aware of what she was doing in the classroom. Previous to this project, she confesses that she too often blamed her students for failing to achieve good results and didn't think to look at what she was doing. She now finds it unbelievable that she was so unaware of her own role in their learning and better understands the expression 'teaching-learning process' – before judging students' scores or performance we need to look at the *whole* process.



I heard my students.
I saw myself.

Leyla is now keen to implement the changes she has planned and is looking forward to investigating and reflecting on the impact they have.

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