THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THEME-BASED INSTRUCTION IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS FOCUSED ON ENHANCING ACCURATE SPOKEN PRODUCTION IN ENGLISH OF ELEVENTH GRADERS IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL IN PEREIRA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Justification

Since long ago, many human inventions have been employed to communicate messages between people; elements such as the telegraph or the letter could be regarded as examples. Yet counting on these artifacts, speaking has remained the primary means of communication for civilizations' everyday purposes. In support of this fact, Zaremba (2006, as cited in Boonkit, 2010) stated that, out of the four macro skills, speaking seems to be the essential skill required for communication. Such importance derives from the fact that a person with excellent speaking skills is much more likely to succeed at different types of real-life scenarios, e.g., a job interview, a commencement speech with no preparation, an academic debate in an educational environment, or a meeting with new people in social events. Regarding this aspect, Kayi (2006) found that, to fulfill the demands of a globalized world, the teaching of speaking must improve students' both communicative and intercultural skills for them to learn how to follow social and cultural rules appropriately for each circumstance in any context.

Furthermore, speaking plays a crucial role in English language teaching (ELT). Historically, numerous methodologies have been carried out to teach English as a second or foreign language effectively. From the 17th to the 19th century, *The Classical or Grammar Translation Method* was implemented since the process of learning Latin and Greek were focused on instructing people to teach the two different codes. Therefore, grammatical rules, syntactic structures, memorization, and translation were the principles followed. Oral communication was not considered since the goal was acquiring the knowledge. Late in the 19th century, this method officially took "grammar translation method" as a denomination, whose aim was only translating from language two (L2) to the native language or language one (L1).

By the last two decades of the 19th century, *the direct method* emerged as a reaction to the grammar-translation method. This new instruction conceived learning the L2 to be equally

demanding as the L1 acquiring process. In that sense, the target language was the primary means, grammar was taught inductively, speaking and listening were more important, and only the language of daily use was taught. The use of visuals and realia to illustrate concepts in the classroom is still implemented nowadays in several ELT settings.

During World War II, military personnel needed to have specific proficiency at distinct languages to confront enemies successfully. As a response, American universities designed *the audiolingual method,* which was based on the linguistic theory and Skinner's behavioral psychology. It shared several aspects with the direct method since its emphasis was on the acquisition of structures and patterns of typical everyday dialogues. Both intended to avoid the grammar-translation method principles, prioritizing listening, speaking, and not considering L1. Exchange of ideas was primary, and drills were the leading training techniques.

The following method used in ELT was known as *the silent way*. Gattegno (1963) showed that teachers should remain silent during class-time, whereas learners should speak as much as possible. This method focused on learners' creativity, problem-solving skills with L2 as the means, and the use of ''cuisenaire rods'' (small wooden rods of different lengths and colors) as a visual resource to stand for various areas of language. Later, Lozanov (1979) proposed relaxation as a method to retain new knowledge and auditive content, using music as the means to make students ''suggestible.'' That purpose was the reason for its name: *suggestopedia*. Vocabulary, readings, role-plays, and classical music in the background with students in comfortable seats were the basis of this approach.

In the 1960s, British applied linguists were concerned about how to teach appropriately the functional and communicative aspects of language. They identified the need of focusing on language teaching on communication rather than on the assimilation of structures and form as done in the situational language teaching (SLT) at that time. On top of that, education was one of

the council of Europe's major areas of interest over those years. They considered articulating and developing alternative methods for language teaching as a high priority. Later, Wilkins (1972) proposed that language learners need to understand and convey an idea effectively, rather than to express it from the basis of traditional concepts of grammar. He attempted to demonstrate the systems of meanings that lay behind the communicative uses of language.

By this time, the work of the council of Europe along with the contributions of Wilkins, Wid-dowson, Candlin, Brumfit, Johnson, and other British applied linguists, converged in favor of establishing the theoretical foundations for the communicative approach to language teaching. Furthermore, British language teaching specialists, curriculum development centers, and even governments agreed to concede official validity to the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and further apply these principles in educational textbooks. Aligned with this approach, Hymes (1972) coined the "communicative competence" theory, which relied on what a speaker needs to know to be communicatively competent in a speech community. In Hymes' view, this skill is composed of aspects such as what is entailed by interacting, to what extent something is formally possible, feasible (in virtue of the means of implementation available), and appropriate to the context.

On the other hand, Chomsky (Higginbotham, 1982) held that the focus of the linguistic theory was to characterize the abstract abilities that enable speakers to produce grammatically correct sentences in any language. Another linguistic theory of communication favored in CLT is Halliday's (1975) functional account of language use. This theory described seven language functions employed by children when acquiring their mother tongue:

- The instrumental function: using language to get things.
- The regulatory function: using language to control the others' behavior.
- The interactional function: using language to create interaction with others.

- The personal function: using language to express personal feelings and meanings.

- The heuristic function: using language to learn and to discover.

- The imaginative function: using language to create a world of the imagination.

- The representational function: using language to communicate information.

To sum up the CLT theoretical basis, it is worth highlighting that:

- Language is a system for the expression of meaning.

- The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.

- The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.

- The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and struc-tural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

Some studies have been conducted to prove whether specific methods and techniques can specifically develop learners' linguistic competence in recent years. In related research, Prayoga (2018) investigated the possible improvement in the linguistic performance of first-grade students at a senior high-school in Indonesia by teaching them through the "topic-based group discussion method". It took place in four meetings done by the researcher and the English teacher of the course. Its results proved that this method increased students' motivation towards learning the L2 and improved students' overall speaking abilities.

In Colombia, López (2016) implemented real-life topics on a university conversation club at the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira. This club aimed to encourage students to interact in English. Still, instead of discussing random issues, López supplied real situations causally related to their lives to motivate them to participate and improve their speaking abilities. López

concluded that university students could be encouraged to learn English by adding real-life topics to the speaking sessions.

Exploring further research, Gutiérrez (2005) conducted qualitative action research on developing oral communication abilities through scaffolded interaction and taking the task-based language-teaching principles with a group of ninth graders of a public high-school in Bogotá. The study's conclusion states that the enhancement of speaking abilities requires wrapping the four principles previously mentioned with confidence, meaning, and communicative situations. Even though this study seemed to get positive results, fifteen years later, the issue of bilingual education has not improved as expected by Colombia's ministry of education.

Now, reviewing the labor of the Colombian government along with the ministry of education, programs such as "The COFE Project" (1991), The national program of bilingualism (2004-2019), Bilingual Colombia (2014-2018), and "Colombia very well" (2015-2025) have been implemented. Once overviewed these initiatives, it would be reasonable to affirm that the English proficiency levels in eleventh graders should be acceptable at least, but that is not the case. In 2017, 609.107 eleventh graders from both public and private schools presented the ICFES SABER 11 (the exam elaborated by the Colombian institute for the evaluation of education and regulated by the ministry of education).

This number of students belonged to schools that commence the academic year in January and closures it in November (Calendar A). According to *Universia*, (a university portal that supports 1.401 universities of 20 countries worldwide) in 2017, the overall result of these students in the English section of the exam was 50,75 over 100. Such a score inevitably leads to reflect: what if the ICFES SABER 11 assessed the speaking skill? Apart from the fact that the score is below expectations, the most disturbing reality, as mentioned before, is that the English section only assesses reading and grammar skills. Even though listening, writing, and mainly

speaking skills are included in the current suggested curriculum for the teaching of English; they are set aside from learning and even assessment processes.

To support these arguments, we conducted a short interview (see appendix 13) with the English area's chief from the Suroriental school, which is our host educational institution. According to his experience, this teacher provided insights from which we could certify that, in fact, English teachers, at least in our local context, devote the class time to preparing eleventh graders for the ICFES SABER 11. This emphasis is motivated by institutional interests that schools have for achieving high results in this exam to meet the national minister's standards. Given this reality, there is an urgent and evident need to design and develop projects that promote oral production in English in Colombian secondary schools, especially in higher grades.

Thus, the purpose of this pedagogical project will be to enhance accurate English spoken production in eleventh graders in a public high school in Pereira. This will be executed through the implementation of theme-based instruction, which enables learners to interact about topics of their interest in scenarios such as discussions, debates, among many others. The selection of this methodology is motivated by the success it has had in diverse systematized practices, which have been carried out in different countries where English is not the mother tongue. Moreover, we consider the CLT approach to be the most effective for English language teaching as it places purposeful and meaningful interaction at the center of the learning process. Consequently, as theme-based instruction enables the achievement of the latter mentioned principle, we decided to select it as the type of instruction for this project.

As stated before, Colombian English learners are demanding the implementation of speaking activities and learning experiences that motivate them to see English, not as something they cannot access, but to express their perspectives on the world. For that reason, this project seeks to contribute in terms of familiarizing the eleventh graders of the Suroriental school with

the use of formal speech expressions in the English language that enable them to give their opinions and perceptions about any topic of their interest. This language function will be useful for them before facing higher academic environments such as national or international universities. Thus, these learners can use the English language effectively and accurately at any given scenario where they are willing to engage verbally in the topic of discussion.

Deepening in what we mentioned about students' rejection towards the possibility of communicating in a different code, in this case English; it is evident that this generalized intolerance comes from the fact that English has been taught through the grammar-based method and with textbooks from foreign countries. Learners feel that English is just another subject that they must pass but it neither relates to their lives at any point nor do they see the usefulness or applicability of learning English and all the advantages it would bring to them. We are not stating that grammar and textbooks should be removed from the curriculum, what we mean is that English lessons cannot be based totally on them as it has been demonstrated that they are not effective as considered many decades ago.

Grammar rules and textbooks should have a supplementary role in the development of the lessons and the syllabi, and the teacher must be sensible to note when it would be useful to reinforce certain grammar features with a handout taken from a textbook. In support of this, the target grammar rules for each lesson must be embedded in context (theme) so that learners discover them inductively as they feel engaged during the learning process. In other words, the fact is that the English language teaching in most Colombian schools is not showing coherence between the current policies proposed by the ministry of education. That situation is what led us to consider that theme-based instruction must be adequately adapted to the specific context of the students. In fact, the very first principle of the eight listed in the *English Please 3 Fast Track 11th*

grade [(see appendix 11)](#) is: "A topic-based approach to the language syllabus." This resource is the official textbook distributed by the current Colombian ministry of education.

National policies in language teaching and pedagogical resources are based on the CLT approach and they are provided for free usage. The challenge now is to create, design, and adapt contextualized teaching proposals in our English classrooms to deliver lessons in which learners can communicate and interact using meaningful content to achieve the expected language skills; in this case, focusing on speaking development. We will support our lessons on the principles of the theme-based instructional approach in order to select themes, topics, and threads that fit the expectations of the specific population of students so that the learning of the English language takes place while learners find the process relevant and enjoyable.

Objectives

General Teaching Objective

To design theme-based lessons that motivates learners' reflection upon Colombian social matters.

Specific Teaching Objective

To stimulate students' accurate English spoken production through speaking activities using theme-based instruction.

General Learning Objective

To exchange new meanings respectfully in English by participating in speaking activities.

Specific Learning Objective

To express an opinion in English by taking advantage of opinion starters to structure ideas accurately.

Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Framework

The main concepts to understand this classroom project are related to improving oral

production in non-native learners of English.

Speaking Skill

The speaking skill has been diversely defined from different perspectives. From a

biological notion, the complex process consisting of articulating different sounds seeking to

communicate, only achievable for humans, undoubtedly refers to speaking. Gritter (1969, as cited

in Lumettu and Runtuwene, 2018) defined it as a productive skill that requires the learners to

instantly retrieve the precise sound, form, word-order, arrangement, and content vocabulary to

express what he wants to say in unanticipated situations. This definition lets us be aware of what

speaking encompasses: a broad set of characteristics and sub-skills, being explained forward on,

which converge when getting the message across orally, whether in the L1 or L2, and are

essential for the communicative function.

In support of the complexity that speaking in L2 embraces, Boonkit (2010) stated that

speaking is one of the four macro skills necessary for effective communication in any language,

mainly when speakers are not using their mother tongue. This perspective is aligned with the

learning processes that non-native English speakers face to master the whole speech. As a

complement to what has been said, Burns and Joyce (1997) considered speaking to be an

interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing

information (cited in Al- Eiadeh et al., 2016). This definition takes for granted that speaking

exists since we humans are social beings. It refers to a mechanical description of the process as it

is over repeated. Moreover, it leads us to notice that the act of speaking becomes text, and that text is composed of a set of features.

Components of Speaking

As stated above, speaking is a complex phenomenon that occurs, among many other elements, thanks to three components. Vanderkevent (1990, as cited in Kurniati et al., 2015) defined them as follows:

The Speaker. Who articulates sounds (letters/phonemes) with meaning (morphemes/lexemes?)

The Listener. Who knows the speaker's code and can decipher/interpret the message?

The Utterances. Words or sentences are produced by the speakers to state their opinion.

Whereas in Harris (1974, as cited in Kurniati et al., 2015) five components of speaking skill had been previously defined as:

Comprehension. Oral communication requires a subject to respond to the speech and initiate it (announcer and interlocutor).

Grammar. The need to arrange a correct sentence in a conversation. The utility of grammar is to learn the right way to gain expertise in a language in oral and written form.

Vocabulary. The range of words needed to be mastered for effective oral communication.

Pronunciation. The phonological process refers to the uttering of words and how these words sound according to the phonetic pattern in a language.

Fluency. The speaker's ability to respond in a language clearly and concisely while relating meaning and context.

Accuracy. Thornbury (2005) asserts that the correct use of grammatical structures requires the complexity of utterances and well-structured clauses. He said that to gain accuracy in vocabulary. It is needed to select suitable words in proper contexts as pronunciation is the lowest

level of knowledge learners typically pay attention to. It is necessary to master phonological rules to be aware of the various sounds and their pronunciations, considering stress, intonation, and pitch.

Following Harris's line, Mazouzi (2013, as cited in Leong and Ahmadi, 2017) contributed that there should be an equivalence between fluency and accuracy achievement while interaction is needed to know how the language system works progressively. He claims that teachers should emphasize the exactness and completeness of language form when speaking, focusing on grammatical structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The fact of having covered this compositional aspect of speaking leads us to explore how these components can transform the speech acts in different classifications:

Types of Speaking

Brown (2004) stated that speakers do not typically speak complete sentences; they use less specific vocabulary than in written language. For that reason, he proposed five basic types of speaking:

Imitative. The ability to simply imitate a word, phrase, or possible sentence. This is a phonetic level of oral production, including several prosodies, linguistic, and grammatical properties of language.

Intensive. The production of short stretches of oral language is designed to demonstrate competence in a particular language feature.

Responsive. This aspect includes interaction and test comprehension but at a limited level of concise conversations. Such as standard greetings, small talk, simple requests, and comments.

Interactive. This type of speaking relies on the difference between the interaction's length and complexity, which sometimes includes multiple exchanges or numerous participants.

Interaction can take the two forms of transactional language: the purpose of exchanging specific information or making interpersonal exchanges that maintain social relationships.

Extensive (Monologue). It includes speeches, oral representations, and storytelling, during which the opportunity for verbal interaction from the audience is highly limited.

Now, considering the context and the sociolinguistic factors affecting communication, Eaton (2018) paraphrased the manners in which speakers express themselves depending on the field they are immersed in, the topic in discussion, or the setting. The following definitions are framed within what is known in linguistics as the register:

Static Register. Language is immovable in time and form. It does not change. Examples include biblical verses, prayers, and a national political constitution.

Formal Register. It is impersonal, with a prescriptive format. The speaker uses complete sentences, avoids slang, uses technical or academic vocabulary, and avoids contractions.

Consultative Register. This is the register used when consulting an expert such as a doctor. The language used is more precise. The speaker is likely to address the expert by a title such as "Doctor", "Mr." or "Mrs.". This is the formal register used in conversations.

Casual Register. This is an informal register used in conversations and between friends. Words are general, rather than technical, including more slang and colloquialisms.

Intimate Register. This is the lovers' language. It is also the language used in sexual harassment. This is the most intimate form of language. It is best avoided in public and professional situations.

It is pertinent to relate the types of speaking that were just described with those speakers that are not proficient enough. The speaking strategies help learners appropriately meet the language standards, in this case, the speaking skill. It is necessary to define the following strategies since the act of speaking is spontaneous, and a large quantity of spontaneous and

unexpected utterances can take place depending on the speaker's proficiency, the context, and the topic of conversation.

Speaking Strategies

In his taxonomy of communication strategies, Tarone (1980) described a set of oral communication tools used by second language learners, and even native speakers, that helped them in communication and negotiation of meaning. The more these strategies are applied, the more successful the language learning experience and contact with speakers will be. Those are:

The negotiation of meaning; includes confirmation checks– repetition and rising intonation; clarification requests– "what do you mean?", "I don't understand," "what was that?"; comprehension checks– "you know what I'm saying," "Well...", "you know..."; circumlocution– describing a thing or a concept; translation; topic avoidance– switching the topic of conversation; appealing for assistance– asking your interlocutor to help you find the word; approximating– kind of, sort of, almost like; coining: the learner makes up a new word to describe the thing or concept; code-switching: the learner uses their second language to communicate either in one word or longer stretches; paraphrasing: the learner conveys the same meaning but with words that are reachable for his/her linguistic domain.

In concordance with the previous mechanisms, Khan (2010) defends that those strategies are described in terms of negotiation of meaning from the interactional or linguistic view due to problems that have already manifested during the communicative interaction. In support of this, Long (1983) argued that this type of negotiation leads to essential comprehensible input necessary for second language acquisition. Long identified two types of interactional strategies: avoid or prevent problems arising, such as selecting salient topics, treating topics briefly or avoiding topics, and those that repair issues that have occurred, including clarification requests, confirmation checks, and tolerating ambiguity.

Pica (1994) explained the importance of negotiation of meaning strategies by showing that they promote second language acquisition. Negotiation provides learners with feedback on their L2 output, as more competent interlocutors frequently reformulate utterances, expressing what they think in another way and, in doing so, raising awareness of a problem. Going in-depth to the issue, Swain (1985) earlier had stated that it is not only crucial for learners to receive comprehensible input, but they also need to be pushed to produce comprehensible output with specific pedagogical tools or mechanisms, commonly known as activities.

Speaking Activities

Krashen (1982) states in his theory of second language acquisition, that acquisition requires significant interaction in the target language after the assimilation of several comprehensible input, so that learners focus on communicating and expressing themselves as naturally as possible; thereby the name of his approach emerged. This postulate was drawn in response to Swain's (1985) output theory, which tells us that, although input is indeed an indispensable condition for language learning, it is not sufficient and requires output to complement that learning that forces the learner to produce the language.

On the other hand, Chaney (1998) asserts that speaking is "the process of constructing and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts." Speaking is an important, if not crucial, part of language teaching. Despite this fact, most teachers do not value the teaching of this skill as it should be. It is often regarded why young people finish their high school studies and still do not have much fluency in their second language they have been studying for a long time. In other words, the latter means that no matter how much grammar or vocabulary students learn, it is essential to implement speaking activities in language learning classes as it is required for students to assimilate language structures and functions better.

Therefore, activities where language is produced in meaningful interactions are fundamental in the learning process.

Types of Speaking Activities

Now that speaking and activities have been appropriately defined, it is crucial to consider the different types of activities that can be implemented to work on speaking skills. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), there are many ways to promote speaking skills in ELT classrooms. The main types of speaking activities are discussions, personal speeches, role plays, group conversations, audio-recorded speech journals, and other precision-based activities. These actions can also be related to different types of speaking. Each kind of speaking provides us with a different strategy or training to promote speaking skills in our students. This advantage will generate a broad set of activities that we can use to make learners produce the input they have learned.

In a more recent study, Avila (2015) tells us how we, as teachers, can deal with a lack of students' engagement or interest, even when they are shown a subject that is supposed to call their attention. To improve this situation, he developed several activities that can be used along with the topics we want to address. His most famous activity is called "Sharing a speech," in which students are given 20 minutes to write about something appealing to them, whether a personal life anecdote, a favorite movie, their friends, or family members.

The advantage of this activity is that not only detects limitations in the students' records but builds interpersonal relationships between them. On the other hand, Holmes (2004) tells us that another alternative to foster discussions for practice is to talk about traveling, trips, tours, talking and the way a traveler would have to speak to a native person as a foreigner, whether in Thailand, Asia, Europe, America, or the rest of the world. This simulation can help students learn

about other cultures and encourage their intercultural skills. Monologues, fiction stories, or role plays can also be taken into consideration.

How to Design Speaking Activities

After reviewing which types of speaking activities can be meaningful for students, we can move on to check how we can do lesson planning based on the speaking skill. As one of the most important language skills, it is considered a challenge to teach speaking. Khamkhien (2010) found in his research with Thailand students that the speaking skill can be difficult to teach if there are no relevant topics presented in the language classroom. He suggested that speaking in the English classroom should not focus on fixed-response phrases, but on emphasizing and strengthening both communication in real situations and production of new phrases or utterances while speaking English.

Likewise, Kayi (2006) states that speaking should be taught through interaction tasks, where students need to communicate between themselves by considering real-life situations. The teacher's role is to promote a classroom environment where students feel encouraged to talk and collaborate in groups. In his same research, he proposes that teachers need to involve each student in every speaking activity, which can be challenging since shy students will always be afraid of expressing their ideas in front of the whole classroom. As a solution, he suggests that teachers should not often correct students' mistakes as it can discourage further students' participative attitudes.

How to Assess Speaking

During the implementation of this project, several evaluation gaps must be solved in order to have satisfactory outcomes. According to Lenski, Zavala, Mayra, and Irminge (2006), evaluation is a critical part of effective literacy instruction; thus, classroom teachers must know how to evaluate English language learners' literacy development. Celce-Murcia (2001) considers

that teachers should decide when to evaluate speaking and suggests that whenever possible, extensive fragments of speech that have a communicative intention and are coherently structured should be obtained. This postulate means that isolated sentences, spontaneous production without preparation, and decontextualized tasks do not work when the target is fostering speaking skills.

Another important teaching strategy which aims at speaking production is how the information is presented to the students during the instructional design: input in a graphic to stimulate elicitation, implicit grammar structures to be grasped as content is displayed, and interactive exercises that are meaningful for learners. It should be made clear that all results from assessment procedures must be delivered for students to keep up their progression after receiving quality personalized feedback.

In support of the importance of assessment, Coombe, Davidson, O'Sullivan, and Stoynoff (2012) suggest that choosing the right type of assessment instruments is crucial since evaluation targets to make important decisions, in this case, how much vocabulary students have acquired, how knowledgeable they have gotten to be in a certain subject matter, and whether all the strategies selected have worked properly as expected. Choosing the wrong type of assessment is professionally irresponsible as evaluation will provide schools, teachers, and students with accurate, precise, and up to date information to make the necessary adjustments, so it doesn't mislead the curricula and academic targets.

Here, it would be worth mentioning that theme-based instruction has been highly considered in the last decades for teaching speaking to second language learners. The effectiveness of this method is that it encourages students to practice their speaking abilities using meaningful and appealing topics that engage learners in their path towards achieving foreign language proficiency. Now that this type of instruction has been mentioned, it becomes necessary to further explore where it comes from and how to implement it.

Content-Based Instruction

Although presenting interesting and engaging input to foreign language learners has been implemented since the 1960s, it has become a growing tendency since the early 1980s. Ever since educational institutions that prioritize the acquisition and mastery of a foreign language in their curricula have tried to integrate subject matter contents with the instruction of the target L2. This type of teaching received the name of Content-Based Instruction (CBI). Crandall and Tucker (1990) point out that CBI is an integrated approach to language instruction drawing topics, texts, and tasks from content or subject matter classes, but focusing on the cognitive, academic language skills required to participate effectively in content instruction. In a similar definition, Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (2003) assert that CBI is an approach to language teaching in which the selection of interesting themes or topics sets the course's structure.

As content and language are the major aims in this type of instruction, educational institutions have tipped the balance on one of the two according to their needs. As a result, different types of courses have been implemented and established as options to take advantage of either if the objective is to teach solely content in the foreign language or to use the content as the vehicle for learners to acquire the non-native language.

Figure 1.
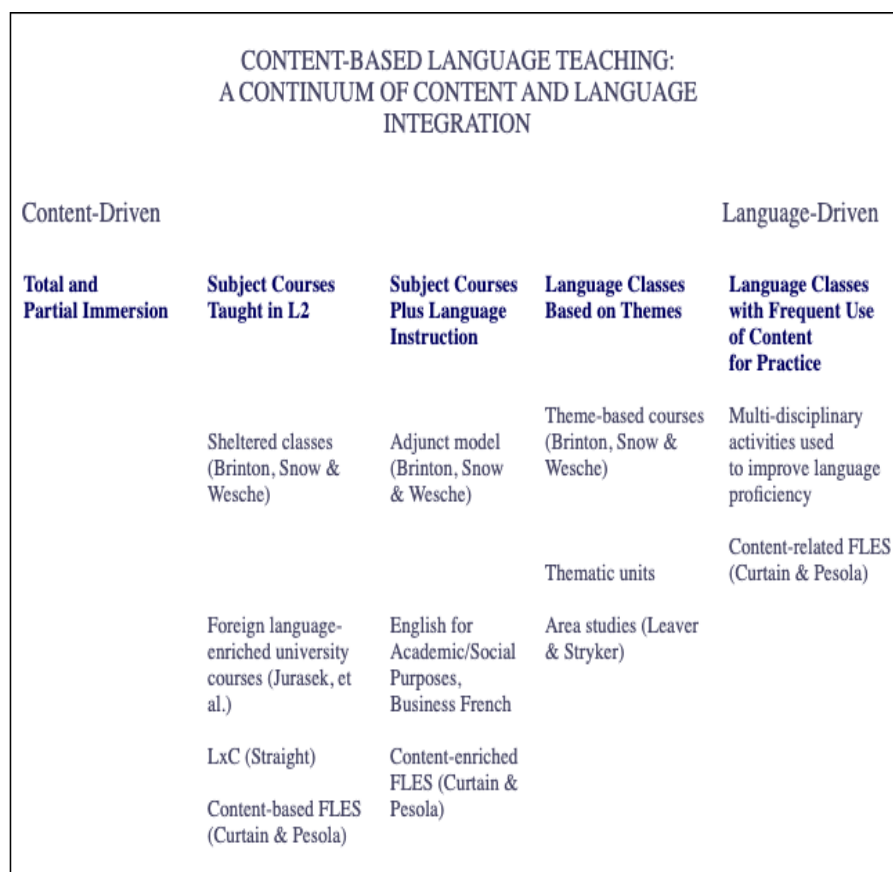
Met, M. (1999). Content-Based Language Teaching: A Continuum of Content and Language Integration [Chart]. Taken from: https://carla.umn.edu/cobaltt/modules/principles/decisions.html

Theme-Based Instruction

As observed in the continuum (see figure 1) proposed by Met (1999), theme-based courses are much more proximal to the language-driven end. According to Eskey (1997, as cited in Met, 1999), theme-based instruction adds a missing dimension to traditional approaches to language syllabus design. Whereas form-based and notional/functional syllabus focus on rules, rather than on real communication, theme-based language courses give learners an interesting subject to learn or communicate about. In a similar perspective, the use of theme-based instruction offers the possibility for students to decide which topics to cover, with which the

teacher could introduce the topics related to the classroom project. But even if the students had more considerable influence, "the teacher's role does not diminish, but changes." (Mumford, 2000, p. 4).

The advantage of using this approach is that theme-based instruction provides the learner with more material and input than traditional teaching in which simply a textbook is used as the content basis of the course. According to Cameron (2001), the integration of theme-based instruction helps find specific individual difficulties in learners who would face other content types than they usually encounter. Now that the theme-based instruction has been explained, it is necessary to verify language learning through this classroom method.

Framework in Theme-Based Instruction

Willis (1996) created a framework for task-based teaching in which she offers teachers a guide to conduct this method in the classroom. The framework consists of three main phases: the pre-task phase, the task cycle, and the language focus phase. The pre-task phase is centered on preparation. The teacher's objective is to prepare students for the task, introduce the topic, and make sure that students understand the directions to avoid any confusion. The task cycle has three sub-components: (1) the task, where students work in small groups while the teacher performs observation; (2) planning, here the students prepare a report to their classmates to explain how they did on the task and what insights they discovered and learned; finally (3) accounting, in which the small groups report the results to compare them.

As the wrap up, the language focus phase consists of an analysis where students check some features about a text input or transcript from a recording and a practical activity in which the teacher encourages them to rehearse novel words and phrases based on the data from the analysis. This framework for theme-based instruction can be flexible and useful since teachers can adapt their stages according to the learners' needs. The three steps that are reflected on the framework

can be significant for the class because the effectiveness of the lesson is decided from the pre-task phase. Moreover, dividing the task into three components can be much easier for teachers when planning and implementing the lessons as well as having time to analyze the English language input, after the topic has been studied, help learners achieve learning objectives more satisfactorily.

Language Learning Through Theme-Based Instruction

Ingvarsdóttir (2007) states that "language is no longer seen as a set of grammar rules and decontextualized vocabulary learned by heart. Language is first and foremost seen as a tool for communication in the variety of social settings where the language is used." (p. 7). Currently, one of the most significant issues in learning English is that most schools are still not implementing other language learning methodologies, different from traditional grammar and vocabulary techniques. For this reason, Lúðvíksdóttir (2011) implemented the theme-based instruction to her high school students, and she concluded that "these lessons seemed to provide students with an enjoyable learning experience, as they were overall highly motivated and active during the lessons." (p. 9). Thus, she suggests that theme-based instruction can better impact students than basic workbook and decontextualized grammar worksheets.

Planning Lessons Based on Theme-Based Instruction

Swain (1985) states that learners must have extended opportunities to use productively the second language to develop their communicative competence. Thus, English teachers who want to implement theme-based instruction must be more attentive to including productive skills for the tasks, specifically speaking skills in meaningful contexts. Following the same line, Stoller and Grabe (1997) proposed a lesson planning technique based on theme-based instruction using what they called the "Six-T approach." In this method, the teacher first finds the available resources, students' needs, academic goals, and what the class expects as the final performance outcomes.

After these first steps, the Six-T approach is implemented to make decisions around six components: themes, texts, topics, threads, tasks, and transitions. This approach could be beneficial for any teacher since it is a simplified manner of planning a theme-based lesson. The T's included in the process help teachers select the primary ideas, resources, and the way of making the transition between the topic and the task that students will be exposed to at the end; in this case, the speaking tasks that teachers want them to perform. Therefore, theme-based classes should be planned around the student, considering the students' needs and environment. Teachers need to carefully select a proper real-life topic that is useful and appealing for students. Yang (2009) mentioned that "theme-based teaching as an approach, will not automatically make learners more interested in learning English." (p. 170). Hence, teachers need to select suitable materials for those theme-based classes with the aim of impacting students' learning process positively.

Lathufirdaush (2014) implemented theme-based instruction to improve her students' speaking skills in an elementary school in Bandung. She focused her lessons on assessing three language aspects: lexicon appropriation (vocabulary), pronunciation, and grammar structures. Those three components are, according to Nunan (2011), the language systems of linguistic competence that are necessary to be able to speak effectively according to the context. During the class activities, she used "repetition drilling," which required students to listen and repeat what the teacher said without making any variations. She stated that since her students were both too young and basic English users, no perfect pronunciation of words was an objective, but to be intelligible and pronounce the words understandably. Based on her results, she concluded that using repetition drills in her lessons helped students enhance their vocabulary range and pronunciation patterns, even if they were required to rehearse the vocabulary multiple times.

Literature Review

Speaking has always been a matter of special attention in language learning processes. It implies crucial factors such as a specific learners' proficiency, confidence, understanding of the topic (input), and a given scenario (context/domain) for interaction to take place, as speaking is a social act. In our project, we will work on the development of the learners' accuracy dimension in English spoken production by providing them with a target content, the necessary vocabulary, and some contextualization through the CALLA model. If using L1 becomes necessary across the stages of the lesson, then we will consider its usage.

We expect this type of instructional design to encourage learners to take part in class' interactions about real-life matters, e.g., political, social, and economic issues, using the target formal expressions (language chunks). Further research and teaching strategies have been conducted to evidence which could be the most effective strategies to develop speaking proficiency in English as a second language. For that reason, this literature review aims at presenting five studies that, even though they were carried out in very similar contexts, the type of research and the purpose of the researchers were slightly different.

Lopez (2016) conducted research in this regard, which had as the main question: How does the exposure to contextualized input affect interactional speaking skills in participants of a conversational club? The study was qualitative research, and it was carried out through the conversation club "Let's Talk," with fifteen students who belonged to the bachelor in English language teaching of Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira. The data collection method was qualitative evidence, as it was gathered in a minute-by-minute observation in which students were monitored continuously. This technique was used because it was a conversation club and not a formal course guided by a professor. The data collection instruments used were interviews and observation. The interviews provided a wide variety of data collection as they could be

carried out individually. Students could self-assess and identify their strengths and weaknesses in groups, making it possible to identify common points and differences regarding the learning process.

Furthermore, two main conclusions were reached in this investigation. One about students' reactions to some activities and tasks; the other was about students' willingness to be active participants in the proposed activities. The first finding consisted of how the use of encouraging and meaningful topics and actions affect the motivation of the club's participants. This phenomenon occurs because input given to the students seems to be essential for both risk-taking and producing desire to give their opinion. In the second finding, there was some evidence on how students started to be assertive in the sense that they overcame their fears and autonomously used their linguistic abilities in English to communicate their opinions. Consequently, the discussion club encouraged this aspect, making them go beyond and use the language for real purposes. It was noticed that by providing rehearsal time and the opportunity to see other peers speaking, many of them, who at first did not dare to speak, changed their minds, and started to participate in the conversations.

Based on the previous conclusions, it would be safe to claim that University students are motivated to speak in English by adding interesting and real-life topics to the speaking sessions; nevertheless, it is vital to verify if this paradigm could have the same positive impact on High school students. For that purpose, Prayoga (2018) wanted to investigate if there could be an improvement in high school students' speaking performance by teaching them through the topic-based group discussion method. The research was carried out on first-grade students at a senior high school in Indonesia, and it took place in four meetings done by the researcher and the in-service English teacher. This study used a quantitative data collection method by using a pre-test, data treatment, and post-test. The instrument used by the researcher was a speaking test, which

was carried out through individual interviews where students were asked about real-life problems such as: "Should smoking be banned?" or "Is television good or bad for people?" while being recorded to extract the scores further on.

The pre-testing was carried out at the first meeting by the researcher and the English teacher. They wanted to measure students' speaking performance before being exposed to the topic-based discussion technique. After conducting this technique in the three treatment meetings, both educators carried out the post-test. The results demonstrated that topic-based group discussions could contribute to the improvement of second language learners' proficiency. The author concluded as well that by comparing the post-test and the pre-test results, it seemed to be an improvement in the speaking skill grades by the addition of group discussions. He recommends English teachers try this technique to increase students' motivation towards learning the second language. In the results, the researcher found that students' confidence is low when it comes to speaking in front of an audience, meaning that this should be an aspect that educators should work on before presenting more challenging speaking tasks.

It could be stated that even though both types of research were developed under different research paradigms, they reported significant results while using theme-based instruction, making an exception in the kind of research and data collection methods. Nonetheless, their purposes differ in the sense that in Lopez's study, the goal was to provide a safe environment in which English teachers in development could get in touch with the second language more often besides classes and thus, demonstrate that contextualized interaction increases the L2 speaking skill. At the same time, Prayoga just wanted to evidence the effect of topic-based discussions by testing it in a real classroom setting.

In conclusion, learners seem to experience a significant improvement in their speaking proficiency and interaction abilities when provided with real-life topics that they find meaningful.

This assumption connects directly to our classroom project as we seek to stimulate students' risk-taking traits that enable them to overcome such fears of being on the spot. In our proposal, students will count on the necessary content and linguistic resources to engage in formal interactions upon real-life matters such as politics, economy, and social issues.

Considering the conclusions from the previous articles, we could notice that presenting real-life topics to students can directly promote their English-speaking abilities; nevertheless, we found that not only the speaking skills can be enhanced through theme-based instruction. Romero (2017) conducted qualitative research in a University from Tuluá, Colombia, intending to improve the English reading skills in a bachelor's degree program. The focus group of this research was those students from schools and universities who obtained a very low score in the English section on standardized national tests. In his study and implementation, he used the models of task-based language learning (TBLL) and theme-based learning (TBL) for the design of activities and assessment tools, explaining how both methods complemented each other thanks to their shared principles.

On the selection of content, the researcher planned six themes based on the students' academic program. The six themes were mostly on human motor skills, teaching practices about it, sports related, and the human body. Since the models were task-based and theme-based teaching, the researcher wanted students to keep considering the topics from their main programs while learning the second language. He divided the tasks into three sections: the pre-task phase, in which he presented a brainstorm of ideas about what learners wanted to do in the future, the task phase, in which students developed some activities based on the class' topic, and the language focus phase, where the teacher gave feedback on any students' errors in the English language during the task cycle.

After reviewing the findings, the researcher found that both models (task-based and theme-based) seemed to complement each other effectively. The task-based method provided a clear pattern to develop the activities in class (the pre-task, the task, and the language focus phases), while the theme-based method focused on developing communicative competence by engaging students in meaningful and authentic activities. In terms of language development, the researcher stated that there is a need of implementing proposals that enhance students' cognitive processes to improve the current English levels of high-schools and universities. Regarding this situation, the Colombian government through its minister of education has launched the national bilingualism program (PNB 2018-2022) since students from most of the public schools have demonstrated an inferior level than the required B1, according to the common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR).

Furthermore, it became evident that reading comprehension skills are one of the most relevant issues that students currently have. Pretending to provide solutions on this matter, Padilla De La Cerda (2016) researched: How does a reading class, focused on a theme-based and genre-oriented syllabus, develop students' reading comprehension skills? This project was qualitative research since such data collection took place while students were observed during class time. The data collection instruments were questionnaires, interviews with teachers and coordinators, and class observations. One of the reasons why the researcher chose theme-based instruction was to be able to select authentic readings from academic areas as his main source of input for the project. Most of the readings were chosen from a database of science books, which are used in bilingual schools. This method was of a great benefit when selecting topics without neglecting the language used, which is crucial for students not to lose their motivation.

As in previous studies, this research showed that students can improve their reading comprehension by providing them with relevant reading materials. Planning classes and

integrating the theme-based instruction helped students foster metacognition since they learned what types of texts in English they enjoyed reading the most. Hence, this experience led to conclude that it is important that students not only like the repertoire of texts but also that it challenges them to go beyond and expand their current background knowledge. On the other hand, the integration of specific genres seemed to be essential since it made the familiarization process easier for them, which yielded that they chose the best learning strategy to understand different kinds of texts.

Another national research was carried out in three different universities of three different cities of Colombia. Caicedo, Lozano, and Vanegas (2018) implemented action research focused on improving accuracy and grammatical range when speaking in English through self-assessment of video speech drafts. The focus group of these three English language teachers/researchers was twenty-seven adult students with a B1 proficiency level, who wanted to improve their speaking to meet personal and professional goals. The research question that guided this project was: Does the self-assessment of video speech drafts improve speaking grammatical accuracy and range in B1 learners?

As data collection instruments, researchers used journals (from both researchers and participants), semi-structured interviews (one before starting the process and one right after wrapping it up), a pre-test, a post-test, and mainly, the participants' video recordings. The raw data was condensed by using both qualitative (students' and researchers' comments) and quantitative (frequencies, means, and statistical deviation of the results) methods of data collection. To justify the selection of both methods, the researchers argued that they intended to provide strong and reliable answers to the research question. To implement the project, the researchers designed nine stages of development that they called: "The intervention procedure."

The purpose of this set of phases was at first to raise awareness of grammatical errors that they commonly made and apply self-assessment strategies in between the stages. Also, the goal was to prepare and scaffold the learners for the practice exercise as they were going back and forth checking their errors and monitoring their progress. To support the process, the researchers encouraged the use of an online platform called "Mailvu". This application enabled the learners to record their speech drafts in a practical way. By the eighth stage of the process, the students had to record themselves undertaking the speaking task and send it just how it came out. The speaking task for this project was taken from the IELTS tests. By the ninth stage, the researchers revised the videos applying a specific rubric they designed for it. After this, general feedback was given based on the conclusions of the performance evidenced. The results were socialized with the learners through a simulation of a real plenary.

As conclusions about the investigation and considering the results, the researchers stated that self-assessment, awareness on error making (in this case in terms of accuracy), identification of ways to improve, and the incorporation of technology can significantly support the oral production enhancement in the same way that those elements have helped the improvement of writing skills**.**

Methodology

Context

This classroom project was developed at the school Suroriental, which is in a stratum 2-3 neighborhood called Boston in Pereira. The educational institution has only one schedule, which goes from 06:30 to 13:30. The school's grades go from kindergarten and primary to secondary (academic and technical).

The Suroriental Educational Institution seeks to promote integral education using technological tools and the development of values in the community's members. This school is

firmly committed to strengthening the English language teaching and bilingualism as they consider it a crucial competence to succeed in the current globalized world. The institution targets to be an educational institution with quality certification at the end of 2021, capable of offering formation focused on values that lead to the improvement of the community's life; being recognized for its excellent service and its graduates' contribution to the society.

Setting

Suroriental's English teachers design their lessons based on the suggested English curriculum from the *Colombia Bilingüe* program of the ministry of education. The institution has a total of five English teachers; two of them graduated from the licenciatura en blingüismo program from the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira. The school has access to certified textbooks, their own online platform, most classrooms have a video beam, and some others have modern televisions. Two hours per week are devoted to English classes in both elementary and secondary grades.

Virtual Environment

The unexpected Covid-19 worldwide pandemic changed our normal living routines and forced an abrupt transition towards a 100% telematic education. Therefore, we had to reformulate our project's setting. We decided that the Google service for synchronous meetings *Google Meet* was the most appropriate setting for our project since nowadays almost every single student has a Google account. Although we were familiarized with digital platforms and tools, we had never conducted an online class before. Additionally, we and the students had never had contact in a physical scenario, which could have been an important disadvantage in terms of engagement, motivation, and confidence. This challenging situation made us reflect that the only way to ensure a successful implementation of our project was to get the best from all the materials we had at hand by maximizing our creativity as teachers.

Participants

This project's participants were eleventh graders, between 16 and 19 years old, divided

into three groups composed of an average of thirty-five students, out of which an overall of ten

students strictly attended the telematic sessions of this project. The students come from a

socioeconomic stratum ranging from 1 to 3. For the English standards that the school manages,

students must have a level of English proficiency ranging from A2 to B1 according to the CEFR.

However, the English area's chief informed us that this current promotion of eleventh graders

was between A1 and A2.

Project Developers

The teachers in development who carried out this classroom project are students of the

bachelor's degree in Bilingualism of Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira, who conducted this

project as part of the requirements for graduation. The language proficiency of the developers is

between B2 and C1 according to the CEFR. We exchanged roles (observers and teachers) during

the development of the project. That is, class by class, one of us took notes while observing the

other two implementing the lesson plan.

Data Collection Instruments

The data collection instruments were selected considering the objectives, the instructional

design, and the language phenomenon under study. The chosen instruments were written

observations of each lesson, journals in video, and students' artifacts.

Observation

We decided to include this instrument in our research exercise since the detail and

specificity that it provides are greatly beneficial for the results section of this type of project.

Kawulich (2012) describes observation as a tool used regularly to collect data by researcher

teachers in their classrooms, social workers in community settings, and psychologists to record

human behavior. We conceive the observation process to be one of the best methods to collect data since it is a real-time process where researchers can identify the ongoing indicators, the outcomes, and the reactions that students have towards the theme-based lessons.

Teachers' Journal

According to Gilmore (1996), the implementation of journals is highly broad in educational and research contexts. This type of tool gives teachers the possibility of writing down their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and reflections about the classes they impart. In our case, journals provided us with the opportunity to make a critical analysis of what we did in the class by identifying problems, the strategies that worked well and not that well, and how students adapted and reacted to the issues raised.

Students' Artifacts

According to Gupta (2016), artifacts are effective examples of student work. These outcomes can include electronic documents, videos, and audio passages. The purpose of collecting and using these artifacts, in our case video and audio excerpts taken from the class' recordings, was to determine the students' speaking progress in terms of accuracy throughout the lessons. This analysis aimed at fulfilling the objectives proposed in this classroom project.

Instructional Design

As our goal was to stimulate students' accurate English spoken production using the theme-based instruction to provide input on relevant real-life issues, we decided to select the model designed by Chamot and O'Malley (1994) called "cognitive academic language learning approach" (CALLA) as we considered it suitable with both our project's speaking aim and the type of topics we planned to present. This approach consists of developing learning strategies for students to assimilate content and improve their second language proficiency by becoming autonomous. The purpose of its five stages (preparation, presentation, practice, self-evaluation,

and expansion) is that learners become independent users of the target language, reflect on their

learning process, and relate the topics to their context's situations.

Figure 2.
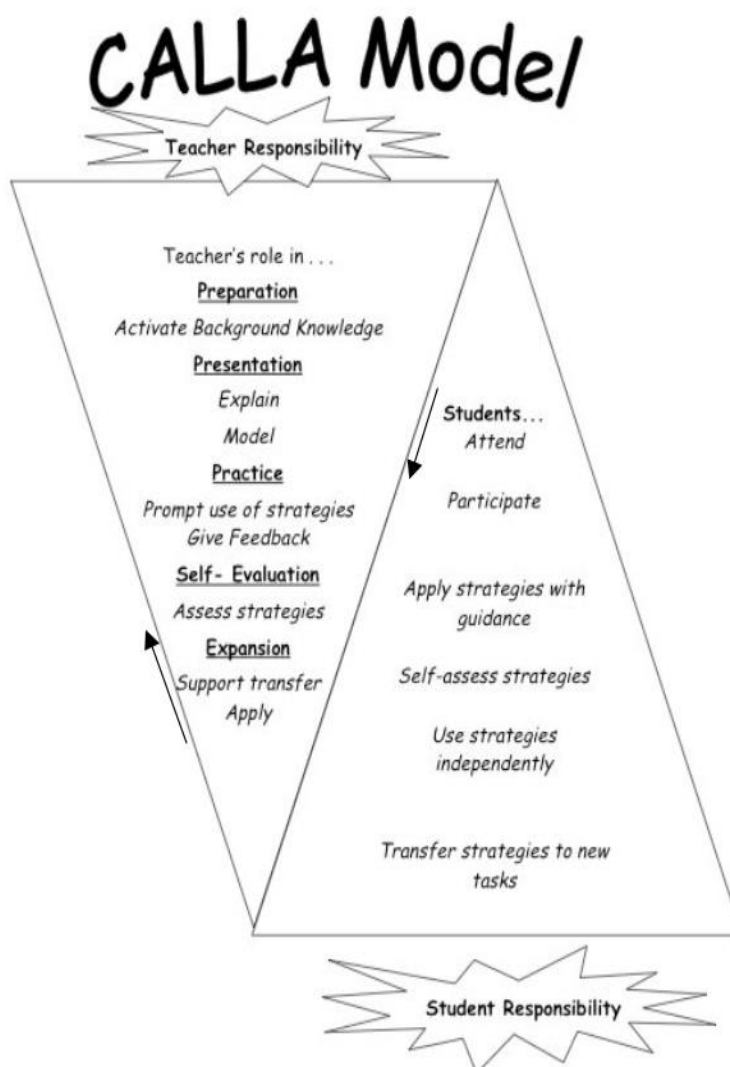
Taken from Chamot, A. U., Barnhardt, S., Robbins, J., & El-Dinary, P. B. (1999). The Learning

Strategies Handbook. [Figure].

Preparation

This stage helps students identify ways and strategies they already use or even describe

new ones to develop learning awareness. In this phase, the idea is to introduce the topic implicitly

by exploring students' prior knowledge and experiences about the topic. Furthermore, reviewing what was yielded in the previous classes develops the students' metacognitive awareness of their own learning. A suitable activity is to encourage discussions for the students to give information about what they already know and to make an individual reflection by the end of the class.

Presentation

At this stage, teachers will present and explain the topic and the necessary strategies for students to succeed. Strategies used here include predicting vocabulary by viewing images related to the topic at hand or using illustrations to recall prior knowledge of the topic. Similarly, the teacher may ask students to identify or remember previously used strategies. This modeling helps students see that the strategies are successful and begin to use them.

Practice

In the practice phase, the students practice the strategies and skills they have learned. The practice is usually done in collaboration with other students. Possible activities include interviews, discussing the meaning of unknown words, and guessing the meaning and summaries of previous classes. The advantage is that the strategies can be practiced with any content.

Self-Evaluation

Self-evaluation is important in many processes. At this stage, students will understand how much they could learn with all the skills and strategies they have managed to internalize. Through self-assessment of their own success, students will develop metacognitive awareness of their own learning. Self-evaluation activities include post-practice discussions, recording learning results, etc.

Expansion

The expansion is the last phase of the CALLA model. At this stage, it is expected that students make connections between what they learned with the real world. The purpose is that

students use the strategies independently and reflect on how they learn better. This strategy helps guide students towards increasing levels of independence and fostering academic growth by applying what they already learned in other tasks.

The Design of the Lessons

The Topic

According to Wesche and Skehan (2002, p. 220, as cited in Yang, 2009), the emphasis of theme-based instruction relies on exposing students to a "highly contextualized" second language environment by using the subject matter as the content of language learning. For that reason, we took into consideration the Colombian context, the learners' age, interests, likely motivations, and needs when we delimited themes, topics, and threads for each of the lessons (see appendix 2).

Materials and Resources

For the execution phase, we used the materials that the virtual environment allowed us to take advantage of. The materials were a key source of support for the students. Since the topics presented had to do with social and political matters, the idea was that the materials would help the classes be enjoyable, engaging, and not unpleasant for students. The materials used in the lessons were PowerPoint presentations and some videos taken from YouTube. The use of these materials was analyzed based on contributions from different authors who state the importance of these materials when teaching a second language.

PowerPoint Presentations. The use of PowerPoint for teaching has considerable potential (see appendix 4). To determine this premise, researchers have asked how effective the use of this tool in teaching is. Clark (2008) stated that the key element in using PowerPoint as a presentation tool is its potential to increase and sustain student interest in the lecture or class, which is much more effective when combined with active teaching and student participation. Moreover, Bart (2009) says that using PowerPoint correctly can be an effective way to

communicate ideas, share data, and transfer knowledge. The key is to incorporate visual elements that enhance what is being said by showing contrast, flow, hierarchy, unit, or proximity.

YouTube Videos. The use of technological tools for educational purposes has become almost mandatory. One of the most useful resources for ESL teachers is the videos hosted on the YouTube platform. According to an Amazon website called Alexa, this platform has become one of the most popular websites in the world. Thanks to this success, you can find an infinite number of videos on an unlimited number of subjects on this platform. That's why we decided to use this resource and added it to our PowerPoint presentations so that students had a moment to take notes, improve their vocabulary through search, and have input other than the one obtained from the teachers.

Implementation

At an early stage of the project, we identified the most appealing topics for the students and the ones that they were most interested in exploring in-depth through an online survey designed by us (see appendix 1). This data allowed us to start developing the lesson plans based on those topics, as one of our objectives is to make students feel confident and comfortable with the proposed topics. In the execution, the CALLA model worked as a guide to design the lessons (see appendix 2). We used PowerPoint presentations and YouTube videos for the students to get in touch with the target language and thus increase their vocabulary. The slides were very important to support all stages of the implementation as we were in a 100% virtual environment. The visuals made the class more fun and attractive for our target population who was teenagers.

The PowerPoint presentations were also used for different purposes, including to make a brief review of the previous topic, to introduce the target vocabulary, to show the activities that had been planned, to make the questions related to reflection at the end of the class, and most importantly, the language chunks, which were essential for our objectives. Other materials

incorporated into the lesson were videos to expose students to authentic input related to the topic of the lesson. The videos also had the characteristic of being more attractive to the students than a simple slide, and although the level of English in some of them could be challenging, the images and scenes allowed them to have a better understanding of the topic. Right after the end of the videos, they were asked about the unknown words with the class with the aim of increasing their vocabulary for the development of the practical stage.

The activities in which the students had to participate were done in two ways throughout the project: group and individual work. The group work was essentially interviewing between two students (see appendix 2) and the individual work was questions asked by the teacher in which the student gave a spontaneous answer (see appendix 3). The activities were based on giving opinions based on questions related to the topic seen in class. Before starting the activity, teachers conducted a modeling exercise to make the students have a clearer notion of how to fulfill and feel more confident when speaking. Throughout the activity, the teacher adopted the role of a facilitator to scaffold the students' learning process.

The final part of the lesson was devoted to reflection. As we mentioned, reflection is a fundamental aspect of this instructional model, as it serves as a means of self-evaluation in which students discover their progress and what they need to improve. This stage also aimed to have a wider view of how the learners were receiving our project in terms of motivation and interest that they demonstrated or not with their responses.

Language Chunks (Guided Practice). These were the language chunks given to the students in every class to practice their speaking skills and to participate by sharing their viewpoints and ideas.
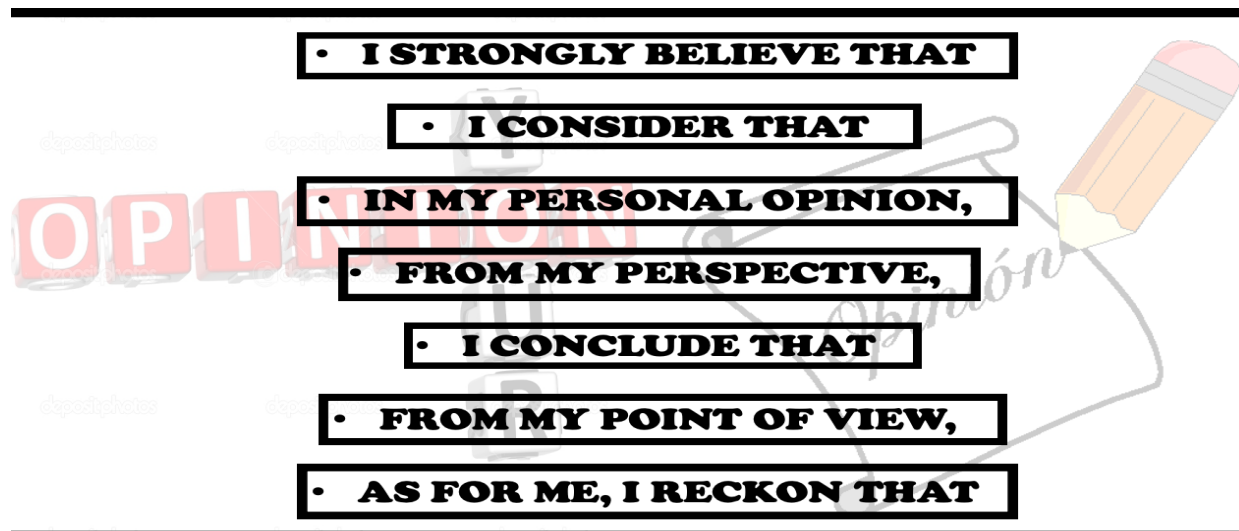
Figure 3. Slide for practicing language chunks.

Source: Own.

Vocabulary (Preparation). The students were presented with several target words and chunks to increase their linguistic repertoire. Also, they could take advantage of them to elaborate on their oral interventions during the practice stage.

Figure 4. Slide for presenting the vocabulary of the session's theme.

Source: Own.

Videos (Presentation). The videos provided were directly related to the topic. They

expanded the target vocabulary and encouraged learners to ask for unknown words when they

returned to the session. The YouTube link was given to the students, and they went to watch it.

As a tool for better understanding, this activity allowed them to turn on the English subtitles that

the platform brings by default.

Figure 5. Slide for presenting complementary input (video).

Source: Own.

Speaking Activity in the way of Interview (Production). The speaking activity that we

mainly used was assigning roles of interviewer and interviewee to each pair of students. We

considered that this was such an effective and practical pedagogical exercise to provide a

scenario or setting for learners to feel the necessity of giving their opinions.

Figure 6. Slide for illustrating the speaking scenario during the practice stage.

Source: Own.

Self-Evaluation (Reflection). The students were exposed to these reflective questions so that they could evaluate their learning process. Additionally, their responses provided us with useful information and feedback about their motivations and impressions so that we could consider that for the following sessions.

Figure 7. Slide for eliciting thoughts about the session's theme.

Source: Own.

Results

The main goal of this classroom project was to determine to what extent the integration of theme-based instruction and chunks to start an opinion (opinion starters) could improve the speaking dimension of accuracy in students of eleventh grade. From the process of ideation to the execution, there is an enriching set of resulting experiences to be highlighted as part of the constant reflection exercise we as educators must carry out in order to perform better. After the execution of seven virtual sessions, we obtained some results regarding professional growth, students' responses, and linguistic outcomes.

Professional Growth

The completion of this classroom project had a great and valuable impact on our development as English language teachers as it represented a set of learnings that will shape our professional fulfillment from now on. Therefore, we decided to further analyze three essential aspects regarding professional growth: classroom management, lesson planning, and material design. These three components will be approached according to the strengths and challenges encountered during the execution of this project.

Classroom Management

Strengths. How well students behave in class and how teachers deal with these situations are essential aspects of classroom management. As we knew in advance that the project had to be executed through telematic lessons, we wanted to ensure good behavior from the learners during the sessions. Therefore, we considered establishing ground rules from the beginning of the project to prevent disruptive actions from any student and guarantee the normal development of the sessions. To cope with this, we asked the in-service teacher to allow us to give some words to

the students during one of his synchronous classes before the first lesson of our project. Besides introducing ourselves and having a short interaction with them, we took advantage of this time to explain some virtual classroom rules that they had to follow before and during the lessons. The ground rules were:

- To be punctual

- To turn their cameras on

- To stay muted unless it was their turn to speak

- To use the hand signal to ask for the word

- To remain seated during the lesson

- To avoid doing other activities during the lesson

In the words of Carter (2015), ground rules are fundamental to order in the classroom, and order in the classroom is essential if effective teaching and learning are to take place. We kept this in mind from the beginning of the process and students could grasp the rules in a good manner as there was not any disturbing situation throughout the sessions.

In conclusion, we could evidence that defining ground rules is equally important in virtual teaching as in traditional settings. This classroom management aspect worked well for us because the students showed respect for the process every session, the atmosphere was academic all the time, and we learned that letting students know a list of classroom rules at the very first class of a new course is essential to ensure the best possible learning environment.

Another strength that we find important to address has to do with the paired work carried out during the practice stage of every lesson. The aim of proposing an interview, as the scenario for the students to give their opinions, was to provide roles and a context for them to interact and speak confidently (see figure 6). The following excerpt gives evidence of two major learnings

that we obtained from this part of the instructional design. First, we noticed that providing a real-life scenario (interview) for the students to frame their speech, gives them a sense of organization and purpose at the moment of speaking, in this case, to give an opinion. Second, we confirmed that scaffolding is an essential technique if we want students to take the plunge. It is pointless to expect that they produce some language at the first time; the teacher must be close to them, and eventually, they will perform by themselves.

        Observation Session # 1 (29/09/20; L11 to L17). In the practice stage, one group of students had to adopt the role of interviewer and make a question related to the topic of exercising the right to vote, while the other students acted as the interviewees to answer that question with an opinion. They showed understanding of the dynamic, but they were very afraid of mispronouncing words at the beginning; however, thanks to the encouragement provided by the teacher, they gained the confidence to read the questions (interviewers) and could elaborate their opinions by themselves (interviewees).

The aim of implementing this type of activity was to provide learners with a responsibility for their own learning process and get the lessons away from acquiring a teacher-centered focus. That is the reason why we assigned two different roles so that they felt that the floor was theirs entirely. We supported the spoken participation of students while they were shown (shared screen) the opinion starters chunks to help them construct their answers. We evidenced that students got their affective filter lower as they assimilated that the aim was having lots of practice, not performing correctly. The strategy described in this excerpt was applied in every session. Regarding this way of teaching speaking, Thornbury (2005) suggested that the speaking activities should be based on the principle of *practised control* because 'it involves demonstrating

progressive control of a skill where the possibility of making mistakes is ever-present, but where support is always at hand.'' (p. 63).

All in all, as teachers, we see this as an achievement on the grounds that this activity made it easier for students to engage in the speaking practice; otherwise, it would have been more difficult for them to make sense of what they were required to do (exchange opinions). We also learned that this *practised controlled* exercise works well for groups of students with a beginner level of proficiency because it awards great importance to teachers' scaffolding moments with every student during the activity accomplishment.

Challenges. There will always be challenges in terms of classroom management in every course, which entail that teachers have to elaborate action plans to solve them. In our case, the fact that this project had to be mandatorily implemented in the dynamic of telematic lessons increased the risk of having low attendances. On top of that, we had never had face-to-face interaction before with this group of students and our project was an extracurricular activity for students, which was even more disadvantageous for us because they were totally autonomous to attend.

Consequently, to solve this challenge that implied motivating students to attend every session, we kept constant communication with them twice or thrice a week by creating a WhatsApp group (see appendix 12). This communication channel aimed to monitor students' attendance, punctuality, and scheduling needs so that at least ten students could join weekly without interfering with any other school activity of theirs. The following excerpts certify that; indeed, the low attendance severely affected our project.

Observation Session # 6 (3/11/20; L96 to L97). In the sixth lesson, only three students attended the class punctually. After the first 25 minutes of the class, there were

five students connected; however, some of them left early, so the class ended up only with the same three from the beginning.

Observation Session # 7 (11/11/20; L113 to L114). Due to schedule issues with most of the students, the last session was held on Wednesday at 5:00 pm and only four students were punctual, three more students connected eighteen minutes later.

The issue here was that all our lesson plans were designed for at least a group of ten students with a duration of sixty minutes. Even though they confirmed their attendance through WhatsApp, most of the time they did not show up at all by the time of the class, or they had around twenty minutes of tardiness, which means that they did not engage properly with the content and the speaking activity. In consequence, we solved this inconvenience by letting students know through constant messaging that we were available many times during the week so that they could feel encouraged to attend by noticing that their learning evolution was severely important for us.

To conclude, the learning obtained from this challenge was the relevance of the ability to be teachers who adapt to specific needs and get the development of the projects ahead, no matter the adversities encountered, is a skill that every twenty-first-century teacher must train frequently. The importance of acquiring this mindset is that we are immersed in a technological era and the current times are highly unpredictable due to the uncertainty caused by the covid-19 pandemic.

Another challenge that we found in our project was the necessity of using Spanish due to technical issues with the students. We knew in advance that Spanish would be an essential means of communication in our project to ensure understanding of instructions since the participants had a proficiency level of A2 and none of them interacted with the English language in their daily

lives. However, the type of setting of our implementation (telematic) did not allow us to know if students were on the same page with us because they often neither activated their microphones nor did they write through the google meet's chatbox.

Observation Session # 2 (2/10/20; L17 to L20). For our second session, five students attended from the beginning. The fact that some of them did not have the microphone available during the whole lesson was disadvantageous for us. The teacher in charge of this lesson increased the L1 usage so that he could make sure that students were on the same page.

We want to address that, in a face-to-face classroom, English would have been more understandable for students to follow the process because teachers take advantage of paralinguistic features such as gestures or body movements to convey meaning. Nonetheless, the overused tendency of students to remain their microphones muted and cameras off during the class caused an increase in Spanish usage in the virtual English classroom. We intended to solve this situation with questions such as "Is that clear for you?" or "Do you have any doubts so far? We repeatedly used these chunks with a sharp intonation at the end to let students infer that we were making questions, but it hardly worked.

After all, as none of us had conducted synchronous lessons before, we learned that the successes and mistakes committed during the process of conducting these telematic lessons, engaging, and communicating with a group of students only through virtual environments, will be useful for our professional development as education is currently in an accelerated transition to this type of instruction to fit society's needs. Furthermore, if the global health emergency gets to be overcome and face-to-face educational settings return to the first place, we will be able to be skillful teachers in either environment.

Lesson Planning

Strengths. The selection of themes, topics, and threads is essential to have a successful

theme-based course. According to Snow (2001), "The theme-based model is a type of content-

based instruction in which selected topics or themes provide the content from which teachers

extract language learning activities." (p. 306). As we had this aspect clear before starting the

implementation, we designed a survey (see appendix 1) through which we aimed to know

students' interests and likes, mainly those about social matters. This resource allowed us to

design meaningful lessons for the students as they would be learning the language in an engaging

context for them. Then, based on the survey data, we brainstormed a list of topics that derived

from the themes (social matters) that emerged and that implied the target threads (social values)

we wanted to include in our lesson plans.

- Topic in lesson N.1: The importance of exercising the right to vote.

- Topic in lesson N.2: Why Fracking should not be practiced.

- Topic in lesson N.3: The advantages and disadvantages of using plastic.

- Topic in lesson N.4: How could we overcome war and conflict in Colombia?

- Topic in lesson N.5: Music as a way of respecting others' likes and dislikes.

- Topic in lesson N.6: The advantages and disadvantages of virtual classes.

- Topic in lesson N.7: After graduating, will I go to university, or will I start producing

  money?

The excerpt below represents how we elicited students' thinking about social aspects. We

aimed to relate the topic of the lesson with threads such as social responsibility, democracy, or

taking care of the environment; in this example, we intended to work on respecting others'

differences.

Observation Session # 5 (27/10/20; L83 to L86). After asking all of them about their favorite music genres, the teacher connected this topic to the importance of respecting opinions by asking students why they considered that respecting others' opinions and likes was important or not. They had issues creating an answer, so the teacher helped them be confident and construct ideas at their pace by eliciting the use of the chunks: " I consider that respecting others' opinions is important because … "

We intend to demonstrate with this extract of information that, indeed, having selected in advance themes and topics appealing for students (based on the data from the survey) was highly beneficial for them to be eager to participate and give their points of view. Otherwise, we as teachers would have had to push them more and their spoken contributions would have been shorter.

Summing up, we learned from this procedure that a proper selection of the content, that will be used as the means of teaching the target language, ensures the effectiveness of the pedagogical process because learners find a spot to express themselves upon what they really care about, not what they are imposed to learn or interact about. In this case, the survey helped us make sure of what the students were keen on learning so we could design contextualized lessons.

Another strength that is worth highlighting is related to the students' role. As we were three project developers and had only one hour to implement our lesson plan in the synchronous sessions, we decided to assign the main role to one of us for both planning and executing session by session. That is, one member was in charge of three lessons and the other two were responsible for two lessons by the end. However, we gathered on weekends to help the partner in charge of the following week's lesson by contributing, approving, or disregarding ideas.

We considered that two of us implementing each lesson at the same time could take valuable minutes away from learning and our aim was to give as much class time as possible to their active participation so that the class had a student-centered focus.

According to Carrasco and Miranda (2013), 'oral communication in English is a process which should be guided until every student is free to produce orally and that the teacher's role is not teacher-centered anymore.' (p. 32). During the production stage of every session, we wanted to be close to the students, scaffolding their performance so that they felt supported and confident despite their basic level of proficiency.

To sum up, we consider that this strategy was a strength since we learned how to adjust our lesson plans to the limited time available and implement every stage successfully while we gave constant opportunities to the students to take the floor and participate.

Challenges. The design of the lessons based on the CALLA model (Chamot and O'Malley, 1994) became a challenge due to the setting where the project had to be implemented. The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to move abruptly from classrooms to virtual rooms, so we had to adapt our lesson plans. As explained in the instructional design subtitle above, the CALLA model has five stages:

- Preparation
- Presentation
- Practice
- Self-evaluation
- Expansion

The challenge with this situation was that we had to promptly and effectively modify the original format of the model based on our purposes, needs, population, and limitations. The next

scheme shows the lesson plan format that emerged after the adaptations we considered accurate to apply.

Preparation (activating schemata)

We started the lesson by preparing students to learn the target vocabulary inductively. Only images were shown at first so that learners had to grasp what words they referred to.

Presentation (input - reading/listening)

Then, we moved to the second stage of the lesson. Here, we presented the topic (content) of the lesson through a video and a short reading passage, which students read collaboratively paragraph by paragraph with their microphones activated. The relevance of input is that "through reception, we internalize linguistic information without which we could not produce language" (Vernier et al., n.d, p. 276).

Modeling

Now, in the third part of the lesson, we turned the practice stage of the CALLA format into a modeling exercise in which we showed students how the speaking activity was expected to be performed by them.

Production (guided practice)

In the production part of the lesson (speaking activity), we turned the *expansion* stage of the CALLA model into a guided activity in which the students had to interact in pairs by adopting the roles of interviewer and interviewee. We wanted to be close to the students, scaffolding their performance so that they felt supported and confident despite their basic level of proficiency.

Reflection (self-evaluation)

The final part of the instruction aimed at exposing students to reflect upon what they learned during the lesson; what they found interesting, challenging, and relevant.

STAGES	WHEN & HOW THEME-BASED INSTRUCTION.	LEARNING GOAL	PROCEDURE	COMMENTS
Preparation (Activating schemata) 20 minutes	The students will be shown eight slides, each one containing two or three images alluding to some target vocabulary for the lesson's theme.	The students will learn some lexicon related to the lesson's theme. First, they will be encouraged to come up with possible words, and then, those will be shown one by one for students to remember them more easily.	The teacher will start the class by greeting students one by one. Then, the teacher will raise two questions: "How old are you? and Do you know what implies to be an adult?" These questions will help to introduce the lesson's theme from direct students' introspection. Next, students will be shown eight slides, each one containing two or three images alluding to some target vocabulary for the lesson's theme. It is expected that students utter out loud in English as many words as they can. Then, the teacher will display the target words one by one.	
Presentation (Input) 20 minutes	The students will watch two short videos in English about the importance of voting.	The students will raise a little bit of awareness about how essential is the fact that they exercise their right to vote.	Either by sharing my screen or providing them with the links, the students will watch two animated videos. The first one is about the importance of voting. This video's characteristic is that there is not someone talking but a cartoon guided by clouds of messages and pictures (muted narration). Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_CPqbKlV9Zg The second video is about the same as the previous one but emphasizing that one single vote means one step closer to the desired CHANGE we all wish. This time the video does have a narrator and is subtitled as he talks. Video:	
			https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbgmfQMvzKk Moreover, the transcript of the second video is copied in a slide. This text is divided into three parts so that three volunteers will read them out loud. The pedagogical intention is that students have a deeper comprehension of what they listened to in the videos. After these three activities, the teacher will ask the students what unknown words they want to clarify. First, the teacher will elicit the meaning by giving an easy description or an example. If the student does not get it, the translation will be given.	
Guided practice (Modeling) 15 minutes	Both the question and the answer will be about the lesson's theme.	Students will have the required elements to engage in the speaking activity with confidence. Lesson by lesson, they will dare to speak naturally.	The teachers will present the activity for practice. Before asking students to engage, they will perform an example (or two if they require it) for the activity about what is expected. Next, there will be a space for students to ask for clarification before proceeding.	
Production (Expansion) 25 minutes	Questions and expected answers will have the lexicon embedded related to the lesson's theme.	Students will be able to give an opinion using the vocabulary learned about the lesson's theme.	To carry out this practical activity, the students will work in pairs and have to adopt the roles of interviewer and interviewed. The pairs will be assigned by the teacher in order not to waste time asking students to select their peers. The expected amount of pairs is up to eight since there are eight different questions about the lesson's theme. To scaffold the oral production, students will be provided with a chart that contains eight different opinion starters so that they can take the plunge and start speaking.	
Self-Evaluation (Reflection) 10 minutes	The students will be encouraged to re-consider the concept and notion they have towards elections, politics, and the right to vote.	To have students reflect on their learning process.	The learners will reflect on some questions guided by the facilitator. What did you find interesting in the lesson? What did you find challenging? Is the topic relevant to you? Why?	

Taken from Chamot and O´Malley (1994). Adapted by Álvarez et al. (2020).

Figure 8. [Lesson plan #1].

As shown in lesson plan #1 (figure 8), the lesson format maintained its five stages. The first two parts of the lesson remained the same as the original, the third stage was more oriented for us to model the exercise to students, the fourth stage focused on students' production of the language with the support of the teacher in charge, and finally, self-evaluation was carried out at the end of each lesson based on some reflective questions for students to check their progress.

Although the CALLA model has been mentioned above, in this part of the results section of the project, it is necessary to explain the usefulness it had for our implementation and what we learned from the process. The CALLA model is an instructional design based on the cognitive theory of psychology (Piaget and Vygotsky), which the main objective is that educational institutions integrate into their curricula the instruction on content subjects, academic language development, and acquisition of learning strategies for students to become self-regulated and independent learners. Even though we had the challenge of modifying it, we preserved the main foundations of this original model and that helped us achieve engaging lessons incorporating meaningful topics (content), academic language instruction, and learning strategies (opinion starters and self-assessment).

To conclude, we want to remark that we felt anxious at the beginning about the fact that the virtual environment was mandatory for our project as we were aware of our inexperience as virtual teachers. However, we grew professionally by turning the negative perspective upon this situation into a new possibility of expanding our teaching skills so that learners could engage and keep attending after the first lesson. In that sense, we learned that applying the cognitive theory's theoretical foundations with models as the CALLA and merging content and language instruction is highly beneficial for learning a new language because students learn to communicate effectively in different contexts while they acquire the grammatical rules inductively.

Material Design

Strengths. Visual aids are fundamental to complement lesson planning in a telematic setting. We focused on designing attractive PowerPoint slides to grab students' attention and ensure that the lessons were both appealing and interesting for them. We are aware that attractivity is subjective; however, by saying attractive we mean that the mixing of colors, font size variations, amount of text per slide, type of images, transitions, and animations/effects while showing the slides, were carefully selected following the theory and standards we learned in previous courses of the program such as multimedia tools and E-learning.

In support of the design of visuals, Matthew (2009) asserts that visual aids "... convey what words cannot do alone, explain abstract concepts, aid retention of information, and maintain audience interest" (p. 1). Therefore, through visuals, we exposed students to infer the target vocabulary in English and we discovered class by class that they came up with the expected words easily. Additionally, regarding giving instructions, we intended to reduce the use of Spanish as "visuals have been found to be especially helpful when teaching students whose first language is not English (Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm, 2003; Carrier, 2005, as cited in Allison and Rehm, 2007).

On top of that, we wanted to create an engaging atmosphere from the writing style of the WhatsApp messages (see appendix 6). We supplied this idea with the design of invitation GIFs, which were five seconds clips that contained a segment of famous songs (see appendix 7). We thought of this material as a way of gaining their attention every week and producing a nice feeling that may defeat their excuses to attend.

In summary, we learned that the design of visual aids is key for teachers of today. We need to be prepared to capture our students' attention with these materials in virtual or telematic settings. Therefore, there is a need of being skillful at designing visual aids and digital resources

that make students have an additional motivation to engage in the learning process, especially if

they are young learners because they can be easily amazed by creative and resourceful teachers.

The following samples were mostly taken from lesson #4 of our project. (See appendix 5):

- Sample of invitation flyer: This resource aimed to increase students' attendance. (See

  appendix 9)

- Sample of invitation GIF with music: This resource produced funny reactions in the

  WhatsApp group. (See appendix 8)

- Welcoming slide:

1. Preparation: Eliciting prior knowledge. Students were encouraged to guess the topic.

At first, students only watched the images. Then, we popped out each word after students tried to come up with them.

2.Presentation: Listening and reading input related to the topic of the lesson. When the video found on YouTube had an intermediate language demand, we projected the transcript so that students could recognize the vocabulary and practice pronunciation by reading out loud in turns.

How many times have you wanted to make a change? A change in our schools, in our environment, and in our relationship with other countries? You can make that change! All you have to do is vote for the people who you feel will bring about these changes. It is not enough to complain or just hope that things will get better, stop backseat driving, and steer our country where you think it should go. Some people think that one vote doesn't matter, but each vote gives politicians a better understanding of the opinions of the people that they represent. Opinions on important issues such as gun control education reform, immigration, climate change, and abortion; without our vote, they would have no idea of what we think of these issues.

For example, in the last United States' elections, only 57.5% of eligible citizens voted; that means politicians are unaware of the opinions of nearly half of the country. Each vote is a chance to speak your mind and work towards a better country and a better world. So vote for someone who you think could help us achieve those objectives as a country and society.
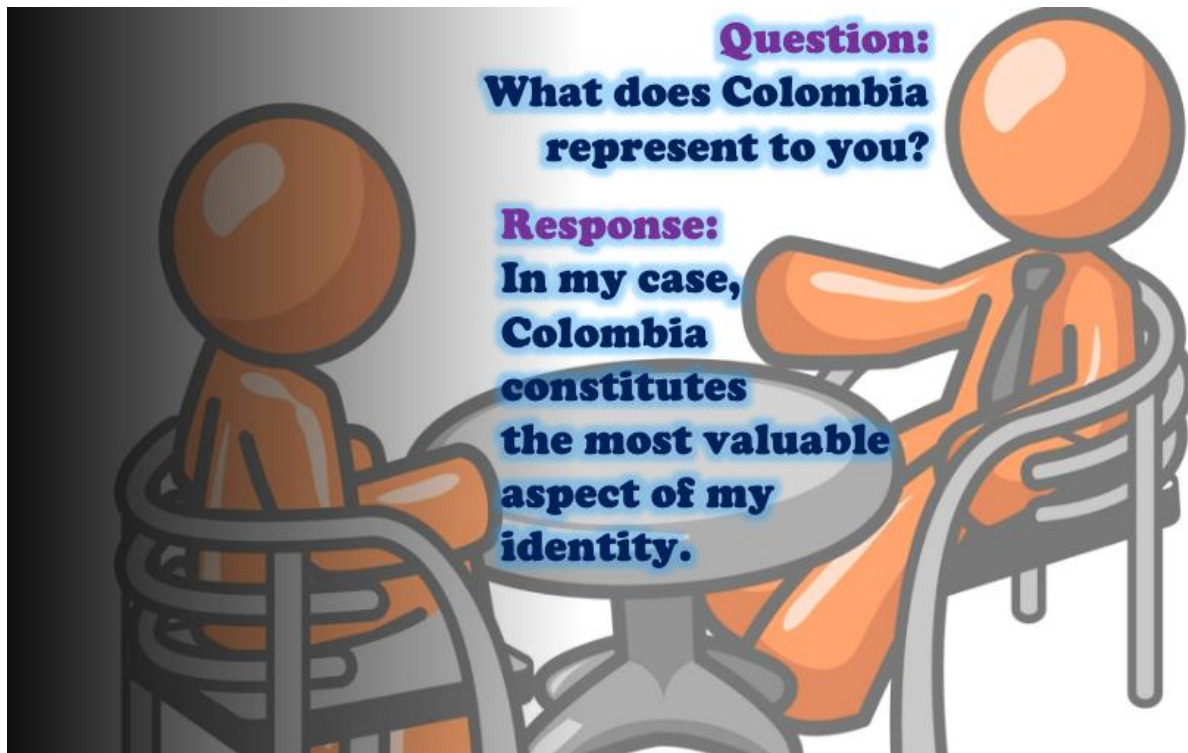
Then, we ensured understanding by asking students unknown words and eliciting any insight about the input presented. Students always asked for the meaning of over five or six words.
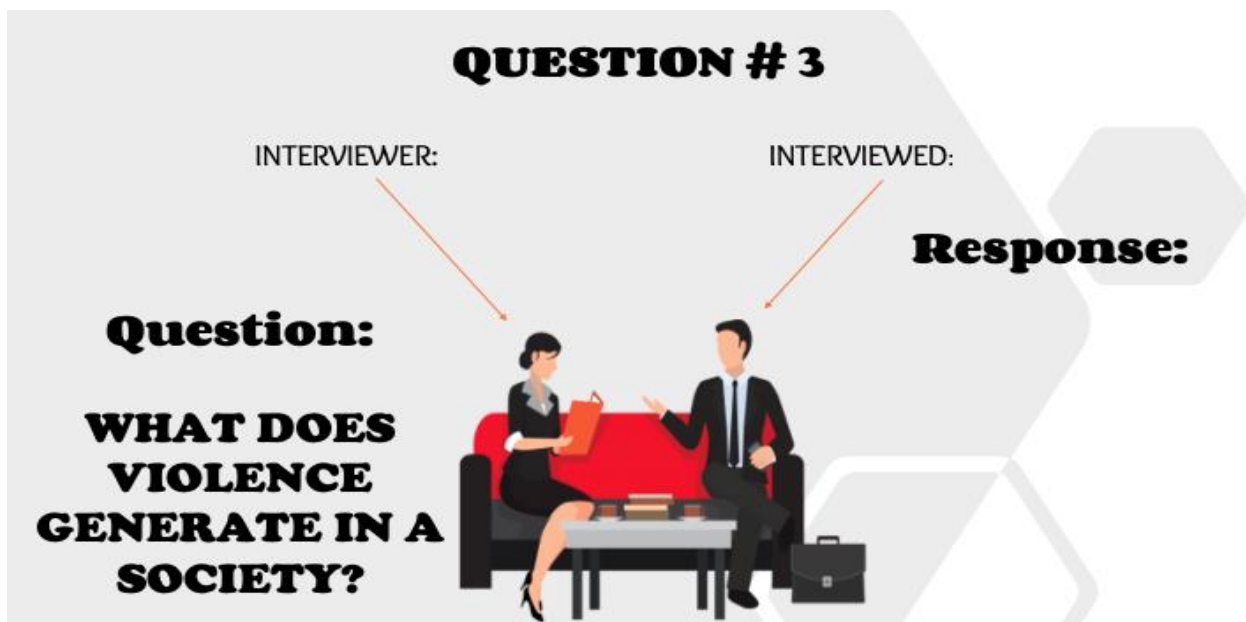

3.Guided Practice: We modeled to students the way they had to participate in the production stage in order to ensure understanding of the interview dynamic.

4.Production: Students had to interview each other in pairs. They could see their partners' names on the screen. The two teachers in charge were very attentive to scaffolding students' performance.

5.Self-Evaluation: Students were praised after their performance and supported to make a reflection upon the learning process. Students did it mostly in Spanish.
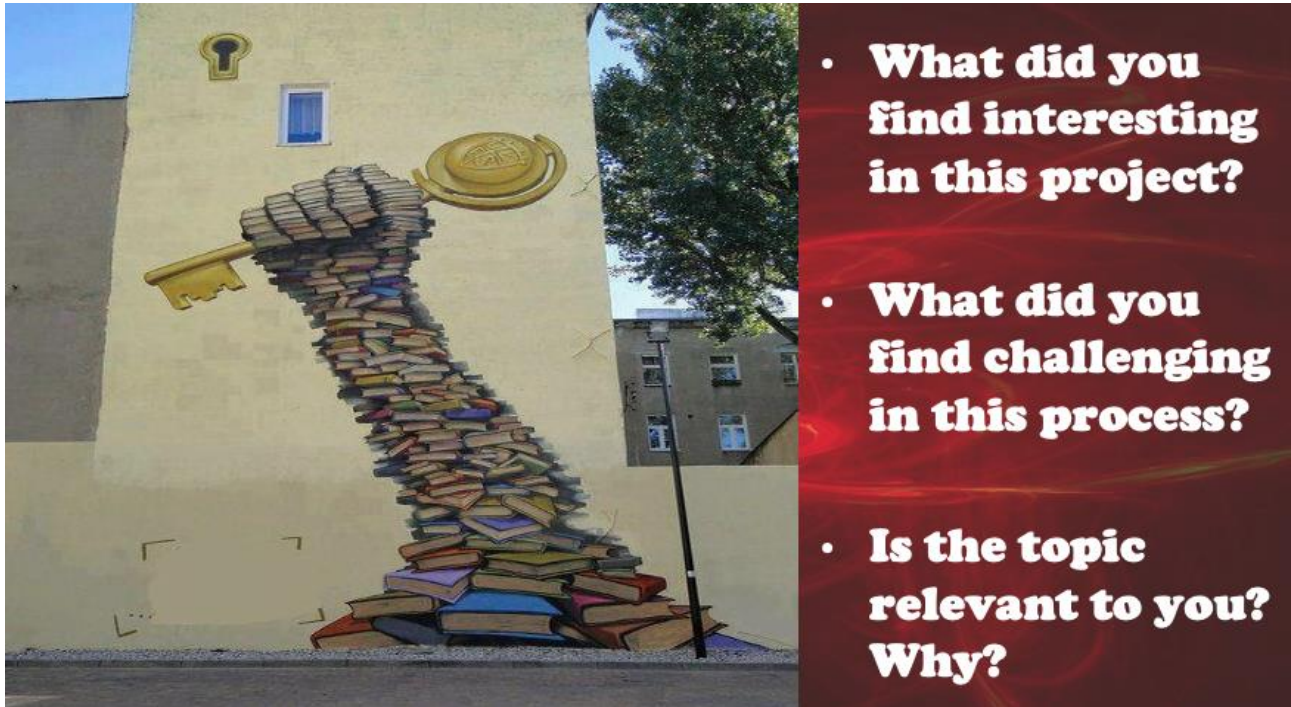
Challenges. The process of creating pedagogical materials is a critical task for every single teacher. Prior to the implementation of the project, we were informed by the in-service teacher of the course that students' socioeconomic conditions were medium-low, which implied poor internet connection sometimes and low-range smartphones.

This situation was a challenge because it did not allow us to implement some digital tools that we have previously taken into consideration such as "baamboozle" or "Quizziz" as students could not correctly display the materials created on these platforms on their devices. Moreover, our knowledge and skills on digital tools such as PowerPoint 2020 and Canva were basic and superficial, and we did not know all their features and design elements available. Nonetheless, we were aware that living in this ever-changing 21st century implies that "time, goals, project plans,

workload, and "just-in-time" learning must all be self-managed and self-directed in today's wound-up work world." (Trilling and Fadel., 2009. p. 78).

Thus, we came up with the following solutions. First, we made our best effort to apply the mindset of going beyond in terms of learning how to include different design elements throughout the design of the materials since we wished to increase students' engagement with the lessons. Moreover, we employed a high degree of autonomy and self-determination to learn in-depth how to manage and use all the functions of the two aforementioned resources (PowerPoint 2020 and Canva), as well as optimizing the use of WhatsApp and the Google Meet chatbox. In words of Trilling and Fadel (2009), stated that self-directed learners "go beyond basic mastery of skills and/or curriculum to explore and expand one's own learning and opportunities to gain expertise". (p. 79).

On the whole, we discovered the importance of being self-taught learners in order to become creative teachers. We learned that it is crucial to step forward in terms of designing catchy audio-visual resources for students immersed in this digital era. Thereby, we were able to achieve the goal of making a good impression on the students as they let us know their thoughts after each session through the reflection stage. Likewise, we had a more personal-friendly conversation at the end of the last session in which they said that they felt now more comfortable interacting with the English language.

Students' Responses

In this section, we will explain multiple aspects regarding students' reactions towards the implementation of the project. The aspects that will be described account for their attitude, participation during the sessions, and their responses to the lesson stages. We will expand these aspects into two main sections which are strengths and challenges.

Strengths

Students' attitude and participation during the sessions. Keeping students motivated during the lessons was one of our priorities each time we planned a lesson, mostly since the attendance was completely voluntary. According to Elliot and Covington (2001), motivation gives the reasons for people's actions, desires, and needs. Therefore, we knew that working on this affective factor was important for students to keep attending the sessions, and the theme-based methodology was key in this process since we presented realistic situations and topics to encourage students to take part and participate.

In our second session, we presented the topic of "Fracking" with a short review that explained the process of fracking and why it is dangerous for the environment. This topic was presented by one of the practitioners as it was a trending topic in Colombian news. In the beginning, students were quiet and did not have much idea on how they could participate in the conversation, but after we presented some videos, images, and vocabulary related to the theme, students felt motivated to talk and contribute with their own sentences. The outcome of this class is evidenced in the observation notes of one of the practitioners:

> **Observation Session # 2 (02/10/20; L30 to L34)**. For the practice phase, there were a total of 6 students, and they had to state their opinions about fracking based on three questions designed by the teacher. This time, they were fearless and more participative in this second lesson. By the end, they shared with us that the lessons were interesting and helpful for their process of learning English.

As it is evidenced in the previous observation note, students were eager to participate once the topic was explained to them. They even shared some positive comments about the lessons and how those were appealing to them. Given this fact, we started noticing that students' reactions can

be positive if teachers use relevant topics that are related to our culture and lifestyle to teach English. The addition of topics that involve real situations and real-world issues not only promoted students' motivation but also their participation. They were sometimes not very participative because of their mispronunciation and lack of confidence.

To overcome this situation, the practitioners decided that every student was going to participate in short interviews related to the topic at the end of each session, taking into consideration their English level and providing them with the necessary input and sentence structure to interact. This interview activity was challenging at the beginning since they did not have much English knowledge to create a simple sentence, but their interactions increased with each session thanks to the topics presented, which were more related to their personal goals and the virtual setting of the lessons. This progress was evidenced in the observation notes from a practitioner from one of the last sessions:

Observation Session # 6 (03/11/20; L110 to L114). The practice phase started by assigning some students a positive position about virtual classes and others with a negative one. This time, they activated their microphones and started giving their opinions using the opinion starters almost naturally as their answers were directly related to their real experiences with the classes during this pandemic.

As teachers in development, we learned that students' attitude plays an important role in the process of learning English as a second language. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (2003) state that if the lesson content is perceived to be relevant by the learners, their motivation is more likely to increase, and effective learning can then be promoted. By focusing on increasing students' motivation from the beginning of the implementation as well as presenting relevant content that

was interesting to them, we as teachers were able to encourage their participation in the whole process and grow their desire to learn English in the future.

Students' responses to the lesson stages. Students' reactions during the sessions were key to the success of this implementation. In each session, we planned our classes focused on three main stages (preparation, presentation, and modeling) for students to review the main topic, ask for clarification and practice the English language. Each stage was planned carefully for students to prepare their speech and to improve their speaking skills. It was demonstrated during the implementations that students were constantly getting better at their interactions, they started getting accustomed to the three stages and they interacted between themselves without the need of excessive support from the tutors as at the beginning. One of the practitioners explained the students' positive response to the stages in his journal entry from the final session:

Video Journal Session # 7 (E7; 11/11/20; L153 to L157). Most of the students wanted to take the plunge and give compound sentences rather than simple sentences, which is very positive. Additionally, I noticed metalinguistic awareness at the moment they were giving their opinions. The self-correction was evident. The use of Spanish was again present as a means of understanding and clarification of words.

When we started this implementation, we had to ask every student to create their own sentences, which was difficult for them since the tutor always had to support them to create or correct the sentence. To start improving this linguistic aspect, we took advantage of the theme-based instruction in our favor to present the content, after all, as Freeman and Freeman state: "when the content of the lesson is relevant and interesting, students are more likely to try harder to

understand and to stay focused." (2006, p. 64). As evidenced in a journal entry, for the final sessions the students wanted to produce more complex sentences than just the simple ones they were uttering at the beginning. As teachers in development, we learned that labeling the sessions into stages can be useful as once the students get accustomed, we can expect their participation in the classroom to go up, which facilitates the learning process.

Students' response to the theme-based instruction. Focusing on students' reactions towards each topic of the sessions was important for us since it was directly related to the main objective of the project. At the end of each session, we reflected on the results of the class to check if students had understood and liked the topic presented. Based on their responses and comments, we could assure that they did like the topics that we were using to improve their accuracy in speaking, meaning that the use of the theme-based instruction was yielding positive results on them. In one of our video journal reflections, one practitioner explained the positive outcomes of the students during the lesson:

>   **Video Journal Session #5 (E5; 27/10/20; L124 to L128).** The result we expected
>   from the class was to have more participation from the students, and it was nice to see that
>   this was indeed the case. The students seemed happy and enjoying the class and topic, and
>   on several occasions, they participated in their free will. At the end of the class, they were
>   grateful to us. The results can be seen.

As stated in the journal entry, it seemed that students were enjoying the topics that we were presenting, some of these topics were about the environment (use of plastic and fracking), their opinion about war and military training in Colombia, and what to study in the future. One important advantage that Cameron (2001) presents about theme-based instruction is that new

vocabulary items can be learned easily, with the theme providing a meaningful context for understanding, and the natural use of a wide range of discourse types, both written and spoken. We were able to benefit from this advantage to teach new vocabulary to students, without worrying too much about the complexity of the topic.

As professionals in development, we are glad to conclude that the theme-based instruction worked positively for us. When young learners are exposed to a topic that is relevant to them, we can take advantage of it to present and teach the second language, and this way we could learn that there are better methodologies to teach English than using the traditional methodologies that several teachers are still accustomed to.

Challenges

Even though students' motivation seemed to be favorable during the sessions, we still encountered some challenges on the affective factor such as the anxiety of virtual classes and students' disposition. From the beginning of the implementation, we were experiencing a global pandemic due to the Covid-19, and most of students in Colombia were attending their classes virtually. This type of setting had a major impact on the way the lessons had to be planned and the attendance of students, as they did it voluntarily. This circumstance caused the attendance to be variable with only a few students attending regularly to all the classes. This issue was evidenced in an observation note from a practitioner:

Observation Session # 4 (21/10/20; L56 to L58). The teacher in charge decided to change the day and the hour of the lesson to check if more students would attend the class. Although more than ten students confirmed attendance, just six of them connected to the session.

As teachers in development, we learned that motivating students to attend classes on their own can be difficult, and unless we as teachers manage to come up with a plan to resolve this issue as soon as possible, students will stop connecting to the lessons. Nonetheless, we were able to talk with all the students to reach an agreement on the best day of the week to conduct the lessons, and after everyone agreed on a day and an hour, we were able to continue with the sessions with a reasonable number of students.

In addition to this difficult item of the virtual modality, most of the students were not turning on their microphones to talk during the first sessions. This disruptive behavior affected the main objectives of our project, which was to stimulate and improve the speaking skill of students in terms of accuracy. This was certainly a challenge that we had to overcome as soon as we found an alternative. To come up with a solution to both issues, we started including relevant topics that would be related to students' lives after they graduate.

We constantly made students aware that the learning obtained during these lessons was going to help them with their ICFES SABER 11 result. On top of that, by using invitation flyers (see appendix 10) as weekly reminders of the classes, we were able to boost the number of students participating in the lessons. At the end of the implementation, students gave us their comments about the lessons, as noted in the last observation entry from a practitioner, most of them seemed to be rewarding:

Observation Session # 7 (11/11/20; L137 to L141). The final session concluded with some important advice from the teacher regarding the importance of education and the advantages of studying at the university. The students expressed their gratitude to us because they felt comfortable during the sessions. Some of them also stated that although

the sessions were virtual, it had been much better for them because they felt in their

comfort zone where they could participate without worrying about classmates' laughter.

It was highly challenging to implement the classes under the virtual conditions because we

started planning the project under the regular face-to-face setting. As soon as the project was

approved, the global pandemic occurred, which changed our modality and methodologies

drastically. Even though we faced this inconvenience, we were able to get them solved and get the

most positive attitude from students to carry out the lessons in an effective manner that was useful

for our project purposes and objectives.

Linguistic Outcomes

In this section, the results related to students' linguistic outcomes will be discussed. The

main purpose here is to analyze the linguistic elements produced by the students during the

implementation of this project from the perspective of strengths and challenges. In addition, each

dimension will be described and supported by practitioners' data evidence.

Strengths

We considered that one of the strong points that the students were able to take advantage

of was the use and assimilation of language chunks. It is important to note that this achievement

was generated because the practitioners always emphasized the importance of using them to begin

the sentences and answers that students elaborated on. This constant technique led them to use

these language chunks more and more as the sessions went ahead and evidenced a significant

advance in linguistic aspects compared to how they formulated the answers at the beginning of the

project. Figure 3 above shows the different language chunks that the students were exposed to when answering the questions proposed in the production phase of the lesson plan. As explained in previous sections, the exercise of the production stage was a short, paired interview in which the students asked each other one question and gave their opinion related to the topic.

This interview activity involved one of the students being the interviewer and the other the interviewee, to have both students in both positions. The best manner to determine the students' linguistic progress was by exposing them to the language chunks displayed in figure 3. As we wanted to encourage students to practice their speaking skills and actively participate by sharing their views and ideas, we decided to make use of opinion starters, as these would greatly help them to start their sentences, losing some of their insecurities to speak. From the first implementation, we encouraged students to constantly use those opinion starters. The first use of these language chunks can be evidenced in the following excerpt:

1st Implementation (29/09/20; L17 to L18) Question: In a democratic country, what is our most important responsibility? In my opinion, the most important responsibility is vote.

Later, in the subsequent implementations, we could observe how the students used them more autonomously and, in many cases, different from the cognate "In my opinion":

6th Implementation (03/11/20; L170 to L171) Question: Why do you think virtual classes can be hard? From my point of view, is class hard because bad internet connection "o es al revés?"

This improvement was thanks to the use of the proposed language chunks since the students memorized them and then when trying to give an opinion, they went ahead by taking these resources to give their opinions in English. The explanation for this application can be seen from Richards (2008), who states that, in carrying out communication tasks, low-level learners often rely on a lexicalized communication system that relies heavily on memorized vocabulary and language chunks.

It is also worth noting that, in the light of the project objectives, it could be determined that the use of the language chunks was useful to develop and strengthen the students' communicative competence in terms of their linguistic competence. Working with the language chunks in contexts such as conversations and interviews made it necessary to constantly use the lexicon provided in the classes, which was used simultaneously with the opinion starters. This practice can be evidenced in the following interaction of one of the students:

7th Implementation (11/11/20; L192 to L193) Question: What do we need to face university successfully? From my perspective, studying in university is the best option because help us a successful life.

Here, we can see how one of the students managed to give a slightly complex answer thanks to the appropriation of the lexicon and the language chunks provided throughout the process, which was one of our specific learning objectives.

To conclude, we could learn that students' progress in their linguistic domain when they are provided with the necessary linguistic resources for them to be able to produce spoken ideas in line with the topic of the class. Data that support this linguistic progress was the correct use of the language chunks at the beginning of each of their opinions, which was our target. Furthermore,

they seemed to improve the performance of the function of giving opinions on everyday issues concerned to some topics of the Colombian context.

On top of that, we learned how useful and effective these linguistic elements can become for students' speaking development, which along with teachers' scaffolding techniques, seemed to have a positive impact on the development of their overall learning process, not to mention that they helped us somewhat meet our learning objectives.

Challenges

At the end of the project, we could evidence some improvement in the students' linguistics performance. However, it was quite difficult to get students to produce even simple sentences; there were some aspects partially achieved and not achieved at all. One of the challenges we faced was the students' constant use of Spanish as a resource, e.g., students avoided giving their opinions entirely in English and had a recurrent tendency to use their L1. This situation was directly linked to the use of the language chunks since our aim with those chunks was that students practiced them frequently, of course in English. Nevertheless, they repeatedly used Spanish when participating, which resulted in an extra effort for us as implementers to encourage them to participate mostly in English. This circumstance can be appreciated in one of the early implementations of the project:

1st Implementation (29/09/20; L11 to L14) Question: What type of people should make the laws in all the countries? In my opinion, should be honest and "no sé cómo se dice justo en inglés" *the teacher helps to find the word and invites the student to go ahead and repeat the whole sentence* In my opinion, should be honest and fair people.

In the fourth implementation students had the same pattern:

4th Implementation (21/10/20; L94 to L98) Question: Why do political parties generate division? In my opinion, "¡ay se me olvidó la palabra! ¿Ay puedo decirla en español?" *The teacher suggests going back and review the slides with the target vocabulary* In my opinion, generate conflicti- conflicto "bueno no sé cómo se diga", division, and problems *the teacher asks to repeat the whole sentence* In my opinion, generate conflicts, division, and problems.

To avoid the constant use of Spanish, we had to manage to find a strategy that helped us both lessen the L1 usage and achieve our learning objectives without forcing them to speak only in English as this would increase their stress levels. Consequently, we decided to take into account some scaffolding techniques more frequently such as eliciting, the use of cognates, and asking them to repeat the whole sentence that they produced as many times as necessary until it was grammatically correct, so that they could notice their mistakes without explicit explanation. At the end of the project, we could see that some students made less use of Spanish and only used it to ask for vocabulary in English:

7th Implementation (11/11/20; L205 to L207) Question: What can we do with the learning obtained in university? In my opinion, with the learning obtained in the university can work on the we are "apasionado como se dice?" passioned.

As teachers in development, we learned that forcing students to speak only in English without any pedagogical strategy could never be an option as this can lead to a stressful

environment in which they would not be able to perform spontaneously. Added to this conclusion, we experienced the prominent interference that the mother tongue has when it comes to second language learning and how it gets harder to overcome in virtual settings where paralinguistic elements such as gesturing or doing mimics cannot take place.

Aligned to the aforementioned aspect, we encountered a constraint in the low level of student's English proficiency. Since we thought they had a better level, we expected them to produce sentences with complex structures. This limitation indicated to us that the project had to be adjusted to the students' capabilities to prevent unsatisfactory outcomes. Thus, we tried to get students to use Spanish as a means for clarification of what they wanted to convey in English by asking intentional questions for them to notice the errors. Subsequently, we scaffolded the process of conveying their thoughts in an accurate English sentence by making use of the language chunks and the target vocabulary. In one of the implementations, we experienced this situation and we tried to overcome it as follows:

1s Implementation (29/09/20; L25 to L28) Question: What is our most important duty as citizens? I think what is the vote *the teacher asks: What would you correct or add to the sentence? * "faltó ciudadanos. Entonces sería… [goes ahead and elaborate a more complete sentence] I think what the duty most important the citizens is the vote.

After some lessons students managed to produce more complex sentences, but with great difficulty. At this stage, we learned that by giving them the right tools and teaching them how to use them, the students can cope with this type of problem. As the project continued, progress was noted in producing more complex sentences, but it was still not at the expected level:

5th Implementation (27/10/20; L150 to L154) Question: Is it ok to insult or make fun of people if they do not hear it? From my perspective, it's not ok because "es importante el respeto sería" is important respect o respect is important "así o al revés?" *The teacher clarifies, and the student goes ahead voluntarily and starts over the whole sentence* From my perspective, it is not ok because respect is important.

In conclusion, although we knew that the students' level in English was low, we learned that being adaptable to the given context is beneficial; it helped us to draw alternatives to deal with specific challenges entailed in that scenario. On our behalf, we can conclude that by using the right tools and double thinking certain teaching strategies, it is possible to achieve an accurate linguistic production from students despite their limited background with the language, as well as the implementation of scaffolding techniques to help them increase their spoken production and structure their ideas in English.

Conclusions

The present classroom project intended to enhance the accurate spoken production in English of young learners by assimilating and putting into practice language chunks to give opinions upon social topics related to the Colombian context. The data and outcomes were collected across seven sessions implemented with a group of eleventh graders from a public school of Pereira.

Both the general and specific teaching objectives of this project aimed at strengthening students' speaking skills in English taking advantage of the theme-based instruction principles to design lessons with social-related content of Colombia. Analyzing the results section, especially from the students' responses, we can take as a conclusion that theme-based instruction oriented to

language teaching is highly effective when the target is to stimulate productive skills, in this case speaking, since our learners seemed to be predisposed to interact with the input of the lessons as they had been involved in the process of selecting the topics from the beginning of the process. Therefore, we noticed that they attended the classes not only expecting to improve their speaking skill in English but with an additional motivation to learn about matters that sincerely called their attention.

They seemed to be quite interested to learn the vocabulary taught in the sessions even when they did not recognize most of the target vocabulary in English. This attitude helped us conclude that they can try harder to understand if the topic shown is appealing to them. Thus, their response towards the implementation of the theme-based instruction demonstrated to us that these objectives somewhat reached their initial purposes as students showed progress on each session in their speaking skill in terms of showing the intention of moving from simpler sentences to more complex ones with some eventual success, as evidenced in the results section above.

Relying more on students' linguistic development, our general objective of designing the lessons using the theme-based instruction principles, along with the specific teaching objective of stimulating students' spoken production in English taking the opinion chunks as linguistic resources, had the purpose of paying special effort on improving the accuracy of the sentences that students produced lesson by lesson during the speaking activity of interviewing each other. For that reason, we included a list of different language chunks (opinion starters) in every class. These linguistic resources intended to elicit the accurate elaboration of simple, compound, and complex sentences when students had to share their viewpoints. Following that pattern, they could have a structure to start giving their opinions in English and at the same time, they could integrate these opinion chunks into their linguistic repertoire for subsequent lessons.

From the excerpts provided in the linguistic outcomes section above, we can conclude that they seemed to assimilate these language chunks satisfactorily according to the accurate pattern of use they showed in the last classes. However, the L1 interference and their limited repertoire of vocabulary caused students to be more likely to use Spanish when trying to convey their opinions in the form of simple/compound sentences in English.

Consequently, we are allowed to conclude that delivering appealing and contextualized input plus linguistic tools such as language chunks to structure their spoken elaboration, provide learners with the confidence to see themselves as capable language users, which positively impacts the linguistic dimension of their communicative competence and facilitates the increase of spoken production in the second language. The latter being explained, we consider that our learning objectives were partially achieved as our initial target was that, by the last sessions, learners were able to produce both compound and complex-type sentences, which included at least one or two linking words of addition, reason, or contrast.

Finally, bringing into attention the unexpected and challenging situation provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic is certainly necessary. Before this worldwide emergency, we hadn't considered modifying our lesson planning model or elaborating well-designed slides and audiovisual materials. The interaction between students could have been more productive if it had been conducted in a classroom with face-to-face interviews, but since the sessions were presented through virtual meetings, it was more challenging for students to exchange their ideas and express their agreement or disagreement with the opinions presented.

Hence, this problematic event made us reformulate the methodology of the project; we ended up taking lots of valuable learning for our professional development as English language teachers. Skills such as conducting telematic lessons successfully and designing audiovisual resources, not pretending to simulate the face-to-face classroom but taking advantage of all the

digital tools available to implement engaging lessons in which high-quality learning outcomes can be achieved.

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Appendices

1. **Diagnostic Survey**

2. **Lesson Plan # 1**

3. **Lesson Plan # 2**

4. **Slides Lesson Plan # 1**

5. **Slides Lesson Plan # 4**

6. **Engaging Writing Style in the WhatsApp Group**

7. **Invitation GIF Session 6**

8. **Invitation GIFs Session 7**

9. **Invitation Flyer Session 3**

10. **Invitation Flyer Session 1**

11. **English Please 3 Fast Track 11th grade (Teacher's Guide)**

12. **Entire Evidence of the WhatsApp Group Interaction**

13. **Interview with the In-Service Teacher of the Course**