

TEACHING AND LEARNING BEYOND ACADEMIC-REALITY:  
AN EXPERIENCE ON TEACHING ENGLISH TO COGNITIVELY IMPAIRED  
LEARNERS

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## Resumen

La presente investigación reporta una experiencia sobre la enseñanza del idioma inglés a personas adultas con discapacidad cognitiva, cuya lengua materna es el español. Para dicho propósito, se llevaron a cabo diez sesiones de enseñanza del inglés a trece aprendices con discapacidad cognitiva en un instituto con énfasis en el campo de la educación especial "SEI". El objetivo de este estudio fue describir la experiencia de enseñar inglés tanto de los aprendices como de los maestros. La recolección de datos se hizo usando diferentes instrumentos como entrevistas, observaciones, y la producción de los estudiantes.

Los resultados de este estudio sugieren que los estudiantes con discapacidad cognitiva pueden aprender vocabulario de una lengua extranjera exitosamente usando estrategias, materiales, técnicas y métodos como lo son: el aprendizaje cooperativo y la respuesta física total. Del mismo modo este estudio muestra algunos casos particulares en los cuales las clases pudieron haber contribuido no solamente a que los estudiantes aprendieran vocabulario en inglés, sino que al parecer también tuvo un impacto en su desarrollo de la lengua materna, así como en su desempeño en cuanto a conducta y actitud.

## **Abstract**

This research study reports an experience on teaching English to cognitively impaired (CI) adults whose mother tongue is Spanish. Ten lessons of English language were conducted to thirteen learners with cognitive disabilities from an institute specialized in the field of special education "SEI". The study aimed at describing the experience of teaching English for both, learners and practitioners. The information was gathered through the application of diverse instruments such as: interviews, observations, researchers' journals, and learners' products.

Some findings originated from this study suggest that CI students can succeed at learning vocabulary in a foreign language through the use of different strategies, materials, techniques and methods, such; collaborative learning, and total physical response. Moreover, this study conveys some particular cases, where English lessons not only might have contributed to CI learners to learn some English vocabulary, but it also seemed to have impacted their first language development, as well as their behavioral and attitudinal development.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to all SEI's students and teachers for allowing us to, at least for a while, become a part of them. All the sacrifices, time and efforts invested were absolutely worth it. They opened our eyes and so our minds to understand that some of the best things in teaching do not come in books and are not even written or predicted.

We thank all of you, SEI members, for being interested in this process and for having deposited all your effort in the development of the project, your trust made us become stronger and more committed in order to offer you the best of ourselves, we hope you received it all that way!

This study is all yours, from the planning and execution to the analysis; you were always the main characters and made it come true; today it is a reality because you made it be. And more than the things that you could have learned, there are the uncountable things you taught us which will remain in our memories as the most challenging, yet amazing, experiences so far.

For all of above mentioned and even more, today we say:

“This project is from you, to yourselves”

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For shield lighting our way to investigation

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For standing us, we know it is not an easy job, but you did it with patience and kindness. Now you can take break, at least for a while.

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## Statement of the Problem

*“Nunca ha habido una época en la que tantas naciones necesitaran hablarse entre sí,  
Nunca ha habido una época en la que tanta gente haya querido viajar a tantos  
lugares...  
Y nunca ha sido más urgente la necesidad de una lengua global”.*

*D. Crystal(1998)*

The Colombian National Ministry of Education (MEN) proposed a bilingual program which aimed at reaching bilingualism in Spanish and English for Colombia by 2019 (Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo, 2006). The government has offered training for teachers around the country to make them able to adapt English into their curriculum with the purpose of improving English teaching around the country.

Research on the language learning of people with cognitive disabilities (CD) has been focused on investigating the strengths and weaknesses of this population in terms of first and second language acquisition. However, in terms of a foreign language teaching, there is still a lack of information which might serve as foundations for language teachers to conduct successful practices when facing population with special needs in regular-education classrooms.

In Colombia, according to Law 1098 (*Colombian infancy and adolescence code Act 36, 2006*) it is a fundamental right for children with any kind of impairment to have the benefit of a high-quality life and to be provided with any required condition to foster their opportunities in order to reduce their vulnerability, and to take an active part in society. Also, new education policies have determined that learners with special needs should be involved in regular learning scenarios, which implies that this population would be immersed in conventional classrooms.

Additionally, Colombian education is facing a conceptual revolution; the concept of inclusive education, which intends to establish mechanisms in order to make the rights of education, participation and equality valuable for every child, young or adult, regardless of their personal, socio-economical or cultural characteristics. Maria Velez White, the Colombian Minister of Education, (2008) states that inclusive education refers to the right that people with any kind of impairment have, whether it is cognitive, behavioral or physical, to take part in the development of society; providing them with the required support within a common structure of education, health, leisure and culture, and social services.

Moreover, according to the Ministry of Education, in Colombia an amount of over 40.000 new students with special-educational needs should be assisted in regular classrooms between 2009 and 2010. Nevertheless, Cardona (2006) portrays that, in Colombia, the inclusion of learners with CD into the regular-educational system is not enough to guarantee those learners' maintenance and promotion into that system. She

argues that teachers need to reflect on their practices conceptual and attitudinal changes which benefit the inclusion process of those populations.

Previous studies on the field of language learning experienced by special learners report that negative consequences for many children and their families can result from limiting language input to a single language in a society that is increasingly diverse, as a result of bilingual contexts where bilingualism rules communication (De Houwer, 1999). Besides, he claims that a bilingual environment is most often a necessity, not a choice. It has also been reported that bilingualism is not detrimental to the dominant language of some children with cognitive disabilities, at least, when they experience an intensive ongoing and consistent exposure to both languages (Kay-Raining, et al. 2005) Findings show that even if there are expressive language weaknesses, learners with intellectual difficulties can be successful in acquiring two languages, performing in their dominant language at least as well as their monolingual counterparts under such conditions do. It is relevant to highlight that all the arguments above are delimited by bilingual contexts in which two languages are needed for establishing and maintaining communication.

In contexts, as Colombian, where English is not used as a dominant language, there is a scarcity of information related to the impact that EFL lessons might have upon that kind of learners.

Hence, this study was indented to take a look at how English language learning is experienced by learners under non-regular learning conditions within a Spanish-

speaking context where the use of English is not a necessity for communication. In this study, we explored some methods and described the impact of teaching English to a group of Colombian adults with different cognitive impairments (CI) . In that sense, English sessions were conducted to the participants of the study and data collected from those sessions was further analyzed.

As a conclusion, it was important to conduct a study which aimed at describing the impact that learning English as a foreign language might have on special learners, given the current circumstances in Colombia where it is mandatory for most teachers to face this population. Besides, it is relevant to contribute to the literature in this area since there is no available information to be used so far. The intention of this study was neither to contradict nor to support any controversial stream, its idea was to explore a topic that still remained under-studied in our context and to provide some basis for further research as well as some literature on cognitive disabilities in language classrooms constrains.

## Research Questions

- *How do CI learners experience the English language lessons and what does this experience tell us about teaching this population?*
- *How can the learning environment and teaching strategies such; code switching and collaborative learning mediate the foreign language teaching and learning processes?*
- *How can this experience contribute to our growing both as persons and as professionals?*

## Theoretical framework

Pending this section some relevant terms and their definitions will be provided to make the understanding of the jargon used through this study possible.

This study reports an exploration on how students with cognitive disabilities face the process of learning a foreign language. According to MEN (2006), a foreign language is that one which is not spoken in the near and local environment, due to the fact that daily social conditions do not require speakers to use it to communicate. Whereas second language is understood as a language needed for communication among the people of a country, and which is used with official, commercial, educational, and social purposes.

As this study aimed at knowing some abilities of people with special needs in terms of foreign language learning, it is compulsory to get familiar with some terms that allow a brief understanding of the population. In the field of education, special needs are commonly understood to require an isolated treatment in which learners are constantly under a specialist's care. Nowadays, in Colombia, Mexico and The United States; learners with special needs have been incorporated into regular-education classrooms.

Special educational needs are pedagogical requirements applied to a person who, by diverse reasons, is seen as "different" whether because of his physical appearance, communication way, interaction, access to information, movement, or pace and learning mode (Cardona, 2006).



The integration of special needs in regular classroom is called inclusive education; the idea behind that concept is that students with special needs have the same opportunity to develop a consistent educational life than regular learners do. Narvarte (2005), states that inclusive education might cause an impact on language teaching professionals, due to the fact that having students under non-regular learning conditions inside regular classrooms may require a re-structuring of the curriculum and conditions of instruction.

Among the different facts that can limit students to have a regular integration into educational system, two concepts emerge and need to be considered to develop language teaching and learning research; those concepts are Intellectual disability which refer to the individuals' difficulties to develop or perform the abilities or actions that allow them to adjust successfully in any context (MEN, 2006), and Cognitive impairment that according to Cardona (2006) does not pass on to diagnostic categories such as mental retardation or learning difficulties; instead, it constitutes a more functional concept which is related to an individual's cognitive development.

Cognitive impairments cover a large range of individuals' conditions along with specific language impairment, Down syndrome, and Autism. Specific Language Impairment is a term applied to a set of language difficulties which cannot be explained by psychiatric or neurological conditions, by sensory loss or by inadequate language environments diagnosed in children who develop normally but present some language difficulties (Bishop, 1997; Leonard 1998). Plus, Rondal (1995), defines Down syndrome as a state where individuals present a compromised delay in their cognitive

development, they have moderate to severe levels of intellectual disability and there may be little correlation between formal aspects of language and nonverbal cognitive ability. On the other hand, autism is a disorder that affects individuals' social interaction and communication, and as a consequence, their development in everyday life is affected.

Some other conditions in which people deal with cognitive impairments include Bipolar disorder which The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines as a disruption in an individual mood. Bipolar Disorder is characterized by the occurrence of one or more maniac or mixed episode often accompanied by depressive episodes. And finally, Psychiatric disorders which is defined by Salters-Pedneault (2009) as any psychological or behavioral symptom that affects or impairs an individual's ability to function in life.

The teaching process, with this population, demands special conditions for instruction. Entertaining activities stimulate attention and memory, optimizing the development of the body and the senses due to the fact that individuals coordinate their body movements. Games were found to be highly positive when teaching cognitively impaired people since they increase the partaking level in class activities, the games allowed the assimilation of difficult experiences facilitating the management of the anxiety associated to those situations, and stimulating peer communication and cooperation. According to Roseberry-McKibbin's (2002) the initial stage of foreign language learning for special needs students should entwine drawing, painting, grouping, labeling, pointing, selecting, and matching activities.

Some strategies are commonly used to facilitate the process of teaching a foreign or a second language, in that sense we bring into consideration the term code switching which played an important role in the implementation of this study and which according to Meyers-Scotton (1992) refers to the use of two or more languages as a vehicle for communication in everyday conversations. Besides, it is also important to highlight as an strategy what Cook & Friend (2007) denominated as Collaborative teaching approaches; they pointed out that it is when there are two or more professionals in a single physical space, providing instruction to a diverse group of learners. They set the following categories to understand the collaborative teaching process:

- One teaches, one observes: Teachers design in advance what types of specific observation and information to gather during instruction. While one teaches the other instructor observes. One teach, one drift: One person keep primary responsibility for teaching while the other professional circulates through the room providing assistant to students as needed.
- Parallel teaching: Both teachers are teaching the same information, but they divide the classroom and do so simultaneously
- Station teaching: Content is divided and so are students, each teacher teaches the content to one group and subsequently repeats the instruction for the other one.
- Alternative teaching: One teaches to a large group of learners while the other one works with a smaller group.

- Team teaching: Both teachers are delivering the same instructions at the same time.

Moreover, Villa et al., (2004) also proposed the term Complementary Teaching to describe when one teacher enhances the instruction provided by the other teacher.

In the same way, it is essential to portrait some terms related with the learning process experienced in this study starting with Collaborative learning which is defined by Johnson & Johnson (1994) as a process where students work together to accomplish shared learning goals; through collaborative learning, learners encourage and support each other to learn and are responsible for their own as well as their teammates' learning, it provides the opportunity to improve their class performance and to increase their motivation. Motivation is one of the main factors by which the rate and success of second or foreign language (L2) learning are influenced. It provides background to initiate learning the L2 and later a strong support during the long process (Dorney, 1998). Motivation is composed basically by the desire to achieve a goal, the effort extended in that direction and the satisfaction with the tasks (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993)

When talking about students' language comprehension, some of the second language acquisition stages stated by Krashen (1982) are relevant, regarding "the pre-production stage" and "the early production stage" — where teachers can expect students to point at an item, a picture or a person, to internalize new vocabulary, to provide an answer with a "yes" or a "no", or with a word, and to use repetitive language

patterns— to show that at the beginning of the language learning process, comprehension precedes and exceeds the language production in a first or in a second language acquisition.

Furthermore Roseberry-Mckibbin, (2002) adopted the previous stages of second language learning process to a multicultural setting for students with special language needs, where the first two stages are focused on the silent period and language comprehension. This coincides with the idea by Keenan & MacWhinney (1987) who say that children first acquire an ability to comprehend language, and then start to use their knowledge to produce it.

The teaching process requires a constant reflection from facilitator. Under non-regular circumstances the reflection process is more demanding given the fact that these teachers are indebted into a commitment that goes beyond dealing with classroom conventional needs. Cardona (2006) claims that most of the young learners diagnosed as cognitively impaired, are brought into the regular education system, yet teachers not always develop practices according to the learners' characteristics and needs. Reflective teaching is an aspect that no teacher can avoid, no matter what the instruction is related to, or what kind of learners he/she is facing. Richards & Lockhart (1994) define reflective teaching :

“Reflective teaching is an approach to second language (L2) classroom instructions in which current and prospective teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumption and teaching practices and use the

information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about their efforts in language courses” (P.1)

According to Gebhard & Oprandy (1999) through reflection, language teachers raise awareness of their teaching beliefs and practices. In addition to that, Murphy (2001) suggests teachers explore instructional innovations, try out alternatives, and modify methodologies, activities and any kind of teaching approaches or classroom techniques that could benefit the teaching-learning process, considering both, the learners’ and the teachers’ needs which are conceived throughout reflection.

## Related studies

This section portrays some debates on the field of foreign and second language acquisition with a CI population and it also accounts for research explorations on how English learning is experienced by people with special needs and what it is required from teachers to get enrolled into that process.

According to Ortega, (1997), initially children with CI learn language easier by globalization. That means that children get a general idea before getting specific details. Freinet (1983) cited by Cardona (2006) proposes a natural method in which children produce a sound intuitively, and that sound is reinforced by parents and so repeated. Each time this repetition occurs, parents should reinforce the achievements and block the failures. In this way each single success scaffolds the child and prepares him to continue growing in the language proficiency.

With regard to language learning processes, Oliver and Buckley (1999), through a quantitative study carried out in the UK with seventeen children with DS at very early stages of language development, reported that children with DS experience an imitative stage in their language development, just as typically developing children do. During this stage, young children repeat what adults say and start using oral language for communication. Findings show that there exists a vocabulary explosion in some children with Down syndrome but not in all of them. The process will possibly change depending on personal profiles, language input, learning environment and educational background of parents and children. These findings contribute to teachers and parents

in the sense that they can take advantage of the imitation stage to provide children with relevant features of language. However, these findings do not give any support in the field of second language learning because they were found in the first-language development process of children.

In any case, second language teaching remains a main focus of interest for many debates among specialists. Some language pathologists and other professionals consider that people with CI should not be exposed to two languages because they present a delay in their first language (Thordardottir, 2002). On the other hand, some other professionals defend the idea that being bilingual may help the language development of people with CI. Nicoladis & Genesee (1997) argue that learning two languages is just as normal as learning one for many children. It has been also reported that it is possible for some individuals with CI to learn a second and even a third language (Woll & Grove, 1996). The debate remains open to further studies that explore whether to teach or not a foreign or a second language to people that present this pathology.

An example of the language abilities of children with CI is the qualitative study by Kay-Raining Bird, et al (2005) with English speaking children with Down syndrome (DS), learning French as a second language in Montreal. In this study they compared the language abilities of children with DS being raised bilingually with those of children in three control groups (monolingual DS, monolingual and bilingual typically developing). Bilingual children were English dominant or balanced bilinguals (i.e., better



English skills or relatively equivalent skills in both languages). Findings suggest that despite of the fact that in these individuals language comprehension exceeds language production, children with DS can be successful in acquiring two languages, and it was found that the monolingual and bilingual children with DS did not differ significantly on any task of English language proficiency. This finding is relevant to the topic of the present study because it implies that bilingualism does not have detrimental effects on the development of the dominant language of a bilingual child with CI.

Additionally, Felmate & Kay-Raining Bird (2008) conducted a quantitative study, with the purpose of contributing to the analysis of semantic and syntactic abilities of bilingual children with DS. For this particular study, the participants were 12 children, 8 bilingual and 4 monolingual, at early stages of language development with no less than 100 reported productive words. The findings suggest that any second language skill that children develop may serve to expand their abilities beyond that of monolingual children. Through this study, language development was also reported to have changed among children according to their mental and chronological age, hearing ability, auditory verbal memory, parent education and receptive vocabulary skill; varying the extent to which each child develops language from child to child. Felmate & Kay-Raining Bird also state that the frequency of contact with each language seems to be an important factor in explaining relative strengths in the two languages.

Another paramount factor that emerged in this study is motivation, since it plays an important role in learner's learning process. However, Lightbown & Spada (2004) point out that it is not possible to know if it is motivation which produces successful learning,

if learning enhances motivation, or if they both are affected by other factors. They cited Skehan (1999) to argue that we should inquire if learners are more highly motivated because they are successful or if they are successful because they are motivated. With this in mind, we allude to some ideas that help teachers to increase motivation, Rodriguez (2001) stated that it is fundamental to create a pleasant learning scenario where learners feel comfortable, and generate an appropriate atmosphere for playing and communicating. Under such circumstances, it is relevant to say that when learners feel good in class, motivation might increase, moreover it is important to convey Alessandri's (2005) comments referring to the fact that an affective environment will contribute to increase self-esteem in the field of special education.

Likewise, Johnson & Johnson (1994) claim that students who presented social difficulties, lower participation, and less academic achievements became more confident, increased their motivation, their participation, and their correct answers during the classes through collaborative learning. Tok Hoon Seng's (2006) confirms this idea, claiming that when learners set up positive relationships among students in the same group, they create closer ties that allow them to be more confident, to enhance their participation, and to learn from each other.

Research on this field has revealed that collaborative teaching also affects the learners' learning processes, in the sense that it provides teachers the opportunity to establish a close relationship with learners, which increase their participation, their motivation, and their confidence. Learners can benefit from collaborative teaching as they can have more attention, and support from two teachers (Hourcade & Bauwens,

2001). They also portrait that collaborative teaching benefit teachers in the sense that it is an opportunity for teachers to become renewed — through sharing and adopting ideas from others— and avoid teacher burnout, sharing responsibilities to facilitate teachers' work.

Additionally, Cook & Friend (1995) claim that collaborative teaching should be available in all classrooms —regular classroom, and special education classrooms— due to the fact that the presence of more than one teacher in the classroom reduce the student–teacher ratio, and increase the opportunity for teacher-student interaction.

Rodriguez (2001) considers that when teaching a foreign language, instructors should take advantages of learners' L1 prior knowledge and avoid presenting unknown concepts or contents that are not familiar for learners, not even in their mother tongue. Besides, Ur (2001) states that teachers should mediate initial learning by using diverse tools and so facilitate comprehension.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Type of study**

The present study is qualitative since it seeks to answer questions, collect evidences, produce findings and look for specific information related to a particular population (Guest, et al, 2005). The study is also descriptive and interpretive due to the methods used to collect data and the fact that it was intended to discover and understand a phenomenon or a process related specifically to the people involved in it (Merriam, 2002). Besides, this author considers that for a study can be interpretive and descriptive, it should identify the commonalities among the data to produce the findings and later on the findings should be presented and discussed using the literature references.

### **Context and Setting**

The study was conducted in an urban private institution of special education named SEI “*Special Education Institute*”, located in Pereira-Risaralda (Colombia). Its building is shared with an institution that works with deaf people, but both units work separately. SEI has two classrooms, one of them used for Arts, Math, Social Sciences and Spanish lessons, and a multiple room where painting, dancing, and, sometimes, physical education classes are held. There is a set of stairs to access the classrooms, but there is additionally a ramp for people, whose movement difficulties do not allow them to go through the stairs, to enter the classroom.

SEI is not a formal establishment and students are not promoted into grades or classified by levels. It works as a complement to the inclusion process for those young learners enrolled into inclusive education programs, and it also works as a full-time assistance center for older people with cognitive impairments that do not belong to any kind of formal education due to their age, or educational abandonment influenced by familiar or personal reasons. Hence, SEI aims at educating learners in different areas of mental, physical or social development.

The principal, one coordinator and two teachers are the permanent human resources of the organization. However, SEI also receives some volunteer collaboration from different schools and institutions of the city.

### **Participants**

A total of twelve learners with cognitive impairment (CIS) and three teachers took part in the execution of this project. The three teachers were professionals in special education from different universities.

The selection of the participants was based on a purposeful sample, (Merriam, 2002) since this is a qualitative study and it sought to understand a particular phenomenon from the participants' views. Besides, this specific population composed the object of the study being the main actors of this research from whom we could learn. The learners were six men and six women, the totality of students in SEI. Additionally to genetic, psychological, neurological, and psychiatric diagnoses such as: Down

syndrome, bipolarity, all of them presented moderated mental retardation and different levels of verbal disabilities and language difficulties.

Their chronological age ranged from fifteen to forty-eight years old, and their mental age oscillated between five to eight years old. Participants have been raised in a Spanish-speaking context where the use of English language is not a necessity to maintain communication. This was the first experience with English learning for most of them, others had already had some exposure to the language and one of them lived in the United States for seven years.

Table 1.1 provides relevant information about the participants involved in the study.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Chronologica l Age</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Catalina</b>	<b>35</b>	Psychiatrically diagnosed, developed communicative skills (L1). (CI)
<b>Cristina</b>	<b>19</b>	Moderate mental retardation, Productive speech difficulties, disperse attention, short-term memory problems. (CI)
<b>Diana</b>	<b>38</b>	Moderate mental retardation, moderate productive speech difficulties, social and behavior difficulties. (CI)
<b>Enrique</b>	<b>22</b>	Moderate mental retardation, severe productive speech difficulties, disperse attention.
<b>Harold</b>	<b>35</b>	Down Syndrome, moderate mental retardation, moderate productive speech difficulties. (CI)
<b>Julian</b>	<b>30</b>	Down Syndrome, moderate mental retardation, severe productive speech difficulties, behavior difficulties, disperse attention. (CI)
<b>Libardo</b>	<b>15</b>	Down Syndrome, moderate mental retardation, severe productive speech difficulties, disperse attention, behavior difficulties. (CI)
<b>Marcos</b>	<b>25</b>	Moderate mental retardation, severe productive speech difficulties, disperse attention, behavior and social difficulties. (CI)
<b>Martin</b>	<b>17</b>	Bipolar, moderate mental retardation, disperse attention. (CI)
<b>Mateo</b>	<b>45</b>	Moderate mental retardation, movement difficulties. (CI)
<b>Mary</b>	<b>48</b>	Moderate mental retardation, some articulation problems, and personality difficulties. (CI)
<b>Yuly</b>	<b>26</b>	Moderate mental retardation, some articulation problems
<b>Coordinator</b>	<b>42</b>	Takes care of the institutions business, deals with 31 parents.
<b>Lily</b>	<b>50</b>	Full-time teacher,
<b>Sophie</b>	<b>30</b>	Art part-time teacher. Julian's mother.

### **Researchers' roles**

We, as the researchers of this study, played the role of participant as observers that according to Adler and Adler (1994,p.80) represents an “active membership role” in which researchers are involved in the teaching activities and take control of the group they are working with and collecting data from. Our roles as researchers had a dual function, because we were participants of this study and at the same time we were observing and reflecting on the facts, tasks and reactions that took place in the classroom.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collected for this study was gathered through the use of some methods which included; observations, interviews, and researchers' journals. The methods are described in detail subsequently.

**Observations:** according to Potter (1996), the observation is the method used in research in order to obtain data of a specific topic through the contact with an individual or a group of individuals documenting their characteristics in their natural state or applying some variations. In this study, two preliminary observations were conducted before starting the English lessons with the purpose of getting informed about the population, their needs, and about specific aspects concerning the care of this type of learners. Moreover, the fact of learning about their needs helped us in the design of the lessons, since the information collected in the first two observations served as a referent for the inclusion of activities that meet the participants' needs and interests.



The observations were conducted during a math class. The main focus of the observations was the learners: their attitudes towards class activities, gestures, questions, responses, participation and most importantly language use. The observations were video-recorded because this is a tool to aid researchers in the documentation of the unobservable aspects or situations that are not perceived during the research observations in real time (Beebe and Takahashi, 1989). Each session was video recorded in order to have available evidence to revise and reflect on, and to portrait specific class factual information that could not be recalled through the field notes or the journals.

These observations were also documented through field notes because of the detailed support that those field notes can provide. Through the field notes we described in detailed what happened during the sessions. We also included dialogue and characterization to have a specific picture of the session and the participants. Those field notes were expanded after each session in the form of a collective journal.

**Journals:** Thomas (1995) describes a research journal as a reflective writing document where the researchers capture their own experience all along the research process; two types of journals were written. Individual journals<sup>1</sup> where we wrote down detailed descriptions of the sessions as well as our perceptions about the process, and a collective journal<sup>2</sup> with the purpose of having a shared opinion of class occurrences.

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<sup>1</sup> Entries from the individual journals are found along the document as T1JE and T2JE (teacher one/two journal's entry).

<sup>2</sup> Entries from the collaborative journal are found as 2TJE

**Interviews:** an interview is defined as a tool for gathering data from individuals through the use of questions and verbal interaction (Potter, 1996). For this study, two interviews were completed, one targeted at the learners, and another at the teachers, who also gave us several informal talks which were documented on the journals. The learner's interview was addressed at the beginning of the process in order to know their experience with the English language, and the teachers' interview was carried out at the end of it with the aim of documenting their opinion about the participants' process in the English lessons.

The interview for the learners contained the following questions:

- ¿Sabes qué es el inglés?
- Y ¿Sabes quienes hablan en inglés?
- Y tu ¿Sabes algo en inglés?
- Y ¿Te gustaría aprender inglés? ¿Por qué?

The interview addressed to the teacher included the following questions:

- ¿en termino generales que piensa ud acerca de la importancia de la enseñanza del inglés?
- ¿Usted cree que la enseñanza del inglés sería importante para este tipo de población?
- En términos de metodología, ¿Cuáles cree usted que son las condiciones propicias para que ellos aprendan?

- ¿Usted ha visto algún progreso en ellos? ¿Cree que les han servido las clases? O ¿Cree que no?

The process of data analysis was framed into the Grounded theory proposed by Glasser and Strauss (1967). This method maintains that theory emerges from the analysis of the data collected through the study. In this sense, we went through different stages of analysis that contained first, the coding of the information; second, the identification of concepts; third, the categorization of these concepts and finally the interpretation of the emerging categories that produced theory.

Data was assigned with codes so as to keep track of the collected information and to facilitate the process of triangulation. The codes are used in the findings section and they are identified as follows;

1TJU: first teacher's journal entry (English)

2TJE: second teacher's journal entry (English)

ITS: interview to teacher Sophie (Spanish)

ITL: interview to teacher Lili (Spanish)

ITC: interview to the coordinator (Spanish)

VT: video transcription (Spanish-English)

## **Instructional design**

The instructional design was accomplished during two months of English classes. A total of ten one-hour sessions were implemented. Sometimes, there were two sessions in a week, some others just one session. During the teaching stage, we covered three topics; namely, colors, clothing and finally numbers.

The lessons developed in this study followed the ESA (Engagement- study and activation) sequence for a language teaching scenario proposed by Harmer (2007) which consists of three main stages during the sessions. Firstly, students are engaged with songs, games, nursery rhymes, among others. Secondly, the topic is introduced through diverse material and finally, students have the opportunity to put into practice what they learned. During this study, a color's song was always presented as the engagement stage in order for students to review the colors and to relate them with real objects. Then, the topic was presented using visual aids as flashcards and realia. Afterwards, the whole group was invited to do activities where they could demonstrate what they had learned, at this stage; they used to provide support to their peers when needed. Lastly, students worked individually doing an activity related to the topic, it is important to say that partakers did not work in the same activity due to their divergent levels of cognitive development. While students worked in the class activities, we walked around the classroom and monitored their performance and helped them when it was required.

It is remarkable to highlight that as most of the students presented a short-term memory the topics had to be repeated and related among them, and the use of visual material and real objects was a key to support learners to retain the information presented. The following is a sample of a lesson plan completed in the teaching phase.

### **Sample lesson plan**

- **Learning aim:** at the end of the session learners will be able to:
  - Recognize some colors.
  - Use English to name some colors and say what things are in each color.
  
- **Personal aim:** Throughout this session we will:
  - Try to know learners' learning style.
  
- **Assumed knowledge:** colors (L1)
  
- **Anticipated Problem:**
  - What if learners do not know the colors in their mother tongue?
  - What if they cannot follow the instructions?
  
- **Anticipated Solution:**
  - In that case, we will have to switch the presentation and use it to teach them the colors but this time in Spanish.

- We will try to be the most understandable as possible and we would try to use body language or mimics to explain again.
- **Materials:** flashcards, colours, sheets of paper.

STAGE / ACTIVITY	WORKIN G MODE	AIM	PROCEDURE
Greeting Time 10'	Whole class  □	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Learners will be focused on the class.</li> </ul>	Learners will hear our presentation, after that we will try that they introduce themselves. We will use the expression “my name is...” to introduce ourselves and the idea is that so do they. We will speak clearly and loudly in order to let them know how they will do it. Before the introduction we will say “hello” to them to try to let them know that it is the word set to say when someone arrives.
Vocabulary Time 20'	Whole class  □	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Learners will get to know the vocabulary</li> </ul>	We will start by asking them what color the classroom objects are, as well as the clothes we will be wearing (L1). When we consider that they do know the colors in their mother tongue, we will proceed to show them some flashcards, telling them what the name of each color in English is. We will paste the flashcards on the board and ask them to go there and point at any color we call out.
Task Time 25'	Individual work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ To provide the learners with the opportunity to practice the vocabulary</li> </ul>	Students will be shown a different set of flashcards which contain some drawings related to a song of the colors that we will teach them after having shown the flashcards. The song will be sung a couple of times by us in order to allow the students to hear it. We will sing the song completely and after little by little trying to make them sing along.
Closure Time 5'	Whole class  ○	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Learners to conclude the lesson.</li> </ul>	Learners will conclude the session by telling what has been done along it.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Throughout this section, the most relevant findings that emerged during the study are presented in view of providing evidence, interpreting and discussing the data obtained through the application of the different methods used in the research.

**Cognitively-impaired learners experienced language progress and changes in terms of behavior, attitude and motivation.**

- ***English lessons evidenced students' progress in both the foreign language and the mother tongue***



Participants with intellectual disabilities made use of the English lingo they had been exposed to by naming some surrounding items using the new labels, and performing class activities making efforts to correctly produce vocabulary in L2.

Pending sessions, and through the implementation of a set of activities and techniques, the learners' partaking in the classroom gave an impression of progress. This was evidenced when some students who did not produce speech at the beginning of the course started to articulate sounds and words not only in English but also in Spanish.

Below, we provide evidence taken from the collaborative researchers' journal which commented on an interview conducted to one of the SEI's teachers talking about a specific student's progress.

(2TJE)...”the teacher emphasized that his articulation skills are not fully developed, it means that he does not produce many words easily, his repertoire is limited to just a few sounds, but the surprising fact is that he is trying to articulate some utterances in English, and, which is more, we are able to understand what he is trying to say”

The teacher's comment confirms that exposing the participants to the English sessions helped them activate the articulation of both the mother tongue and the foreign language. In that sense, the lessons might have contributed as a language therapy.

(ITS)...”**T2:** ¿usted ha visto algún progreso en ellos?

**S:** si, a ellos si les ha servido porque esta es la hora que todavía se acuerdan de muchas cositas que ustedes les enseñaron...ellos olvidan muy fácil, pero lo que ustedes le enseñaron, ellos se acuerdan mucho de eso, entonces eso les sirve a ellos mucho”

A possible answer to why students were able to recall what we taught during the sessions is related to the kind of visual materials and the order in which the classes evolved, in addition to the high levels of motivation shown by them. Recycling practices seem to have been appropriate for students since after the completion of the course, the students still recalled the vocabulary embedded in the lessons. This recycling process may have contributed to their language progress in their L1, as well.

With the samples provided above, we confirmed that exposing the learners to foreign language learning does not detriment the development of the dominant language of people with cognitive impairments; (Kay-Raining Bird, et al., 2005) rather; it contributes to the development of the mother tongue. All along this research, we found that enrolling students with CD in language learning processes might be a helpful experience for them in terms of L1 as well as L2 development.

On the other hand, when we talk about linguistic issues concerning to learning experiences in this project, we bring into consideration the following sample taken from a teacher’s interview: This teacher expressed that the instruction of English impacted the learners’ production on their mother tongue.

(ITL)...”**T2**: ¿usted cree que la enseñanza de inglés sería importante para ellos?

**L**: pues... les ayuda mucho, porque a ellos les suelta... como diría uno la lengua, les suelta mucho y ellos recuerdan mucho lo que ustedes les han enseñado de inglés, ellos se acuerdan mucho de eso entonces sí creo que sea importante.

It seems that exposing students with cognitive impairments to foreign language learning can help them to reinforce some articulation skills since it allows them to explore sounds and words that might not appear in their mother tongue.

In addition to that, we observed that participants were able to recognize and put into practice the new vocabulary that we had presented to them in advance. And beyond a simple recognition, we noticed that there was an accurate association process between the target label and its corresponding realia. The following excerpt taken from an observation shows evidence of this fact.

(VT) **T2**: what color is this?

**learners**: bu bu (meaning blue)

**T2**: y que cosas son de este color.

**learners**: bu bu

**T2**: listo pero que cosas son de este color...¿ el sol o el cielo?

**Mary**: chite chite (trying to say teacher) bu como mi oitos (blue like my little eyes)

...” **Diana**: teacher, teacher mire esos zapatos son red.”

With these examples, we evidenced that students were experiencing English language learning using words not only as an academic resource, but also they used it to establish relationships with their surrounding items.

Data resulting from this study showed that the actors of this study had learned some words in English which allowed us to confirm what Nicoladis & Genesee (1997) expressed concerning the fact that learning two languages is just as normal as learning one for many children. It has been also reported that it is possible for individuals with cognitive disabilities to learn a second and even a third language (Woll & Grove, 1996).

- ***Students presented changes in terms of behavior, attitude and motivation in the course of the English lessons***

At the beginning of the implementation, the students that participated in the project shared some characteristics in terms of behavior and attitudes; some of them preferred working individually, but by the end of the project execution those students were more engaged and participated as a team in class. Data suggest that the implementation of the English lessons benefited the participants not only in the linguistic aspects but also they seemed to have impacted the population on some other areas of development, which might have been a consequence of their high motivation.

To illustrate the previous information, an excerpt of an interview shows a teacher's perception about the English instruction, she pointed out how students' specific behavior was different towards the English lessons in comparison to other subjects.

(ITL): pues, yo realmente los he visto a todos muy motivados, incluso hay varios de los estudiantes que no.... Que no permiten que personas ajenas al instituto se acerquen a ellos, como que... será que no les gusta. Por ejemplo cuando vienen las niñas estas a prestar servicio social ellos simplemente se salen del salón y me toca ponerlos a hacer otras cosas. Pero con ustedes yo no sé... ellos cuando las sienten llegar, ellos ahí mismo se van para el salón.

This kind of occurrences in the classroom led us to believe that some students also experienced some changes in terms of their social development. We cannot provide evidence that support that those changes were a result of the exploratory interaction with the English language lessons but we can affirm that these changes were detected in the course of the project.

The following is a part of a journal entry resulting from an informal talk to one of the SEI's teachers, which made us consider the social implications as a relevant topic to take into account when referring to how the learners experienced the process of learning a foreign language.

(2TJE)...”today we had a talk with Lily, the full-time SEI's teacher; we were talking about Mateo and his huge adjustment with us, with his classmates and with the class itself. She told us about the progress he had shown during the course of that year, she mentioned that Mateo used to be an aggressive and complicated person who did not like to have any contact with people. However, she also highlighted the fact that he was participating in our classes in a “calm” way”

With the previous samples in mind, we would dare to say that language learning experiences might contribute to other areas of learners' development, as long as teachers keep the learners motivated towards the academic process. It is allied to the standards proposed by the MEN (2006) when they refer to the fact that learning a foreign language contributes to students in the social interaction practices and in the negotiation of meanings. Likewise, it enhances their abilities to establish relationships with other people and to act upon new situations.

To sustain our ideas, we portrait the concepts by Lightbown & Spada (2004) who maintain that it is not possible to know if it is motivation which produces successful learning, if learning enhances motivation, or if they both are affected by other factors. They cited Skehan (1999) to argue that we should inquire if learners are more highly motivated because they are successful or if they are successful because they are motivated. Based on data, we can conclude that regarding a CD population, successful learning hinges on the levels of motivation that may have an effect on behavior, attitudes, and social interaction.

- ***Comprehension exceeded production***

As most of the students struggled with language difficulties, we must mention that language production was not an easy issue for them to deal with, even when Spanish was being used. However, we should highlight the learners' remarkable language comprehension skills we evidenced.

Participants of this study did not have any English background; nevertheless, we conducted the lessons using both languages, the L1 and the L2 to provide them with instructions. When we used the participants' L1 as a vehicle to present new vocabulary, it was easier to evidence their comprehension. What we did not expect was that when we used English, participants were going to follow the instructions, providing us correct answers and giving the impression of understanding even when they did not produce speech.

Some strategies played a significant role to facilitate comprehension; through the use of body language, visual material, and code switching from Spanish to English or from English to Spanish, students could deal with English vocabulary, questions, and sentence meanings, which allowed them to perform the tasks they were demanded accurately.

As evidence of the previous information some samples are presented below:

(VT)...”T1: bueno vamos a hacer un repaso. ¿what color is this? (vinilo Amarillo)

**Marcos:** yellow

T1: Harold what color is this??

**Harold:** llou (yellolow)”

In some cases, when students were asked a question in English, they gave an appropriate response which is probably a hint of understanding since they were apparently able to recognize what the question was. Likewise, these students with

language difficulties demonstrated their comprehension using utterances with an approximated pronunciation to the English words presented.

(VT)...**T1**: Natalia what color is this?

**Natalia**: azul

**T1**: ¿y como se dice azul en inglés?

**Natalia**: bu”

...**T1**: listo Carlos what color is this? (vinilo Amarillo)

**Carlos**: Amarillo

**T1**: y en ingles?

**Ss**: yellow”

We evidenced learners’ comprehension when we asked them a question in English and they in fact responded correctly in their L1. When this occurred, we immediately tried to elicit students’ responses in English and the responses were, in most of the cases, the ones that we were expecting.

(T2JE)... “We were playing twister, there were colorful circles on the floor, we had to say a color and learners had to find it and stand up there. When we started, after saying a color, I noticed that Mateo, who never says a word in class, was located in the right place, in that moment I wondered if it was a coincidence or maybe he knew the correct answer, then, I focused on his movements during the game, surprisingly, he did it well several times, what made me think that although Mateo cannot produce language maybe he can understand it”



The fact that some students were not producing oral language in class, neither in English, nor in Spanish, motivated us to seek a different activity where we could check whether they were understanding or not the instructions and the lessons. The idea of a twister, as we considered, facilitated that process for us; during the game students were asked to look for the color we named, so we could verify the learners' comprehension by looking their movements around the colors.

The following sample coincides with what we could notice all along the lessons, the fact that even when students did not say a word in class, did not mean that they were not into a learning process. This interview confirmed our ideas in terms of students' comprehension.

(ITS)T1: ¿Cree usted que a pesar del hecho de que algunos de los estudiantes no están en capacidad de producir lenguaje, están entendiendo lo que les decimos y el vocabulario que les hemos enseñado?

**Sophie:** ellos captan, ellos captan lo que uno les dice; es de pronto que son un poquito retraídos a la hora de expresar lo que uno les está preguntando. Algunos son muy habilidosos para captar las cosas y memorizan fácilmente. Uno cree que ellos no saben, pero a la hora que les preguntas por ejemplo ¿Qué letra es ésta? Ellos se acercan y ponen la mano en la letra que tú les estás preguntando, o tú les das una orden: ¡Haz ésta plana! Ellos lo voltean a ver a uno y uno cree que no entendieron pero uno se retira y cuando vuelve ellos ya han terminado.

When talking about students' language comprehension which seems to go beyond language production, we must bring to the discussion some of the second language acquisition stages stated by Krashen & Terrel (1983) regarding "*the pre-production stage*" and "*the early production stage*" — where teachers can expect students to point at an item, a picture or a person, to internalize new vocabulary, to provide an answer with a "yes" or a "no", or with a word, and to use repetitive language patterns— to convey that at the beginning of the language learning process, comprehension precedes and exceeds the language production in a first or in a second language acquisition.

Moreover our outcome coincides with the idea by Roseberry-Mckibbin, (2002) who adopted the previous stages of second language learning process to a multicultural setting for students with special language needs, where the first two stages are focused on the silent period and language comprehension, and the goals that learners should achieve are related to drawing, painting, grouping, labeling, pointing, selecting, and matching.

Finally, it is important to mention that the concepts presented in the current finding confirm that in most of the cases, children first acquire an ability to comprehend language, and then start to use their knowledge to produce it (Keenan & MacWhinney, 1987). In our specific study, we could evidence that, in fact, before learners could produce language they were able to recognize it and carry out the activities.

**The learning environment and strategies such as code switching strengthened and mediated the instruction and the students' performance in the classroom.**

- ***The provided learning environment strengthened the students' performance in the classroom***

In the implementation of the instruction, we detected a relationship between the provided learning environment and the students' responses towards the instruction. We noticed that students easily performed a task when it was conditioned by meaningful and appropriate learning scenarios that involved the setting, the planning of the activities, the students' needs and the teachers' work.

Through a constant reflection on our practice, we could identify techniques and activities that had a good impact on students' learning. These activities were characterized by the use of flashcards, and the use of senses like; sight, touch, smell, hearing, and taste. The following is a documentation of an interview conducted to the coordinator that illustrates this issue.

(ITC)...” Pues yo pienso que a los de aquí tienen que hacerles como dinámicas juegos, canciones, traerles los letreros que ustedes les trajeron en colores; eso les sirve a ellos mucho. No con libros ni nada de eso.”

For every lesson, we prepared a lot of colorful material according to the topic that we were introducing, thus, we implemented or adapted class work in order to get students involved in the class. We also provided learners with a set of handouts where they could practice the words they were learning.

Along this experience, we could perceive that people with special needs are very emotional and active. In view of offering the students an appropriate learning scenario, we planned the lessons in such a way that the activities could integrate physical movement, appealing material, sitting arrangement, and grouping. We observed that when students are encouraged to actively participate in an English lesson, comprehension is evidenced in terms of production or participation. Also, we tried to be careful with our words and actions in the development of the activities to avoid declines

in motivation and, as a possible consequence, behavioral breaks which could affect learning.

Below we supply some of the experiences that caught our attention to the ideas previously exposed. The following information was taken from an interview conducted to the coordinator of the institution.

(ITC)...” Mejor dicho ellos todo lo cogen si usted los trata bien... ellos todo lo que les enseñan lo aprenden o al menos le ponen mucho interés, mucho entusiasmo, mucho amor.”

As far as we could witness, when the participants perceive that teachers have a good contact with them and their learning and emotional needs and interests are considered, motivation might arise in the classroom setting and the scenario for learning can be more appropriate for their profiles. Alessandri (2005), suggests that the security provided by an affective support will motivate the learner to evolve the difficulties with the tranquility of knowing that he is valued because of his achievement instead of his limitations.

(T1JE)...” it is just very special to understand that sometimes when you teach is not only knowledge what matters but some other things that you do not learn at college: that is loving what you do and who you treat with ”

In our perspective, motivation is an unavoidable topic in terms of lesson planning and execution; therefore, it is also unavoidable the fact that when both, teachers and

learners feel good about what they are doing, motivation arises or increases in the classroom and learning goals become less difficult to achieve. The ideas presented confirm what Rodriguez (2001) stated concerning that it is fundamental to create a pleasant learning scenario where learners feel comfortable, and generate an appropriate atmosphere for playing and communicating.

In addition, during the interviews SEI'S teachers reported that the methodology used in the instruction was adequate for the students' needs. Their comments revealed that the learning environment provided in the lessons might have contributed to the students' positive responses in the lessons. Moreover, the preliminary observations and the informal talks carried out with experts in the field shed light on the type of instruction the learners needed.

We could perceive that a balanced integration between motivation and class materials when working with this population might be a helpful strategy to facilitate teaching and learning processes in the classroom. The following extract, taken from the teachers' journal, portrays this fact.

(T2JE)...”today we brought a musician to the classroom, students who are always dispersed were motivated during this class, participating actively. The fact of having a musician playing his guitar in the classroom, got the students so immersed in the session as far as they were completely euphoric”

As in the previous classes we had been observing that participants enjoyed singing the color's song we wanted to create a scenario in the classroom in which students had the opportunity to experience learning in a different method to the conventional one.

From our perspective, a meaningful learning environment is defined as the integration of topics, materials, teaching and learning resources brought into our lessons in pro of facilitating learning. Our outcomes support Alessandri's (2005) comments referring to the fact that an affective environment will contribute to increase self-esteem in the field of special education.

Then again, understanding significant experiences as opportunities for students to learn something suitable for their lives; we can implement games, songs, handcrafts and all that kind of classroom interventions as productive tools to be handled in the EFL classroom. The activities designed for the lessons were aligned to Roseberry-McKibbin's taxonomy (2002) that establishes that the initial stage of foreign language learning for special needs students should entwine drawing, painting, grouping, labeling, pointing, selecting, and matching activities.

In addition to that, games were found to be highly positive when teaching cognitively impaired people since they increase the partaking level in class activities, the games allowed the assimilation of difficult experiences facilitating the management of the anxiety associated to those situations, and stimulating peer communication and cooperation. Entertaining activities stimulate attention and memory, optimizing the development of the body and the senses due to the fact that individuals coordinate their

body movements. McKibbin (2002) also offers a set of strategies to assist special-educational-needs associated to intellectual disabilities which we would share as part of a contribution to the field of special-education programs. They suggest:

- To provide a high amount of various experiences for them to learn what teachers teach.
  - To encourage students with interesting and diverse objects to get them enrolled in the activities.
  - To help them to take advantage of the surrounding events relating the concepts with what they learn in class.
  - To take them to explore new situations and to do things by their own.
- 
- ***The use of Spanish as L1 mediated the instruction of English as a foreign language in the classroom***

Using Spanish as a mediator when teaching English vocabulary to people with cognitive impairments facilitated the foreign language instruction, as well as partakers understanding. Learners showed that they could accomplish a task better when they used their L1 to access the information.

Given the fact that the participants of this study did not have any English background- except for a girl who lived abroad for seven years, we used the



participants' mother tongue (Spanish) as a vehicle to introduce some English vocabulary in order to establish a relationship between the target lexis and what McNamara (2009) called general knowledge which is a person's repertoire.

Taking into consideration the participants' context where Spanish is the L1 and English is set as the official foreign language (MEN, 2006) it is important to highlight that there is not a necessity to use it for communication. As a result, it seems that the use of the L1 during the implementation of the lessons provided us with a set of linguistic and significant tools. These tools benefited the participants' learning processes which turned into learning advantages, in the sense that they offered us a proximity to the learners background, and facilitated L2 comprehension through an association to learners' already known mental concepts.

During the first sessions, colors were presented through different materials such as flashcards, realia, games and songs, in which we used a combination of both L1 and English vocabulary, which is known as code switching. For instance, in one of the sessions, the students were asked to sing along and they showed their engagement and interest in the activity. That might have been a result of exposing them to a song that mixed their mother tongue and the target language. The following journal entry reveals how the process was conducted.

“ (T1JE)... We started singing the song stopping in some specific parts of it where participants were supposed to end the sentences. For example, when the song says en ingles se dice we stopped and they continue singing yellow, yellow, yellow, or whichever the color was. ”

As the classes kept going students, in fact, learned the song and they seemed to be engaged with the topic (colors) demonstrating that they were recalling information from the song.

The extract shown below presents an evidence of the role of code switching in the classroom, where L1 became a vehicle to teach new words in English.

(VT)...”T1. Entonces cuando nosotros lleguemos como decimos

Ss: Good morning (no todos los estudiantes responden)

T1. Y cuando nos vayamos a ir como vamos a decir?

Ss. Adiós...yao

T1. Escúchenme vamos a decir “good bye”

Ss. Good bye”

Likewise, in some sessions students also drew on code switching in order to answer some questions they were asked. And that switching might be understood as a signal of comprehension.

(VT)...”**T!**: what color is this? (Showing a yellow card)

**Marcos** 1: Amarillo

**T!**: ¿y en ingles?

**MARCOS** 1: yellow”

These examples are divided into two crucial stages. Firstly, students were asked a question in L2 and we could notice that they provided an accurate answer using L1

which is likely to demonstrate they did know what the question was. Secondly, there was a code switching in order to mediate students L2 responses through the L1 use, which resulted to be apparently effective, since it allowed students to recall the necessary information in L2.

With regard to the use of L1 as a mediator when teaching a second or a foreign language, Rodriguez (2001) considers that when teaching, foreign language, instructors should take advantages of learners' L1 prior knowledge and avoid presenting unknown concepts or contents that are not familiar for learners, not even in their mother tongue. In addition, our results also confirm Ur's (2001) ideas when she states that teachers should mediate initial learning by using diverse tools and so facilitate comprehension. In our case, Spanish was used as a tool to make possible FL understanding. However, it is important to highlight that Ur's ideas refer to regular learners.

- ***Collaborative learning enhanced students' performance***

When students worked together in the development of a task, they took advantage of the opportunity, supporting, correcting and taking care of each other. All along the classes conducted, the class activities and the performances demanded in the implementation of this project, students were constantly trying to look for their peers' assessment or to assess others when, in their opinion, they were doing something in a

different way to the required. In most of the cases, it seemed that the support offered by a classmate contributed even more than the teachers' feedback.

As teachers, we could have been expecting to see learners help or explain each other how to complete a task but as researchers, we were not expecting to see people so committed into a common benefit and progress. Students seemed always willing to stop their own work to help those ones who needed more assistance in completing a task. They cheered up their classmates when they succeeded in doing something.

Several times when one of the facilitators presented a new label, one of the learners tried to pronounce it and instantly the rest of the class was doing exactly the same, we could notice that the participants would rather follow their classmates' guidance than the teachers'.

Below, we provide some particular cases where we could notice that students were co-working even when individual work was required

“(2TJE)...In some opportunities when we asked questions they all remained quiet for a while but rapidly any of them gave us an answer and the rest of the class was repeating it whether it was right or wrong. We also asked individual questions and some of them had a great performance as well, but for some others it was more difficult to answer appropriately by themselves than when they were helped by the classmates”

For the subsequent activity, cardboard-circles in different colors were pasted on the floor all around the classroom and the idea was that the learners stood in a specific color that teachers were calling.

“(T1JE)...Students were all moving around the circles, and it called my attention the fact that those learners who are not that able to move by themselves were walking around the circles holding their partners' hands, and when they had to stop in a color, they stood there remaining hugged”

This might be a proof of collaborative learning because it seems that more than a contest, these students took the activity as something to work on as a group and hence, learn together. This was particularly evidenced when some of them performed appropriately a task and then rest of the class was cheering up the effort.

In some other situations students even told each other what they had to say:

“ (VT)...T1: Carlos una prenda de vestir. Carlos mirame ¿Qué es esto? (Pointing a dress)

Carlos: falda (But he is not looking at the dress)

Erika: ¡Diga dress!

Carlos: dress.”

This time the teacher was asking each student to say a name of a clothing item and collaborative learning was observed again when Erika tries to correct Carlos who, in

fact, corrects himself. It is important to highlight that the behavior mentioned above was observed in many sessions.

The examples presented, place us in a position where we cannot avoid mentioning collaborative learning and peer cheering and correction as an efficient aspect to be managed when working with a challenged population.

This finding conveys that through collaborative learning, students encouraged and supported each other to learn, and they improved their academic performance, as a consequence of the support offered by their partners. This idea also supports concepts by Johnson & Johnson (1998) who claim that students who presented social difficulties, lower participation, and less academic achievements became more confident, increased their motivation, their participation and their correct answers during the classes through collaborative learning.

Our findings are associated with Tok Hoon Seng's (2006) remarks towards collaborative learning, who says that when learners set up positive relationships among students in the same group, they create closer ties that allow them to be more confident, to enhance their participation, and to learn from each other. Such was the case of the participants of the study, who found emotional and academic support in their peers.

**Collaborative teaching impacted the English lessons and induced pre-service teachers to reflect on their practices.**

- ***Collaborative teaching impacted teaching and learning processes***

In addition to the language learning difficulties commonly faced along the learning process, participants in this study struggled with cognitive impairments affecting their

learning abilities. Under such circumstances, collaborative teaching turned into the best choice for us, as teachers, when designing the English lessons, since it allowed us to have a semi-personalized treatment and teaching, monitoring, assessing and assisting every individual process, and therefore, facilitating the teaching-learning experience. However, it is important to highlight that in some circumstances not even the two teachers were enough when behavioral issues arose.

Taking into account what teaching work demands, it is convenient to mention the important role that collaborative teaching played during the implementation of this project. In fact, the use of collaborative work as a teaching strategy pending the English lessons facilitated the teachers' work, before, during and after the English lessons.

(2TJE)... "it was not enough to be one taking the role of teacher while the other observed. As a consequence, we decided to continue working together as teachers and as researchers in the same class; complementing us, supporting each other and looking for strategies that facilitated the teaching and the learning processes"

Our teaching experiences were complemented from each other in the following ways: Before class, conducting the classes through planning the lessons, designing material and activities, and identifying learners' needs. During class, when presenting English vocabulary, monitoring students' activities and progress, supporting and solving students' needs. And after the lessons, evaluating and analyzing participants' progress. In other words, being two teachers working together affected positively the teaching



process as we could learn from each other, share responsibilities and ideas, and be supportive colleagues.

The following samples taken from journals' entries and some interviews evidence the previous information

(VT)...”After doing a review about the colors, the **Teacher 1** started singing the color song with the students. After they finished, the **teacher 2** started their participation in the class introducing a new topic meanwhile **teacher 1** supported her by showing the realia to the students and by helping to monitor discipline.

We worked together in the same class, complementing our teaching process, and having different responsibilities addressed to help participants in their language learning. One teacher reviewed recycled vocabulary and the other one introduced the new vocabulary. We relate this issue to some of the collaborative teaching approaches such as: “One Teach, One Observe”, and “Team Teaching” stated by Friend & Cook (2007) and also by Villa, et al. (2004).

Below we present an excerpt taken from the collaborative researchers' journal where we discussed about the necessity of working as a team in the classroom.

(2TJE)...“During the first sessions, just one of us was focused on monitoring students' activities but we did not have the opportunity to interact with all students in the same way. As a consequence, some learners were “mentally absent” and we had not paid attention to them for

being focused on those students who were motivated, who participated actively, and who provided us correct answers.”

Working and reflecting together contributed to realize that we needed to reconsider our roles in the classroom and provide more support to those learners that sometimes were left aside. We must convey that collaborative teaching also affected the learners’ learning processes, in the sense that as teachers it provided us the opportunity to establish a close relationship with all of them, which increased their participation, their motivation, and their confidence. Here, we draw attention into Hourcade & Bauwens (2001) who report that learners can have a benefit with collaborative teaching as they can have more attention, and support from two teachers.

Working together as team teachers had a positive impact on the experience we faced in this project in terms of improvement on our praxis at the same time that it opened a gate for reflection on teaching for us. Our results, coincide with the concept by Hourcade and Bauwens (2001) who stated that collaborative teaching benefit teachers in the sense that it is an opportunity for teachers to become renewed — through sharing and adopting ideas from others— and avoid teacher burnout, sharing responsibilities to facilitate the teachers’ work.

To conclude, Cook & Friend (1995) shed light on the fact that collaborative teaching should be available in all classrooms —regular classroom, and special education classrooms— due to the fact that the presence of more than one teacher in the

classroom reduce the student–teacher ratio, and increase the opportunity for teacher-students interaction.

- ***Teaching cognitively-impaired learners induced pre-service teachers to reflect on their professional development.***

For us, as language teachers, it was very common to find ourselves, sitting at any place, staring into space and thinking about what went on the lessons we had conducted, after each single session. Either one or both of us spent a lot of time discussing all the occurrences during the classes; we recalled a lot of images, thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that appeared all along the sessions.

In every session, tons of inquiries came along, and with each inquiry a moment for reflection took us through hours of analysis. In those moments, we had the opportunity to think about the class and the students, the other teachers (but also about ourselves), the instruction, the institution, the activities, the classroom, the procedure and a large amount of aspects related to the teaching-learning process.

Sometimes, we felt motivated because of the achievements we considered accomplished, and excited about the apparent progress we were facing. Nevertheless, some other times it was inevitable for us to feel concerned or even frustrated because of the fact of not knowing or understanding some of the students' behaviors, attitudes, and performances during the class activities, or the development of the class.

(T1JE)...”today there were some moments during the class where I felt lost and frustrated, we had planned a set of activities for the class which were supposedly sequenced, it means, we had a specific order to work on each activity. The truth was that we couldn’t conduct our plans successfully, Marcos got really upset about Martin’s behavior during an activity (the worst thing was that Martin was not doing anything annoying!) and he started kicking Mateo, and we did not know how to react. Later, Carlos had a “breakdown” and started crying a lot; in such moments we could not simply pretend that there was nothing going on, we had to interrupt what we were doing and take care of the situation”

These incidents were constant throughout the classroom meetings; we could not predict when students got extremely excited about a task and the next minute, extremely mad at anything that displeased them. Previously, we had mentioned that reflection allowed us to anticipate classroom misbehaviors, but when those occurred it was just not as easy to handle them as we could have anticipated. Reflecting on these situations allowed us to know our own limitations associated to teaching to CI learners, in addition to the fact that it drove us to seek support from the professionals in the field and provided us some knowledge on how to react upon them.

Having this population’s attention back is a complex issue to deal with. In relation to attitudinal breakdowns, Ortega (1997) claims that non-regular learners are extremely perseverant, they are as obstinate as stubborn; it is almost impossible to make them do something they have decided not to do. This suggestion was evidenced during an interview and it is reported below:

(ITL)...”**TL:** Hay algunos casos que uno cree que ellos no entendieron, pero mentiras que sí, porque cuando uno trata de evaluarlos ellos señalan lo que uno les dice o contestan lo que unos les pregunta. Lo que pasa es que hay muchos momentos en los que ellos no quieren hacer nada. Y si ellos ya dijeron que no ¿usted cómo los obliga pues?”

In this interview, we were asking a teacher for a possible explanation for some of the students’ attitudes towards some lessons; when learners seemed not to be engaged with activities sometimes they decided not to be part of a task or a session and it resulted useless trying to convince them. Once more, the reflection gate was opened for us, and we had to inquire what we were doing right and what we were doing wrong as well as what to do for further sessions with the purpose of enhancing class growth along with learning-teaching process.

Reflective teaching is an aspect that no teacher can avoid, no matter what the instruction is related to, or what kind of learners he/she is facing. From our point of view, it is necessary that teachers take time to analyze critique and understand their daily practices through reflection. To support our idea we portrait Richards & Lockhart’s (1994) definitions of reflective teaching:

*“Reflective teaching is an approach to second language (L2) classroom instructions in which current and prospective teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumption and teaching practices and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about their efforts in language courses” (P.1)*

According to Gebhard & Oprandy (1999) through reflection, language teachers raise awareness of their teaching beliefs and practices. In addition to that Murphy (2001), suggests teachers to explore instructional innovations, try out alternatives, and modify methodologies, activities and any kind of teaching approaches or classroom techniques that could benefit the teaching-learning process, considering both, the learners' and the teachers' needs which are conceived throughout reflection. The samples presented earlier coincide with these ideas taking into account that each of them was drawn looking forward to a restructuring of the lessons we were conducting.

Finally, in terms of the impact that reflection brings to lesson planning we draw attention to Murphy (2001) who considered Richards & Lockhart (1994) asserting that reflective teachers are capable of learning from, and further developing, their personal understandings and explanations of life within language classroom. As we see it, reflective teaching contributed to our own professional development.

### **Research and Pedagogical implications**

This research project has presented a number of findings that may contribute, in a certain way, to the field of second language teaching and learning for cognitively impaired learners.

Firstly, this study highlighted the significant role that collaborative learning and teaching play in the language learning process; for students with cognitive disabilities to succeed at language learning, and for teachers to facilitate participants' language learning development. With this in mind, teachers should create an appropriate learning environment to foster the use of cooperative learning as a strategy to improve academic learners' performance, and to provoke communicative interaction among students.

Secondly, teachers should consider the use of L1 as a relevant aspect when implementing language teaching in a context where participants do not have any previous knowledge of the L2, or where they have language difficulties even in their L1. Thirdly, any teaching process requires a deep and a constant reflection from practitioners. Nevertheless, teaching a foreign language to a cognitively impaired population demands more reflection on instruction, because of the fact that the kind of needs they present are much more complex to supply than the needs existing in a regular classroom. Results from this study suggest that teachers must reflect on their practices in order to have an impact on the students' process, helping them to overcome their difficulties and improving their professional development.

This study expands the knowledge about how English language teaching can be addressed to cognitively impaired learners and may contribute to the literature on the field, in terms of analyzing, understanding or conducting English as foreign language lessons in non-regular classrooms where all the learners share a type of intellectual disadvantage. However, it would be interesting to explore how English teaching can be

carried out for CI learners in a conventional classroom. Besides, further research could also address the following questions: What is the impact of collaborative learning for those CI students when they are included in a conventional classroom as a minority group? To what extent can CI students progress in English as a foreign language classes in a formal-institution classroom? Does the inclusion affect the learning pace of regular students? To what extent, can CI learners succeed in learning English as a foreign language? What would be the impact of teaching English to CI young learners within inclusive education?

Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct some research in the language learning area, in which professionals on the field of teaching as well as phonology, neurology and linguistics work together in order to know what entails the process of learning a foreign language in terms of their physiological and cognitive development.

Taking into consideration all the facts presented, it is relevant to the field of Colombian education that educators start thinking on how to achieve a successful English-special education in their classrooms. To reach such an ideal outcome, it is even more relevant to start researching in the field of special education with the purpose of getting to know different types of students, and to understand what it takes to teach a student with cognitive impairments. To conclude, it is worth it to mention that literature needs to be enriched to serve as a base for language teachers and to guide them in processes of a probable inclusion of non-regular students in their settings.



## **Limitations**

Although this study remarked results reporting the fact that CI students can succeed when learning foreign language vocabulary and that they might be benefited from that process, there are some aspects that limited us as researchers when trying to proceed with all the stages we had initially planned for this research.

In the first place, the weak literature related to foreign language teaching in special education contexts brought some difficulties for us because there were not enough foundations to guide us in the construction of the theoretical basis of this study.

A second limiting issue was our lack of experience and preparation in the field, which caused us some difficulties when behavioral or attitudinal breakdowns occurred. In addition, as a consequence of not having the possibility to conduct an interview to the parents of the learners, we had no opportunity to document how the process had impacted the participants from the parents' perspectives. This fact also limited the process having in mind that parents could have provided a more detailed description of learners' characteristics and progress.

Finally, to get a deeper understanding of the process we aimed at exploring, time and exposure could provide some more relevant features and more descriptive results; unfortunately time was reduced because of the pre-arranged activities that SEI's people had in advance and exposure, as context is Spanish-speaking, made the instruction more difficult in a certain way.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study conducted detailed analysis on teaching strategies and language learning impact when working with population with exceptional necessities for thirteen adults belonging to an institution of special education. The samples presented and later

analyzed all along this document, evidenced that the English as a foreign language instruction benefits learners, diagnosed as cognitively impaired, in different areas of language, cognitive, social and attitudinal development. The study also evidenced what types of teaching approaches and material can be successful when addressing this population.

At the beginning of the research we posed some questions which were concluded in the following ways:

- ***How do CI learners experience the English language lessons and what does this experience tell us about teaching this population?***

Since most of the learners did not have any English background, they demonstrated that they could learn the vocabulary presented and use it accurately in their near context. Furthermore, we evidenced the progress of learners not only in the foreign language but also in their mother tongue; some learners who had articulation difficulties in the L1 started to articulate words in both languages English and Spanish.

Additionally, during the implementation of the English lessons, we could notice that students were motivated; this motivation had a positive effect in their performance as it allows them to change their behavior and their attitude towards

the class improving their social competences and establishing better relationships with their partners and teachers. It is important to say that we cannot affirm that these changes are the result of the English lessons, but they were evidenced during the implementation.

Finally, we consider important to mention the fact that even when production was not easy for them, nor in English neither in Spanish, they demonstrated abilities to comprehend the foreign language, to recognize vocabulary and to associate it with their context; they were able to follow instructions even when those were given in English. With this in mind we would dare to say that comprehension does exceed production when working with special learners.

- ***How can the learning environment and teaching strategies such code switching and collaborative learning mediate the foreign language teaching and learning processes?***

It is important to mention that inside the classroom, teachers should create an accurate learning environment where learners feel comfortable and motivated to learn. In a classroom where CI students are taught, language teachers should try to foster autonomy as much as they can; along this research we noticed that when students perceived that they could make decisions and that they were responsible for their own learning they got more encouraged with the tasks.

In addition, we documented evidence on how getting students motivated might facilitate the language instruction, if teachers turn their classroom into places where students enjoy coming because the content is interesting and relevant to the learners' age and level of ability, learning goals are challenging but manageable and clear, and where the atmosphere is supportive and not threatening, they can make a positive contribution to the students' motivation to learn.

This study also provides evidence to support that strategies, such as code switching, collaborative learning and some classroom techniques like grouping, activities that include painting, labeling, and matching might be effective when teaching English as a foreign language to CI learners.

Moreover, collaborative learning seemed an effective strategy to be used when working with people with special needs; in that sense, learners can learn from their peers given the fact that they are close with each other and learning might emerge more naturally. Moreover, code switching played an important role during the lessons taking into account that it allowed us to take advantage of the learners' language prior knowledge to present concepts in their L2 facilitating the recognition of vocabulary and their comprehension.

Evidence also conveys that teaching materials play, if not the main, a relevant part in the facilitation of the learning process for CI students. Results from the current study document that these participants performed better the class-tasks when their bodies and appealing material were used during the instruction. Through the use of

diverse class materials, CI learners tend to get more engaged onto the development of the classes, fact that, as it seemed, smoothed the progress of learning.

- ***How can this experience contribute to our growing both as persons and as professionals?***

In our opinion, being a language teacher can provide a person with a set of knowledge of the world from different perspectives since it requires him or her to understand features of foreign cultures which has an implicit consideration of thoughts, behaviors, traditions and all those aspects that belong to foreign cultures societies. Inside the language classrooms one teacher can face a large amount of learning styles and differences among students; differences that can include having a CI student in the group.

This situation challenges the teachers in the sense that they are required to be updated in the field of special education and reconsider what they have proposed on their syllabus, and even the project they have at school. This goal is reached by reading recent publications, attending to conferences on the field and consulting with professionals when doubts come up. But it benefits them since it makes them more prepared to understand the classroom occurrences and the special treatment to conduct.

Teachers can always continue growing according to their expectations, inquiries, interests and, why not, abilities. In terms of professional growth, they can go onto

further specialization related to cognitive disabilities which might update them with the most current advances in that area. For us, as professionals, this study opened a gate of inquiries that might bring us to go deeper in this field in order to understand more details of this process and to get involved in some related studies so that we could continue developing as researchers.

As teachers, working with CI learners showed us some different approaches to teaching and permitted us to innovate our practices, demanding us to have every detail under careful supervision. In addition, we discovered the role that collaborative teaching played in a teaching process; we must say that teachers might have advantage from working collaboratively in the sense that they can support each other and share knowledge from their previous experiences.

As persons, this research inspired us to take courage to change things, to maintain straight even when it looks not possible to and keep trying to achieve our goals.

The intention of this study was never contradict neither support any controversial stream, its idea was to explore a topic that still remained under-studied in our context and to provide some basis for further research as well as some literature on cognitive disabilities in language classrooms constrains.

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## **Appendix**

### **The colors' song**

Amarillo es el sol  
Las estrellas y el león,  
En inglés se dice yellow, yellow, yellow.

Rojo es mi corazón,  
El tomate y la manzana,  
En inglés se dice red, red, red.

El cielo es azul,  
Como las olas del mar,  
En inglés se dice blue, blue, blue.

Verdes son nuestras montañas,  
Del color de los limones,  
En inglés se dice Green, Green, Green

El siguiente es el morado,  
Como el color de las uvas,  
En inglés se dice purple, purple, purple

La naranja es muy rica,  
Y hermoso su color,  
En inglés se dice orange, orange, orange

