

My Experience Teaching English to Young Learners and Teenagers: Some Reflections

Enseñanza de la lengua inglesa a niños y adolescentes:

Algunas reflexiones acerca de mi experiencia

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In spite of the harsh environment teachers from the official sector have had to work in, teaching English to children and young learners is a challenging, demanding, hard, but pleasant activity. I am going to write about my experience teaching primary and high school, the difficulties I have encountered, and also the satisfaction of doing my best in this profession.

Key words: English-Teaching, Children Second Language Acquisition, Adolescents Second Language Acquisition, Teaching-Primary School, Teaching-High School

A pesar de la difícil situación que han vivido los maestros del sector oficial, la enseñanza de la lengua inglesa a niños y adolescentes es una actividad desafiante, exigente y sumamente gratificante. En las siguientes líneas escribiré sobre mi experiencia en la escuela primaria y secundaria, las dificultades que he encontrado y además, la satisfacción de hacer lo mejor en mi profesión.

Palabras claves: Inglés-Enseñanza, Adquisición de segundo lenguaje en niños, Adquisición de segundo lenguaje en adolescentes, Enseñanza-Escuela primaria, Enseñanza- Escuela secundaria

THE CHALLENGE OF PRIMARY TEACHING

I have been learning English since I was in high school. Then, when I left school, I felt I could not say I had learned it. Before leaving the University, I started teaching English at a university where I learned a lot. I met interesting people and all kinds of students: those who hated the language, and others who changed

their minds because of the imprint I left on them by teaching a subject I like very much. There I understood what being a teacher means. Some years later, I applied for a job at the Secretaría de Educación del Distrito Capital Bogotá (SED). I was assigned teacher of English for the primary level. I was required to teach English in four primary schools. At the beginning it was difficult for me because I was afraid of that challenge, since I had not been prepared to teach children.

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That challenge meant starting from scratch. At university we were never taught how to teach children nor what to teach them. Teachers who got a job at SED were sent to different schools to fulfill the demands of the General Law of Education, but without any training, pedagogical knowledge, and, worst of all, without the most basic amenities. The principals did not know what we were going to do. Fortunately, that situation only lasted 6 or 8 months for me.

Nevertheless, what was unknown to me became an important part of my life. Thanks to the training workshops the teachers of English in the elementary level were given by the SED under the leadership of a teacher educator who knew what to do with all these human resources, we started to learn how to implement English at that level. We also discovered alternatives to foster the students' motivation and to offer them an opportunity that only pupils from some private schools have been given: having access to English learning. Through monthly meetings, the teachers of the program shared experiences on methodology. We also examined activities and resources used with our students or to be used with them.

We studied different reference books and articles on the key aspects we needed to keep in mind when teaching primary; for example, students' ages, likes and interests. We learnt that children have the necessity to move constantly and to participate in short and meaningful activities. We also realized that kids love singing, playing, and competing, as well as receiving immediate encouragement.

However, as always happens, good things come to an end. The project was stopped by the SED; the teaching materials that were purchased as a result of the English in Primary Programme remain packed away in boxes in many schools. Furthermore, most of the teachers

participating in it were transferred to high school levels. This programme was never evaluated in spite of the good results it was showing. Consequently, its lack of continuity confirmed once again that many projects related to education remain at "planning" level. That is to say, they are stopped for financial reasons without prior evaluation or consideration of socio-pedagogical implications. This case shows that the government often considers coverage instead of quality.

Nowadays, classrooms are filled with almost 50 students and we teachers are not provided with resources to effectively do our job in class. Besides, the number of hours for English teaching at schools has been reduced, in many cases, from four to three hours per week, and we are not trained or updated on current or necessary pedagogical issues. This is the case of several schools that were supplied with the "Red de English Discoveries" programme and whose teachers have not been given guidance as regards implementing it appropriately.

EXPLORING OPTIONS WITH ADOLESCENTS

Despite all the negative aspects mentioned above, things are still comforting. I was assigned to teach English in sixth and seventh grades at the school I currently work at. For the first group of learners, whose ages ranges between 11 and 16, I have planned activities similar to the ones I had implemented with the elementary levels I previously worked with. Those included songs, rhymes, games, modeling, and drawing, among others. So far I have noticed that they liked them a lot.

With the second group of students, whose ages range from 12 to 15, I have developed activities based on the topics they choose. It

was not easy at the beginning because they were used to getting mainly lists and basic structures.

My teaching is influenced by my belief in the importance of learning by doing and through play activities. I do not want my students to learn things by heart. On the contrary, I hope they enjoy what they are doing and love English. Thus, the lessons are developed around meaningful topics. Examples of this are the topic "Clothes to wear according to the weather" and the activity involving a fashion show. Likewise, I try to speak English all the time, even for the most common expressions used in the classroom.

Additionally, and keeping in mind the number of students in every classroom as well as the time provided, I have introduced principles of the autonomous learning philosophy. By autonomy I mean students are the ones who organize the groups, no more than five students per group. The topics are chosen through an agreement between them and me, but also considering their age and interests. Every member of the group is responsible for his/her own work and also for the team's. I ask them what they need to achieve and they determine what they need to communicate. After that, I advise them and solve their doubts or answer their questions. I provide them with dictionaries and some books from the school's library. In addition, they can take any basic English book to the class.

At the very beginning the students from seventh grade asked me to give them vocabulary lists, but I inquired about what they were going to do with all those words. What you need, I said, is to communicate in English. As a result, they have shown motivation. They have learnt some English, but more importantly, they are enjoying it.

I asked some students about the class, the topics, the activities, and the methodology. They found them interesting, pleasant and different from the other subjects. These are samples of their responses:

Rocío nos enseña con gusto y alegría, que tiene un buen método para evaluar y además me brinda seguridad...

Me parece que el método que ella está usando le puede resultar.

No me gustaría que la profe se fuera porque su clase es divertida.

Lo que más me gusta es que la profe dicta las clases con cariño y con ánimo.

La clase me parece súper chebre (sic) la profe también nos hace divertir mucho porque es re genial.

Despite those achievements, there is only one problem we share: to keep good discipline. I have always had difficulties maintaining it in my classes. Probably because I like listening to everybody and I allow them to be themselves during the activities. The students themselves ask me to be more demanding in that respect. If someone could help me, by offering some advice, I would appreciate it. Thanks.

MY QUEST FOR CLEAR POLICIES

In conclusion, I think I have done some good things in my English classes. My students have noticed how much I love teaching English, but I also recognize that there are many aspects I need to change, improve and learn. However, the first thing that must be changed and improved is the way in which the national and the local governments adopt a programme regarding education and stop it with no evaluation.

I am always ready to adopt changes supported by experienced teachers, or by my own experience or according to students' interests. I would like to have, as many teachers, better conditions to do my best in class. Nevertheless, the challenge is to try to work responsibly with what we currently have.