

Promoting Environmental Awareness in the English Class using Task-Based Teaching

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**Abstract**

This Action Research project analyzed the impact of tasks to promote environmental awareness and to foster students' English learning. The participants were fifth graders from the educational institution Normal Superior de Envigado. Data were collected through the implementation of several instruments: my journal, students' work, a focus group with eight students, and an interview to the CT. The development of this project brought interesting results, namely, the viability to work on tasks as a strategy to develop environmental awareness, and to improve students' English learning, motivation, and self-confidence.

*Key words:* Task-based teaching, Environmental Awareness, Meaningful English Learning, Students' Participation.

### **Degree Requirement**

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellín, Colombia.

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### **Preface**

Being a foreign language teacher carries a much higher responsibility than just teaching grammar patterns and helping students to improve their communicative skills in another language; becoming a foreign language teacher also brings with it a social responsibility where teachers should try to help students to create a critical view about the society in which they are immersed, the role they have within that society, and how learning a foreign language can help them to expand their voice and thoughts about society and its problems.

Taking into account this perception, this paper addresses the implementation of some tasks related to the taking care of the environment as a way to promote environmental awareness and to keep the students interested in learning English. These tasks were carried out following the Task-Based Teaching Approach and the implementation of the four task phases proposed by Norris (2009).

This paper describes the context where this project was developed, the analysis of the problem, the theoretical support to implement a task-based teaching approach and the implementation of environmental activities, the actions planned to reach the objectives proposed, and the analysis and results of the two tasks implemented.

### Context Description

This action research project was carried out at the Institución Educativa Normal Superior de Envigado (Hereafter IENSE). It is a coeducational school located in the neighborhood Los Naranjos in the municipality of Envigado. The school was founded on April 16th, 1956 with the specific purpose of educating teachers. According to the Institutional Educational Project (PEI), the mission of the school is

To educate cultured teachers with high competences on the scientific, pedagogical and research fields. They aim at the education of teachers able to create and reinvent themselves with the knowledge and with intellectual and moral richness, teachers able to live their vocation under the educational principles <sup>1</sup>(Institutional Educational Project, 2013, p. 6).

The vision of the school states that they want to

“Be an educational institution and a pedagogical research center that serves the educational community of the Aburrá Valley through the education of qualified teachers who lead the changes required by society <sup>2</sup>” (Institutional Educational Project, 2013, p. 6).

To guarantee the education of highly competent teachers, the school offers four educational cycles: preschool, elementary, high school, and a complementary cycle<sup>3</sup>. These four

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<sup>1</sup> Misión. *Formar Maestros cultos con altas competencias en los campos investigativo, pedagógico y científico. Maestros capaces de crear y recrearse con el conocimiento, de tal manera que, con solvencia intelectual y moral, puedan vivir su vocación bajo los principios institucionales.*

<sup>2</sup> Visión. *Nos vemos como una Institución educativa, polo de desarrollo y centro de investigación pedagógica, al servicio de la comunidad educativa de la región Sur del Valle de Aburra, a través de la formación de docentes cualificados, para protagonizar el cambio que la sociedad requiere.*

<sup>3</sup> The complementary cycle has been designed for the high-school graduates who want to become teachers acquiring knowledge about pedagogy and research. The complementary cycle has a length of five semesters for the high-

educational cycles are located in three blocks. Each block has spacious classrooms, several computer rooms, two restrooms, one cafeteria, and one teachers' lounge. In addition, the school counts with several common areas as, the restaurant, the stationery shop, the auditorium, two yards, the library, and vast green zones.

The classroom where I was doing my practicum is located in the elementary section; it is a wide and well illuminated classroom that includes one video beam, a sound system, two teachers' desks, one acrylic board, a bookcase, and Wi-Fi coverage. In this classroom, there are 46 fifth graders, 29 girls and 17 boys whose ages ranges from 10 to 12 years old. Most of them live in Envigado, and they belong to the lower and middle socio-economic strata. Those students are known for being participatory and for trying their best in the different content areas. Inside the classroom, the students are very active and attentive and they always have a good disposition to participate in class. However, they are also a little noisy and chatty, and they can be distracted easily by other classmates. In the English classes, most of the students look very interested in the class, they really enjoy the dynamic activities proposed by their homeroom teacher who is also their English teacher, and they are always willing to participate.

The fifth grade English teacher who is also my cooperating teacher (Hereafter CT), has been working at the IENSE since 2005. He is graduated from Universidad de Antioquia, and holds a bachelor degree on Foreign Language Teaching, an English specialization from Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana and in this same University, he is currently studying a master's program on Arts in Learning and Teaching Processes in Second Languages. Inside the English classes, he uses the communicative approach to give the students the opportunity to use the target language through situational role plays. In an interview conducted in February, 2016,

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school graduates of other private and public schools and four semesters for the high-school graduates who finished their studies in a "normalista" school.



he stated that his group is an excellent group because they always want to participate and be immersed in the English classes. Nevertheless, the teacher also stated that he must work with them on classroom rules because there are times when the students become excited about different activities and they start talking out loud and walking around the classroom. He also highlights that these students are kind, respectful and active.

It was in this fifth grade group and with the collaboration of their homeroom teacher where I did my practicum and where I developed this research project to help students to improve their English knowledge through diverse and meaningful tasks. This experience offered me the opportunity to end my undergraduate program, and to understand and put into practice all the pedagogical knowledge that I have been learning at the University.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As I previously stated, my practicum experience took place in the group 5D at the IENSE. As part of my practicum, I observed the English classes for some weeks and then I started teaching. Before beginning the observations, I felt worried about the big quantity of students that I was going to have and if I was going to be able to manage and motivate 45 students in the English class. For this reason, I decided to pay attention to the students' reactions to the activities developed in the classroom, and the interaction they had with their English teacher.

Inside the English class, I observed that the students always had a positive attitude towards learning English; they enjoyed the dynamic activities which demanded movement; and they had a good disposition to participate in class. In addition, I realized that the teacher was always trying to implement new activities to help students to improve their learning, and he was

always immersed in the students' learning processes. These aspects called my attention, as I stated in one of my journals "A good teacher is always ready to be immersed in the activities that the students perform, he is always ready to interact with his students, and learn with them" (Journal entry, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

Taking into account that the students seemed to be engaged in the English class and they had a positive rapport with the teacher, I started looking for activities that could help me to keep the students' interest in the English learning process. And it was during one of my observations when I noticed that every day, the students had to pick up some pieces of garbage and throw them into the trash can before getting inside the classroom after recess. This activity called my attention because I saw that both, the students and the teacher had an environmental commitment and they were always trying to do their best to keep not only the classroom clean but also, the school. In a personal conversation with my CT he expressed that he could not include this activity as part of an environmental project because of time constraints. Therefore, I started looking for information about school projects based on the environmental care, but I only found few fragments about this topic on the school handbook, and in the English syllabus. For instance: in the school handbook, the school states the following in relation to the students' profile: "...Environmentalists: students who love nature and want to be environmentalists as an urgent alternative to continue living in the planet" (school handbook, p. 17). And the English syllabus, regards this language as a way to promote the students' awareness about the good treatment of the different species and natural resources. "He (the student) is concerned about the good treatment that animals, plants, and natural resources receive" (English syllabus, p. 46). After reading the previous ideas in school documents that reflect what the institution aims at in terms

of environmental awareness and its importance, my idea about the implementation of ecological activities became clear.

Under the previous circumstances, and taking into account that the students wanted to learn English, that they had the motivation needed to learn it, and that they had been developing this ecological activity, I started considering the possibility of using the English class as a way to develop environmental awareness using diverse activities related not only to the English learning but also, related to the creation of a space where students could work on activities that promote environmental awareness, and the analysis of those environmental problems that are affecting our health, and our way of living. These considerations led me through different readings about the use of environmental activities inside the classroom, the benefits that students might obtain from those activities, and the possible environmental and social changes that students can bring about inside their community.

Now, considering that my purpose was to promote environmental awareness in the English class, I started looking for strategies that could help me to carry out these activities in a meaningful way since, as I previously mentioned, the class had a big quantity of students and I had to create activities that could engage them in the English class and help me to manage them. For these reasons, I chose Task-Based Teaching (TBT) since this approach can help students to use the target language while they are working on activities closely related to the environment. Accordingly, Rodriguez and Rodriguez (2010) remark that the implementation of tasks can improve students' participation when they are immersed in meaningful activities and when the environment favors communication to share meaningful thoughts. I consider that the implementation of Task-Based Teaching Approach can help me to promote students' awareness about the environment as they continue working on their English learning.

### **Research Question**

To what extent can students develop environmental awareness in the English class using Task-Based Teaching?

### **General Objective**

To analyze the impact of tasks on students' English learning and on the development of their environmental awareness.

### **Specific Objectives**

- To make the topics of the English syllabus more meaningful for the students through the reflection about environmental issues in the implementation of Task-Based Teaching.
- To keep students motivated and engaged in the English learning process implementing meaningful tasks related to environmental care.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Throughout history, our world has had to deal with different social, economic and political problems which have left indelible marks in our society and in our lives. Nowadays, our society is fighting against global warming which is a problem that has been present over years and is becoming stronger as time goes by because of the degradation of the ecosystems that is caused by different factors such as deforestation to improve infrastructure and transport; pollution due to the chemical waste of the companies; and water shortages due to long waves of heat, among others. Concerned about these situations, many scientists have presented sustainability strategies as the implementation of renewable energy, the use of natural gas,

recycling, among others. However, these strategies have not had the impact expected due to the poor knowledge that people have about this problem.

Alternatively, society has presented us education as a process that helps us to acquire knowledge as we learn to develop our intellectual capacities and as we become social agents. Education as a fundamental process, can also promote environmental awareness through the teaching of the different sciences taking into account the context in which the students are. Concerning this idea, the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) presents a new education perspective based on environmental awareness.

“The goal of environmental education is to develop a world population that is aware of, and concerned about, the total environment and its associated problems, and which has the knowledge, attitudes, skills, motivation, and commitment to work individually and collectively toward solutions of current problems and the prevention of new ones”

UNESCO, 1976 (as cited in Atham, J., Monroe, C. 2001, p. 38).

Following this perspective, it is important to analyze the role that teachers can play to promote environmental awareness, and how an English language teacher can create consciousness about those environmental issues. About the first statement, Atham, J. & Monroe, C. (2001) argue that those teachers who are conscious about the environment and its problems can motivate students to enhance their sense of wonder and their sense of place raising the students' awareness and encouraging them to understand and question concerns and actions. In addition, Arikan, A (2009) declares that language teachers can also become socially responsible agents who can promote progressive changes in the community through content and instruction. Based on these ideas, a foreign language teacher has the chance to increase the students' curiosity, and the motivation they have about learning a foreign language through different

methods that can help the students to be more conscious about the environment and what they can do to protect it.

In the teaching and learning processes, it is also relevant to consider the role that students play in the English classroom as we promote environmental awareness. About the students' role, Arikan (2009) considers that students are active social agents with the power to recognize and solve social and ecological issues as long as they are encouraged to do so. In agreement with this consideration, the promotion of environmental awareness inside a classroom can be possible if the teacher in charge of the classroom takes the challenge of helping the students to be more conscious about their environment and if the students start thinking about their responsibility with their environment and the possible actions they can take to solve environmental issues in their community. Likewise, the development of activities related to the taking care of the environment like the creation of posters related to this issue, English campaigns about recycling, and so on, can help the students to develop meaningful learning processes in which the foreign language can be perceived as a tool to learn more about the environment and other situations that surround them.

Based on the idea of creating an English class where the students could learn about the foreign language and the environment, I started thinking about possible activities that could motivate the students to keep learning English language and becoming aware about some environmental issues and how they can do something to fight against global warming, animal abuse and so on. However, to organize those activities it was necessary to find a methodology that could be adapted to the purposes of the class stated in the syllabus of the school. With this in mind, I decided to focus my attention on the implementation of Task-Based Teaching, defined by Norris (2009) as:

“Task-Based Language Teaching is an approach to second or foreign language education that integrates theoretical and empirical foundations for good pedagogy with a focus on tangible learning outcomes in the form of tasks that is, what learners are able to do with the language” (p. 1)

As its name suggests, this approach is centered around the development of tasks, “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form”. Nunan, 1989, (as cited in Rodriguez, M., Rodriguez, J, 2010, p. 166). In addition, Norris (2009), states that the implementation of tasks inside the classroom enables students to find a reason for communicating using the language they are learning. Besides, it allows students and teachers to set up a linkage between the language functions, language forms, and the meaning and use of the language inside the task. This approach offers the possibility of developing environmental awareness because it implies the development of tasks that are closely related to the students’ context, and also because as Rodriguez & Rodriguez (2010) stated, learners can be engaged in the implementation of tasks since their previous knowledge and their life experiences support learning. In this case, the implementation of this approach aimed at calling students’ attention on the environment and enabling them to learn and use the language meaningfully.

In order to develop this project and achieve its purpose, I decided to follow the four task phases proposed by Norris (2009). He describes them as follows:

**Task input.** This phase refers to students’ exposure to the target language. The teacher introduces the activities that are going to be made using diverse technological or pedagogical

resources (videos, readings, and live performances) in order to put the target language in a context.

**Pedagogic task work.** This stage focuses on students' awareness of new language forms and their use. The teacher designs similar activities to the target task so that the students can put into practice the language they are going to need during the target task performance.

**Target task performance.** The students perform what they have learnt during the task. In this phase, the teacher's role is to replicate a context where the task will be performed using diverse elements like physical surroundings, audience, and questions.

**Task follow up.** The students enhance the knowledge that they have acquired. In this last phase, the teacher gives feedback about the task performed by the students.

The implementation of tasks taking into account these four phases can help the teacher to create a meaningful experience for students to acquire knowledge that is closely related to their context and that promotes the improvement of their language skills.

Based on these ideas about Task-Based Teaching and the importance of promoting environmental awareness in the classroom, I planned some tasks to promote environmental awareness and maintain the students' motivation in learning English as a foreign language.

### **Action Plan**

To develop my research project with the 5D students, it was necessary to read the English syllabus for fifth graders to be fully aware of the topics that the students would learn in the third and fourth terms of the school year, and think about the activities that I could plan in order to accomplish the objectives of this research project.



In the following chart, I present the tasks that I planned to do with the students during the last two terms of the school year.

WHAT?	WHEN?	HOW	WHAT FOR?
<p>UNIT 3 “Let’s compare planets”</p> <p><b>Topics</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Planets.</li> <li>2. Feelings.</li> <li>3. Superlatives and comparisons</li> </ol>	<p>Third term (from July to September)</p>	<p><b>Task #1.</b> Posters about the importance of taking care of the planet.</p> <p><b>Task # 2.</b> Creation of superheroes who fight against global warming.</p> <p><b>Task # 3.</b> Stickers about the importance of taking care the natural resources.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To present to the school community the ecological problems that its society has.</li> <li>• To help students with their English learning processes through meaningful activities.</li> <li>• To enhance the students communicative competence.</li> </ul>
<p>UNIT 4 “I would like to travel”</p> <p><b>Topics.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Physical appearance.</li> <li>2. Descriptions</li> <li>3. Places.</li> <li>4. Nationalities</li> <li>5. Geography.</li> </ol>	<p>Fourth term (from September to November)</p>	<p><b>Task # 4.</b> Comic strips about the superheroes.</p> <p><b>Task # 5.</b> Creation of short stories about the natural wonders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To help students to continue working on their written competence using activities related to their likes.</li> <li>• To create ecological campaigns promoting the protection of the natural resources in the school.</li> </ul>

To analyze the impact that these tasks had on the students’ learning process and environmental awareness, I used the following data collection instruments.

WHAT?	WHEN?	WHAT FOR?
Journals	Every class	To reflect about the activities that the students developed to notice if those activities helped the students to learn the English language as they become more aware about the environmental problems.

Student work	Every two weeks	To observe if the activities done in class have helped the students to acquire new knowledge about English.  To analyze if the activities implemented in the class have helped the students to be more conscious about the environmental issues discussed in class
Focus group with eight students	At the beginning and at the end of each academic term	To know if the students liked the new methodology implemented in the class and if they felt comfortable with it.  To know if the students obtained meaningful learning about the environment and the English language.
Interview to the CT.	At the end of my practicum	To know the teacher's perception about the activities implemented in the classes.  To know if he has any suggestion about my work, and the perception he has about my research project.

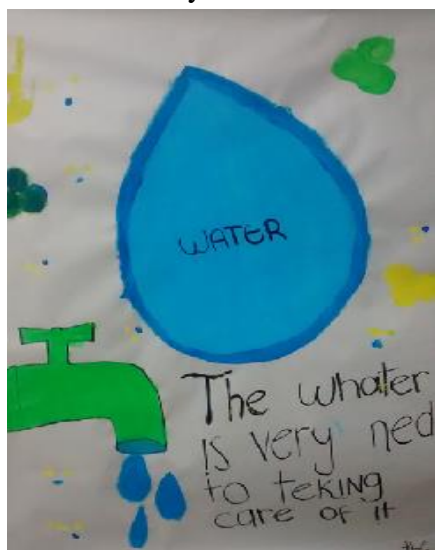
### **Development of Actions**

After analyzing the English syllabus for fifth graders, I planned some tasks that could help me to accomplish the objectives proposed in my research project. In these tasks, the students were able to learn English and they could have the opportunity to identify certain environmental problems and the strategies they could use to preserve the environment. For the implementation of these tasks, I took into account the English contents the students were going to learn throughout the third and fourth academic terms, the objectives established for those terms, and the possibility to plan activities where students could work in teams. I planned two or

three tasks for each academic term. However, I was able to implement only two tasks due to some difficulties presented along the second semester.

The first task was developed in the third academic term and it had a length of three weeks (from July, 29<sup>th</sup> to August, 12<sup>th</sup>). The purpose of this task was the creation of posters promoting the taking care of water, and it took place after reading the book “I am water” by Jean Marzollo, and a short reflection made with the students about taking care of water. In this task, the students could reflect about what people do with water, how they waste it, and the strategies people can use to save this natural resource. The final product of the task was a poster in which the students wrote short sentences about water and its importance, and during the oral presentation of those posters, they proposed some strategies they could use to give water a better use. Those posters were very meaningful for the students because first, they had the opportunity to work in groups; second, they had the opportunity to use the English language as a means to communicate information about an important topic; and third, they had the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary.

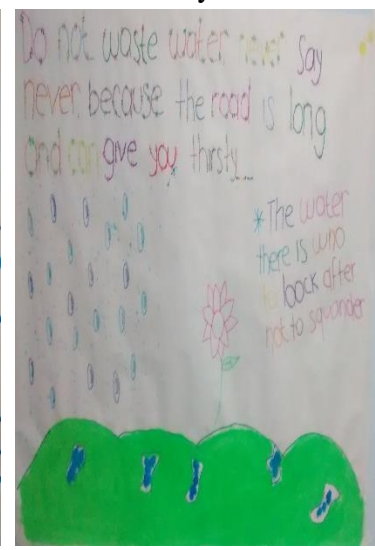
Poster made by team # 6



Poster made by team # 3



Poster made by team # 1



Despite the good response obtained from students in the first task, there were some problems that made impossible the implementation of the other two tasks planned for this academic term; some of those problems were related to the school life like the planning of some events, the lack of English classes because the school day finished earlier, and a training workshop for teachers. However, due to my lack of experience I consider that my time management was also a factor that played a role in this situation. All those difficulties delayed and moved on the other tasks to the fourth academic term. From this first implementation, I observed and analyzed my performance as a teacher and obtained a clearer idea about how I should continue planning the following task.

The second task was developed during the fourth academic term. The purpose of this task was the creation of superheroes who were going to fight against some ecological problems like, deforestation, chemical wastes, air pollution, illegal fishing, and hunting, among others. The development of this task took place after the projection of one video about pollution and the reflection about those ecological problems that are affecting our way of living, and how in some cases we contribute to the destruction of the planet with some bad habits. During the development of this second task, I tried to take into account the English contents that students were going to learn and adapt them to the task. So, during some classes, the students learnt about physical descriptions, feelings, and expressions that they can use to express their opinion; all these topics were closely related to the second task so the students could use this new knowledge during the presentation of their superhero.

Poster made by team # 5

Poster made by team # 4

Poster made by ST7



Superhero who fights against contaminated water



Superhero who fights against deforestation



Superhero who fightst against contaminated water

From this second task, some aspects were improved: the use of some strategies like, giving short and clear explanations about the topic, talking clearly about the purpose of each activity, and what I expected from the students helped me to improve the use of time in the class. In the same way, students' involvement and participation in each class were increased thanks to the implementation of short pedagogical tasks or activities that helped them to be aware of what they were going to need during the task performance stage.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

In the course of my research project I gathered the information needed to analyze the impact of the strategies proposed in the Action Plan through four data collection instruments: the journal entries I wrote since the beginning of my practicum, the students' work, a focus group with 8 students who were randomly selected, and an interview to my CT. The information obtained from these instruments was analyzed using an inductive coding which as Burns (2010) explained is when:

“We scan the data carefully, usually several times over to see what categories suggest themselves, or “emerge”, from the data. The research term for this is an emic approach. Which is sometimes also called an “insider” approach. It means that we look at data from the perspectives of people closely involved in the research context and analyze their opinions and views exactly as we find them. In other words, the data gives us the categories” (p. 107)

Bearing in mind this inductive coding, I analyzed the data searching for categories to see the impact of the implementation of various tasks and diverse class activities. From that analysis, I could draw the results of this project that I will present in this part of the paper. I will talk about students’ achievement, and also about my own development as a teacher.

### **Students’ Interest and Motivation.**

The observations I recorded in my journal and the reflections about the events that took place in my classes, showed me that it was possible to reinforce the motivation and engagement that the students had in their previous classes with my CT. All the tasks and class activities were directed to maintaining the students’ interest in learning English as we worked on the English topics in the syllabus. From these observations, I could see the good disposition that the students had about the new activities proposed: “I really liked the motivation and the enthusiasm that the students had during the activities proposed. And I reinforced the perception that I had about the students, this group is very participative and enthusiastic, and I think that I can work very well with them.” (Journal Entry, July 22, 2016). And their motivation was growing as they started recognizing how much they were learning.

During the development of the different activities proposed, the students always had a great interest for knowing what we were going to do in each class, questions like, teacher are we

going to play today? Or what activities are we going to do on the board? Gave me the impression that they were feeling comfortable in my classes and that there was expectation concerning the activities to be developed. This positive perception about the class activities were presented during the focus group that I did with some students at the end of the third term. They expressed: “a mí me gustaron mucho las actividades que hacíamos al frente... eran muy divertidas y podíamos aprender palabras en inglés como cuando el compañero saltaba y uno tenía que pensar como se decía saltar pero en inglés” (Student# 32, focus group, September 16, 2016). [I liked very much the activities that we did in front of the board... they were so much fun and we could learn words in English like when one classmate jumped and we had to think about how to say that word in English]. “lo bueno de aprender inglés con la profe Francia es que ella siempre trae actividades muy buenas al salón, yo siempre la veo pegando fichas bibliográficas con palabras en inglés o imágenes, y eso me gusta porque sé que en la clase vamos a jugar un rato y no nos vamos a quedar sentados” (Student # 19, Focus group, September 16, 2016). [The good thing about learning English with the teacher Francia is that she always brings very good activities to the classroom, I always see her pasting index cards with English words or images and I like that because I know that we are going to play for a while and we are not going to remain seated]. This motivation and engagement continued along the implementation of the two tasks. As I stated in my journal: “The way students responded to the activity about the natural resources was very good. They had amazing interventions about the topic, they showed interest in it and they looked engaged.” (Journal Entry, July 29, 2016). This motivation was also perceived by my CT who in multiple occasions mentioned the good responses the students were having in my English classes. “Los niños estaban muy motivados, había gran aceptación hacia ella, la querían mucho y a pesar de que yo era el director del grupo, yo sentía ese gran feeling y eso es una conexión muy

importante dentro del grupo” (CT interview, September 16, 2016). [The children were motivated, they had a great acceptance for her (the student-teacher), they loved her so much and even though I was the homeroom teacher, I felt that great feeling and that is a very important connection inside the class]. This might imply that a good rapport between the teacher and students is important to sustain and enhance students’ motivation.

Based on the previous information, I can state that one of my specific objectives was achieved, namely, to keep the students motivated and engaged in the English learning process implementing tasks related to environmental care. Besides keeping their motivation, students were also able to improve their participation in class by trusting their capacities as English learners.

### **Self-confidence: A Students’ Gain**

Despite the good disposition of students in class activities and in the tasks developed, one of the difficulties that I could perceive from the students was the fear they had when they were trying to participate in an oral or written activity and the awareness they had about this difficulty. On my journal, I wrote “Even though the students are participative, they feel afraid of those activities where they have to show their knowledge about writing in English. They know their lacks in relation to the English language so, I think it is my responsibility to give them the knowledge they need to feel comfortable when they are using English as a foreign language” (Journal Entry, July 22, 2016). To ease this fear, I planned activities that could lower students’ affective filter and help them feel more comfortable in the English classes like, mime games to guess the action presented by one classmate; matchings on the board to classify images related to some pollution problems and their names; short readings about pollution and the natural resources, and of course the implementation of the two tasks that were presented in the



development of actions. With the implementation of these activities, children were gradually overcoming their fear and the students who had not participated before, began to participate without feeling the anguish of being mocked by their peers. The following excerpts from my journals present the gains the students had in relation to this category. “They were attentive to the reading, they were enjoying the reading and there were some moments when they started reading with me.” (Journal entry, July 19, 2016). “They have been losing their fear to come to the board and write and they do not feel bad when they receive feedback.” (Journal Entry, August 5, 2016). “The students understood the activity and their performance was great. They have learnt so many things about grammar and their writing is more fluent.” (Journal Entry, September 2, 2016).

All these fragments about the activities made, the reactions that the students had about them, and the students’ improvements let me notice the high level of engagement that the students demonstrated in the English class, and how little by little they were losing their fear to participate in activities that implied the use of English. As Cambourne (1995) asserted “engagement also depends on active participation by the learner, which in turn involves some risk taking; learners can participate actively only if they are prepared to “have a go.” (p. 185). This was evidenced in my classes; students were gaining self-confidence, and as a consequence, they started participating more and taking risks. They even took the initiative to propose activities that they considered meaningful for them and that could help them to improve their English skills and their knowledge about the environment. The following sentences were taken from the answers the students gave in their focus group “en una exposición podríamos planear un día en el que vamos a tratar de hablar todo en inglés para que así aprendamos más fácil... no todo en inglés, más que todo máximas palabras que podamos en inglés. Por ejemplo, yo desde

las clases de inglés, he estado cambiando algunas palabras en español a inglés y eso me está ayudando mucho” (Student # 1, Focus group, September 16, 2016) [In an oral presentation, we could organize one day in which we are going to try to say everything in English so we could learn easily... or not all words in English, but most of them. For example, since the English classes started, I have been changing some Spanish words into English and that has helped me a lot]. “también podríamos proponer una actividad acá en el salón haciendo un crucigrama en inglés sobre el medio ambiente... para no solo aprender hacer crucigramas en español o sopa de letras en español sino sobre todo, adaptarnos al idioma del inglés”. (Student # 35, Focus group, September 16, 2016). [We could also propose a classroom activity about doing crosswords in English about the environment. To not only learn about doing crosswords or word search exercises in Spanish but also, get adapted to the English language]

From the students’ quotations presented above, I can infer how important the implementation of those class activities was because the students could feel comfortable and therefore their participation and engagement increased.

### **Awareness on Ecological Issues**

From the beginning of my observations, I noticed how much these fifth graders were involved in the implementation of some activities related to the environment and how much they knew about some ecological issues like recycling. So, taking into account the students’ interest on these ecological activities, I started planning English classes where the students could improve their environmental awareness through the implementation of different tasks related to the taking care of the environment and then analyze the impact that these tasks had in the students’ English learning.

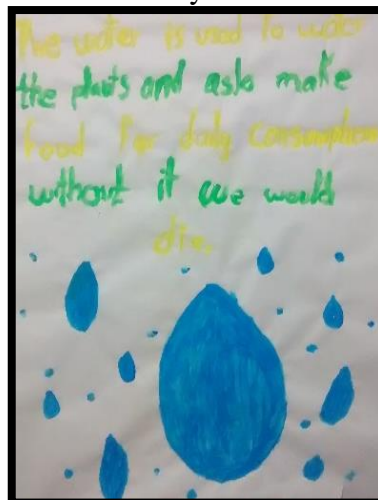
As part of the implementation of the first task, the students were involved in some pedagogic task work that allowed me to contextualize the purpose of this task within the English topics they were studying. In the first task the students had a space to talk about how important the water is in our lives. In one of the lessons, some students stated “el aire es el más importante porque es el que permite que todos los seres vivos puedan respirar”. (Journal Entry, July 29, 2016). [Air is the most important [resource] because it allows all living beings to breath]. “El agua es importante porque es la que nos alimenta, nosotros cocinamos con ella”. (Journal Entry, July 29, 2016). [Water is the most important [resource] because it feeds us, we can use it to cook]. After having studied the topics proposed during the third academic term, the students were able to create and present a poster where they demonstrated the new perception they had about water and the strategies that they could use to preserve it. Additionally, the students also learned and improved their knowledge in relation to the English language being able to write short sentences using action verbs, adjectives and in some cases first and third personal pronouns. The following posters show some of the reflections made by the students about the taking care of water.

Poster made by team # 2



“Without water there is not life”

Poster made by team # 4



“The water is used to water the plants and also make

food for daily consumption. Without it we could die”

In the fourth academic term, the students should study some English topics as countries and nationalities, physical appearance, and description. So, to adapt these topics to the promotion of the environmental awareness, the students participated in the creation of their own superhero who was be able to fight against one pollution problem using non-biodegradable material like, plastic bags, wrapping of goodies and so on. During the implementation of this task, the students gave their superhero a nationality, they were able to describe it physically, and talk about the actions their superhero can do, and the powers he has. In this second task, the students learned about some pollution problems through short readings that presented one ecological problem and the consequences that it carried on. These readings were very meaningful for the students because first, they were able to recognize the damage that these problems can cause in the community, and second, because the students could read short stories in English and improve their reading skills at the same time that they learned new vocabulary. In the following quote, I present the perception they had about those readings and one video about pollution. “The second thing that I noticed from this same activity was the reactions that the students had about those readings, they felt worried, sad, and angry about the things that people can do against the environment and how those problems affect others. These students’ reactions, really called my attention because I could perceive through their faces what they were feeling about the video and I felt proud of what I have been doing with the students in relation to the environment because, they are recognizing the ecological problems that we have and they are showing some kind of concern about them” (Journal Entry, September 9, 2016). After these readings and the video about pollution, I asked them to choose one of the pollution problems they had seen on the video (urban air pollution, hunt, illegal fishing, contaminated water, and so on) and work on the

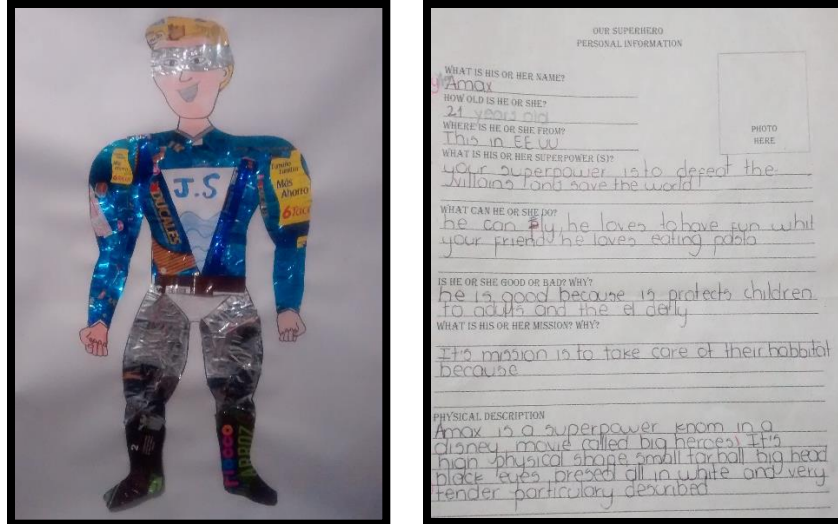
creation of their superhero, his characteristics, and what he could do to preserve the environment and fight against pollution.

At the end of the fourth academic term, the students did an oral presentation about their superhero. From these presentations, I noticed they used the vocabulary learned in the classes to present their superhero. They presented their superhero using the verbs can, to have, and to be when they were describing their superheroes.

Finally, the implementation of these tasks helped the students in diverse aspects. First, they allowed the students to recognize and use their naturalistic intelligence, which I consider went beyond the meaning that Gardner gave about it. According to Gardner, 1983 (as cited by Davis, K. et al). “Naturalist intelligence allows individuals to identify and distinguish among of the natural world such as animals, plants, types of rocks and weather patterns.” (p. 6). In these tasks, the students showed that this intelligence is also the capacity to perceive the environment as a fundamental part in our lives, it is to be conscious about the problems related to the environment and the capacity that each person has to contribute to their solution. The development of these tasks generated amazing reflections about the strategies and activities the children could develop in the classroom or even in the school to call the attention of their classmates about the environment and how to take care of it. The following quote is one strategy presented by one student: “Una actividad que podría hacerse sería hacer un árbol y que todos pensemos en una actividad del medio ambiente y la coloquemos en una hojita y que en ese árbol coloquemos varias ideas y hacer de esas ideas varias campañas” (Student # 43, Focus group, September 16, 2016). [An activity that we can do could be the creation of a tree and write down on every leaf of the tree, the activities we can do about taking care of the environment and transform those activities into campaigns] From this reflection and the other ones presented in

the focus group, I can assert that the students were involved and interested in continuing the work on activities that can promote the ecological awareness in their school community. Second, through the implementation of these tasks, the students were also able to make connections between the topics they were studying in other subjects with the new topics they were studying in English. The following excerpt is the reflection that one student made about the tasks during the focus group. “A pesar de que solo hicimos dos actividades, la profe no solo nos está enseñando inglés, sino que también nos está hablando del tema de ciencias y a mí me parece muy bien porque aparte de que vamos aprender hablar inglés vamos a también saber cómo cuidar la naturaleza” (Student # 19, Focus group, September 16, 2016). [Despite we only did two tasks, the teacher not only taught us English, but she also taught us about topics that we were studying in natural science and I liked very much these activities because we could learn about English and how to take care of the environment]. Thanks to these tasks, students started perceiving the language as a tool to learn more about other subjects or topics as they developed their communicative skills.

Taking into account what the students achieved through the development of these tasks, I must say that the project reached all the objectives proposed at the beginning of this paper. Besides, it made evident the definition already presented by Nunan (1989) about the tasks as a classroom work that allows students to be in direct contact with the target language focusing more on meaning than on form.



## Teacher Development

Apart from the objectives achieved in this research concerning students' learning, motivation and ecological awareness, my growth as a teacher was also a result of this process since, it gave me the possibility to analyze and be very critical about my own practice as a teacher. From this experience, I understood many aspects of teaching. For instance, I learnt about the importance of taking into account the time I spent in every class and how I can use this time properly by the planning of lessons with a clear and coherent purpose. This understanding about the use of time came to me thanks to the multiple difficulties I experienced during the implementation of the first task; as I stated in the following reflection "I think that I am wasting time and it would be better if I move on to another activity, this class was the second class that I spent trying to finish the first task of my project and I could not finish it." (Journal Entry, August 5, 2016). From this experience, I could analyze the factors that were generating the wasting of time and I had the possibility to correct them in the following task.

Another aspect found about my practice as a teacher is the understanding about the importance that each methodology and approach has inside a classroom and the great level of

observation that I as a teacher should have to adapt one of those multiple methodologies into a classroom taking into account the students' needs, and the goal that I want to achieve with the students. I could learn that the students are not the ones who must be adapted to my way of teaching; on the contrary, it is me the one who must be adapted to the students.

Notwithstanding, from all those aspects that I could improve about me as teacher, there was one aspect that called my attention and it was how I became aware about the students' capacities, and how I could realize that I cannot expect the same achievements in all my students; their ways of learning are different as they are different, and those differences that each student may have over others do not make him good or bad students because, they are all intelligent and able of learning, they all have their capacities and their own learning rhythms and styles.

Finally, I also learnt that an English syllabus or a plan needs to be adapted if we want our students to have a relevant learning experience. In this case, the use of tasks and the development of a theme were key elements to achieve the involvement of students in their English learning process.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research project was to help the students to keep their interest in learning English as they started using their knowledge about this foreign language as a tool to promote and increase their environmental awareness through the implementation of tasks. From the implementation of these tasks, I can say that in most of the cases, they worked as an appealing strategy to develop environmental awareness due to the direct contact that the students had with diverse classroom activities that promoted the reflection about diverse environmental



issues. These classroom works helped the students to use their English knowledge during the performance stage of the tasks.

Even though there were improvements in students' learning and awareness on ecological issues, the implementation of these tasks also had their problems. First, I focused the tasks on the amelioration of the students' writing skills, and I left behind the development of other communicative skills. And second, at the beginning of the project I planned multiple tasks for each academic term, but sadly they could not be developed due to some school events, and also to some problems I had with time management. For these reasons, I would like to suggest to teachers who are interested in the development of tasks in the English class first, to make an observation and analysis of the students' needs regarding their language learning. Second, to plan short activities that will help the students to establish connections between the English topic that is being explained and the task that is going to be carried out. Third, to always keep in mind the schools' schedule so you can give to the time you have a better use. And finally, being realistic in terms of the goals we set and the resources available. In conclusion, despite the inconveniences I could have had in the implementation of these tasks, I could observe meaningful progress in the students in relation to their English learning.

### **Reflection**

The implementation of this project was without any doubt the possibility to keep my feet on the ground, it allowed me to put into practice all the theories that I studied through my process of becoming a teacher; it gave me the opportunity to implement a project about a topic that is important and meaningful for me. And thanks to this project I understood and learnt so many aspects about my profession.

As a teacher, I became aware about the responsibility that I am going to have in this profession because, being a teacher is not only being in charge of teaching English or French; this profession goes beyond that because the society demands us to educate people on values like, respect, discipline, and cooperation.

As a researcher teacher, I realized how difficult it is to be critical about my own work, it was not easy to recognize my errors about my performance as a teacher. However, being able to embrace those errors and trying to correct them made me understand the importance of doing research in our daily work, and how research is a tool that can help us improve our practice.

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