

From Traditional Grammar to Theme-based: Teaching English with a Purpose

Deisy Carolina Marín Carvajal

Universidad de Antioquia

Thesis, Research and Practicum advisor

Sandra Milena Echeverri Delgado

Medellín

November 2017

Abstract

This action research aimed to contextualize English learning and promote students' interaction through the use of theme-based activities with clear purpose, context and audience with fifth graders in a public school. In order to achieve the research goals, a series of actions were implemented. Firstly, the unit to be developed was designed based on a theme. Secondly, appropriate materials and activities were selected and addressed through four stages of classroom instruction: introduction, demonstration, practice and assessment. Finally, cooperative work was promoted throughout several of the stages. Data collected for this study included class journals, questionnaires, interviews and students' artifacts. Data analysis suggested that students become more engaged with activities when they have a closer relation to real life and are presented with eye-catching materials. Furthermore, it showed that students improved their English performance as a result of the strategies implemented.

Key words: Theme-based teaching, contextualized teaching (activities), cooperative learning.

Degree Requirement

This action research project was carried out during one year in a public school in Copacabana, Antioquia in 2017, as a degree requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Foreign Language teaching, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

Acknowledgements

To my beloved family, which has been there supporting me during all this long process.

To my practicum, research and thesis advisor, Sandra Echeverri, for her guidance and assistance towards my professional development. And specially for all the patience she had during this long and hard process.

And to my CT Luz Adriana Bustamante, and my fifth graders at IEENSMA, for their commitment and outstanding work in this project along this year.

I will always appreciate all your support.

Table of Contents

Preface	6
Description of the context	7
Statement of the problem	8
Theoretical framework	10
Research Question	14
Objectives	14
General Objective	14
Specific Objectives	14
Action Plan	15
Development of Actions	17
Findings and Interpretations	20
Engaging students through the use of visual aids	20
Using images to support texts.	21
Contextualizing activities with the use of images.	22
Gaining awareness of group work responsibilities	22
Helping each other and participating actively.	23
Overcoming group work difficulties.	25
Clarifying stages and consequences.	26
Improving students' performance thanks to contextualized and purposeful activities.	27
Conclusions	30
Reflection	31
References	32
Appendix	34

Preface

The present research project was carried out from January to November 2017 in a fifth-grade class in the Institucion Educativa Escuela Normal Superior Maria Auxiliadora, a public institution located in Copacabana, as requirement as a pre-service teacher from the School of Languages of Universidad de Antioquia to get my degree in foreign language teaching.

During practicum I, I had the opportunity to observe my Cooperating Teacher and identify a problem situation that I attempted to address through the implementation of different actions.

In this paper, I firstly describe the context in which the project took place. Secondly, I mention the theoretical elements that supported my research. Thirdly, I describe the actions implemented. Finally, I present the analysis and interpretation of the data collected followed by the conclusions and reflection.

Description of the context

This research study took place at a public, Catholic and coeducational institution that offers its services in pre-school, elementary and high school with a pedagogical approach. It provides also a complementary cycle (vocational school) to train elementary school teachers. It has a single shift and follows schedule A. The institution has a student body of about 1634.

The course I observed and in which I carried out my research project was 5°A. The English classes took place three times per week fifty-five minutes each day. The classroom was located in the first floor of a two-story building shared by the upper grades of elementary, the lowest grades of high school and the high school teachers' room. It was medium size, with good illumination, a chalkboard and a speaker and it was organized with six rows and eight files. There were two video rooms nearby, but they were located in two different buildings.

In this group there were forty-six students, thirty-six girls and eleven boys. They were kids between ten and eleven years old. According to my class sessions observations, students were well behaved, and most of them participated answering the questions made by the cooperating teacher. Based on a survey I carried out with students, they expressed that they liked English classes and they enjoyed the work with the teacher but they also wanted to develop different kind of activities.

The cooperating teacher held a Bachelor's Degree in Languages. She had been working at the institution since 2001, that is to say, for sixteen years. She taught preschool, third, fourth and fifth grade and she was paid by the parents' association because the Ministry of Education does not pay English teachers for primary schools. She expressed that she used mostly the board and chalk to teach her lessons; however, she also believed one of the most effective teaching-learning

strategies for her students was when they worked with their peers, even though this was not evident in the lessons observed.

The English syllabus for elementary groups, according to the cooperating teacher, followed the classroom project approach. As it was stated in the institution's PEI (n.d.), classroom projects emerge as strategies of learning and teaching that are built around a problem of interest for learners and educators. Such projects integrate learning and action and promote group and collaborative work transforming education and the teacher's role. Nevertheless, there were no curricular plans supporting such projects or the English program for each school grade in the Institutional documents.

Statement of the problem

English teaching has recently become a very important issue for teachers, schools and even the national government which make big efforts to make of this process a meaningful and productive one. Despite all their efforts, it is evident that public schools, especially elementary schools, are not prepared to teach the language in the light of the latest approaches: methodology has barely changed. Although the Institución Educativa Escuela Normal Superior María Auxiliadora de Copacabana is well known in the department for its educational processes, English in elementary levels is still taught *artificially*, that means, through decontextualized linguistics topics. There are several factors that prevent English education from having a context and a real purpose. For instance, materials are barely varied, activities have no connection to broader themes, and students' interaction is completely reduced.

Materials are important tools that teachers use to make content more accessible to students. They can be intangible, as ideas and all the knowledge that teachers have. However, there are multiple tangible materials that educators can create or adapt according to the learners needs. In a fifth grade at IEENSMA, it was possible to observe almost no variation of materials from class to class. The main resources used in this class were the teacher's knowledge displayed on the board, the students' notebooks, a few worksheets for completing information and pictures printed or cut from magazines.

In the light of the latest theories of language and teaching approaches, the activities intended to be use in classes have evolved from a traditional grammar-based orientation to a more situated, contextualized and purposeful view. This implies the design and use of activities with a clear purpose and an audience, and a coherent relation between the language and a context. In addition, activities aim towards the integration of language practices and competences. However, the activities implemented in these classes were usually decontextualized and based on grammar notions. Some of the most common were: filling in the blanks exercises, answering questions, and writing simple sentences. These types of activities were reduced to completing grammar exercises or reinforcing grammar patterns; they were not enriched by a theme or content that contextualized language. The following journal excerpts illustrate how the traditional grammar orientation was evident in the class activities.

“Vocabulary is very important so students can use more complete sentences, but is there another way to teach it different to giving a list?” (Journal, March 15th)

“One way to practice pronunciation is repetition. But, is there another way to improve students' pronunciation? What kind of activities can I implement that help

students improve their pronunciation? What about using songs or audiobooks?"

(Journal, March 27th)

“These are good activities to practice the use of adjectives but maybe they should start getting more complex so students are challenged and they don’t stay just with the simple decontextualized sentences.” (Journal, March 28th)

Furthermore, with the purpose of engaging on less teacher centered classes, educators implement diverse patterns of interaction. In this specific context, there was not much space for peer or group work, the teacher was always leading the class and the students’ interaction was restricted to answering the teacher’s questions. In the following journal excerpt it is possible to observe the contradiction between the teacher’s belief and what was carried out in the practice.

“The teacher says that work with peers is important to her but during the classes I have observed, students have worked in pairs only once.” (Journal, February 27th)

In summary, the main purpose of this research project is to reconsider the way we are teaching in public schools, and venture to offer a more contextualized education supported by the coherence and organization of a theme-based syllabus that favors students’ interaction as well as the use of more challenging materials.

Theoretical framework

In order to transform a decontextualized grammatical program into a contextualized and purposeful course plan, it is necessary to modify the teaching methodology that is currently being used at the practicum center. This section will examine *theme base teaching*, its principles and stages, as the main subject that will guide such transformation, as well as the importance of giving context to language teaching and the role that students’ interaction play in this approach.

According to Cameron (2001) “The essential notion of theme-based is that many different activities are linked together by their content; the theme or topic runs through everything that happens in the classroom and acts as a connecting thread for pupils and teacher.” Theme based teaching enables the connection of several different activities or tasks linked by a topic which determines their content. Language teaching and learning goes beyond just repeating isolated words or grammar drills which have no context neither real purpose. By implementing theme-based teaching it is possible to actually go beyond and start giving context to the activities carried out in the language classes. Consequently, the focus is on content, on a theme, rather than on grammar structures which are not totally forgotten but are learned with the use.

Contrary to what happens in a grammar-based curriculum, the planning of a theme-based course begins with the selection of content or themes rather than the grammar features. Cameron (2001) states that “The language learning opportunities offered by theme-based teaching in the foreign language classroom arise from the content and activities that pupils undertake. Together, the content and activities produce language-using situations and discourse types.” Those language-using situations and discourse types, which might be spoken or written, determine the necessary grammar features and vocabulary to achieve the language and content goals set for a term or course.

Richards & Rodgers (2001) address theme-based language instruction as one of the several approaches developed from Content-Based Instruction (CBI). In this specific one, the syllabus is organized around themes or topics that view the language as involving several skills together and which can be introduced through different types of materials like readings, audio or video recordings. The focus of teaching is then “how meaning and information are

communicated and constructed through texts and discourse.” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.208)

Likewise, Quintero & Lopera (2016) citing several authors as Ramírez (2008), Nunan (1997), Jones (2007), Heidari-Shahreza (2014) Grabe and Stoller (1997), Haley and Austin (2004), Kaufman & Crandall (2005), and Stoller (2002), offer numerous reasons why CBI works inside the classroom, for instance: its main purpose is focused on the content, the language teaching method suggests an immersion through contextualized activities which are neither artificial nor empty of meaning, the approach shares principles with other methods or approaches that make learners the center of the process, among others.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) state that, given the fact that Theme-Based Instruction (TBI) refers to an approach rather than a method, there are not specific class procedures or activities allied neither for TBI nor for CBI. However, Kovalik and Olsen (as cited in Beatty, 2009) suggest implementing specific instructional activities to help learners achieve the learning goals, they call them “Key Points and Associated Inquires” and include the following phases of classroom instruction: introduction, demonstration, opportunity for practice with feedback, and final performance with assessment.

Implementing theme-based teaching would then lead the path for a contextualized teaching that does not intend to neglect grammar. According to Petrovitz (as cited in Korkmaz & Korkmaz, 2013) “De-contextualized way of teaching grammar was mentioned as the main shortcoming of traditional grammar materials in which every rule is explained and followed by some exercises without placing the subject within a meaningful context.” In a theme-based syllabus, the grammar or language notions need to be contextualized by the different

communicative situations. According to Perin (as cited in Ambrose, Davis & Ziegler 2013) contextualization aims to "create conditions for more effective learning". Consequently, "If practitioners want to help students become more motivated to learn, engage with the material, and learn skills, connecting new skills to a real-world task has the potential to make that skill easier to understand and to make that skill more valuable to the students." (Ambrose, Davis & Ziegler, 2013, p.40)

In the process of giving context to teaching, materials play also a significant role; that is why "texts that can be used in theme-based teaching include songs, rhymes, video, stories and non-fiction informational texts... catalogues, leaflets and magazines, and educational materials written for native speaker children" Cameron (2001, p.193). These types of materials present different communication purposes as well as vocabulary and grammar structures and they also serve as models for students to use for their own productions. "Theme-based work lends itself to the production of displays and performances of various sorts that, because they will have an audience, motivate children to re-write, practice or rehearse towards a polished language performance or text". Cameron (2001, p.194)

Working with themes, also provides students with opportunities to take a part on real life situations what in turn, facilitate different types of interaction in which they can negotiate meaning and engage in cooperative learning. According to Slavin (1995) as cited in Yamarik (2007), cooperative learning is a teaching method in which students are expected to work in small groups, solve doubts and learn by helping each other. When working with theme-based activities, students can be involved in real life like situations that promote an exchange of knowledge among them. In the words of Contreras & Chapetón (2016) "...cooperative learning

is suitable to promote a social construction of knowledge, mutual learning, and at the same time, personal and social development, students' interaction in the classroom, and language development.” (p.127)

In summary, the implementation of theme-based teaching can foster different types of interaction among students since they promote the reproduction or representation of real life-like situations. The use of appropriated and eye-catching materials as well as theme-based activities with a clear purpose, context and audience, favor the coherent and organized connection of content, therefore making of the language teaching and learning a more contextualized and purposeful process.

Research Question

How does a theme-based syllabus design favor a contextualized and purposeful English learning and promotes students' interaction?

Objectives

General Objective

To analyze how the transformation of a decontextualized grammatical English program into a contextualized purposeful course plan benefits students' interaction.

Specific Objectives

- To design a course plan for the third and fourth terms based on themes instead of grammar notions.
- To implement varied and contextualized materials either created or adapted.

- To promote theme-based activities with a clear purpose, context and audience.
- To guide students in the process of analyzing information, function and structure of texts and enable them to create their own ones in an autonomous and independent way.
- To foster students' participation through different types of interaction.

Action Plan

Research question: How does a theme-based syllabus design favor a contextualized and purposeful English learning and promote students' interaction?		
Theme: Around the city		
Subtheme N1: Where is the School?		
Vocabulary: Places in the city Prepositions of place		Grammar: Wh question: Where Verb to be There is – there are Simple present
Stages	Activities	Dates
Introduction	-Students' previous knowledge. -Vocabulary presented in context inside a neighborhood description. -Analysis of function and location of prepositions of place in the sentence.	August 8 th and 9 th
Demonstration	Students and teacher together create a city/neighborhood plan and write a short text to describe it.	August 15 th and 16 th
Practice	-In small groups students design a city plan and write the description. (Poster + text)	August 18 th , 22 nd , 23 rd and 25 th
Assessment	-In small groups, students read another team's text, identify the corresponding poster and answer a set of questions about the city/neighborhood. -Self and co-evaluation on group work.	August 29 th and 30 th September 1 st
Subtheme N2: How can I get to the museum?		
Vocabulary: Expressions to give directions		Grammar: Wh question: Where, How

Places in the city Prepositions of place Greetings, farewells and expressions to ask for somebody's help to find the location of a place.	Verb can Simple present	
Stages	Activities	Dates
Introduction	-Recognizing vocabulary on flashcards. -Following directions game.	September 6 th
Demonstration	-Students watch and answer comprehension questions about a video (people asking for and giving directions). -Students and teacher together write the script for the conversations. -Analysis of vocabulary and structure.	September 8 th and 15 th
	-Students and teacher together practice writing and performing a few short conversations to ask for directions.	September 19 th
Practice	-In pairs, students are given a small city plan and they write two conversations asking how to get to places.	September 20 th and 22 nd
Assessment	-In pairs, students perform their dialogues. The city plan is recreated in the classroom with drawing made by students.	September 26 th and 27 th
Mini project/Final Outcome: City brochure		
Vocabulary: Expressions to give directions Places in the city Prepositions of place	Grammar: Simple present	
Stages	Activities	Dates
Introduction – Demonstration	-Students analyze a brochure made by the teacher the teacher (purpose, context, audience).	October 4 th
Practice	-In small groups students design and decorate their city brochure.	October 17 th , 18 th and 20 th
Assessment	-Students share their brochures with the rest of the group	October 24 th and 25 th

Research instruments	Purpose	Dates
Journals	To determine according to what I observed in each session, if the changes made in the planning and the use of theme based engaged students in meaningful interactions.	Each class session

Students Artifacts	To determine according to students' products if their performance improved or was affected because of the use of theme based teaching or the different interactions promoted.	Students' self- and co- evaluation September 1 st
		Brochure October 24 th
Students' Questionnaire	To know students' impressions about the content, activities and class procedures.	October 27 th
CT's Interview	To know the CT's impressions about the content, activities and class procedures used and their impact on students' performance.	October 31 st

Development of Actions

To develop the proposed actions, I started by selecting a central theme to plan the thematic unit. This theme was selected taking into account the language notions that, according to the cooperating teacher, had to be covered during the third term in the school.

The thematic unit was then named "Around the city". This unit was divided into two subthemes stated as questions: "Where is the school?" And, "How can I get to the museum?" Each subtheme was developed in four stages following Kovalik and Olsen's "Key Points and Associated Inquires" that name the phases of classroom instruction as "introduction, demonstration, practice with feedback and final performance with assessment". Generally, the first two stages would take one or two classes while the last two would take longer. As a final outcome, I encouraged students to create a brochure that allowed them to illustrate the most important information about their dreamt neighborhood or city, the theme they worked all through the stages and activities planned in the new syllabus. As the interaction between students had a very important role in this project, pair and group work were implemented especially in the practice and assessment stages. Down below, I will explain in detail the steps followed for the development of each subtheme and the final outcome.

The first subtheme “Where is the school” had as purpose that students were able to write a description of a city by indicating the location of different places using prepositions of place. To introduce the vocabulary of prepositions and some places, I posted a city map on the board and gave each student a short text with the description of a city. I asked several students to read the text aloud. Whenever we reached a preposition, I asked students to stop, I repeated the sentence while I showed the map making sure that students would understand its meaning. Then student would underline the preposition. For more vocabulary practice, students received a worksheet with images and sentences from the text that were missing the preposition. During the demonstration stage, students and teacher together created a city map and its description on the board, students took notes in their notebook as well. The teacher guided the writing process but students produced all the ideas. For the practice stage, students were asked to work in groups of four. Their task was to create their dreamt city map followed by its description. This stage took several sessions. At the end of each class, the teacher would collect students work and returned the following day with comments and corrections. After several revisions, students handed in the final paper, which the teacher typed, and made a poster with map. Finally, the assessment stage included two moments. In the first moment, students displayed the posters around the classroom and by groups they were given a different text. Their task consisted on reading the text and identifying the map it represented, then they would answer some questions explaining if and why they liked or not their classmates’ city, the places they would visit and the ones they would not visit. In the second moment, students completed a self-assessment and a peer-assessment format about their commitment and performance working in groups.

The purpose of the second subtheme “How can I get to the museum”, was that students were able to indicate the directions of different places in the city. For this subtheme, the

vocabulary was introduced by the use of flashcards and practiced through a game of following instructions. In the demonstration stage, students were presented two videos with conversations asking for and giving directions. The teacher asked comprehension questions and students identified the situations and the expressions needed, then teacher and student together wrote down the scrip of both dialogues. For more practice, students guided by the teacher created two more dialogues. During the practice stage, students were asked to work in pairs. Their task consisted on creating two dialogues asking for and giving the direction for two different places. All students would base their conversation on the same city plan provided by the teacher. For the assessment stage, each student was asked to draw one place of the city. Those drawings were used to recreate a city plan (the same that students were given to create the dialogues) inside the classroom. Students performed their conversations, moving around the plan while they talked.

Finally, the mini project had as purpose that students put into practice all the content and activities carried out during the classes through a real life like situation: providing information of their dreamt city with a brochure. For this section, the introduction and demonstration stage were combined. Students were given a brochure of Divercity (a sort of amusement park, consisting on a pretended city in Medellin and other cities in Colombia, in which kids play to be adults) created by the teacher. Students analyzed the content and sections present in the brochure, as well as which of the activities developed would help them to created their own brochure. For the practice stage, students were asked to work in group once again. They designed their own brochure using all the information created during the different class sessions. Finally, students presented their work as in a fair.

When the implementation of actions had come to its end, students completed a questionnaire and the cooperating teacher an interview. This questionnaire and interview had the purpose of collecting information about students' and the CT's impressions on the content, activities and class procedures implemented throughout the project. Both research instruments asked questions about the themes, materials, activities and types of interactions, with their advantages and disadvantages, that had place during the process.

Findings and Interpretations

The present study intended to explore how the transformation of a decontextualized grammatical English program into a contextualized purposeful course plan, guided by theme-based approach principles, and the implementation of different patterns of interactions and materials benefited students' performance in the English classes. After having analyzed each source of data collected through the journals, the cooperating teacher's interview and the students' questionnaires and artifacts, I compared and classified the information reaching to the following main findings: a) engaging students through the use of visual aids, b) gaining awareness of group work responsibilities, c) improving students' performance thanks to contextualized and purposeful activities.

Engaging students through the use of visual aids

One of the objectives of this study was to implement varied and contextualized materials either created or adapted. To do so, I planned on the themes and the activities I was going to implement in the different class sections, and looked for the most appropriate materials to introduce, demonstrate and practice them. In several occasions, it was possible to observe

students reacting and becoming more engaged with the activities thanks to the materials used, especially with images. In one of my journals I expressed how students seemed very attracted to the city plan used to introduce the vocabulary of prepositions of place.

“When students arrived to the classroom and saw the city plan on the board, they looked kind of impressed. Many of them got close to it and touched the images. I think that this big colorful material called their attention.” (Entry #3 8/8/2017)

Visual aids supported linguistic topics and served to call and keep students’ attention throughout the development of different activities. In this section I provide examples that illustrate the benefit and impact of using visual aids.

Using images to support texts. During the introduction of the subtheme “Where is the school?” it was evident how the images supported and facilitated the comprehension of the linguistic topic that was being developed, since students could observe what was written in the city’s description, represented on the city plan displayed on the board. In a questionnaire applied to students they were asked: “*Out of the materials used in class, which one called your attention the most?*” they expressed how much they liked the use of images giving different reasons:

“Las imágenes porque de ahí sacábamos información.” “Imágenes porque así podemos describirlo.” “Imágenes porque expresan muchas cosas.” “Imágenes porque permite entender mejor el texto ya que es en inglés.” (Students’ questionnaire, question N4 10/27/2017)

In students’ words, they mentioned they liked images but analyzing their reasons it is possible to interpret that those images served as references to not only get information that would

be later used in descriptions, but also as representations that would allow them and their classmates to better understand what was written.

Contextualizing activities with the use of images. It is important to mention that not only the teacher has to be in charge of creating materials, students can also help and they would be happy to do so. My students were children and they liked to draw, in one occasion I asked for their help to create some material that would be used later for a different activity. Students were very committed, they liked knowing that they took part on the preparation of the activity, that this drawing exercise actually had a purpose since it was intended to be used as realia: to represent a real city inside the classroom. In the questionnaire mentioned before and answering to the same question, *“Out of the materials used in class, which one called your attention the most?”* students gave the following reasons:

“Las imagines porque con ellas creamos ciudades y realizamos muchas actividades” “Las imagines, con estas pudimos hacer mapas.” (Students’ questionnaire, question N4 10/27/2017)

Undoubtedly, the images created by students served to bring a real-life situation inside the classroom reality which helped to make of the dialogues a more contextualized activity. Students could actually walk along the city blocks represented with their drawings while performing the dialogues they prepared.

Gaining awareness of group work responsibilities

During my observations at the beginning of the year, I could notice that students’ participation in class was reduced to sharing the homework and answering the teacher’s questions. Even though this methodology seemed to work for my cooperating teacher, I wanted

to provide students with different situations in which they could work cooperatively. Jacobs and Hall (1994) define cooperative learning principles and techniques as tools that teachers use to encourage mutual helpfulness in the groups and active participation of all members. I wanted students to exchange knowledge and help each other to work together developing different activities. In order to carry out a meaningful group work, all the participants involved, that is to say, team members and also the teacher, needed to effectively carry out their responsibilities.

Helping each other and participating actively. As it was mention in the previous paragraph, group work intends for students to learn together while helping each other to understand better the content that is being developed. It is important then that every member of the team participates actively doing their part. According to what student mentioned in the questionnaire, it was possible to say that group work in terms of mutual helpfulness was a successful accomplishment. To the question “*How did you feel working in teams?*” several students answered:

“Muy bien ya que cada uno tenía ideas diferentes y así completamos todos los trabajos” “Bien ya que hice el trabajo con un muy buen equipo que participaron.” “Se sintió bien porque compartimos entre nosotros nuestras opiniones.” “Nos pusimos de acuerdo y trabajamos aportando opiniones cada uno.” “Bien porque todas nos ayudábamos.” (Students’ questionnaire, question N8 10/27/2017)

When students completed their self-assessment after their first group work activity, they gave some general comments about their work inside the team. From that information it was possible to observe that students assumed their responsibilities as being part of a team and that working with a group had some advantages. These are some of the comments students wrote on

their self-assessment, which are similar to the answers given in the questionnaire, that show how students helped each other and participated developing the activity:

“Todos aportamos ideas y manejamos muy bien el vocabulario y nos ayudamos entre sí” “Trabajamos en equipo y con compromiso.” “Trabajamos muy bien, aunque a veces nuestras opiniones fueran diferentes, pero eso es común. Las ideas de todas fueron usadas.” “No peleamos, trabajamos juiciosas, aunque a veces jugábamos. Nos pusimos de acuerdo en el mapa y el texto y nos repartimos los párrafos.” (Students’ self-assessment, general comments 09/01/2017)

However, collaborating and helping to each other was not true for every single group. While students worked in the class, I was constantly going around, observing how students carried out their work and asking how they were doing. Most of the times they would explain me how they had divided their work and every member was doing something. Other times, a few students would complain saying that not all the team members were actually helping to complete the work. “*How did you feel working in teams?*” a few students gave the following answers:

“Bien porque pudimos completar todo el trabajo y hacer las cosas bien, mal porque una compañera no hizo nada y dejó todo el trabajo.” “Fascinante, pero había personas que no hacían nada.” “Bien, aunque algunos no trabajan.” “Algo mal porque cuando había que traer imágenes a veces no traían algunas personas.” “Algo mal ya que algunas niñas no cumplían con su deber eran muy groseras.” (Students’ questionnaire, question N8 10/27/2017)

Several students stated that between the advantages of working in groups they found that they could help each other, they could learn more by sharing with their classmates, and that they could work faster and also have fun when everybody participated. But some students also said that they should be more careful when deciding who to work with.

Overcoming group work difficulties. Working in groups represented a lot of difficulties too, especially in terms of school coexistence. Several times, while carrying out the activities, students asked for the possibility of changing groups because there were some discussions and misunderstandings. Sometimes students complained about feeling mistreated, not taken into account or being left to do everything alone. Because of those situations, they were about to start a fight with the other members of the team. In the questionnaire, when students were asked “*What advantages or disadvantages did you find working in groups? Explain your answer*” several students answered:

Disadvantages: “Que algunas veces no trabajamos en equipo y tuvimos dificultades.” “Si una no quería hacer algo, peleaba.” “Que nos pusimos a pelear y nos desentendimos.” “Que a veces uno de nosotros ponía problema y nos retrasábamos.” “Siempre discutíamos y estábamos en desacuerdo.” “Que hay muchos problemas a veces.” (Students’ questionnaire, question N9 10/27/2017)

Similarly, in the self-assessment activity, students recognized this situation as a difficulty.

In the section of suggestions for further group work, some of them recommended:

“No ofender a los otros con nuestras palabras ya que las podemos hacer sentir mal.” “No desconcentrarnos y asociarnos con los que nos llevamos bien.” “Casi no pelear y aportar más, que sean más cumplidas.” “Trabajar mejor en equipo, mejor relación con mis compañeros.” (Students’ self-assessment, suggestions 09/01/2017)

As students were not used to work frequently in a cooperative way, they did not know how to deal with situations of disagreement and that is why the easiest way to solve them was arguing or even fighting. A good idea to help ease this situation, is working with students on respect, tolerance and friendship; to develop workshops about social skills and teach

students to work in a cooperative instead of a competitive way; to assign students roles and specific responsibilities as members of the team.

Clarifying stages and consequences. As I mentioned before, the teacher has also great responsibility in ensuring a successful group work. I realized that a few times I was not completely clear with the instructions I gave to students. Going around observing students' work, I noticed that they were doing something different than what they were asked, or maybe in a different order which would not exactly allow their progress. I was also faced with their doubts and many questions searching for clarification. It was possible to identify this situation in the description of a journal entry:

“I was constantly going around and observing students work and I needed to remind them about the characteristics of the map and the text. I also reminded them that the text and the map were connected and that any person should be able to observe in the map what was described in the text.” (Entry #5 8/22/2017)

They were still kids and they forgot instructions fast and easily. Additionally, knowing that students were not used to working cooperatively, I should have foreseen difficulties on working autonomously and planned to overcome such situation. I gave too much freedom to students about deciding how to divide or organize their work. As it was supported in the reflection of the same journal entry, it was not the best idea.

“Some students did a great job at designating responsibilities and sharing the work. Some others had more difficulty to agree on what to do, how to do it and when to do it. When you work in groups, sometimes all the members of the team need to be concentrated in one aspect and then you can divide the work and make everybody do it at the same time so it doesn't take that long. Students need to learn to sort their

priorities, be organized and autonomous. They are still kids and need to be guided in the process of autoregulation.” (Entry #5 8/22/2017)

To avoid these situations, I could have implemented strategies like giving students the instructions written in a piece of paper or writing them down on the board and asking students to write them in their notebooks. In this way, I would not have to go around reminding students about the work they needed to do. Along with the instructions, students should have also written and had clear every stage, the order in which they should have carried them out, deadlines and consequences for not having met the deadlines. Additionally, at least in the first group work exercises, I should have given students specific roles and duties that they should have answered for. In this way the work would have been more organized and clear for students.

Improving students’ performance thanks to contextualized and purposeful activities.

Finally, students’ English performance was one of the concerns I had at the beginning of my implementation. When I started observing, I noticed that students were used to produce only isolated sentences and using as many words from any set of vocabulary learnt as they could remember. I wanted to implement activities different from filling in the blanks, answering questions and writing simple sentences. Thanks to the models used in the introductory stages and the text we built together in the demonstration stages, students started showing progress in their writing. In the reflection of a journal entry I wrote:

I was satisfied with the progress most groups were showing. I could see students were writing more complete sentences and organized texts. (Entry #5 8/25/2017)

I strongly consider that most students improved towards this issue. Thanks to the organization of the syllabus by stages with connected activities, students started to use the language in a more meaningful way, writing complete dialogues and descriptions of places. The different activities

implemented had a context and a closer relation to real life. Students saw the purpose of carrying them out and also enjoyed them. Students let it know in the questionnaire when they expressed that the theme of giving directions called their attention because:

“...es muy divertido con el mapa que parecía real.” “...es algo muy importante para podernos dirigir a alguna parte.” “...antes no sabía cómo indicar el lugar a una persona en inglés.” “...porque aprendí a decirle a alguien su ubicación.” “...porque cuando vaya a USA podré saber las indicaciones de los otros y podré ayudar a alguien.” (Students’ questionnaire, question N2 10/27/2017)

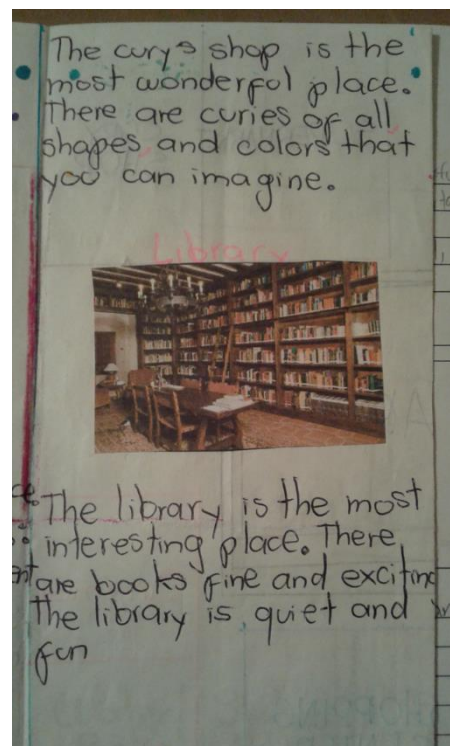
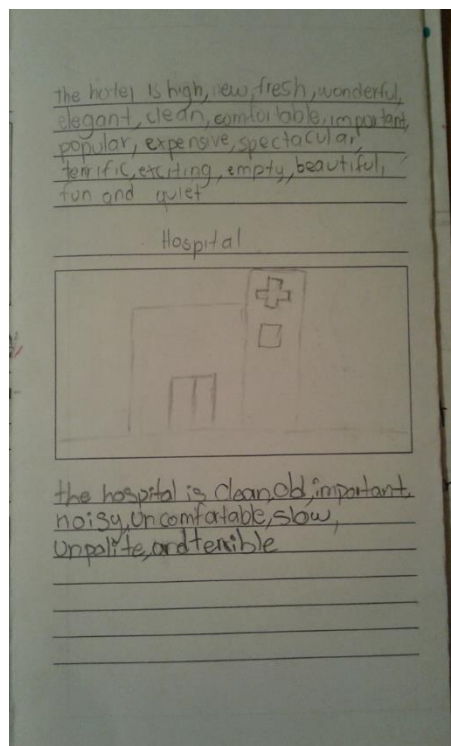
Additionally, students agreed that the sequence of all activities carried out during the third and beginning of fourth terms helped them to easily develop the final activity which consisted on the creation of a brochure providing information of their dreamt city. It was also supported in the students’ questionnaire. Students answered to the question “*Do you believe that the activities carried out in class were useful for developing the final task (brochure)?*”

Yes: “Ya que con ellas entendíamos más lo que teníamos que estudiar para el trabajo del brochure.” “Porque al final nos ayudaron en la estructura.” “Porque nos ha enseñado cuales son las direcciones. Como debemos describir los lugares y porque sabemos cómo hacer mapas.” “Porque allí expresamos todo lo que aprendimos durante las clases.” “Porque en clase trabajamos mapas, direcciones, etc y todo eso iba en el brochure.” (Students’ questionnaire, question N7 10/27/2017)

The brochure was done in two moments at the beginning of the project before starting the implementation as a diagnostic brochure, and in the last section of the implementation of actions. The first one, was completed without explanation and was considered as a diagnostic, intended to show the kind of language students used at the beginning of the implementation. After developing all the activities and analyzing with students a sample of a brochure, students collected all the texts, content and structures worked during the class sessions and used them to

create the final brochure. By analyzing both, the diagnostic and the final brochure, it was evident that before starting the implementation of actions, the type of sentences students were able to use to describe a place were composed by a subject plus a verb and a list of adjectives as complement. For example, “the hotel is high, new, fresh, wonderful, elegant, clean, comfortable, important, popular, expensive, spectacular, terrific, exciting, empty, beautiful, fun and quiet” (Sara, Maria, Samuel and Camila’s diagnostic brochure 7/24/2017). After the intervention, they were able to write more complex sentences to describe places, they used superlatives, *there is/there are* structure and relative clauses. This can be evidenced in Maria, Sara, Samuel, Simon and Camila’s description: “the cury’s shop is the most wonderful place. There are curies of all shapes and colors that you can imagine.” (Final brochure, 10/25/2017) In the following picture you can observe the work made by a group of students in the diagnostic and final brochure.

Figure 1. Comparison of sentences used in the diagnostic and final brochure



Conclusions

The purpose of my study was to analyze how the transformation of a decontextualized grammatical English program into a contextualized purposeful course plan, guided by theme-based approach principles, benefited students' interaction and performance. After having gone through different stages in this research process, I came with some conclusions. In the first place, when students were provided with attractive materials which caught their attention or which represented real situations, students became more interested and engaged with their learning process and understood much better and easily the content and language that was taught since it was contextualized and had a clear purpose. The sequencing offered by the theme was also an advantage, students were aware of the connection between activities and how the content could be complemented with every new subtheme.

Second, promoting different types of interaction between students allowed them to learn together, gaining not only knowledge but also social skills while helping and complementing each other and correcting their own mistakes. On this regard, some students from the specific context where this research took place, need still some more guidance for assuming an active role as part of a team. Besides, some work should be done to help them become more respectful and tolerant with their classmates.

Lastly, I proved myself that students were able to produce more complex texts. After exposing students to complete descriptions and dialogues and building some together with them, students became able to understand and also produce complete and purposeful texts. What I want to highlight in here is that students would produce what teachers ask from them, so depending on the activities and materials promoted and used by the teacher to carry out the classes, students

will continue repeating isolated sentences or they will go beyond and challenge themselves becoming able of using language instead of just learning chunks of it.

Reflection

After having concluded my project, I can reflect about all the positive and negative experiences that accompanied all this process. First of all, having the opportunity to teach in a public school, gave me the possibility to face the challenge of teaching to a very large group. I gained experience with classroom management, commitment and patience. Sometimes it was very hard and I felt discouraged because I did not know if I was doing well, but my cooperating teacher and practicum advisor suggested me not to be so hard on myself and value my efforts and good results.

I felt very satisfied at the end when I saw the progress that most students had made in their writing. I learnt that as a teacher you have a big influence on students' confidence and also their performance. They need to feel that you value their effort and encourage them to keep improving. Also, if you challenge them with more complex activities and texts, they will surprise you by becoming able to use the language in context and with a purpose.

I think that the biggest challenge was my attitude and motivation. I had to fight myself every day to go to school, to the seminars and to write. What I learnt from this is that you have to give your efforts to something you really like and makes you happy, otherwise it is going to be a torture.

References

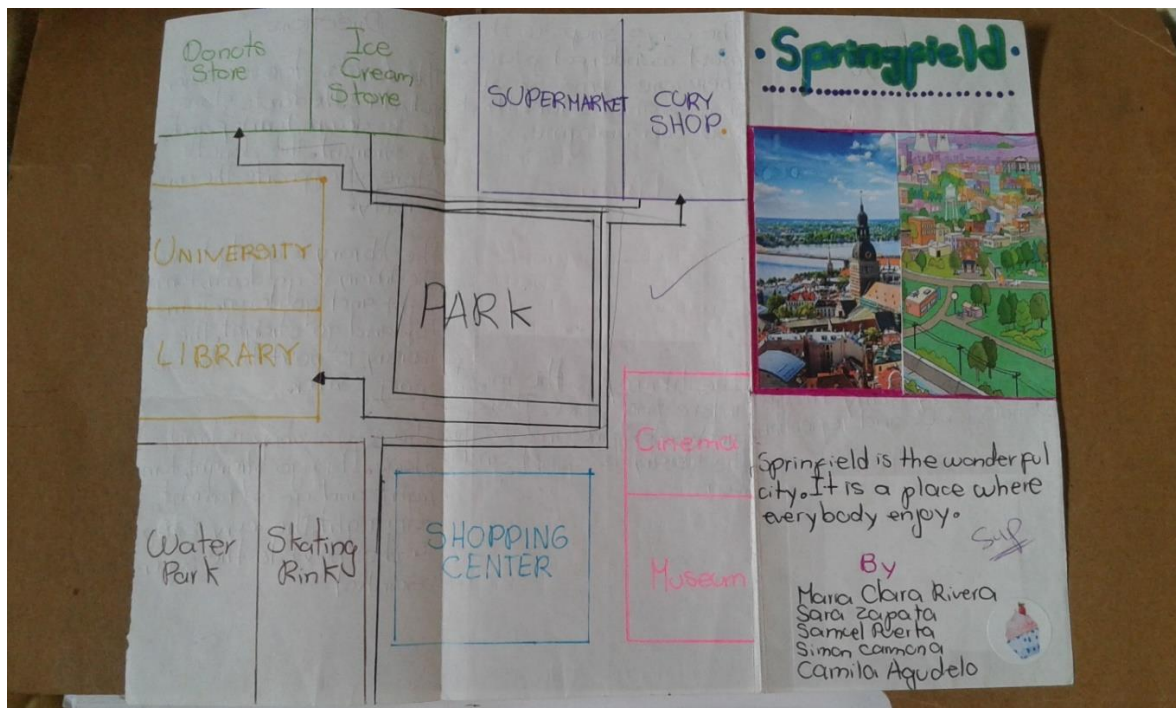
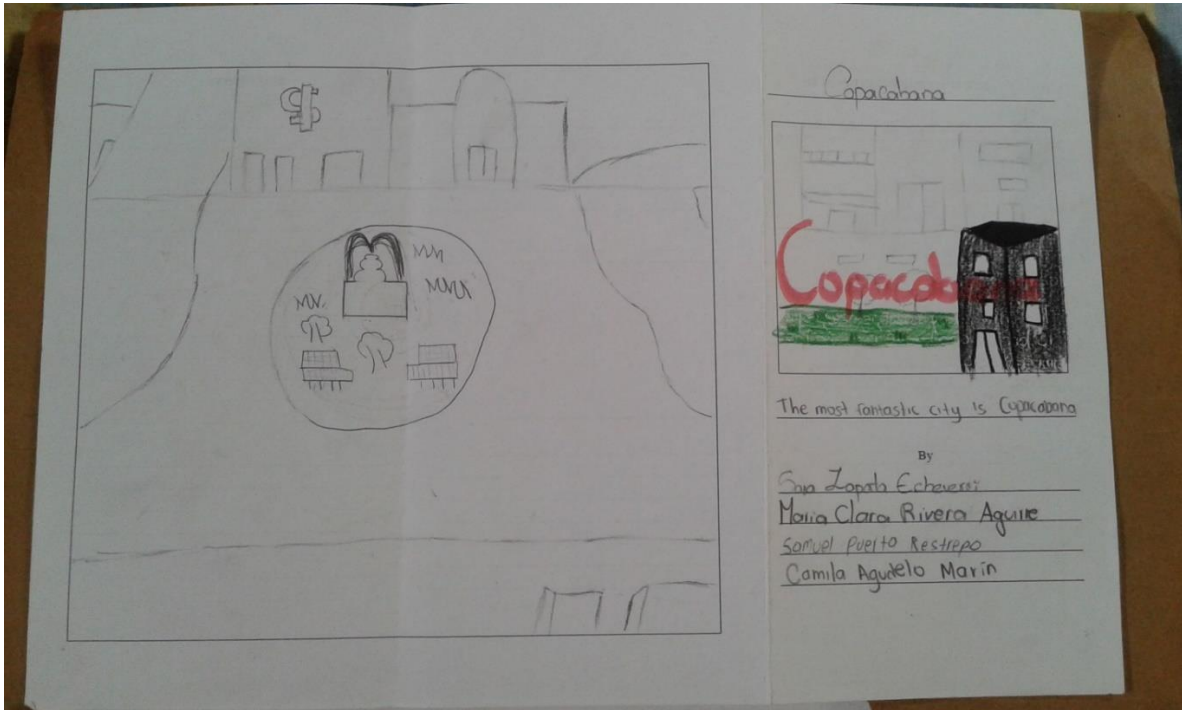
- Ambrose, V. K., Davis, A. & Ziegler, M. F. (2013). From Research to Practice: A Framework for Contextualizing Teaching and Learning. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 44(1), 35-50. doi: 10.1080/10790195.2013.10850371
- Beatty, B. J. (2009). Fostering Integrated Learning Outcomes across Domains. In Reigeluth, C. M. & Carr-Chellman, A. A. (Eds.), *Instructional-Design Theories and Models Building a Common Knowledge Base* (pp. 275-304). London, UK: Routledge.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Contreras, J. J. & Chapetón, C. M. (2016). Cooperative Learning with a Focus on the Social: A Pedagogical Proposal for the EFL Classroom. *How*, 23(2), 125-147.
- Jacobs, G. M. & Hall, S. (2002). Implementing Cooperative Learning. In Richards, J. C. & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.), *Methodology in Language Teaching an Anthology of Current Practice* (pp. 52-58). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Korkmaz, S. & Korkmaz, S. C. (2013). Contextualization or De-contextualization: Student Teachers' Perceptions about Teaching a Language in Context. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 93, 895-899.
- PEI. Institucion Educativa Escuela Normal Superior Maria Auxiliadora de Copacabana
- Quintero, J. & Lopera, C. J. (2016). Content Based Lesson Plans inside the English Rural Classrooms. *International Education Studies*, 9(11), 130-141.

Richards, J. C. & Rodgers T. S. (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Second edition. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Yamarik, S. (2007). Does Cooperative Learning Improve Student Learning Outcomes? *The Journal of Economic Education*, 38(3), 259-277.

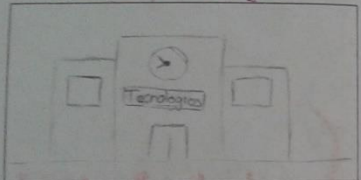
Appendix

The following pictures are examples of brochures developed by students as a diagnostic and final version.



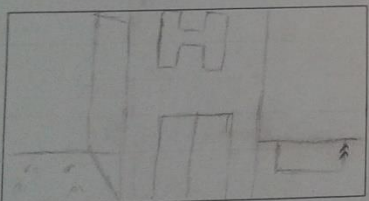
THE MOST IMPORTANT PLACES

The university "Technologica"



The university is high, is new, is pretty, is big, is cool, is wonderful, is important, is elegant, is useful, is fantastic and good.

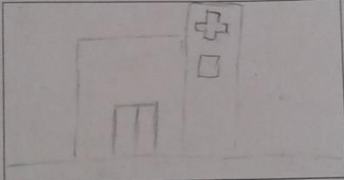
Hotel



DIRECTIONS


The hotel is high, new, fresh, wonderful, elegant, clean, comfortable, important, popular, expensive, spectacular, terrific, exciting, empty, beautiful, fun and quiet.

Hospital




the hospital is clean, old, important, noisy, uncomfortable, slow, unpolite, and terrible.

Donuts store




The donuts store is the most wonderful place. It is the wonderful and clean place. You can buy many things: Donuts, juices and refreshment.

Library



The library is the most interesting place. There are quiet books, fine and exciting. The library is quiet and fun.

Curry shop



The curry shop is the most wonderful place. There are curries of all shapes and colors that you can imagine.

Directions

The donuts store is a wonderful place. The donuts store is go down, turn left and go straight. The donuts store is opposite the university.

The library is a quiet place. The library is go down, turn right and go down. Turn left and go straight. The library is next to the shopping center.

The curry shop is a kind place. It is go straight, turn right and go straight, turn right. The curry shop is the next to the super-market.