Designing and Implementing a Project Based Learning Oriented English Syllabus to Help Eighth Graders Improve their Communicative Skills at a Public School in Medellin

Vanesa Marín Arbeláez

Universidad de Antioquia

Thesis, Research, and Practicum Advisor

Iván D. Flórez G.

Medellín

November, 2017
Abstract

This action research explores to what extent the implementation of a contextualized syllabus designed by my cooperating teacher and me can help eighth graders improve their communicative skills at a public school in Medellín through the use of Project Based Learning. This implementation took into consideration the fact that motivation is a must to learn an additional language, so students need to find a real purpose for learning English. Thus, after having asked students what they would like to do in the English class, we decided together that they would create a simple short video clip of a story in groups. Data collection of this project included interviews, surveys, journals, and students’ artifacts, which were developed at the beginning, the middle and the end of the implementation. Preliminary findings have shown that, to some extent, students improved their communicative skills, such as retelling a simple story, expressing simple ideas without using a translator, and being more confident at speaking English. However, due to lack of time, the large number of students, some classroom management issues, and students’ lack of commitment, students had some difficulties working in groups, and the project was not as meaningful as expected.

Key words: Syllabus design, project-based learning, communicative skills.

Título en Español: Promoviendo el mejoramiento de las habilidades comunicativas a través del aprendizaje basado en proyectos.
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.
# Table of the Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of the Context</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Background</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus design</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus design steps</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualized syllabus</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Based Learning</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Objective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Objectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Plan</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of the Actions</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and Interpretation</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This document portrays the development and results of the action research I carried out in my practicum as a pre-service teacher of English as a foreign or second language. The former explores to what extent the implementation of a more contextualized syllabus designed by my CT and me -for the eighth grade- could help students improve their communicative skills by using Project Based Learning as the in class strategy to teach and learn. I came out with this proposal due to in the first semester of observations I could identify that my CT was having some difficulties trying to comply with all syllabus requirements she was given. Besides, students had problems expressing their own ideas in English without using a translator, and had a negative attitude towards the English class.

This project included the following stages: A first stage in which they learnt the structure of a simple story and the different components it should include (Orientation-Complication-Resolution-Coda); a second stage in which they decided what their stories would be about the location, the characters, and the title. Here we also studied the structure of the simple past as the main tense they would use in their stories and they also started to write the first part of the story or the Orientation.

In the third stage, students received the corrections of their Orientation and they started to write the second part of the story or Complication. Here we also worked on the use of some common connectors to use in their stories. The fourth stage consisted in receiving observations on, and making corrections to, the Complication, and also starting to write the last part of their stories or Resolution. Finally, in the fifth stage, we worked on the pronunciation of their stories and the use of Movie Maker to edit the videos. They were allowed to film their videos the way
they preferred, so some of them wanted to act out, some others preferred to use puppets or cardboard with drawings.

Data collection of this project has included interviews, surveys, journals, and students’ artifacts from which I noticed that to some extent, students have improved their communicative skills, more specifically their ability to retell a simple story, to express simple ideas without using a translator, and to be more confident at saying something in English. Nevertheless, factors like lack of time, the large number of students in the group, some classroom management issues, and students’ lack of commitment, I also remarked that students had some difficulties at working in groups, and that this project has not been as meaningful as expected.

Description of the Context

The Educative Institution Antonio José Bernal is a public school located between the neighborhoods Héctor Abad Gómez and Plaza Colón in Medellín city, next to Acevedo metro station. The institution offers school education from kindergarten to eleventh grade. Thanks to a covenant with the institution SENA, it also offers three intermediate technical training in electronics, graphic design and computer systems. The institution is currently working with the fellowship program driven by the National Ministry of Education under the National Bilingualism Program. Moreover, the institution allows pre-service students to conduct their academic practicum.

The institution principles

The institution pursues a social integration for the healthy coexistence and the development of the human being to form citizens capable of assuming challenges in the fields of education, technology, occupational and formative research. Besides, the institution has as
FOSTERING COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS THROUGH PBL

challenges the respect for diversity and the commitment to the academic improvement and bonding of the family as a vital support for the transformation of the context.

The Eighth Grade English Syllabus

The general objective aims at developing in the students the reading comprehension in narrative and descriptive texts, as well as their involvement in conversations capable of leading them to a more effective use of the language. The former syllabus is guided by the institutional Malla Curricular, and the different documents proposed by the Ministry of National Education such as the Basic Learning Rights, The Suggested Curriculum Structure, the Guía 22 and the Suggested Pedagogical Principles, and the students’ book named Way to Go, which are part of the National Bilingualism Program and serve as materials or in class tools for developing the course, providing the teacher with the specific objectives to develop during the course, as well as suggested activities, methodologies and approaches for learning and teaching.

The Students

The group 8th E is a large group with 37 students among 15 and 17 years old, who have shown to be well behaved and respectful although often noisy and distracted. They usually work on classroom activities and pay attention to the teacher, but sometimes they get distracted by the use of their cell phones, or because they consider the activities very hard to do.

The Classroom

The students of the group 8th E have a comfortable classroom disposed for the English class, and where everyone has a desk. This classroom, also known as the English Lab, has a teacher laptop with internet access, and a big screen to play videos, songs. This classroom has also different materials such as flashcards, story books, the textbooks provided by National
Ministry of Education under the national Bilingualism program, some dictionaries, among other materials on which the teacher can support her teaching.

**The Cooperating Teacher**

The CT is a young teacher who has a bachelor degree in English Teaching, and has been teaching for about 16 years. She is a generous teacher who always tries to fulfil all the requirements she is asked, and treats her students with respect and solidarity as she knows her students come from difficult environments. Her teaching practice is framed by the goals proposed by the institution, the National Bilingualism Program, and the specific syllabus of the grade. Accordingly, she tries to give the students opportunities for them to use the language, and to express themselves.

**Statement of the Problem**

Public schools in Colombia have faced many challenges concerning the English level that their students should develop along their primary and secondary levels (Usma, 2015). This limited English proficiency level is an issue that mostly affects the public schools belonging to the most vulnerable cities and towns of this country because of the lack of resources and teachers, and also teacher’s integral training. The students of the eighth grade, where this project took place are not the exception: They have shown that they do not have the English knowledge that, according to Basic Learning Rights, they should already have. However, this limited English proficiency, in their case, is not due to lack of resources or qualified English teachers. Instead, it is due to the fact that students do not find a purpose on the classroom activities proposed; and that the teachers of the institution have to comply with several syllabus requirements such as the Malla Curricular or institutional syllabus, the syllabus proposed by the National Bilingualism Program, and the Aprendizaje Basado en Proyectos method.
Consequently, it is hard for the English teachers to find connections among those requirements to promote more meaningful classes.

Since most of the classes are part of a set of disconnected topics worked in the shape of isolated activities, students have shown lack of interest towards the class as they do not find a real purpose in it. Therefore, when they have been asked to produce simple sentences or give personal opinions about a common topic, they usually say they do not know English:

“Then, she explains how she is going to evaluate the presentations, and some of the girls say “what if we do not know anything about English” “you think we are gringas or what?” teacher answers that they have their notes and they have had the time to prepare it not only in class” (Journal entry 3).

In consequence, and as they think they know nothing of English, they always appeal to the translator or do they copy from their classmates. For example, “some students asked if they could go to the computers room to do the translation of their personal opinion, and the teacher answered that the goal was to do it using the dictionary and not the translator” (Journal entry 4).

On the other hand, the English teachers of the institution need to adapt their classes to a set of requirements from the Ministry of Education and the institution itself that are not always connected nor do they necessarily appeal to the same goals. Hence, it is difficult for the English teachers to establish connections among those goals so that they can answer to all those requirements and the students’ own needs and interests that must be actually the most important ones. This load of requisites has become an overwhelming issue for the English teachers (Informal chat with the CT).
“The teacher says hello in English and informs them that the dynamic of the Project has changed, so they were not going to do it the way it was first proposed, in which they were going to translate all their projects into English” (Journal entry 15).

Some requirements such as the implementation of the Aprendizaje Basado en Proyectos (ABP) promoted by the National Ministry of Education have resulted in a hindrance for the English class. For instance, sometime after the beginning of the term, my CT realized that the activities related to ABP were purposeless and time consuming for her and the students, so she decided to stop working on such activities.

“The teacher congratulated the group for their performance in the project presentation. I do not know how those presentations were, for they took place a day I do not go to the school; besides, they were not very related to the English class since the teacher decided to exempt from those projects” (Journal entry 16)

As a result of these purposeless and disconnected classes, these students continued having a stagnated English level that really needed an improvement. Consequently, I wanted to find a way to connect all these curricular requirements so that lessons could be more connected and meaningful, and in so doing, I considered that they would be able to express themselves and be really aware of what they say, so they would perceive English as a purposeful tool in their real lives.

Theoretical Background

The process of syllabus development has been a top down process where teachers are only part of its enactment inside the classrooms. As stated by Bell (as cited in Nunan, 1988), “teachers are, in the main, consumers of other people’s syllabuses; their role is to implement the plans of applied linguists, government agencies, and so on” (p. 7). However, nowadays
“teachers are increasingly being called upon to design the courses they teach” (Graves, 1996, p.1) and so is the syllabus as an integral part of course design. The following paragraphs explore the concept of syllabus, its components and variables, as well as Project Based Learning as a pedagogical and positive way of in class syllabus implementation.

**Syllabus**

According to Yalden (as cited in Nunan, 1988), “the syllabus is now seen as an instrument by which the teacher, with the help of the syllabus designer, can achieve a degree of “fit” between the needs and aims of the learner (as social being and as individual) and the activities which will take place in the classroom” (p. 3). Thus, the syllabus is not only a list of content to be covered as stated by White (as cited in Graves, 1996), in which “the syllabus is the specification and ordering of content of a course” (p.3), but also a path that should be followed in order for learners to come to satisfy their needs and aims (Yalden, as cited in Nunan, 1988, p.3).

Among the different types of syllabi that exist, Nunan (1988) establishes a distinction between **Product-oriented and Process-oriented Syllabuses**, being understood the former as a syllabus whose focus is on the knowledge and skills which learners should gain as a result of instruction, while the latter is a syllabus which focuses on the learning experiences themselves. Among **Product-oriented syllabuses** we can find **Grammatical syllabuses** which focus on the structures and grammar of language, and **Functional-Notional syllabuses** which focus on the use and different functions of language (p. 27).

On the other hand, among the syllabi that derive from **Process-oriented syllabuses** we can find **Task-based syllabuses** in which through the use of tasks learners develop language; **Content syllabuses**, which embrace the idea that through language it is possible to construct
knowledge; and the *Natural approach*, which focus on the empirical comprehension and production of the language (Nunan, 1988, p.40).

**Syllabus Design**

Syllabus design is a process in which the designer generates a set of units of work and particular methodologies Wilkins (as cited in Brumfit, 1984, p.3). More recent approaches to syllabus design promote the active involvement of teachers in this process. Thus, as stated by Nunan (1988) “it is hoped that most teachers are in a position to interpret and modify their syllabuses in the process of translating them into action” (p. 8). Furthermore, he proposes a set of steps for designing a syllabus depending on its nature.

First of all, as starting point, there should be a **need analysis** of the language, information about the learners, beliefs about the learning process itself, or a combination of these. This need analysis process can be guided, for example, by Paulo Freire’s concept of _Problematization_ (G. Kathleen, 1996), understood as “a process in which someone reflects on a content which results from an act, or reflection on the act itself in order to act better together with others within the framework of reality” (Freire, as cited in Graves, 1996:5). Thus, as the act of reflecting implies an analysis of a situation, an action or a condition, this reflection can be guided by asking questions and identifying problems Graves, (1996:5); problems that become challenges in the sense that teachers are willing to find or propose a solution for it or in Freire’s terms “to act better within the framework of reality”.

Moreover, when doing this reflection process or need analysis, it is important to consider the following eight syllabus components proposed by Van Ek (as cited in Nunan, 1988:7) which can work as a guide and are useful in the development of the syllabus.

1. The situations in which the foreign language will be used, including the topics
2. The language activities in which the learner will engage
3. The language functions which the learner will fulfil
4. What the learner will be able to do with respect to each topic
5. The general notions which the learner will be able to handle
6. The specific (topic-related) notions which the learner will be able to handle
7. The language forms which the learner will be able to use
8. The degree of skill with which the learner will be able to perform.

Second step is the setting up of objectives. In this step, it is important to define performance or product objectives which specify what learners should do as a result of instruction; and process objectives which describe activities designed to develop the skills needed to carry out the product objectives. Then, there should be a selection and grading of content. In this third step, the designer needs to select the grammatical, functional and notional content to be explored in the course, and grade them under the adopted conception he/she has of difficulty. Finally, there is a selection and grading of the learning tasks. An aspect that must be taken into account when selecting and grading the learning activities is that there must exist a connection between goals, objectives and tasks since “failure to provide links between them can lead to a situation in which the desired outcomes of a program are contradicted at the classroom level” Nunan, (1988, p. 96). Besides the connection that must exist between goals, objectives and tasks, there must also be a connection between the syllabus design development and the approach to teaching and learning claimed, which provides the pedagogical principles to consider.

Contextualized Syllabus

Taking into account the importance of having teachers intervening and interpreting the syllabi as stated in previous paragraphs leads us to more contextualized syllabi, in which different needs presented in the learning settings are tackled in a more efficient way. According
to Ball (1994), “policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set” (p. 19). Furthermore, Widdowson (as cited in Nunan, 1988) states that “syllabus is not only the specification of a teaching programme, but also the pedagogic agenda which defines a particular subject for a particular group of learners. Such a specification provides not only a characterization of content, the formalization in pedagogic terms of an area of knowledge or behaviour, but also arranges this content as a succession of interim objectives” (p.52)

That is to say that every single course is a specific, particular learning setting, whose needs require of a contextualized syllabus for it to achieve the interim objectives. The next section analyses the approach to teaching and learning defined as Project Based Learning, which makes part of the pedagogic agenda leading this action research and which will answer to the needs of our particular learning setting.

**Project Based Learning**

It is an approach to teaching and learning where “students actively work planning, evaluating and developing a project that is related to the real world and where language is used as an instrument to carry it out” (Martí as cited in Ministry of National Education PPG SEC, 2016). Therefore, it promotes the prevalence of the process over the product, which might lead to engage students in developing their own projects by providing them with a purpose related to their real lives. “Project work leads to the authentic integration of skills and processing of information from varied sources, mirroring real-life tasks” Stoller (2002, p.110). As a result, students do not only develop their projects, but also enhance their communicative skills, which is, in terms of language development, the English class’ main goal. Consequently, this approach also involves student's’ responsibility of their learning process after having them
engaged, as stated “by integrating Project work into the classrooms, educators create vibrant learning environments that require active student involvement, stimulate higher-level thinking skills, and give students responsibility for their own learning” Stoller, (2002:107).

To sum up, teachers need to become active participants of their own syllabus design so that their syllabus can become contextualized ones that satisfy real learners’ needs while complying with government’s curricular guidelines. After getting awareness of the latter, it is unavoidable to make a need analysis of the particular context and all the aspects that make part of it so that we can turn those needs into objectives that will guide our courses and achievements. Then, it is required to select and grade not only the content for the course, but also the learning activities that are going to be part of the learning and teaching process. Moreover, it is essential to mind that all these four steps are guided by the approach to syllabus adopted as well as the approach to learning and teaching, in this case Project Based Learning, so that it can be a coherent process leading to a coherent experience or process.

**Research Question**

To what extent does PBL help contextualize the English syllabus in an eighth grade class at a public school in Medellín through Project Based Learning?

**General Objective**

To explore to what extent the implementation of a contextualized syllabus designed by my CT and me can help eighth graders improve their English Language Skills at a public school in Medellín through PBL.

**Specific Objectives**

- To design instructional units for the third and fourth terms of the eighth grade English class taking into account the guidelines in the Basic Learning Rights. The Suggested
Curriculum Structure, the Guía 22 and the Suggested Pedagogical Principles, and the Institutional Malla Curricular.

- To implement a PBL approach to help the students improve their language skills.
- To introduce students into the classroom dynamic of PBL approach.
- To have students work in groups in order to promote cooperative learning.
- To support students through the different stages and time tables of their projects.

**Action Plan**

In order to implement a more contextualized syllabus through PBL at the eighth grade where my project took place, I decided to start analyzing and intervening the different curricular documents that my CT was given, and then implement the new contextualized syllabus in the classroom through Project Based Learning. First of all we did a need analysis based on the Documents (Suggested Curriculum Structure, Basic Learning Rights, Guía 22, and Suggested Pedagogical Principles and the institutional malla curricular) to select the content required for the new syllabus and state the different objectives. In order to problematize our classroom situation, I talked with my CT to know what she considered as strengths and weaknesses of the group; and with the students to know their expectations and first insights, so that we could take into account their own interests and personal expectations in the development of the projects, and this way engage them in doing so. Once we had a clear idea of the needs, we turned those into goals; selected and graded the content and tasks for the new course. After having the new syllabus for the following school terms of the grade, we initiated its implementation by sharing with the students the different objectives and making them write them down; showing the students some examples of different projects and different themes we could use for our own projects; agreeing on a theme for the project; and determining the final outcome. On the other hand, as one of the objectives of this implementation was to
have an English environment to learn the English, we shared with the students some vocabulary to interact in the class, which they should start using from that day on. Finally, the main part of the implementation was the creation and writing of the Orientation, Problematization and Resolution of their own stories, which they would use as the main supply for creating their short films.

Development of the Actions

This action plan was developed in the third term of the school year. To do this, I intervened the English syllabus of the eighth grade course following Nunan’s steps for designing a syllabus, and implemented the new contextualized and redesigned syllabus in the course through PBL. I started analyzing carefully, with my CT, the documents suggested by the government and the institution itself as a framework for the syllabus, that is, the (Suggested Curriculum Structure, the Basic Learning Rights, Guía 22, the Suggested Pedagogical Principles and the malla curricular (school curriculum). With this analysis, we wanted to establish connections among different topics and units and to decide which of them were too ambitious for our students’ current English level and Zone of Proximal Development. Then, and after having had informal talks with my CT and students, we settled mean language needs, interests and expectations, and we turned those into the goals, which would drive our course.

After having seen genres as a main topic in most of the documents, we selected the different grammatical and discursive topics such as simple past tense, common connectors, and structure of a story.

The stage of selecting and grading tasks was presented since the beginning given that we had already decided to work based on PBL, so we knew we would develop a project in which the tasks were determined by it. After having shared with the students the objectives for
the course and showed them different samples of projects we could develop such as portfolios, brochures, role plays, magazines, we decided to develop a short film of a simple short story students would create on their own as the final product. Is of paramount importance to highlight that creating a short film was proposed by a student, and most of the group voted in favor.

To create an environment in which students could interact in English with us the teachers and between them, I implemented a task to develop class vocabulary; so that they started to use English in the classroom instead of being afraid. Therefore, after having showed them the vocabulary, we played who wants to be a millionaire to practice the use of these words and expressions, and the next class we evaluated them on this issue, and asked them to start using that vocabulary; so that they could understand and use some English expressions in class throughout the rest of the school year. I also proposed to give points in every single class to those students who would use the taught vocabulary, and I would keep a record of that on a poster I brought hung on a classroom wall.

Next, we started to work on the writing of the story. We emphasized on the non-use of translators since we wanted students to write their own stories with their own words and the knowledge on which we had worked with them, we showed them 3 samples of simple short stories, The Controller, and Divided Brain, both taken from youtube, and The very Hungry Caterpillar; then we wrote a story together on the board. To do this we worked jointly on the elaboration of the different stages of the story, that is, the orientation, problematization and resolution. Then, we started to develop the first part of their own stories, the orientation. In small groups of three or four, the same groups they had for the institutional projects they were developing in other subjects, they first decided on a topic and a tittle for the. We tried to do all tasks during class time to make sure they were really following the instructions. After some
classes writing the orientation, students submitted a first draft of the orientation and we provided some observations, so they could correct mistakes, improve it, and continue with the stage of complication in their stories, to write the complication and resolution of their stories. Similarly, once they finished a stage of the story, we provided them with feedback for them to rewrite it. This took about a month and a half to be done.

Finally, once they had their stories, we sent them podcasts to their whatsapp’s accounts with the right pronunciation of their stories for them to listen to and practice it. We also showed them how to use Movie Maker for editing the videos, and we gave them two weeks to film and to edit the videos at the school in case they did not have computer. Some of them worked well in those classes, asking us questions and using the time to practice the scripts and the role plays or what they had planned to do. Students were free to decide how to do the videos and to use another video editor, but they had to include the voice of all of the members, credits, and some effects.

The day of the presentation of the projects only one girl, who had decided to work alone since she had a trouble with her initial group, brought her video following all the instructions. Other four groups out of eleven brought their videos the following week, two of them were well developed videos and the other two were fairly developed.

In order to analyze the development and impact of this project I conducted a whole group survey in which I wanted to analyze their perceptions on the development of the project and the difficulties they faced; a group interview in which I went deeper on the difficulties they had expressed they had in the previous surveys; and I used students’ artifacts, and my observation journal in order to analyze students’ engagement on developing the tasks and their feelings towards the class, the project and my involvement as the pre-service teacher.
Findings and Interpretation

After having conducted a group survey to know students’ perceptions on the development of the project, their feelings towards it and difficulties; a five student interview to verify and clarify some of the questions of the survey; and an analysis of my observation journals and different students’ artifacts to see their engagement and participation besides their improvement of communicative skills, I came out with the following findings and their corresponding interpretation.

Students Preferred Drawing Activities

Data suggested that students enjoyed activities that required them to make drawings, use pictures, and express ideas through them. This was noticed in different tasks such as the one where students were asked to draw the global idea of a story from a short film called “The Controller”. In this activity, they were asked to look at the video once to get global ideas, then to look at it again to get more specific ideas; after this we debated what was understood and the possible reasons of the situations and characters’ actions; and finally they were given a sheet for developing the task in which they had to order the story which was disarranged and to divide it into the three main parts Orientation, Problematization and Resolution, and to draw something that represented that main part; that is to say, a drawing for the Orientation, another for the Complication and another for the resolution. In another activity, students had to make a drawing representing the orientation, problematization and resolution of their own stories. This was developed the day all of the groups had finished their writing of their stories and we aimed that they could figure out the three main moments they would show on their videos. The former can be seen in the following picture in which a group of students drew the arrival of a new classmate as the Orientation of their story; a girl who was in love with him and who had
many problems as the Complication; and a happy supportive couple as the Resolution of their story.

![Orientation, Complication, Resolution](image)

**Students were Able to Understand Global Ideas**

Data also suggested that; after having been taught some strategies, students were able to understand global ideas in a text, learning that understanding every single word was not the most important issue when listening to a podcast or looking at a video. This could be noticed in activities in which students watched the short films “The Controller” “Brain divided” and “Butterfly circus”. The following pictures were taken from the second part of the activity made with The Controller film –which was already described in the previous statement- here students had to make a drawing representing the three main parts of the story (Orientation, Complication, and Resolution): thus, students drew, as Orientation, a mom asking her son to stop playing video games and go to tidy up his bedroom; as Complication, a mom who got into the video game itself when trying to turn off the TV; and a kid and his mom playing happily together after having understood each other’s position, as the Resolution of the story.
Some Students were Able to Express Simple Ideas in English with their Own Words and Knowledge

In terms of expressing simple ideas in English, data suggests that some students were able to do this using their own words and knowledge. This could be noticed in the students’ stories in which they wrote their own simple short stories, most of them without appealing to translators, and most of them coherently written. The following is a sample of the stories they wrote, and the screenshots of the simple short films they developed.

In the following story, it can be seen how they mostly used simple past tense, short simple non-descriptive sentences, and common connectors such as “but”. Besides, they could state an Orientation, Complication and Resolution for their story.

**The superhero boy**

“Once upon a time a kid wanted to be a superhero. He always wanted to help the humanity, but the young boy looked that every time the humanity was more polluted. Time passed and the kid knew that he could help humanity in a different way, he understood that helping humanity by recycling would be the best way to help a city” (by a group of students)

These are the screenshots of the videos they created and their titles, as it can be seen only four groups developed the videos, the rest of the groups, five in total,
did not do it. Three of the videos were developed by using images, posters and animation, and in the first one they acted out the story. These videos required the title at the beginning, some animation, the voice of all the members, and credits at the end.

Most students often showed lack of commitment to do their tasks

Data also indicated that most students did not show commitment or engagement in doing some of the activities. This lack of commitment and engagement could be noticed in activities such as the quiz about the in-class vocabulary, in which only 3 out of 38 students got 5 out of 5 possible points and 17 passed it with a three and the other 16 failed it. Some of those students who failed wrote mockeries in their quiz sheet, such as “no sé jajaja”. (Journal entry 6). In another strategy proposed for practicing the in-class vocabulary, the motivational poster which would be used to record students’ use of this, they wrote offensive words towards other classmates (Journal entry 6). Students’ lack of commitment could also be seen when they did not do their presentation of the video the day it was due although they were given enough class time to develop it (Journal entry 16). Besides, six groups of students did not make their videos, which equates to over half the whole group.

Students recognized they did not do their best, and also expressed they did not care

After having analyzed students’ surveys and interview, it could be seen that students would have done things different and that they felt their performance was not the best. The
FOSTERING COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS THROUGH PBL

former can be noticed in the following statements from the survey and the interview. Thirty students marked number 3 to evaluate their performance and work during the process, which gave the concept of “my own performance during the development of our projects” a grade of fair (Students’ survey)

2 of 5 interviewees answered that they felt satisfy with what they did. The rest said they could have done better, for example student A said: “no pues es que a mí si me hubiera gustado hacer un video como más bonito, así como el de student B y yo sé que si nos hubiéramos puesto de acuerdo también hubiéramos sido capaces” (Interview)

Most Students had difficulties working in groups

Another major difficulty that could be identified was that most of the groups had problems working together. This was probably due to the fact that they did not choose the classmates they would work with in their groups, as it had been decided that they had to work in the same groups established for the institutional projects they were developing. The former could be noticed from the different problems they went through such as some group divisions, a girl decision on working alone (Journal entry 16), and the non-participation of some of the members of the groups in the videos. Besides, at the interview, when I asked about their experience working in their groups, all interviewees answered that they had different problems working in groups due to reasons such as lack of commitment from some of the members; difficulty to get an agreement, incompatibilities in terms of likes, the fact that they did not choose their groups, big groups, difference in terms of the English level of the members, intolerance, selfishness, personal quarrels. For example student A said “a lo último yo me arrepentí de no haberlo hecho sola pues era muy maluco ponerse de acuerdo” student B said “el cuento lo teníamos listo pero el video no lo hicimos porque algunos no estaban dispuestos
a participar en el, algunos estaban pero otros no” student C said “hubieron problemáticas de grupo personales, no nos entendíamos bien para hacer el trabajo”

**Most students have problems following instructions**

Data also indicates that most students could not easily follow instructions. This could be observed in all the different activities developed in which many students decided to make the tasks in a different way; for example “Half the group presented their videos, but only a girl did a really good job following all the instructions” (the girl, who worked alone) *(Journal entry 17).* Moreover, in the activity of The Controller Film, they had to do a drawing to represent the general ideas of the story, and then write three sentences to express those ideas. Some students, however, did the drawings, but did not even try to write the sentences. Also, in the development of the stories, they were asked to write at least five lines for every part of the story, but some of them wrote less than that, this can be seen in the story presented previously in which for the Orientation of their stories a group of students wrote this “Once upon a time a kid wanted to be a superhero. He always wanted to help the humanity. Furthermore, one of the groups presented a video without the retelling of the story, which was part of the instructions. Besides, every time they were asked to bring a homework or material many of them came to the class asking for more time to present their homeworks as it occurred the day issued for the presentation of the final projects *(Journal entry 16).*

**Conclusions**

This study aimed to explore to what extent the implementation of a contextualized syllabus designed by my CT and me could help students improve their communicative skills through PBL, and it has been shown that this could help students improve their communicative skills to the extent that they learnt they are able to express themselves without appealing to a translator –one of the biggest difficulties presented at the beginning--; they learnt the
importance of getting global ideas from speeches and how to do it; they are no longer afraid of
the language, for they know they can do it if they get engaged and work; They can retell a
simple short story with little language resources; they can do great projects using the English if
they want and effort; and they could perceive and profit of a more connected course in which
lessons complemented each other and showed them a purpose for doing a task.

Regarding the objective I personally proposed for me as a pre-service teacher in which
they were going to start using English expressions to interact in the class, and that by the end of
my practicum I was going to be able to develop my class in English was not possible to do due
to some discipline problems, and lack of engagement from students to allow the former to
happen by participating and trying to pay attention and understand explanations and
instructions in English. Nevertheless, I tried to use the language for some simple things, so that
they at least could see they can understand and there is nothing to be afraid of being talked in
English.

Although for some students this project was not as meaningful as expected, for some
others I am sure it was and this made me feel happy, for it means not all the battle was in vain.

Reflections

This experience has been a really complex experience in my life because I really hoped
the goals I proposed for the course would be achieved, and almost all of them were not. This
was so, not because the goals were really ambitious, but due to other reasons that send us to
deeper and bigger problems that are affecting not only education but our society itself.

Problems that come from our current families, government policies and its selfish
interests.
For me everything started when the unbalance of power at schools and inside family life was tackled by invalidating families and schools to correct and form children, a procedure that has been taken to the extent that the unbalance remains but in a different way.

Government has not only invalidate us but also has promoted mediocrity for example with the decree 230 in which it is established that institutions must guarantee that the 95% of students pass the academic year per grades.

Consequently, as students are given so many opportunities they do not care for doing something during the year, on the contrary many of them do nothing, but misbehave not allowing those who really want to learn to be thought and complicating the development of the classes. Moreover, many of them, who do nothing during the school year try successfully to pass the academic year doing something the last two weeks; something that really upsets me not because I do not want them to pass, but because they had the same opportunities, but unfortunately they decide not to take advantage of them. Therefore, as they know they can pass courses doing something at the end they simply limit themselves to do the less they can, becoming mediocre students.

On the other hand government promotes mediocrity every time it humiliates teachers with a salary that do not correspond to a salary for a professional, and the amount of responsibilities they put on them. This without mentioning the other policies that limit educators.

Government promotes mediocrity to respond to its selfish interests, in which they want ignorant citizens not to fight against their injustices.

This must change if we want to be able to promote quality education.
References


Stoller, F. (2002). *Project work: A means to promote language content*.

Usma, J. (2015). *From Transnational Language Policy Transfer to Local Appropriation The case of the National Bilingual Program in Medellín, Colombia*. University of Antioquia.