

How to transform the English learning process in a meaningful experience through the influence of the target language in the students' local context?

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Abstract

This project research was focused on how the English input that is always present in the students' daily lives can help them to be in contact with the foreign language they want to learn. The main objective was to explore how this exposure to an authentic form of the language can help them to deal better with the school content resulting not only in an increase of their performance but also in the building of a meaningful learning experience.

Through the development of this project it was also aimed to help the students to become aware of the implications of the use of a foreign language in their local context and to foster a reflective attitude towards them.

Key words: Linguistic landscape, Authentic materials, Meaningful learning, Critical thinking, Local context.

Degree Requirement

This action research project was carried out during my teaching practicum at the institution Benedikta Zur Niden (2016-2017) as a requirement to obtain a Bachelor education degree in foreign languages teaching (English - French) at the Escuela de Idiomas of the Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellín, Colombia.

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Preface

This is the report of an action research project that was executed from August 2016 to June 2017 at the institution Benedikta Zur Nieden with eighth graders. After evaluating the needs of the students, I decided to orientate my project on the English input that is already present in the students' surroundings and how this sociolinguistic phenomenon could be used as an advantage for the students to increase their performance at school. Allowing me to apply and experiment what I have learnt all along the semesters that composes my academic journey.

For developing this project, in the first half of my practicum, I observed my cooperating teacher and the students, looking for a problematic in which I could base my research; after identifying in which aspect I wanted to develop the project, I proposed an action plan that was later, in practicum II, carried out to collect data that was later analyzed and interpreted to be able to make conclusion about its effectiveness.

School context

The institution Benedikta Zur Nieden is located in La America (commune 12); the surroundings are the San Javier metro station, the Parque Biblioteca San Javier and next to the school, is located the Cementerio la America. The school has two entrances, both in use.

The building is made up of two main structures that are connected by a concrete bridge: the first block is a three-story construction built by a basement area: one classroom, a small theatre, a computer room and two storage rooms. On the second floor, there are located the administrative offices and the teacher's room, next to them it is the school restaurant and the access to teacher's lounge on the third floor; inside the lounge, it is located the school's psychology office; the school auditorium is located also in the third floor. The second block is a five-story building where are the other thirty classrooms, a computer room, the library, three laboratories (physics (2) and chemistry (1)), the students' toilets (male and female separately) and the snacks store. There is also an indoor football court. All the spaces in the school have access through ramps for the handicapped people.

The school has as mission to offer to the students an environment that respects the difference and that enhance the family participation providing an integral development based on the research, the love, and the development of competences that allows them to become transformer citizens in society. As for vision, the school aims to be recognized for its human touch, academic proficiency and for its inclusion's process.

The school has a pedagogical model that consists of education with love for life; their commitment is focused on caring about students' personality dimensions, such as their thinking, feeling and acting. For the elaboration of this model, they take as references the Affection

Pedagogy (Ofelia May), Social Pedagogy (Vigotsky) and Pedagogical Constructivism (Piaget). As the institution believes these approaches are focused on aspects that form students' different aspects of life, such as: biological, intellectual, affective, social, transcendental, and axiological aspects, which acknowledge unity of cognitive and affective matters in students' formation, as well as teachers' role as learning mediators.

Three teachers, who have a regular meeting on Mondays to make decisions about the English department, compose the English department. Following a recommendation of this department, the school has all the information signs in both English and Spanish.

In high school the English weekly time is four hours from sixth graders to ninth graders; Tenth graders and senior years have three English class hours per week.

The classrooms are equipped with a blackboard and a white board, a teacher desk and around forty students' seats. The teachers have access to laptops that they can take to the classrooms. Due to the school design, the classrooms are very well lit and fresh.

The English teacher I am assigned to –further referred as CT- was formed in the University of Antioquia as Languages teacher. He also has a master degree on behavior and addictions. He is the teacher in charge of the committee of conciliation and strategies.

His main objective with the students is to prepare them for the Icfes test they will have to take in two years. Because of this, his methodology is based on reading comprehension activities.

The students I choose to make this project with are the seventh graders; their English class takes place on Wednesdays and Fridays from 10:10 – 12:00.

Most of the students are between 13-15 years old. In general, they live in areas classified by their social class as one or two. Some of them have records of drugs-consuming. Their beliefs toward English and their own process is that it is very difficult to speak and that if they know something is merely because they have as English teacher the one they have.

Statement of the problem:

Learning any foreign language in any context could be difficult and tedious if the language is not contextualized in a real and more approachable experience. The fact that it is always seen as something far away or that would provide future advantages is sometimes a factor that does not allow the students to connect in a more personal and immediate way with the language that is being taught.

In Colombia, learning English as a foreign language is a mean to access to some social, economic and academic privileges, and for high school students is a mandatory subject in which they have to succeed in order to get promoted, but the general interest about this language usually stays there. Moreover, currently, there are not enough adequate spaces that allows the students to interact and to be in contact with the language that they are learning.

After several months of class observation in the second group of the seventh grade at the public school Benedikta Sur Nieden, it is being found that the students are struggling to find a connection between English, the English class and their real lives; situation that interferes and obstructs their learning process.

Therefore, I detect that the fact that the students are not seeing a link between the English they learn at school and the one they interact with in their normal lives is interfering with their

willingness to learn. I believe that by providing the necessary articulation between the two of them, the students' English learning process will become a meaningful experience helping them to increase their performance.

Theoretical framework

'English is all around', that is a sentence that can easily cross the mind when walking around the city; a Spanish speaker city in Latin America that based on the last rank provided by the Colombian government is not on the top of the most tourist visited cities in the country. Putting aside the city, English can be found everywhere. The globalization as well as the fact that English is nowadays a lingua franca, it provides the students with opportunities that fifteen years ago were impossible to imagine. The fact that students are all the time immerse in a context surrounded by English should be a factor that had helped foreign language learners to increase their performance in the language but it is hardly the case, taking into account that only few times this phenomenon is addressed or taken into education as a tool for the students to apply, practice and reinforce what is on the curriculum. That's why this action research project seeks to transform the experience of learning a foreign language by using an input that is already in the students' daily lives and that can also be connected with the class syllabus. The process of being aware of the surroundings for a language purpose offers the opportunity for the students to not only learn the language but also to read and to reflect upon the world they are living on. For achieving this goal, there are several notions that must be addressed: Authentic material as a mean to connect the outside world and the English class; local context as the location where to find the authentic material; linguistic landscape as the study of the visual representation of languages – foreign languages included-; meaningful learning as the learning process that goes

beyond the classroom and critical thinking as the reflecting process about the realities learn through the target language.

The definition of the concept authentic material is not homogenous through the literature in language teaching. For the proposes of this project it is going to be taken into account as stated by Swaffar 1985, cited in Thomas, 2014: “[authentic material is] an authentic text, oral or written, whose primary intent is to communicate meaning” (p.15). In other words, authentic material is a text, presented in written or visual form, which is not designed for teaching or with teaching purposes allowing the students -as proposed by Kilickaya (2004)- to be exposed to the ‘real language’ –the language that is being used- and its current implementation employment. According to Thomas (2014, p.15) the use of authentic material also provides numerous advantages in exposing learners to a language that offers a pragmatic purpose; in providing a language learning experience more focused to the student’s interests and needs; in allowing the use of information of a more diverse set of topics and in connecting the classroom with the outside world.

Also, from what Regmi (2011) says, local context is the setting in which the students have grown and in which they dwell. Furthermore, -she says- the language production is usually mark by what is experienced which commonly is directly related to the immediate environment. Being the surroundings what in most cases shapes the language is prudent to affirm that both concepts are indivisible from each other; a discourse that involves “language” cannot ignore “the context” as one is develop through the interactions with the other. Rye & Støkken (2012) have also indicated that “the local context of the students’ daily life should be considered part of the educational space” that is to say that for achieving a holistic experience when teaching and

learning a foreign language it is important for the students' outside lives be taken into the classroom and linked with the language content that is being taught.

The concept of linguistic landscape as stated by Landry and Bourhis (1997, p.23) and cited in Thornbury (2012) makes reference to the visibility of languages in any context and the analysis of its purposed discourse(s) and intention(s). Also, according to Pennycook (2008, p.304) linguistic landscape allows to address questions about the role of a particular language in a given context as he indicates that:

“Meaning does not reside in the text but is always in the context [...]. In order to know what meanings signs may carry in the social domain, however, we need to know more about how and why they are made, with what intentions, beliefs and ideologies, and how they are read, with what interests, interpretations and discourses.”

In other words, the field of linguistic landscape not only offers the opportunity to notice the language that is taking a part in a specific place but also fosters reflection upon the implications of its salience. Shohamy and Waksman (2008, p.313) theorize as well, that LL invokes the text forms located and portrayed in a temporary public space, which is constantly redefined and transformed.

On the other hand, when talking about meaningful learning, Zapata (2005) states that “it is necessary to take into account the stage in which students are in relation to the learning of those contents and the way in which they will construct their own knowledge as a starting point”, which means that the learning process is an interactive one in which the students make connections with the concepts they already have in themselves and with their realities, moreover, those are the tools that would help them to interiorize the new realities that they are learning. Connecting content with meaning can help the students to relate with it in a more personal way

and to provide more lasting connections, as relating new knowledge to pertinent previous notions (Ausubel, 1977) is part of the students understanding of new concepts.

Finally, according to Moore and Parker (1986) cited in Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan (2000), the students must have the ability to choose, to approve, refuse or cease their perception about a claim; by way of explanation, students should develop the enough skills to reflect about the world they are living on and upon the discourses they are in contact with through to the foreign language they are learning. Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan (2000) also suggests that:

“[...] by only using and knowing the meaning, learners do not become proficient in the target language. I strongly believe that learners can only become proficient language users if they, besides using the language and knowing the meaning, could display creative and critical thinking through the language.”

Meaning that when learning and teaching a foreign language, it is important to take into account that the students should also become critical thinkers of the new realities that are being discover.

Research Question

How to transform the English learning process in a meaningful experience through the influence of the target language in the students' local context?

General objective

To establish links between the school and the student's lives to strength the content learnt in the English course

Specific objectives

-To provide (make visible) situations where the students can interact with English outside the classroom.

-To improve students' English performance by increasing their exposure to the language.

Action Plan

The plan to achieve the goals is divided in three action strategies: the use of English outside the classroom, the increase of English exposure, the analysis of the English influence in the local context.

The use of English outside the classroom is going to be addressed through the implementation of three activities; a warm-up in which the students are going to guess the meaning of the brands based on the images that composed their logo, e.g. dove. As they are using those brands all the time, the pronunciation of them is going to be stress and link with words that they are going to need and to use in their daily lives. The activity is going to be measured by the final product that students hand. The second activity is related to the first one as the students are going to work with brands, this time students will have to search in magazines for slogans or mottos that are in English, e.g. Nike: Just do it. They are going to be asked to guess the meaning of that motto based on their previous grammatical and vocabulary knowledge and to answer a series of questions about the purpose of it being in English. They will write a report about it. The last activity of the strategy is called English detectives, and is divided in two parts: in the first one the students are assigned a picture that was taken in the streets of Medellin in which it is visible a text in English. They will have to answer some questions about it, e.g. who wrote the text and they will hand a written report.

For carrying out the strategy called 'the increase of English exposure', students are going to perform in three different activities, starting with one called 'What am I wearing?' in which

they will bring realia that contains messages in English to the classroom to try to de-codify the meaning using their previous knowledge and the content learned suggested by the syllabus. They will present a written report of the findings. The next activity is going to be a listening/comprehension activity, it is called ‘What am I listening to?’, in which the students will express their previous ideas about the meaning of a trendy song. After taking a look at the lyrics and using the content studied, they will write about their understanding of the general meaning of the song and their final thoughts about it. The last activity of this strategy it is called ‘Where in the city are those signs?’ this activity is also divided in two different sections: in the first one the students should identify where they can find English in their most common surrounding the school, then they will do the same activity but in a larger scale as they will have to identify the location of several signs that are in English and can be found around the city. Then they will have to analyze the reason/implication behind that phenomenon. They will present their findings orally to the class. All along the process the students are going to be asked to analyze and reflect upon their findings aiming to become critical about the influences of English in their context and in their lives.

ACTION STRATEGY	METHODOLOGY	ACTIVITY	MATERIALS & RESOURCES	INSTRUMENTS	TIME	FINDINGS
The use of English outside the classroom	Through the reading of specific images that are related to	-Guess the meaning of the word -Brands in English-.	-Printed images of brands	-Students' log -Teacher journal	1 class (February 17)	In general the students showed an increasing

	<p>students context, help them to identify and make sense of the English content that already exist in their reality</p>	<p>(Warm-up) (Pronunciation aid)</p>				<p>curiosity about looking for the English that is interacting with them in their daily lives and also a better understanding of the meanings of it.</p>
		<p>-What does that mean? – Ss will find the meaning of some slogans found in magazines using their previous knowledge (Development activity)(Oral and written report)</p>	<p>-Magazines -Scissors -Glue</p>	<p>-Ss' log -Students' Interviews</p>	<p>1 class (March 1st)</p>	
		<p>-Take pictures of advertisement found in the neighborhood that are in English – What is it about? – Understanding through the reality (Oral presentation) English Detectives</p>	<p>-Video projector -Computer -Usb drive.</p>	<p>-Students' log -Accuracy rubric</p>	<p>2 classes (March 21, 24)</p>	
<p>The increase of English exposure</p>	<p>Using the English related content that already exists in ss lives to make them aware of their surroundings</p>	<p>What am I wearing? – Ss should bring a piece of cloth that has a message in English to decodify the meaning (Group work) (Oral and written report of the findings)</p>	<p>-Alternative pieces of cloth</p>	<p>-Students' log -Semantic coherence Rubric.</p>	<p>1 class (March 31)</p>	<p>This strategy helped the students to feel more connected with English as it explores a language that belonged to</p>

		<p>What am I listening to?</p> <p>Express Previous ideas/ understanding the general meaning of the song/final thoughts</p>	<p>-Speakers</p> <p>-Printed lyrics</p> <p>-Audio player</p>	<p>-Teacher's journal</p> <p>-Students' recordings</p> <p>- Comprehension rubric.</p>	<p>1 class (April 4)</p>	<p>them and that they were familiarized with.</p>
		<p>Where in the city are those signs?</p> <p>As warm up, the ss will observe different pictures of the school's signs that are in English and their locations (some of them will be intentionally mixed) they should analyze and find the ones that does not correspond.</p> <p>In small groups, ss should find the place where the signs assigned belong to in a city map. Results will be orally presented at the end of the class</p>	<p>-Printed pictures of Medellin's signs and of the related places.</p> <p>-Medellin's map</p>	<p>-Check list</p> <p>-Video recording</p> <p>-Students' interviews</p>	<p>1 class (April 18)</p>	

Development of actions

From the beginning of this project the students showed and expressed that one of the reasons for them not being engaged in the class was that the content they were learning was only for the school tests and not for their lives, as they did not feel or notice a connection between the English they were using in their real lives and the one they were learning in the school, the first strategy's objective was about showing them situations in which they could use and interact with English outside the classroom, the activities that were proposed in the action plan were about reading the English that it is present in their real lives landscape, or in the products they are using.

The first activity was about identifying the link between a brand and its product only based on their name, e.g. Redbull, the next activity was about identifying the mottos of some of the brands and lastly to understand the meaning of the messages found in the streets around them. For the implementation of this strategy, the theories of linguistic landscape and authentic material were taken into account. For measuring this strategy, several instruments were used, the students' log being the most recurrent as it is present in all the activities. An interview to some students was also held as it allows to measure their opinions and impressions of the strategy efficacy.

Through the development of these activities, the students were assigned with a brand/motto and were asked to answer some leading questions that would allow them to construct meaning; the questions were always given in English and the students that answer also in English got extra points in the final grade of the activity. They were told at the beginning of each activity that they all required very subjective answer therefore, there were no wrong answers. Because of the large number of students and the amount of time that could be

consumed if the activity was done individually, the students worked in small groups often chosen randomly.

The second strategy's objective was to improve student's performance by increasing their level of exposure to the language. This strategy was tackle using the English related content that already exists in the students' lives. The process followed during the implementation of this strategy was about helping the students to be aware of their surroundings and the situations in which they were already interacting with English. For accomplishing the objective, the students' interests were vital part of the planning and developing of the activities. In the first activity, the students analyzed the messages found in their clothes. The use of students' realia helped them not only to answer their own questions about the messages but also to feel more connected with English. For the second activity, the students analyzed the lyrics of one trendy song: 'Sorry' by Justin Bieber as most of them were familiarized with it, they sang along and having fun while analyzing the message of the song. The final activity of this strategy was the identification and further analysis of signs that were placed in their general local context: the city; and in their more specific local context, the school. For the data collection, the students log, the teacher journal and some rubrics were used. An interview to some students was also an instrument implemented as the students' opinion was also consider.

In the first activity of this strategy the students were asked to take one piece of clothing to the class, the only condition was that they had to have a message in English for them to explore, regarding this request, several students seemed to be very excited as they expressed that they had a lot that they wanted to know what the meaning was, what motivated them to get involve in the activity which was connected with the syllabus requirements through the exploration of the cloths vocabulary, they were asked to describe the piece of cloth they took and to analyze the

message and to write about if they agreed with the message or feel represented by it. A similar process was used with the other two activities in which each student had to develop the activities following some questions. As happened in the first strategy, all the information was given in English and the students were encouraged to answer in the foreign language as well.

Findings and interpretation

To increase students' comprehension of English it was important that they were able to make connections with the English surrounding them and that they were able to perform better in all of the four skills of the language, as stated previously in the objectives. The instruments used for data collection consisted mainly on the students' logs as they gave me the most real insight of how they –the students- were analyzing the input they were dealing in their daily lives. The teacher's journal and some rubrics were also used to measure the impact that the strategies had in the students' performance and how they were doing in terms of accomplishing the objectives set at the beginning of the project.

The result that was expected from the project was that the students would be able to find or create links between the curriculum and the English that surrounds them every day, that is why the strategies were linked with the syllabus content to not only articulate the project to the academic requirements of the school but also to show the students that they could connect what they are learning as a requirement in the school to their own and particular interest and preferences and by doing so, at the end they could feel empowered by interacting [with] and understanding their own entourage.

The project was divided in two main sections, each one corresponding to an action strategy that was planned to help the students to achieve one specific objective of the project. The first strategy aimed to help the students to identify and to understand some 'hidden' meanings in the content that already exists in their context and that happen to be also in English, for accomplishing this, the students were asked to read specific images as names and mottos of well-known brands and general signs that are present in the public space. Some students needed help understanding some of the activities as they were trying to develop them dissecting the

grammar and not understanding the meaning, even though, after a little direction they started interpreting the information they had (the logo form or the use they knew had the product) to understand its message (Appendix A) In general the students choose to present the information in Spanish, they were given the choice as the main goal was for them to understand then to produce, even though the English in their answers were progressively increasing (Appendix B), showing that after the first stage was completed (understanding), they were more confident to start the second one (producing) and continue progressing. Normally when developing the activities, they asked me several questions about English, or things they did not understand similar to the activities, e.g. the meaning of brands that were not mentioned in the activity or the reason for its use. It was also a surprise for some of the students to realize that they had English content in their normal lives and in a very day to day environment. It was evidenced when in the last activity of the first strategy they located pictures that were taken by their classmates in their own neighborhood, some of which were even outside the school (Appendix C). At the end of the strategy, I could conclude that: first, based on their comments registered on the teacher's journal and the results of the activities: the students that were not paying attention to the English they had surrounding them started to be curious of it. Second they started to try to de-codify the meaning of products that they were in contact with in their daily lives based on the input given: the name, the product or the function.

The second part of the project, corresponding to the second action strategy was intended to make the students aware of their own choices, those which linked them to English in their everyday life, for achieving this objective the students perform in three activities in which one of them involved the students to use their own belongings in order to identify not only their own 'English related content but also to be aware of the message they were agreeing upon. The

process of the students identifying which ones of their belongings had English in them, was vital as for the main purpose of this strategy was that the students could become aware of their own exposure to this foreign language. In earlier stages of the project the students were asked for their preferences in diverse categories, one of them being music, which allowed me to identify that they had great interest in music in English, as it was what most of them were already mainly listening to, that is why in order for them to experience the exposure to the language, songs were also used serving the main purpose of the activity and also help them to learn in a fun way as they were singing and having fun in a different setting to the normal classes dynamics. In general, the discipline was an aspect that complicated the activities development but as I stated in the analysis of my 7th journal entry “It is also evident that the students enjoy having a role and a responsibility in the class, the behavior increased considerably when the development of the class laid only in their hands. [...] also showed me another aspect and it was that the fact of using songs that the students know, not only have an impact on their affections and on their motivation towards the class and the activity but also can involve them in the solution of problems as they felt they can be useful.” (Entry # 7, April 4th, 2017) . This strategy helped the students to interact with an English that in a way belonged to them and I found that it helped them to be more engaged in the classes and to help them to think about the English in a less foreign and far away language, instead, they continue to feel it as part of them and their culture and in this way, they feel not only identified with but connected to it.

Conclusions and suggestions

The experience of developing this action research project and of my practicum year helped me to withdraw some conclusions; the teaching and learning process of a foreign language is always difficult, even more when there is few places and opportunities to practice it and when it is disjointed from the reality and the real-life needs. The objective of this project was to tackle that specific problem, and after the implementation of the action strategies proposed, I can conclude that when the students are faced with the fact that the opportunities to practice and to learn are all around them and there is no need to wait for the teacher to create them or for the situation in the future in which they are going to need to use the language, the learning process not only become more meaningful as it is about something more than learning for passing a test or for having a good grade but also more interesting for them, as they are understanding their own surroundings, their own reality.

A second conclusion I got from this experience is that the use of authentic and local material and realia in the classes encourage the students to be attentive to their landscape, to be more motivated and connected with the classes and activities and to transpose the content learnt at school to their real lives interactions.

Finally, I would like to suggest to explore more this field of linguistic landscape as mean to help the students to build meaningful learning in the English as a foreign language class, in my opinion it is a very large field full of potential for helping the young learners to become more proficient in the language and it is yet very 'under researched'.

Reflection

This practicum offered me several opportunities to grow not only as a teacher but also as a human being. The experience to teach in a public school offered me a challenge in which I had to deal with a very large group of students, very diverse in age and interests, disciplinary issues and a teacher's strike that took around one month of classes. Events that are part of our day-to-day professional development and that helped me to be prepared for the world outside the academic book and theories.

I also could put into practice ideas I got while studying different authors in my academic journey in the school of languages of the University of Antioquia and in the University of Sherbrooke, which enriched the need to always seek a way that I as a teacher could offer to the students to make the route of learning a foreign language a much easier and funnier task.

It also challenged me every time to seek different ways to get to the students, to understand them and to offer them more interesting activities.

I feel very pleased with the result of this process, with all its ups and downs that at the end helped me to open my mind to changes and to adapt to a wide range of situations.

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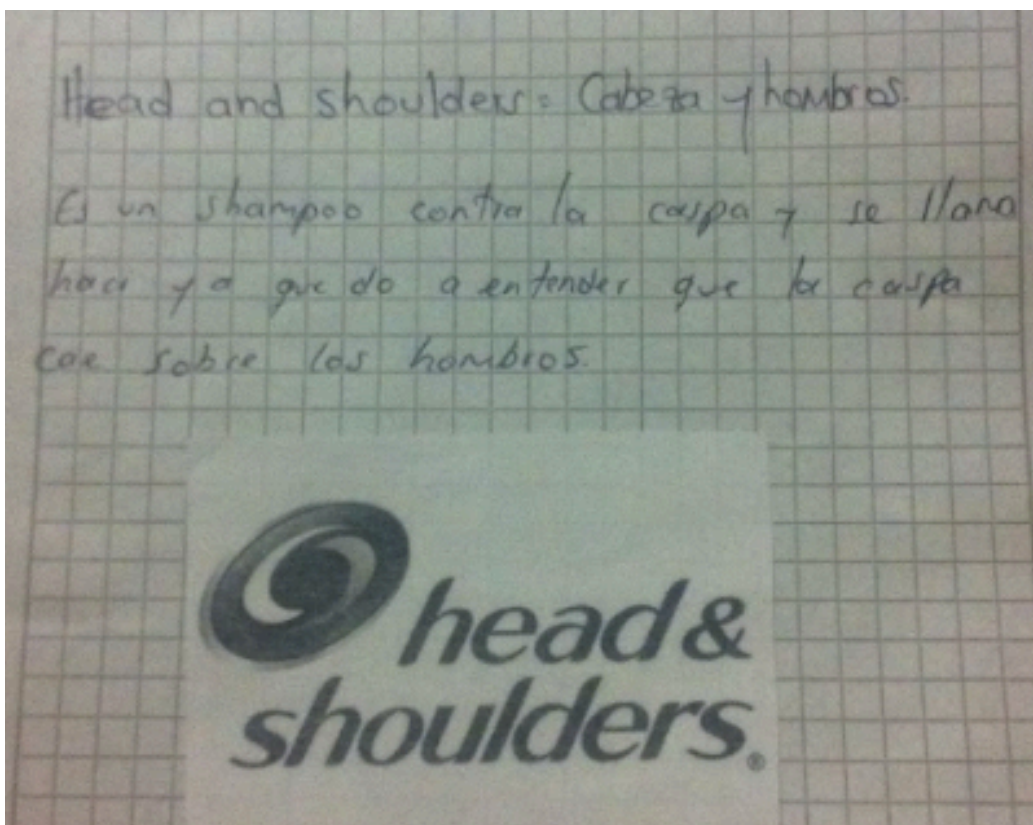
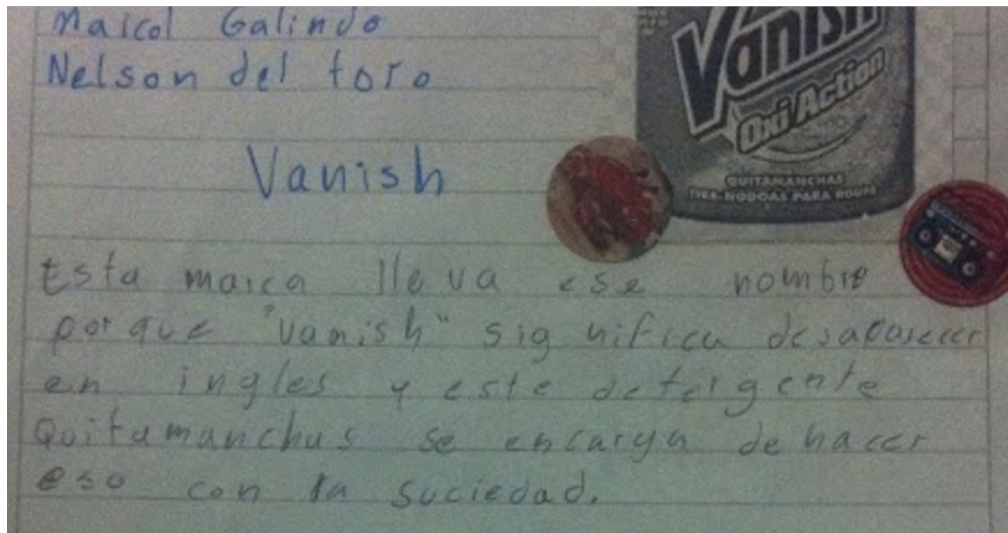
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Appendix A



Appendix B

car en Drive



Chevrolet

FIND NEW ROADS

1. For me "Find new Roads" it is something like looking for finding new ways thanks to my knowledge of the English language, besides as Chevrolet is a brand of cars, would make a lot of sense.
- 2 I think Chevrolet decided to use this slogan because being a car brand must always be innovating to be able to search, explore and create new ways, and wanted to express that goal through that slogan.

Appendix C

