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## Implementing Project-Based Learning to Improve Tenth Graders' Writing skill

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### **Abstract**

This action research project intends to analyze how Project-Based Learning helped EFL tenth graders to improve their writing skill at a public institution in La Ceja. The information used in this project was collected through class journals, students' artifacts, and a survey. The results of the research demonstrated that PBL approach helped students improve their writing a skill by both implementing strategies to apply PBL and to teach the writing of argumentative texts. This was achieved by making students aware of PBL and argumentative text characteristics. Besides, data revealed that students found it interesting when working through PBL as it appeared as a positive alternative in the traditional manner of ELT.

*Keywords: Project-Based Learning (PBL), writing skill, argumentative text, tenth grade*

### **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 Carmen de Viboral, Colombia.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank firstly my mom Edilma. She was the support I needed when I was passing through difficult times. She was the reason why I decided to continue my career when I was about to abandon. I also want to thank my dad and brother, which encouraged me with support and advice. I am grateful to my classmates, I learned a lot from each one of them, the ones who finished the career and the ones who did not, but mainly, thanks to my closest friends, this process would not have been the same without them. I thank the teachers who made part of this demanding but amazing adventure, especially to my teacher Sandra Álvarez for being of great support in the most decisive moment of my career. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my CT, my students, and Concejo Municipal institution for being part of my first teaching experience.

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## **Preface**

My interest in developing this action research emerged from my experience as a student at high school and the observations done in the institution where this research took place. In the last stages of my career, I had the opportunity of glancing through one of my old English notebooks. Hence, as the English knowledge and input I received in my youth came mainly from video games most of the time, I was interested in comprehending the way I was taught English at school. On the one hand, the activities portrayed were focused on translating sentences, writing vocabulary lists, and writing the same sentence in its negative, affirmative, and interrogative form. On the other hand, after discovering and knowing different methods and approaches used to make EFL more meaningful throughout my program, I expected to see a kind of change of ELT in the observations.

However, although the activities were somehow more challenging since students were asked to answer close questions from reading to demonstrate reading comprehension, they still had a passive role. For this reason, to make learning more significant and give students the opportunity of using the English language with a purpose, I decided to foster students' writing skills in conjunction with Project-Based learning. Though writing perceived as a skill that allows students to express their ideas, opinions, and beliefs rather than the repetitive, non-significant, drilling writing skill applied in the traditional ELT.

## **Description of the Context**

### **Institution**

Concejo Municipal Educational Institution is a public school located in the urban area of La Ceja, a municipality in Antioquia. The institution offers formal education in preschool, primary and secondary levels, and technical secondary education in specialties such as computer science, environment, electricity in agreement with SENA. The institution has two shifts, in the morning and the afternoon. The school has two headquarters, the first one is for preschool and primary and the second one is for high school and technical education. The institution offers a pedagogical model for the development of education, with an emphasis on academic excellence and training on values and social responsibility.

The vision of the institution is to lead the collective construction of Colegio Concejo Municipal in all its spaces; stimulate the human and civic development of their students so that they are free, supportive, tolerant of others' opinions, responsible and peace-loving as well as respectful of nature and collective spaces. In this way, students will contribute to the construction of their personal and professional development as well as being critical participants in their community.

### **ELT at the institution**

Concerning the teaching of English, the institution has at its disposal two English teachers for secondary school. The teachers work based on the parameters established by Instruimos, which is specialized in training students for Pruebas Saber. Regarding the resources and hours of instruction, there are 3 hours of English per week. For the classes in the classroom, students have dictionaries at their disposal and a TV set, nonetheless there is no internet connection nor computers.



### **Cooperating teacher**

The cooperating teacher I worked with at the moment of the study holds a bachelor's degree in English and French Languages from *Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana* and he has been teaching in the institution where this action research took place since 2008. Regarding his teaching principles, the teacher stated that he needs to bear in mind the particular institution and its program. In this case, the institution follows a model in which the core of its education is based on 'learning by doing'. Concerning the objectives and content, the teacher follows Instruimos criteria, which is aligned with the National Standards for secondary education teaching.

### **Participants**

The course selected to conduct the study was a tenth-grade group. This course had 3 hours of English per week. However, at the moment of the implementation, they were having only 2 hours because they were participating in a project. The classroom had good illumination, air circulation, and a TV set. Concerning the class, it was composed of 33 students, 19 girls and 14 boys, the average age was around 15 and 18 years old. There were no students with special needs or conditions. Students' conceptions about English were that it was a very important language because of the globalization and because it provides a lot of opportunities in the labor market. Moreover, they were aware of the importance of learning English because it is a language that is progressively more present in our daily life. Nonetheless, most of them claimed that they were unable to express and understand the English language.

The major problem observed in the class was the lack of opportunities for students to express their opinions, thoughts, and beliefs. I will address this issue with more detail in the following section.

It is important to bear in mind that when I carried out the implementation, it was necessary to work virtually with students because of the contingency caused by Covid-19.

### **Statement of Problem**

In the past, and yet in the present, English classes have been focused on grammar, translation, and activities in which students demonstrate “proper use of English” by performing trivial tasks that do not permit the student to make significant use of the language. By cause of this, and as a way of innovating Language Teaching, listening and speaking skills obtained a major relevance as these would be the response of evidencing and recognizing a language in its natural form. Thus, writing remained considered, as stated by Nunan (2002) referring to listening, the “Cinderella skill”. Nonetheless, if writing is not understood as a skill in which students can express and give their opinions by giving an account of the knowledge taught in class, ELT teachers will continue treating writing as a drilling, non-significant, repetitive skill.

The aforementioned scenario was evinced in the school where this action research took place. Students had to demonstrate what they had learned by translating and answering, in a written manner, several closed-ended questions. First, what the CT demanded to students was to translate from English to Spanish. As claimed by Mohamed (2014) translation can be useful in different ways and at different stages of foreign language teaching and learning; nonetheless, the point in question in this study was the use given to it. Having students seated on their desks translating a text that perhaps was not pleasing to them and looking up the dictionary word by word is quite close to Zanettin’s (2009) definition of the regular use given to translation in EFL classrooms: “...in the grammar-translation method, students are asked to translate de-

contextualized sentences with a focus on linguistic structures rather than on communication”.

(p.210)

Furthermore, after translating the text, students were supposed to respond to several closed questions. It is worth mentioning that although this kind of question is useful when demonstrating comprehension of texts, the activities provided by the CT did not demand a suitable interpretation but a superficial understanding. For instance, one of the questions was: “Did he have a good day at work?” though the text title was “Having a bad day at work”. Even one student said aloud that question was already answered. Summing up, working under this dynamic of developing writing by translating and answering closed questions prevents students from expressing their ideas in a written manner.

Based on this data and concerning my research, I disagree on basing teaching on translation activities as they do not allow a deep understanding from students of the theme they are working on. What is more, it is more that students have already forgotten the words they looked up in the dictionary during the activities.

In this regard, I propose to implement Project-Based principles to encourage students as language users with regard to writing as a process, explained by Sadiku (2015). In this manner, PBL approach allows including students’ interests by working in a relevant topic, transforming the class into student-centered, providing scenarios and situations in which students must express their points of view, using in a more significant manner the content learned in class and improving students’ artifacts with the aid of the teacher’s role as a guide.

## **Theoretical Framework**

As one of the main purposes I have with this action research is to give tenth-grade students spaces to improve their English language through writing, I will present the theoretical foundations that support my research. That is why, in this section, I will present some definitions of Project-Based Learning and writing, share some authors' insights about the benefits of working with projects, state what is expected from the teacher and students, and finally the genre of writing that students will work on during the project.

### **Project-Based Learning**

In his research done on Project-Based Learning (PBL), Thomas, J. (2000) declares PBL as a method that includes different authentic tasks that rise most of the time from questions or situations that require research or action. Another PBL feature is the importance given to the student: They assume an active role in the classroom by deciding the topic they will work on, investigating on their own, increasing autonomy by adopting a position towards the problem, and presenting the final product; which has as purpose to use the target language to inform, describe or argue a possible solution to an audience Thomas, (2000). Likewise, Blumenfeld et al., (2000); Krajcik et al., (1994) remark that when students work with PBL they obtain a deeper understanding of the materials and the language rather than a superficial knowledge that will be used or demonstrated in un-realistic scenarios and for a momentary timelapse.

Accordingly, Hedge (1993) affirms that working with PBL gives a considerable amount of advantages and benefits to both students and teachers in the learning process. As a matter of fact, students become more responsible for their own learning process by searching for information and gathering data. Hedge (1993) also proclaims that one essential feature of PBL is the teacher's guide role rather than a teacher who gives direct instructions and restricts students

about what s/he must do. In this way, and following Thomas (2000), students become aware of their learning process by taking decisions on an issue, planning, gathering data, and presenting the final outcome. Additionally, Stoller (2002) asserts that PBL makes it possible to change and adapt either the topic, instruments for gathering data, or the final product regarding the students' ages and abilities.

Although PBL facilitates the incorporation of different teaching methods, Stoller (2002) argues that in order to successfully carry out PBL, the instructor and the students must follow the following steps: 1. Students and instructor agree on a theme for the project and the final outcome. 2. Depending on the theme, students and instructor structure the project and what materials they are going to use to obtain information. 3. The instructor prepares students for the gathering information step. For instance, if students plan to interview people to obtain information, the instructor's responsibility is to teach how to make proper questions. 4. The instructor guides students in the process of gathering and analyzing data. 5. The instructor gives feedback before students present the final product and finally, students evaluate the project in search of suggestions for coming projects and as a matter of self-reflection of the process done and what and how they learned. In her work Stoller (2002) proposes 10 steps; nevertheless, for the purpose of this research, I will work only on steps 1, 4, and 5 without forgetting about presenting the final product.

### **Writing**

Hylan (2002), as cited in Sagre (2012) states that writing is a complex skill that is in constant research given to its different forms and characteristics. Furthermore, writing is perceived as an opportunity for students to express their ideas, opinions, beliefs, and thoughts to achieve a purpose (Sagre, 2012). In addition to this, Bashrin (2013) holds that through writing,

students are considered as language users, and their messages and information portrayed in their ideas count.

According to Sadiku (2015), to make writing more meaningful, it is necessary to cover some steps. First, there must be a purpose, an audience, and a form of writing. Then, after making a brainstorm about what you are going to include in your text, you start writing as much as possible. When you finish your draft, you revise your own work in search of basic mistakes to then share it with a peer or instructor to get feedback. In the end, punctuation, cohesion, and grammar among other writing features are revised and corrected to finally deliver the end product (Sadiku, 2015).

### **Argumentative texts**

For the purpose of this research, students' writing skill will be diagnosed through the production of an argumentative text. As cited in Sanchez & Chapetón (2018) an argumentative essay is "an essay in which you agree or disagree with an issue, using reasons to support your opinions" (Oshima & Hogue, 2006, p. 142). Furthermore, this kind of writing ought to cover some essential components. First, it is necessary to give a brief explanation to the reader about the issue. Second, a clear thesis statement that reflects the specific topic of the essay is portrayed. Third, and although it is not mandatory, argumentative essays usually possess a writer's counter-argument. Yet, the refutation to this opposing argument is required. Finally, as a matter of conclusion, the writer redresses his/her own ideas as the final attempt of persuading the audience (Oshima & Hogue 2006) as cited in Sanchez and Chapetón (2018).

The results from the diagnosis activity will be compared with the ones obtained from the analysis of the final product, which encompasses criteria to evidence students' writing skill. In other words, bearing in mind subject-verb conjugation, coherence, spelling, punctuation, word

order, and text readability in general. Likewise, the students' capacity of expressing and defending their position based on arguments, will be taken into account in both artifacts (diagnosis and final product).

In the following sections, I will portray how Project-Based and writing argumentative texts could be complementary to tackle the issue of this action research.

### **Research question**

How may the implementation of Project-Based Learning improve tenth-grade EFL learners' writing skill at a public institution in La Ceja?

### **General objective**

To analyze how the implementation of Project-Based learning may improve tenth-graders' writing skill.

### **Specific objectives**

- To make a diagnosis for analyzing students' writing skill.
- To implement PBL for improving the ability of writing.
- To teach the structure and content of an argumentative text in English.
- To examine and provide feedback to the students' writing process.
- To evaluate the impact of Project-Based learning on students' writing skill.



### **Action Plan**

Once I decided that the main goal of this action research was to evaluate how Project-Based Learning (PBL) may improve tenth graders' writing skill, I designed several actions that would allow me to answer my research question. This action plan encompassed the steps proposed by Stoller (2002) as well as Sadiku's (2015) perception of what a suitable writing process should include. Stoller proposes 10 steps; however, for the purpose of this research, I decided to divide the implementation into big stages and only cover some of the steps: Agreeing on a theme for the project, gathering information, preparing students for the language demands of the final product and presenting it. Regarding writing as a process, students wrote the draft in sections. First the introduction, then the body or arguments of the text, and finally the conclusion. After receiving feedback and comments they would present the final product

To gather the data for this action research I used the following instruments: Class journals, students' artifacts, and a survey for students at the end of the classes. Along these lines, students would perform a diagnosis activity to evidence their strengths and weaknesses regarding writing skill. Hence, this diagnosis would help when comparing students' writing skill before and after executing PBL and considering writing as a process. At the end of the implementation, data would be analyzed and contrasted to reach the findings of this study.

### **Development of actions**

Initially, I carried out a diagnosis activity regarding students' writing skill before implementing the actions of the project. The diagnosis was about writing in a minimum of 60 words a text in which students stated if they were in favor or against euthanasia. The use of a

translator was not allowed and it had to be handwritten. In addition to this, I introduced the PBL approach to students and I described to them my role as a teacher and theirs as learners when working with this method. Later, and to prepare students for the language demands of the project, I carried out several activities and explanations. I showed several argumentative texts and explained in detail how they were formed as well as the intention or purpose of each paragraph. Students also received different documents about the structure of an argumentative text and how to express their opinions or being in agreement or disagreement with a person or statement. Moreover, students performed tasks about identifying the type of text and filling the blanks with the most appropriate expression. In the end, and after completing the preparatory stage, students wrote their drafts and presented their final product after receiving feedback on each part of the text (Introduction, body, conclusion).

Lastly, intending to recognize students' perceptions when working with PBL, they filled out a survey that contained open-questions and spaces to reflect. Besides, students had the opportunity to state if they improved or not their writing skill. Finally, after gathering and analyzing the data obtained from the instruments stated above, I present the findings based on my research question.

### **Findings and interpretations**

The purpose of this action research project was to explore how the implementation of a Project-Based learning may improve tenth grader's writing skill. To achieve this objective, different pieces of data were collected and analyzed. Including the journals which portrayed students' reactions to the activities provided, students' artifacts as a firsthand information source, and surveys that contained students' perceptions and opinions related to the PBL approach.

The results to support my study emerged after analyzing the data collected through this research. I codified, categorized, and analyzed the information using the program Microsoft word. This tool allowed me to identify some recurrences within the codes and come up with categories. Thus, these findings show that working with PBL approach is useful to improve tenth-graders' writing skill in terms of (a) Evidencing students' starting point regarding their writing skills focused on argumentative texts, (b) implementing strategies to apply PBL and to teach the writing of argumentative texts, (c) students gaining awareness of PBL and argumentative text characteristics and (d) contrasting the results obtained from the final product with the diagnosis activity. In the following paragraphs, I explain in a detailed manner how these findings were achieved. Moreover, I provide evidence from the sources of information that support each finding.

### **Weaknesses identified during the diagnosis step**

As the first step of this process, students performed a diagnosis that will be explained in detail below. Students were asked to state whether they were in favor of or against euthanasia. This diagnosis served to evidence students' starting point regarding their writing skills focused on argumentative texts. For the analysis of the diagnosis, the following criteria were used.

**Students' position towards a topic.** Regarding the first criterion, there were several issues considering the student's position. Some students stated that they were in a neutral position expressing that they see advantages and disadvantages regarding euthanasia and that they respected every person's decision; although this is somehow good when dealing with argumentative texts, this "neutral" mood is prohibited since you must choose a position and defend it, besides and as stated by Sanchez and Chapetón (2018), argumentative texts have the

pivotal objective of persuading the audience, objective that would be unreachable if the student opts for writing evidencing a neutral position. A good example of the previous statement is:

Suicide or authorized murder, The truth I do not know,  
There are many doubts for me on this subject and

**Sentence structure.** Respecting this criterion, students showed problems with subject-verb agreement, even with simple/known verbs as the To Be or Have. Concerning the plurals, some students had problems writing “Peoples”. Concerning the adverbs or adjectives, they did not present significant problems, only with adjective order. Examples of the stated above are shown next.

the family have the responsibility

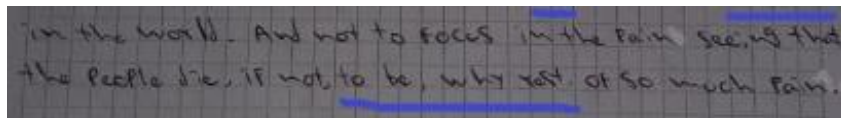
is an shape easy

**Cohesion and coherence.** Concerning the third criterion, I could observe that something that affected the ability to convey messages in the text was students’ use of exact translation, for instance, if students wanted to express something like “ya que” they wrote as follows:

already what.

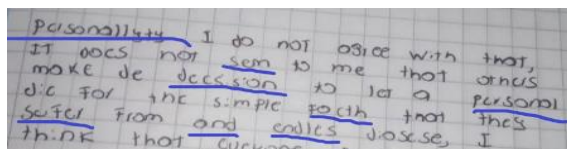
Another example was a girl that confused the cardinal point “East” and the verb to be conjugated. I could also observe the next examples which made it hard for me to understand what they wanted to say:

but the will not comes of we, no the we can remove  
the life.

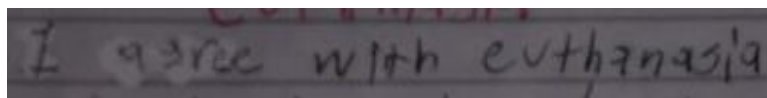


As we can see, although the words are well written, these last sentences were quite hard to comprehend, even for me as a Spanish speaker.

**Spelling.** In respect to spelling, I would say among the most common errors was using “than” instead of “that”, writing “desicion” and the first singular pronoun “I” in lowercase. There was especially one boy whose handwriting caught my attention as he had many spelling mistakes. This can be seen in the next excerpt from his work:



**Proofreading.** Regarding this strategy to improve students’ own text, in this case, I would say that only 2 or 3 students took the time to read their texts again in search of mistakes.



**Text structure (number of words, paragraphs).** Finally, students were told that their texts must have a minimum of 60 words. Although all of them achieved that quantity, the examples stated above about students’ mistakes did not allow a fluent reading and suitable legibility in 14 out of 19 texts.

### Teaching and learning to write argumentative texts through PBL

For achieving the purpose of this study, it was necessary to implement different strategies based on PBL that allowed students to write argumentative texts more accurately. Some categories arose as I analyzed the data based on students’ reactions to my teaching, activities,

and materials. Moreover, I will include results that appeared regarding advantages and disadvantages of PBL and teaching virtually.

**Teacher's strategies to apply PBL and to teach the writing of argumentative texts.**

After explaining to my students that my main purpose with carrying out this project was that they could express their opinions/points of view about a theme or concern, I implemented different strategies throughout the project to achieve this objective. First, for having better communication with them, I decided to create a group in WhatsApp. In the group, I assigned the activities and provided audios to students with advice to improve their argumentative texts. For instance, when students were choosing the topic of their texts, I reminded them that the purpose of the text was not describing or informing but adopting a position towards the topic and defend it using arguments. Also, I was very persistent about the content included in each part of the text; for example, when writing the introduction I sent several audios expressing that in this part they only should add a brief description of the topic. Besides, and intending to make students comprehend the argumentative text structure in a better way, they read and analyzed the characteristics and purposes of different types of texts (narrative/informative, descriptive and argumentative) giving more significance to the last one, as this would be the final product of the project. Then, and after realizing students were struggling for categorizing one text as argumentative and explaining why, I decided to dedicate several meetings at zoom to explain, step by step and in a detailed manner, how an argumentative text was structured.

Firstly, I emphasized the importance of the title, as, from it, the reader could realize the author's position towards the topic in question. Secondly, I used myself as a guinea pig concerning a text that students had worked on previously, titled "The hypocrisy and double moral of anti-bullfighting". We analyzed each part of the text and after that, I admitted in a

virtual meeting that I was against bullfighting, but I enjoyed eating meat. As claimed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958), an effective argumentation contains premises and other negotiated objects such as facts, truths, values worthy of consideration by the specific audience to which it is addressed, cited in Crasnich and Lumbell (2005). In this case, the text achieved its objective of making us question our actions and beliefs.

Thirdly, I used contrasting as a strategy for them to be more aware of the structure and purpose of argumentative texts. In this class, I presented an informative and descriptive text, and also an argumentative text dealing with abortion. I told them that the argumentative one aims at expressing the author's opinions to change something. I remarked the fact that everything that the author wanted to assert was that women should decide whether to abort or not and that they should do it under healthy conditions if they decided to do so.

In addition to this, I took several mistakes out of the diagnosis activity to work on them during the classes. The students identified the mistake and proposed a possible solution. In this way, they would avoid committing them again throughout the project. Moreover, I presented the structure of an argumentative text and remarked some keywords, this also helped in the construction of the final text. According to Stoller (2002), one of the teacher's duties in the implementation of a project is to prepare students for the language demands of the final product through the design of language-improvement activities, cited in Lam (2011). For that reason, besides explaining to students several expressions used when giving opinions, students also had to make an exercise about filling the blanks using the most appropriate expression, an activity they successfully completed, ensuring their comprehension of the theme.

Lastly, I had to make students understand what they were supposed to do in the final product. For this purpose, we analyzed a text of my authorship in which I blamed the human

being for the climate change, and we made an outline about the police abuse case against George Floyd in the United States, taking advantage of a current and interesting topic for students.

Finally, and because of the time, I decided to provide exact and literal feedback to students. For that reason, while I was checking students' introductions, bodies/arguments and conclusions, I suggested them to change some words, I let them know when their ideas were vague and suggested what they could write instead; depending on the topic I advised them about relevant information they could search online or useful sites where they could find it.

**Students' awareness of PBL and argumentative text characteristics.** After presenting the main objective of the project in the only face-to-face class we had in the school, students started to comprehend some features and characteristics of argumentative texts and PBL. By considering the example in which students should say if they were in favor or against euthanasia, they could evidence the subjective and personal touch that an argumentative text possesses. Along these lines, students also realized that to defend or confront their positions they needed to have arguments. Hence, the previous statement gives an account of Diaz's claim that argumentative essays deal with controversial topics, and in them, an author defends a point of view that he/she considers valid through the use of arguments, cited in Chala and Chapeton (2012). I was very insistent on this point throughout the whole project because, although this kind of text allows a personal position towards an issue, this position needs to be based on arguments.

Moreover, students were taught since the beginning that an argumentative text was composed of 3 main parts, the introduction, the body or arguments, and the conclusion. Besides, they could recognize the intention of the content of each section. To demonstrate this, during the



first class we superficially analyzed an argumentative text about social networks and I demanded a girl to sum up what the purpose of the text was. She expressed the following:

“Aunque en el texto uno podría deducir ciertas ventajas de las redes sociales, la posición del autor es más que todo de tener cuidado y ser precavidos cuando se usan estas redes sociales y sobre todo en los jóvenes y niños”. (Excerpt from Journal 1)

Furthermore, data revealed that thanks to some questions provided by the instructor, students could identify the characteristics and purpose of an argumentative text better, as shown in the next statement:

“¿Entonces, ustedes a quién creen que va dirigido el texto más que todo y qué es lo que busca persuadir o cambiar el autor en estas personas?”, two students immediately responded that the text was aiming to the penal code, but there was a girl that said that the text could also be aiming at women, as these would be more careful the next time to don't take the risk of getting pregnant to then want to abort clandestinely. (Excerpt from journal 4)

In the beginning, when students started to write their argumentative texts, some of them omitted the introduction and started to write their opinions at once. So, and fulfilling my obligations as a guide rather than an authoritarian teacher, I advised these students to keep those arguments but including them into the section of the body, and I explained to them again what we are supposed to include in the introduction. The previous statement is evidenced next:

Concerning the introduction, some students confused the introduction with the body of the text and start stating their position or even concluding without arguments, something like: “Videogames are better than reading books”... this kind of statement, besides lacking arguments and proofs, are not appropriate to mention in the introduction. What is more, I recommended that boy to soft a bit that argument by taking the part of the book away and concentrate on talking in

favor of video games only, as for me it's kind of risky to declare such arguments. (Excerpt from journal 6)

In another session, when working with my argumentative text about climate change, I demanded students to organize the whole text because I had scrambled it. I took for granted that students were going to complete that exercise without difficulties, nonetheless, two girls claimed that one paragraph of the body was the introduction. After seeing this "setback" I asked them to read that paragraph again and compare it with the actual introduction. Luckily, they realized that the second one was more appropriate for the introductory part.

Finally, and after analyzing an activity in which students had to express their opinions about someone who wanted to join the police force in Colombia, I noticed that most of the students' opinions were soft and kind, and possessed the same neutral position evidenced in the diagnosis activity. However this time there was a boy that claimed the next: "if you want to become a police officer here in Colombia you should become a good person first, as most police officers take advantage of good people". I congratulated him and I encouraged the rest of the class to take that determined position since students should not be afraid of expressing what they think about any topic if it is done politely.

**Students' reactions to controversial topics and activities developed.** Data demonstrated that students were more willing to develop the activities if these included controversial topics. For instance, one student stated in the questionnaire the next: "I liked the dynamics of the classes, the activities, I really liked to watch the videos and answer the questions". Also, when I asked students how they had found the diagnosis activity, some of them said they liked it because besides expressing their opinions it was a topic with much to discuss. As a matter of fact, one girl decided to investigate, on her own, more about one famous case of

euthanasia (Ramon Sampedro) that I used in an activity. I realized she had looked for more information because one of her answers did not match the reading they received. For that reason, I decided to ask her where she had obtained that information from, and she told me that the story really caught her attention, so she decided to investigate what else had happened in the story.

### **Advantages of using PBL**

Data revealed that when working under the parameters of PBL, students and teacher benefit of considerable advantages, namely the use of authentic materials, involvement in tasks, and language improvement.

**Use of authentic materials.** This advantage gave me a boundless quantity of materials. In this case, when working with social networks, it was enough to type in the YouTube searcher “Pros and cons of social networks” to access many videos related to this topic. The same happened with the readings, and although they are authentic materials, it depends on the teacher how to adapt it through different comprehension activities to ensure students’ understanding.

**Students felt more involved.** Data showed that this was possible since students could work on the topic they liked. Besides, rather than describing, narrating, or merely translating, students had the opportunity to investigate and look for more information for being able to express their thoughts about the topic they had chosen. In the questionnaire, several students argued that at the beginning of the project they felt bored and with no desires of developing the tasks. Nevertheless, as they started writing their argumentative texts, they got really involved in the project. The previous is reflected in Bashrin’s thoughts towards writing, through writing, students are considered language users, and their messages and information portrayed in their

ideas count, Bashrin (2013). The evidence of the previous statement is shown in the following excerpts from the final questionnaire:

**Yo pienso que fue un gran aprendizaje puesto que vimos cosas fuera de lo común que se ven en ingles normalmente, dimos nuestros puntos de vista y expresamos lo que sentiamos, cosas que no se ven en esta materia. Por eso me parece que fue muy válido esta propuesta de trabajo que nos implementaron.**

\_\_la verdad el proyecto de ingles al principio no me interesaba casi por lo que hablábamos de temas que a mi no me interesan hablar aunque sean importantes pero después para hacer el texto argumentativo si me gustó mas ya que hablaba de un tema que yo mismo escogí y el cual me interesaba entonces la verdad si me gusto

**Language improvement.** In terms of language and since students wanted to express their opinions and ideas, they must search for unknown words which enlarged their vocabulary repertoire and improved the quality of the text. Thus, this aspect will be better developed at the end of the final stage.

### **Issues that emerged when implementing PBL**

As it usually happens, there were also some difficulties when carrying out the project. These were unwillingness from some students to work differently and the use of literal translation.

**Students are used to working traditionally.** This difficulty affected the engagement of several students. I insisted that the project required that every student was responsible for his/her own learning process. Nonetheless, some students only showed interest when I asked them about the completion of the tasks. I consider that students were very used to the dynamic of being receptive subjects in the teaching-learning process, so, when they were asked to become language creators, some students refrained from participating in the project or they were not fully committed.

**Use of translation.** This was another issue when developing the project. As claimed by Mohamed (2014) translation can be useful in different ways and at different stages of foreign language teaching and learning; nonetheless, the point in question in this study was the use given to it. For students, to translate a text that perhaps is not pleasing to them and looking in the dictionary word by word is quite close to Zanettin's (2009) definition of the regular use given to translation in EFL classrooms: "...in the grammar-translation method, students are asked to translate de-contextualized sentences with a focus on linguistic structures rather than on communication". (p.210)

### **Change to virtual modality**

I believe that I speak for everybody when I say that this pandemic situation caught us all unaware. Likewise, one of the alternatives to overcome this issue was the implementation of virtual education. As for the present project, this modality had some positive things as well as some negative matters that will be displayed next.

**Virtual modality – Negative issues.** The first issue I could notice regarding virtual modality was that various students lacked a functional cellphone and a steady internet connection. Additionally, other students said they had not any room in their cellphones to download an app and I trusted them because in my case I had to delete a lot of information for being able to download the Zoom app. Later, in the first meeting at zoom, several students started to argue that they had internet connection problems, and for that reason, they could not attend the zoom meeting. So, I realized another problem when dealing with virtual education because one never knows if students actually have those problems or they just want to skip classes or situations. Likewise, since there is not a face-to-face interaction between students and

teacher, it exists the possibility that the one performing all the activities is not the student but an external person. This represents for me the biggest problem when dealing with the virtual modality.

**Virtual modality – Positive aspects.** On the other hand, I found some positive aspects when working with this modality. Although there is an extensive variety of virtual platforms, WhatsApp and Zoom allowed me to communicate with my students in a proper way. Through WhatsApp, I sent the documents and audios for those who could not attend Zoom meetings, and through Zoom, I managed to have more interactive communication with my students while developing the activities. Besides, and different from what I expected, it is worth noting that these platforms are very simple to manipulate when you become familiar with them.

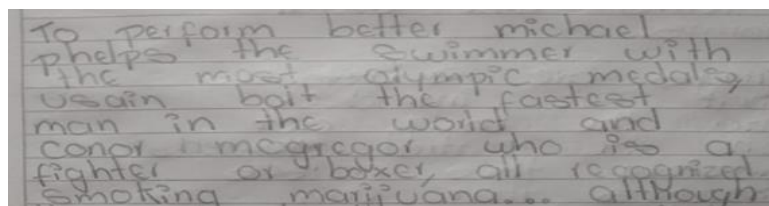
Additionally, and even though Speaking and Listening skills were not the focus in this project, another aspect to highlight with this modality was the advantages in terms of the easiness and suitability of WhatsApp when sending and receiving audios.

Finally, and despite the fact it was not planned, after one of the meetings at zoom, a group of girls, in the WhatsApp group, started to discuss some news that involved several United States political characters. They also argued about famous people that were murdered because they had secrets that incriminated important people, and that everything was set to make it look like suicides or accidents. Then, and when I thought they had finished, several boys appeared to start discussing political issues. As a teacher, I intervened once to call one student's attention because he was making fun of others, but with the rest, I just observed and enjoyed the discussion. At that moment I realized another advantage regarding virtual platforms.

### Final product and students' progress evidence

Finally, students delivered their argumentative texts, each one of them after being revised by me. Thus, and although there were only two students who did not comply with my suggestions, 17 out of 19 students demonstrated a considerable improvement in their texts. The previous finding was reached by analyzing the final products with the same criteria as the first step and comparing the results.

**Students' position towards a topic.** Different from the diagnosis, no student had a neutral position. Although some of them had arguments in favor as well as against the subject in their texts, they could express it through different arguments. These arguments were based on examples, comparisons, and even personal anecdotes. For instance, a girl was writing in favor of drugs. This girl searched on the internet for information about people that medicinally used drugs. Additionally, as she was talking about how drugs aided people to perform better, she carried out my advice about looking for famous sport characters that used drugs, and in the final product I realized she had found interesting information as the next



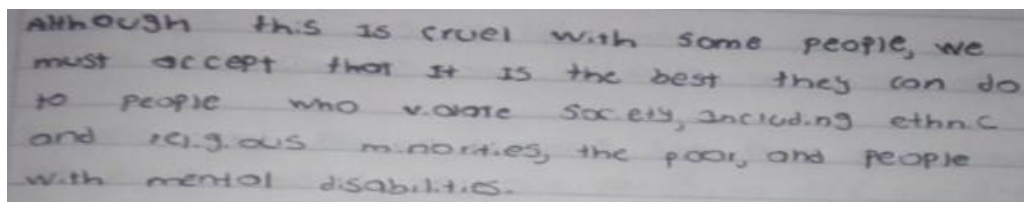
**Sentence structure.** Regarding sentence structure, students demonstrated a suitable agreement among the subject, the verb and the tense, even in complex statements as the next ones: "... this surgery is done so that your skull has a better shape", "because one of the parents is a repressed homosexual". As can be seen, in the first example we have 2 verbs together with their proper tense and in the second although the verb To Be is right after the subject parents, the student could understand that s/he was referring only to one of the parents. In addition to this,

issues about pluralizing nouns and adjectives or misplacing adjectives after the noun in the text were no longer present.

**Cohesion and coherence.** Concerning cohesion and coherence I asked, when necessary, each student what s/he wanted to express, and I helped them by reconstructing some ideas. This was because students attached a lot to Spanish, ignoring that in English we have other ways of communicating or expressing ideas. Moreover, during the different sessions, I provided students with different expressions or sentence starters to help the reader understand and interpret in a better way the students' text. Some of them were: "For instance, for example, in conclusion, finally, to conclude..." Also, I remarked to students when it was necessary to add a comma or a period to make the text more accurate.

Additionally, this time the use of translation was not as obvious and misused as in the diagnosis. For instance, the girl who in the diagnosis wrote "already what" to express "ya que"... in the final product wrote the next sentence "unless we talk about what the catholic church"... Thus, and as we are talking about a misused translation, in the word "unless" one could have expected that she had written something like "to less".

**Spelling.** When dealing with spelling, I wanted to highlight the noticeable improvement in the work of the student who had too many mistakes in the first step of the process. I emphasized on his work because it is a remarkable example of how the steps covered throughout the project, especially when the student is in charge of his/her learning and with the instructor's guiding role, could improve the text in the final product.



ALTHOUGH this is cruel with some people, we must accept that it is the best they can do to people who violate society, including ethnic and religious minorities, the poor, and people with mental disabilities.



**Proofreading.** Concerning proofreading, after implementing the feedback stage I encouraged students to reread their texts. Whether by stating that I liked one part of the text or by asking them what they wanted to say in a specific part as it was confusing, students had to return to their papers and check the part I was referring to.

**Text structure (number of words, paragraphs).** Likewise, and although there was not a minimum of words for the final product, a minimum of paragraphs (3), one for the introduction, another for the body or arguments and finally one for the conclusion was established, all the students far exceeded the minimum of words specified for the first step.

### **Conclusions and interpretations**

Findings in this action research reveal that the use of PBL could help improve tenth-graders' writing skill in my EFL classroom. This approach, besides allowing students to express their points of view, breaks the traditional manner of ELT. Through this process, students had an active role and enhanced their confidence by being in control of their writing and learning process.

Likewise, this study involves some implications for teachers' practice in this context. The first implication is that teachers should provide opportunities for students to become language users. In this sense, when planning EFL classes teachers should pay careful attention to the content being taught and its purpose, as well as the adaptation of materials and activities related to students' context, realities, and needs. Another implication to consider is to transform teachers' and students' perceptions about the use of translation. This strategy, although useful sometimes in ELT, should not be understood as the only objective of activity but a means to reach a more significant purpose. This could be achieved by making students realize how the misuse of translation could completely change the message intended in a sentence.

This research provides a rationale for the PBL approach and a better understanding of its effects on students' improvement in their writing skill in an EFL classroom. Nevertheless, further research on these effects needs to be conducted involving different settings as well as considering working not only with writing but a combination of the other skills. Finally, further research may include the impact of the implementation of virtual platforms and ICTs as well in EFL classrooms, not only as an alternative when student-teacher face-to-face interaction is not possible but as an essential part of ELT.

### **Reflection**

As it is well known, in most careers people study for a long time, preparing and training for developing a task at the end of the process. However, going through this path does not assure that you will be able to successfully perform in the actual professional field. As a matter of fact, in the foreign language teaching program teachers are prepared under different approaches, strategies, and methodologies that ease the teaching process and provide more significant learning for students. Nonetheless, I reckon that all that training miscalculates reality and the complexity of teaching in a public institution. This is because it is only in this stage of the career that you experience the true teacher's role. Although in previous courses we observed and taught one or two classes, it is quite different to have this practicum process in which you become familiarized enough to remember each student's name, their strengths/weaknesses, and most importantly the person beyond the student. Despite this delight spark, not everything went exactly as planned.

Regarding the practicum, I chose to work with 10th graders because students are supposed to have a good English level, and this is an easier population to work with as they are grownups. Nevertheless, when I started teaching, I became conscious of reality. First, there were only a few students that showed the level I expected, the rest of the class had a basic command of the language, at that moment I wondered the way they learned English through the years. Then, after being their teacher for a little time I could realize that teacher's reality is harder than I thought. In my case, and even though I tried to enhance students' participation and that students enjoy English classes because of the activities I proposed and the kind of teacher I was, it was impossible to have some students engaged in the project. At the beginning I was worried because perhaps I was guilty, then I realized there were some other students very engaged in everything I

assigned. Later, I could come up with the conclusion that some students do not like or enjoy English, no matter what activity you propose, what material you employ or the kind of teacher you are, some students are not at all into English or they just do not want to learn. Thus, and as I was not aware of everything a teacher must face in the past, I used to be judgmental; but now I am aware of the arduous task good teachers undergo. What is more, I thought that those students who did nothing, even a single activity and without a valid excuse throughout the project would fail English subject and that is all. Nevertheless, my cooperating teacher told me I had to prepare a worksheet for those students not to fail. I consider that as a lack of respect because it is not fair nor for me as the teacher nor for the students who punctually delivered all their tasks. Finally, on the other hand, it is worth mentioning that because of the pandemic situation the dynamic of the classes was more simple for me as only half of the students, around 17, attended the virtual meeting, besides I could mute a student if this one was producing inappropriate sounds or interrupting the class, a feature, and action that every teacher of a public institution would like to have when teaching in the classroom.

Concerning the research part, it is worth noting that I had to conduct the 2 practicum semesters in 1. For this reason, since the beginning, I had a kind of time pressure. On the other hand, I consider it like a straitjacket in which most of the actions you carry out in your classes must be narrowed down towards your research question. For not being misunderstood, I am conscious of the importance research has in our field, and thanks to previous courses I know practice and theory must go hand in hand. However, considering the external issues as the few hours dedicated to English, the missed classes, and the issues aforementioned, in my opinion, the relationship between both aspects (practicum & research) is affected. On the one hand, the practicum because its implementation depends totally on the research question, so classes lose

certain freedom of developing actions not related to the study. On the other hand, in the research matter because the issues stated above do not allow a high-quality study and we are forced to take action in this regard as implementing just one part of the research or hurrying up with the process, probably affecting the results or findings.

In conclusion, although the practicum experience was not the expected, because of the pandemic situation and the obligation of giving classes unusually, I can say I had wonderful experiences with my students. Perhaps, I had some problems due to my lack of experience but, as I have heard several times during the career, one of the most important parts of being a teacher is that students keep something good about you and vice-versa. As for me, I will take the best of this amazing adventure and look forward to keeping improving as a future teacher.

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