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Promoting a Contextualized Learning Experience through the implementation of PBA and the
use of Authentic Materials in fourth-graders at Juan María Céspedes

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Abstract

This action research aimed at defining to what extent the implementation of project based approach using authentic materials promotes a contextualized learning experience in primary school students. The participants were 18 students from group 4-4 at Educational Institution Juan María Céspedes. Actions consisted in the creation of a project in which students presented some facts about a country. Authentic materials were used as input in all stages of the project in order to have a more contextualized perspective of the target language. Data collection instruments included a teacher journal, students artifacts, a student survey, and an interview with the cooperating teacher. Findings suggested that CTL had a positive impact on students, authentic materials helped the enhancement of reflective thinking and PBL promoted the awareness of students' own learning processes.

Key words: Project-based learning, authentic materials, contextualized teaching and learning

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.

Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to thank my family for all their support, patience and motivation during this process of learning and self-realization, especially to my daughter Salomé, for representing the strength I needed to overcome every obstacle and every difficulty. Secondly, I would like to extend my thanks to my classmates and closest friends who allowed my time at the university to be a pleasant experience; who supported me in difficult moments and always showed their solidarity.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all the professors who had an impact on my learning process, especially my advisor Mary Isabel Arredondo who demonstrated extensive wisdom and above all supported me with great ideas. I must add a special acknowledgement for my cooperating teacher Harrison Calle, who was always a help in the classroom and from whom I learned many positive things.

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Preface

This action research is conducted to fulfill the requirements of the Bachelor of Education

in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de

Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia. Having this requirement in mind, I wanted to explore

Contextualized Teaching and Learning and monitor the possible impact this methodology might

have on EFL learners.

In order to accomplish the obligations of the program, I was assigned to Juan María

Céspedes school where I had the opportunity to work along with teacher Harrison Céspedes in

group 4-4. After carrying out some observations in the classroom, I could observe that students

were receiving context-less input.

Subsequently, I started to look for a teaching approach from which I could foster a

contextualized learning environment within this specific group of students. Thus, recalling all the

knowledge I have acquired during these years at the university, I came up with a research

proposal that aimed at improving this situation and at the same time, helped me to accomplish the

objectives of this bachelor's degree.

Description of the context

Juan María Céspedes is a public educational institution located in Belén, a neighborhood in Medellín, Colombia that offers preschool, elementary school, high school, and technical high school, and counts with 2700 students. It is divided into two campuses. On the one hand, the main campus is located in Belen Miravalle and is a large space, surrounded by trees where most of the administrative activities related to the institution are developed. On the other hand, there is a secondary campus located in Belén las playas, relatively close to the main headquarters, which was inaugurated on April 2nd, 2018, and, as the main campus, has large green areas and optimal classrooms for the learning process of the students.

Due to the overcrowding that was experienced at the main headquarters, the Secretary of Education through Decree 2105 of December 14th, 2017, assigned this new section which offers "Jornada Única" from kindergarten to eleventh grade. In addition to this, in 2018, the Virtual High School program was implemented in the institution with the purpose of schooling the population that could not complete their studies at the primary and secondary levels, due to gender discrimination, forced displacement, teenage pregnancies, armed conflict, among other social problems.

These actions reflect the institution's motto "Overcoming and changing" since they have been able to make their way in the face of adversity and seek solutions that allow them to improve. Their motto is complemented by their humanist philosophy, which is divided into four dimensions: Fundamental, humanitarian, ecological, and community humanism. Therefore, the educational institution focuses on ensuring quality education to the most vulnerable sectors of society, taking into account that most of its students come from socioeconomic strata 1, 2, and 3.

Given the current situation with covid-19 and the restrictions, the educational institution reinforced the Moodle platform that was designed for its virtual education program, which went from having 600 students to more than 2500 in 2020. Likewise, in 2021, at the request of the Ministry of Education, the school began an alternation model that is still subject to changes planned by the national government. This alternation model consists of giving a certain number of students the opportunity to attend the educational institution. In the case of the 4-4 group, which will be the focus of this project, 15 students attended school for one week from 7:00 to 2:00 pm and while the other 18 students developed the activities on the platform at home.

This group is made up of 38 students from socioeconomic strata 1, 2, and 3. Due to the number of students, the opportunities for face-to-face meetings in the classroom are taken by the headteacher Harrison Calle only as moments of review, reinforcement, and social gathering, since the main source of teaching is the Moodle platform. The cooperating teacher is a psychologist who graduated from the University of Antioquia and developed a love for teaching over the years motivating him to study the foreign language teaching program at the same university; however he did not complete it. Nevertheless, he has worked as an official teacher of the Ministry of National Education for eleven years and has been teaching at Juan Maria Cespedes for two years now.

I am a student of foreign language teaching at the University of Antioquia. I have been working as a teacher for three and a half years, mostly teaching children and teenagers. Thanks to my experience, I decided to do my practicum at Juan María Céspedes with fourth graders.

Statement of the problem

The teaching of English in the Colombian context has been linked to compliance with the standards imposed by the Ministry of Education in its bilingualism plans set out in the basic learning rights. However, in the city of Medellin, most students do not have a context where English is developed in a natural way and in which they can perform an authentic production of the foreign language.

On the contrary, Colombian students, especially those in primary education, are exposed to non-authentic materials, which are designed only for the language acquisition process. Even though they fulfill their function in terms of learning linguistic and grammatical features, they do not provide the students with sufficient tools to produce or understand authentic English language interaction. This can be evidenced in the modules designed by the teachers of the Juan María Céspedes Educational Institution, which are intended to guide students in the process of solving the workshops that they must submit at the end of the academic period.

In addition to this, the problems being experienced around the world due to the covid-19 pandemic have led education to be conducted virtually, which has meant that fewer students have the opportunity to be exposed to authentic interaction in the foreign language. It must be taken into account that the student population of the educational institution belongs mostly to socioeconomic strata 1, 2, and 3, and its internet connectivity is, at times, limited and susceptible to intermittency.

In addition to the aforementioned, the alternation model that is carried out in the educational institution does not ensure continuity in the learning process of the students since, during the week they do not attend school, they are only dedicated to answering the workshops

presented in the Moodle platform and have no other input than what is found there.

Furthermore, the class observations made with the 4-4 group illustrated this problem,

since the students expressed concern about how they should develop the workshop and asked the

teacher to develop it along with them. Besides, after analyzing the tasks proposed in the modules,

it was found that they are based on multiple-choice questions, sentence completion exercises,

matching words with their meaning or images, but the students' authentic production is not

prioritized, and no input related to the students' social contexts is proposed.

Taking into account all the problems described above, I have decided to propose a

pedagogical implementation based on teaching English through projects (Project-Based

Approach), which should be combined with authentic materials and be related to the social

contexts of the students. Moreover, I also chose to have one focal group, which is the A section,

due to the alternancy model and the continuity of the project.

This methodology would help students to observe the development of the foreign

language in authentic situations and to use English in context, relating what they have seen in

class and the workshops proposed by the teachers to their own lives and daily experiences.

Theoretical background

The teaching and learning of English as a foreign language under a contextualized

approach has been increasing in recent years, however, many of the proposed materials focus on

mechanical exercises that only cover the grammatical and syntactic aspects of the language.

According to Walz (1989), such mechanical exercises present a simple phrase or sentence that

needs a change or that only allows for limited production of the foreign language by the learner.

This causes the learner to mechanize language production by limiting the learning process into an

observation of the morphological and syntactic patterns, an internalization of them, and a

production that is based on the repetition of those aspects (Walz, 1989, p. 160).

In group 4-4 of the Juan María Céspedes educational institution, it was observed that there

is a lack of contextualization in the materials and workshops proposed for the teaching and

learning process of English. This problem could be solved through the implementation of a

project-based approach and the use of authentic materials. In the following paragraphs, the

concepts that will guide this research proposal will be developed. First, the concept of

contextualized teaching and learning will be addressed, followed by an exploration of the

project-based approach and how it can help to give context to teaching. Finally, authentic

materials and their importance in the development of contextualized learning will be discussed.

Contextualized teaching and learning

Contextualized teaching and learning (CTL) has been previously explored by authors such

as Dewey (1900), Piaget (1929), Bruner (1966), among others, laying the foundations and

fundamental principles that would lead to the development of this conception of learning.

Although their works spoke of the importance of context in the teaching and learning processes,

they did not define exactly what it is. Instead, they talked about meaningful learning in which

students could relate the knowledge acquired in the educational environment with their social

realities.

Berns and Erickson (2001) define CTL as a conception of learning and teaching that

encourages teachers to create a connection between real-life situations and the knowledge being

taught (p. 3). At the same time, contextualized learning "motivates students to make connections

between knowledge and its applications to their lives as family members, citizens, and workers

and engage in the hard work that learning requires" (Berns & Erickson, 2001, p.3). Furthermore,

Mazzeo et al. (2003) agree that contextualized teaching and learning increases students'

motivation since it allows them to observe how the knowledge they acquired operates in a social

context (p. 9).

Students then find a meaningful learning process as they use their previous experiences

and skills to build on their existing knowledge, in order to achieve the proposed objectives (Berns

& Erickson, 2001, p.3). They also reinforce the idea that "By learning subjects in an integrated,

multidisciplinary manner and in appropriate contexts, they (learners) are able to use the acquired

knowledge and skills in applicable contexts" (Berns & Erickson 2001, p.3).

Project based approach

As mentioned above, contextualized learning and teaching is based on creating a

connection between learning and the cultural and social context of the students. This is why it

must be linked to an approach or teaching methodology that relates linguistic topics to the life

and daily experiences of the learners. Berns and Erikson (2001) propose the Project-Based

approach (PBA) as a way to promote contextualized and meaningful learning (p.4). For these

authors, PBA is a means by which students are involved in problem-solving and other meaningful

tasks that help them develop autonomy in their learning through the realization of realistic

products. (Berns & Erickson 2001, p.4).

Tamim and Grant (2013) reinforce what is mentioned above by defining PBA as an

approach to learning that involves the acquisition of knowledge from different perspectives and

encourages the development of autonomy in the students' learning process since it is developed

as a social activity in which the context is essential (p.73). Moreover, Garzón (2018) stated that

due to the fact that PBA comes from constructivism, this approach leads students to face real

learning environments and the solution of problems that are under their interests (p. 17).

Authentic materials

According to Heitler (2005) and Berardo (2006), authentic materials are defined as those

materials produced by speakers of the English language (native or non-native) that are not

intended to serve the purpose of teaching a language but vary in nature. Besides, Berardo (2006)

argues that the difference between authentic and non-authentic materials is that in the last one we

can see an artificial language that is aimed solely at teaching, its structured and produced

languages forms differs from what the student may encounter in real-life situations and therefore,

generates fictitious learning that does not lead to communicative learning.(p. 61).

Research question

To what extent do a project-based approach implementation and the use of authentic

materials promote a contextualized learning experience in fourth-graders at Juan María

Céspedes?

General Objective

- To define how project-based approach implementation and the use of authentic materials

  promote a contextualized learning experience in fourth-graders from the educational

  institution Juan María Céspedes.

Specific objectives.

- To explore the impact that a contextualized learning experience may have on a group of students from a public institution

- To monitor how the use of authentic materials may help students to have a more contextualized learning experience and relate the foreign language to their own lives

- To observe how the implementation of a project-based approach may facilitate a contextualized learning experience in which students could make a connection between what is being taught and their own learning process.

Action Plan

The action plan for this research project had been implemented during the first and second semesters of 2021, being the first one devoted only to observation matters, and the second one to implementation and data collection, and analysis. On the following charts, the timetable for each stage can be observed.

Semester I - 2021					
Activities	**February**	**March**	**April**	**May**	**June**
Presentation of the student-teacher	☑				
Class observation	☑	☑	☑		
Statement of the problem			☑	☑	
Reviewing the literature			☑	☑	
Class intervention		☑			☑
Journal entries		☑	☑	☑	☑

Semester II - 2021					
Activities	**July**	**August**	**September**	**October**	**November**
Project presentation and consent form signing		☑			
Unit design creation	☑	☑			
Implementation of the actions			☑	☑	
Collection of samples (Student's artifacts)			☑	☑	
Interview				☑	
Survey				☑	
Data analysis and interpretation					☑
Findings write up					☑
Review and revision of all sections					☑

Development of the actions

The implementation of this project took six weeks in which a pedagogical unit that sought

to promote contextualized learning was developed. This unit was divided into 6 different sessions

of one hour each and culminated with the delivery of a final project.

In the first session "Countries of the world" the vocabulary related to countries was

addressed using the video "Animaniacs Yakko's World" and the first phase of the project was

assigned, which consisted of finding three interesting facts about a country. In addition, in this

session the project was presented in a general way and the input was shown. In the second

session "Weather and feelings", the video "Sesame Street: Grover weather monster" was

presented for weather vocabulary acquisition and "Winnie the Pooh: A Book About Weather"

was read to invite reflection on the relationship between feelings and weather.

In the third session "Days of the week", the book "Monday is a funday" was read for

vocabulary acquisition, then the video "No more mondays!" was presented on the basis of which

the students reflected on what would happen if one day of the week no longer existed. In parallel,

students were assigned the second stage of the project in which they had to search for information

about the weather during a week in the country they had previously chosen and the video

"Sesame Street: Kermit's weather calendar" was used as input for this activity.

In the fourth session "Healthy food", the book "A very hungry caterpillar" was read to

relate the days of the week with food; additionally, a reflection about the different perceptions of

healthy and unhealthy food was carried out. Furthermore, the third stage of the project was

assigned, which consisted of describing a typical food of the chosen country.

In the fifth session, the preparation for the final presentation of the project took place and

the students received personalized help and advice. Finally, in the last session, they presented the

project.

Data collection methods

During the implementation of this pedagogical proposal, I used different methods to

collect the data that would help me answer the research question. As a main source I took the

students' artifacts and the journals that I wrote during this process. In addition to this, I conducted

a survey to the students to know their perceptions regarding the implemented methodology and

an interview with the cooperating teacher that responded to the same purpose.

It is important to emphasize that each stage of the project developed with the students

yielded a product that served to analyze the process of each of them in particular and whether or

not there was progress compared to the beginning of the research. In addition, the effectiveness of

the authentic material proposed for each stage of the project was also evaluate

Findings and Interpretations

The process of data analysis is crucial to research. According to Bell (2005), "A hundred

separate pieces of interesting information will mean nothing to a researcher or to a reader unless

they have been categorized and interpreted" (Bell, 2005, p. 203). I decided to follow the

categorization process suggested by Bell (2005) in which the importance of finding differences,

similarities, patterns and grouping them to generate an important meaning from the information

collected is highlighted.

After I carried out the process of analyzing the data I was able to collect during the

intervention, three categories emerged: The first one called "Positive impact of CTL on students",

the second one "Enhancement of reflective thinking in students" and finally "Promotion of

students' awareness of their own process". In the following paragraphs, I will describe each of the

above categories and show some examples of the data interpreted in each of them.

Positive impact of CTL on students

After culminating the data analysis process, I found that contextualized learning had a

highly positive impact on students both in the linguistic and in the attitudinal and motivational

aspects. Initially, in the journal entry of April 7, 2021 it is described that students had no interest

other than solving the workshops proposed in the moodle platform:

"There were certain moments in both, virtual and face-to-face classes, when students

interrupted the class by presenting their concerns about the workshops and virtual

modules. Students were constantly showing more concern for the homework than for the

topics' comprehension, this affects their concentration in the classes and their learning

process since it is being focused only on the resolution of the workshops"

However, after the implementation of CTL it was evident that the attitude and motivation

towards the classes changed significantly as the students stopped asking questions about the

workshops and the platform, and began to focus on the materials being presented and the topics

proposed for the class. The journal entry of September 22, 2021 reflected this change :

"During today's class, I noticed that some students who never participated were excited to

see the project that was planned for them and especially the material presented

"Animaniacs Yakko's world". This led them to participate and ask questions regarding the

countries and their customs."

In Figure 1, it can be observed that before the CTL implementation, only an average of 5

students from the focal group participated in class activities. Nevertheless, after the

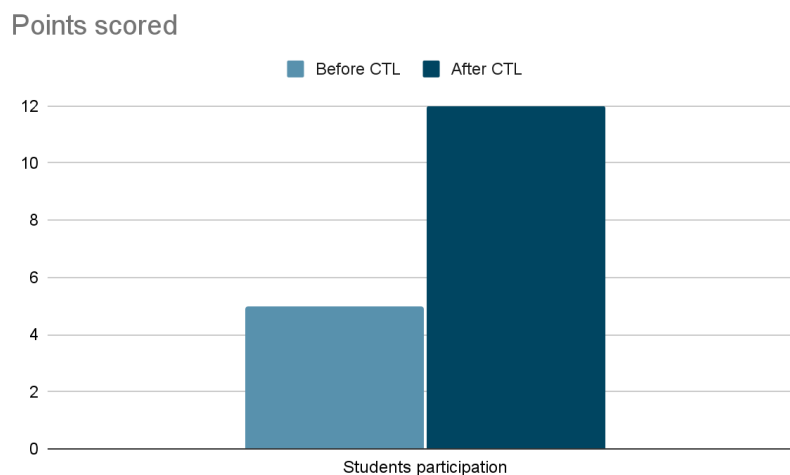implementation the participation of the students grew:

Figure 1. Students participation.

Furthermore, teacher Harrison Calle reinforced this statement by expressing that he could

observe that there was an increase in the motivation of the students since the beginning of the

research project implementation. Besides, he could notice that the students were indeed acquiring

the required learning due to the vocabulary and grammatical structures they used in their

interventions in class:

> "La implementación fue totalmente provechosa porque no se dejó en ningún momento de
> lado la malla curricular institucional… considero que desde la respuesta de los
> estudiantes, los desempeños mostrados, las participaciones que lograba yo observar allí en
> las clases, como el nivel de participación y digamos los contenidos o las estructuras y
> vocabulario que manejaban los estudiantes, daban cuenta de los aprendizajes que estaban
> realizando" (Interview with the Cooperating Teacher)

Enhancement of reflective thinking in students

One of the main problems found during the observation period of this research activity

was that students were exposed to mechanical and context-less inputs that only served to promote

memorization and retainment of information by the students and did not help them to develop

other skills. After beginning to use the authentic materials and providing students with context,

they began not only to acquire linguistic knowledge, but also to develop reflective thinking that

allowed them to compare their lives with the contexts presented within the materials.

The aforementioned can be evidenced in a student's response to the survey, specifically in

the question regarding the authentic material "No more mondays", in which he refers to how this

material helped him reflect on the importance of each day in his life:

"Nos ayudó a pensar qué pasaría si un día no tenemos más lunes, o martes, o el día que no

le gusta a cada uno. Todos los días son importantes así a uno no le gusten porque pasan

cosas diferentes" (Student answer from the survey)

Moreover, after analyzing the activity carried out with this material, I was able to

reinforce this idea, given that the students carried out a reflective process based on their own

experiences and related it to the events occurring in this video. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show how

in the first one a student concluded that if Mondays did not exist, garbage would accumulate in

her house, and in the second, another student identified that if Mondays did not exist, schools

would not open. These conclusions could only be drawn by the students after analyzing their

contexts and engaging in a reflective thought process regarding the relationship between the
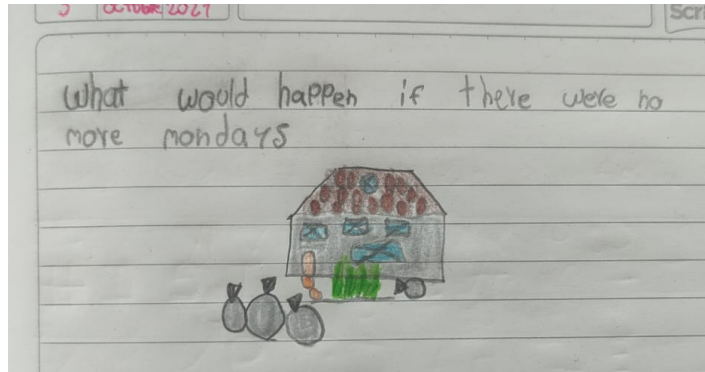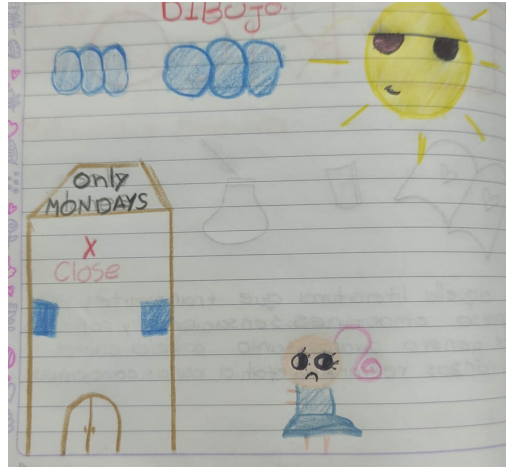
material and their lives.

Figure 2. Student drawing

Figure 3. Student drawing

Promotion of students' awareness of their own process.

The center of contextualized learning is none other than the learner and his or her own

process. This is why Berns and Erickson (2001) propose PBA as a relevant methodology to

provide a suitable environment for CTL, since this approach allows the student's progress to be

seen in a gradual way. This is due to the fact that the projects have several stages that lead the

way to a final product which gathers all the learning acquired during a period of time.

It is important to highlight that the importance of the continuity of the themes and the

relationship that should be created between each of them was evidenced during the analysis. This

line that was drawn during the progress of the project was strongly supported by the selected

materials.

An example of this is the video "Sesame Street: Kermit's weather calendar" that not only

related two topics previously addressed in the course (days of the week and weather) but also

showed in a practical way the second assignment of the project (Figure 4), which facilitated the

students' understanding. Furthermore, I found a student's response to the question about the

material in the survey that supports the previous statement:

"Me gustó el video porque estaban los días de la semana y el clima que eran dos cosas

que ya habíamos aprendido y por eso pude entender todo. Además, la rana rené hacia un

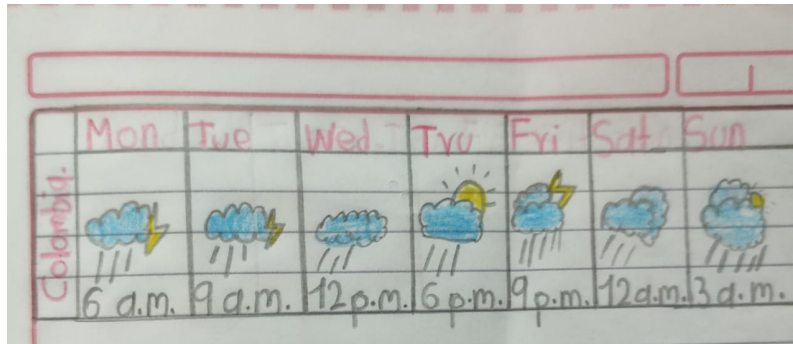calendario con el clima que era lo que íbamos a hacer para la otra clase"

Figure 4. Student's weather calendar

After seeing the continuity provided by PBA, the students, the cooperating teacher and I

were able to see the progress that each had made during the process of implementing this

pedagogy. This approach to teaching and learning allows the student to see their effort reflected

in a tangible product and to observe the changes in their process from the first assignment to the

last one. In Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7 and Figure 8 we can see the different stages of the project

and how the students went through the process to produce the video about the country of their
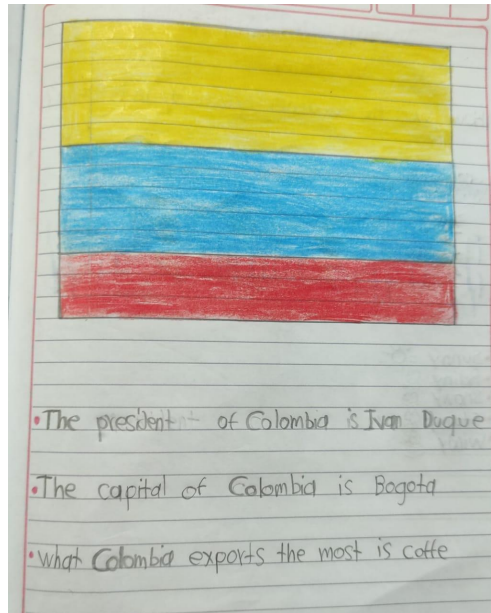
choice.

Figure 5. Student first assignment

Figure 6. Student second assignment

Figure 7. Student third assignment

Figure 8. Student final project video

Conclusions and reflection

This action research was carried out with the purpose of promoting contextualized

learning and observing the possible impact that this methodology could have on elementary

school students in a public school. The results suggested that this methodology had a positive

impact on students both linguistically and motivationally. Furthermore, it could be demonstrated

that this methodology helps students to reinforce certain metacognitive skills such as the ability

to reflect and compare their environment with those of others. Moreover, it was observed that the

students began to develop an awareness of their learning process as they could see it reflected in

the stages of the project.

Throughout the process, the students were willing to participate and were motivated by

the materials and the methodology selected. It is important to highlight that the audiovisual

materials (cartoon videos) worked better with them since the students could see the context

through the images, the movements of the characters, the environment of the video, etc. The

opposite was evident, for example, with the reading of the book "The very hungry caterpillar"

given that the students were not as interested and attentive to this material because, although it

was supported by images, there were no other types of expressions, such as gestures or

movements that would help them understand the whole context.

During this process, some observations that might help future pre-service teachers or

practitioners who want to delve more deeply into this issue emerged. Primarily, the unit designed

for this implementation did not take into account the importance of student-to-student interaction,

which I consider to be of utmost importance. This was due to the effects of the Covid-19

pandemic, as social interaction had to be reduced and social distance had to be respected,

however, I suggest looking for a way to create more interaction between students and not only

interaction with the teacher and the materials.

Secondly, I could see that the use of the notebooks is important for the students because it

helps the continuity of learning. Due to the lack of continuity provided by the alternation, the

notebook becomes an ally so that students can keep up to date and follow the line of what they

have been learning during the classes. Although students were able to remember what was done

in previous classes with only a small review, they had difficulty solving homework or workshops

that were assigned to reinforce the learning acquired.

Finally, I would like to suggest the implementation of CTL as I consider it a highly

effective and positive methodology that helps students to acquire communicative and

metacognitive skills that are important for everyone's life. In the same way, I would like to

highlight the effectiveness of Authentic Materials as they are materials that can be adapted to the

needs and interests of the learners and we can find diverse resources with many purposes.

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