



EMPOWERING MINDS, EMPOWERING TEACHING




Sandra Inés Trujillo Juárez
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Teaching English at Mexico-US Border Schools to Favor Inclusion

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Escuela Normal Fronteriza Tijuana

Abstract

The following paper emanates from ongoing action research with a qualitative approach that has the ultimate goal of making school reinsertion of English speakers in Basic Education schools in Mexico as smoothly as possible. This research responds to constant migration to and from the United States of America, especially in schools located at the country's northern border. The study started in 2018. The methodology includes visiting dual immersion schools in San Diego, California, working at a Binational Project, and guiding Basic and Inclusive Education teacher-trainees into teaching English at their assigned practice schools. The Binational Project is a partnership between different Universities on both sides of the California-Baja California border. It aims to shape a binational teacher's profile to bolster and look for such reinsertion to be thriving.

The main results include acknowledging that at least one student in every classroom has such conditions, and they confront barriers to participation and learning. A valuable percentage of teachers in training are willing to include English teaching as part of their regular class, the opportunity to observe bilingual pedagogical practices in a different country, and to reflect on how bilingual practices in the classroom can act as a tool for inclusion. The information was gathered through direct observation, observation reports, interviews, field journals, and Likert scale surveys; data has been processed and interpreted through Google Forms.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Education, English, Immersion, Inclusion.

Introduction

Escuela Normal Fronteriza Tijuana (ENFT) is a teacher-training Higher Education institution located in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, in which finding English speaking people is not uncommon. However, the majority of the population are not English speakers yet. Since 2018, this Normal School has been a part of a Binational Project that includes Universities from both sides of the California-Baja California border that aim to shape Binational Teachers profiles to bolster and look for English speakers' reinsertion in Mexican schools to be thriving.

In 2018 in Mexico, the Public Secretarial of Education (SEP) developed an unprecedented National English Strategy. This one includes Basic Education (kindergarten, elementary, and middle schools) as the 2010 program suggested, but it targets Normal Schools' Teacher Trainees. This program aims to bring the Mexican population towards bilingualism or multilingualism during the next 20 to 30 years. Under rigorous standards, the strategy included hiring 646 English teachers nationwide and installing them at Normal Schools. At the same time, they developed an English program for such Higher Education Institutions in collaboration with Cambridge University.

One of the National English Strategy goals is for English-speaking children who need reinsertion in Mexican public schools to feel included and fulfill their education needs, in both regular and Inclusive Education. Positive reinsertion might be possible if teachers are encouraged to learn and practice English-teaching during their training years, to bring the language to their classrooms. To better understand these processes, visiting dual immersion schools in California might allow Teacher-Trainees to study them, leading to a practice reflection and strategy design.

Mexico is a country that has a considerable amount of migration. In 2019, there were 207,814 deportations from the USA, according to the National Migration Institute (INM) (cited in Rivera, 2019). They registered more than 500,000 immigrants from different countries in the same year, including many minors (INM, 2020). Also, from the 4,9 million Mexicans living in the United States, according to Passel & Cohn (2019), two million have left the country to

get back to Mexico in the last three years, including families with small children who need reinsertion in public schools.

As stated in the 2015 census report made by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), in Baja California, 4,1% of the population was born outside of Mexico. From this percentage, 82,233 of those people live in Tijuana, Baja California, being the Mexican city with the highest number of residents born in a different country. Nonetheless, 37,7% of these people do have a Mexican nationality, which leads us to the fact that a significant number of these seemingly foreign people come from Mexican families. Plenty of these families are Mexican-American living in Tijuana, Mexico and working in San Diego,US.

All of this information led to coming up with strategies to encourage Teacher Trainees from ENFT to not only learn and improve their English language levels, but also to start practicing teaching it at their practice schools. These practices include studying their groups to find how many students are in the described conditions or have learned the language prior to their current school enrollment. After knowing their students' conditions, they started applying some tests to understand their levels, including the students who have not been directly exposed to the language.

Having studied these facts, Teacher Trainees planned some lessons to start teaching the English program for Kindergarten and Elementary levels, known as “Aprendizajes Clave”, having to adapt them to the level of the majority of students. This includes using contents from a prior grade level to higher schools grades and making adjustments to include higher-level language speakers. After the practices, they had the opportunity to reflect on the experience and talk about it with their peers, as well as presenting their results to the entirety of their professors to get some feedback. Results are discussed later throughout the paper.

Problem approach

English speakers who enroll in public Basic Education schools in Mexico do not have support nor tutoring to confront the language barriers, leading them to stress, frustration, and, ultimately, academic failure. Also, most teachers are

not prepared to help their students through this process since they are either not speakers or do not have the academic training to handle said situations.

General Objective

To train future teachers to acknowledge the importance of Spanish-English bilingualism, helping them improve their English skills, as well as teach them to identify English speakers in regular and inclusive classrooms. In addition, encourage them to implement English classes as a standard practice minimizing the impact that Mexican-American migrant students confront, using the language as an inclusion tool.

Specific Objectives:

1. To guide Teacher-Trainees into teaching an English class at their practice schools to gather experience in such matters.
2. To raise Teacher-Trainees' awareness of the challenges they might confront regarding English-speakers in regular and inclusive classrooms through their research and experience.
3. To provide Teacher-Trainees with observation and reflection opportunities in different contexts, including international visits to dual immersion classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

As Licea (2020) points out “many children attending Mexican Classrooms have priorly gone to American schools, have English backgrounds, or [...] have the necessity to learn the language” (p.24). These facts enhance the importance of bringing the language to the classroom since it presumes an advantage over schools that do not implement similar programs. “Studies have shown that bilingual individuals consistently outperform their monolingual counterparts on tasks involving executive control” (Bialystok 2011, p. 8). The intention is to allow Mexicans to learn this foreign language while making English speakers feel included.

Dominique (2021) talks about Professor Albert Costa's neuroscientific work about bilingualism, stating that “bilinguals and users of a second language have considerable advantages over monolinguals”. He considers that “dual

language ability gives the speaker certain behavioral advantages and can even delay the onset of dementia by up to four years”. Also, “that bilinguals are often better at making considered decisions, less prone to instinctive reactions and better at managing conflict” (p. 100). These discoveries strengthen the idea of the importance of teaching students a foreign language, or in this case, a second language for their everyday use or when in the situation of migrating either to or from the US to Mexico.

In this sense, the Mexican Educational System has related to students living in significant marginalization or special needs. However, nowadays, the concept has been broadening to provide quality education not only to the students with the characteristics mentioned above, but also to the people who belong to different indigenous groups, people who have abandoned formal education and want to restart their studies, and immigrants (Alcantara, Minan & Juarez, 2018).

In terms of bilingualism, Mehisto & Marsh (2011) talk about society’s importance instead of focusing only on the individual factors that directly benefit the immediate and long term. In that matter, they have to say that “if the language is valued by society and is perceived as useful by the business community, bilingualism has the promise to increase the individual economy and overall importance of its use” (p. 22). A language then becomes vital as society uses it and needs it, such as in these learning environments where students are users of the English language.

Considering these and other facts, the General Direction for Higher Education Teaching Professionals (DGESPE, 2018) National English Strategy for Normal Schools, is now looking forward to creating bilingual teachers, making it essential to provide Teacher-Trainees with the opportunity to practice English-teaching aside from language learning. It is also crucial to guide them into Reflective Teaching, which consists of observing and reflecting on one's teaching, using such observation and reflection as a way of change (Richards, 1991). Getting feedback may raise the awareness of the areas that need improving. Also, reflecting on their practice can lead to self-commitment resulting in taking care of their students’ language needs.

When Teacher-Trainees are having difficulties, English Trainers should encourage them to keep on. Dettori et al. (2006) establish “these competencies mostly develop gradually through practice, and they must be consciously pursued by those who design instructional activities for teachers and by those who supervise them” (p. 407). After several practices, Teacher-Trainees should be getting a hold of their knowledge and experience to keep up teaching, after all “consolidation is a dynamic, generative, transformative, and lingering process that is posited to balance maintenance of useful experience-dependent internal representations of the world with the need to adapt these representations to the changing world” (Dudai et al., 2015). Therefore, it is essential to conduct such practices to favor its success.

Consequently, it is essential to start preparing Teacher-Trainees to observe and practice dual immersion education, which is understood as having subject classes in both English and Spanish languages at the same time. Krashen (2009) pointed out that “what immersion has taught us is that comprehensible subject-matter teaching is language teaching. In fact, the subject-matter class may even be better than the language class for language acquisition” (p. 53). This step might bring extra merit to Teacher-Trainees, guaranteeing their students to succeed in their learning process.

Preceding research has stated the importance of English-teaching practices by Teacher-Trainees in border cities. Licea (2020) states, “Tijuana, Mexico is a border city where there is plenty of fluctuation of the population, and more often than not, there is at least one child in every classroom that has an English background” (p.32). Also, “Teacher-Trainees who are motivated and encouraged to teach English during their school years are more likely to want to continue with the teaching” (Licea, 2020, p. 32).

Along with the previously mentioned, providing experiences that allow Teacher-Trainees to observe and experiment with bilingual teaching practices can be entirely satisfactory for observers. Ayala & Haro (2019) comment that these types of activities “offer strategies for the support of bilingualism, promote a multicultural education, [and] a holistic education that impulses the training of students in the Northern border of Mexico in the most suitable way” (p.7).

Methodology

This ongoing active research has had two different approaches and stages: it started in 2018 with the Binational Project, followed by English-teaching practices at Kindergarten and Elementary schools in Tijuana. Regarding the context reality of a border city, it is very relevant that the Teacher-Trainees gather the knowledge and skills necessary to cater to their teaching to the students they could have, in this case, binational students. Thus, through the school's link with Balboa Elementary school and the Binational Project, it was possible to offer the Teacher-Trainees the opportunity to observe educational practices on the other side of the border (Southern California, USA).

Research design. Action Research with a Qualitative Approach.

Population. Teacher trainees of Escuela Normal Fronteriza Tijuana

Sample: *Binational project.* Fifteen teacher-trainees were selected to participate: seven for Balboa Elementary School, and eight for Chula Vista Learning Community Center (CVLCC).

English-teaching practice

Sixty-nine teacher-trainees practice English-teaching in three stages: First Stage, with 28 trainees from kindergarten and elementary, second stage, with 30 teacher-trainees from kindergarten and elementary (15 repeated from the first stage), and the third stage with 26 inclusive education teacher-trainees.

Methods of data collection

Surveys, questionnaires, and Interviews were processed in Google Forms. Direct observation, observation reports, video reports, and field journals. To protect the identity of Teacher-Trainees, the next acronyms have been created with the next codes: **R** (Report), **Visited School Initials** (**B** Balboa Elementary School, **CV** Chula Vista Learning Center, **N** Nestor Language Academy Charter School), **Participant Number**, and **Visit Date** (DD/MM/YYYY). The acronyms used in this document are: RCV1-051118, RCV7-05112018, RB4-051118, RN5-01162019.

Scope and limitation

As ongoing research, practices have been conducted during two full school years, and 84 Teacher-Trainees have participated so far. ENFT has an average of 700 Teacher-Trainees; about a third have the English level required by both programs, and not all of them have access to such practices.

Procedure. *Binational Project.*

In the first stage, there were four observation visits to bilingual schools located in San Diego, California, USA. The first and second visits were to Balboa Elementary School in 2018. The third one was to Chula Vista Learning Community Center also in 2018, and the last one to Nestor Language Academy Charter School (part of the collaboration with the Binational Project) in 2019. There were two calls for participation at ENFT, in 2018 and 2019, in which details and conditions regarding Teacher-Trainees participation were specified. The Teacher-Trainees selected were students from the bachelor's in Kindergarten Education, Elementary Education, Special Education, Middle School with a Specialty in Spanish, and Middle School with a Specialty in Mathematics. Specifications included the following: To have a B1 or higher English proficiency level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CFER). Have the proper documentation to cross the border to the US (either visa or American passport). To be a student from 3rd to 6th semester in any of the different bachelors offered at ENFT. To complete a form providing an answer to these questions:

A. How can experience in foreign education institutions contribute to your professional development?

B. Why should you be chosen to participate in this program?

On the two visits made to Balboa Elementary School, Teacher-Trainees were assigned to a class having to observe and take notes about the teaching practices carried out regarding bilingual education and multicultural education. After these visits, the teacher trainees had to turn in a report where they shared their findings on the requested topics and their perception of the experience. On the third occasion, there was a visit to Chula Vista Learning Community Center

(CVLCC). In this case, the Binational Project team organized a stay under the premise of “The kids we share. Los niños que compartimos,” which takes a look at the situation and hardships immigrant students face in their path to education on either side of the border. The last visit was to Nestor Language Academy Charter School in 2019.

The protocol was similar to one of the first visits; however, apart from going to the school and doing the corresponding observations, the CVLCC organized a panel of students who shared their experiences as binational learners. Then, Teacher-Trainees went to the San Diego State University (SDSU) camp to participate in discussion tables with teacher trainees. SDSU, Benemerita Escuela Normal Rosaura Zapata (Mexicali, Baja California), and Benemerita Escuela Normal Estatal Profesor Jesus Prado Luna (Ensenada, Baja California) participated in such discussions. They had the time to compare their experiences with education in Mexico and the United States. On previous visits, Teacher-Trainees had to turn in a report describing their observations in CVLCC and their thoughts regarding the overall experience living in both CVLCC and SDSU.

English-teaching practice

Since the beginning of 2019, action has been taken by the B1 Teacher Trainer from the Elementary, Kindergarten and Inclusive Education programs. They were divided in three different stages, having a total of 69 students practicing English-teaching at their assigned schools. The First Stage, held in the 2019-1 semester (comprehended from February to June 2019), started by guiding 28 Kindergarten and Elementary Teacher-Trainees from fourth and sixth semesters with an English level of B1 into teaching one 30 minute class in their assigned practice schools. Once they reached level B2, in the 2019-2 semester (comprehended from August 2019 to January 2020), a total of 15 Teacher-Trainees had another opportunity to teach a sequence of two 30 minute classes. Fifteen others who reached a level B1 in this semester participated for the first time, having 30 Teacher-Trainees from the 5th semester in the Second Stage.

In a different bachelor, a Third stage has been promoted in the 2019-2 semester, in which 26 Teacher-Trainees from the 3rd semester of Inclusive Education presented a 30-minute class at Special Education Centers. It is

essential to clarify that this is a multilevel group, having 19 in A2, three in A1, two in B1, and two in B2. In every stage, all groups presented a video report, answered a questionnaire in Google Forms, and showed some interviews.

Discussion of Results

Binational Project

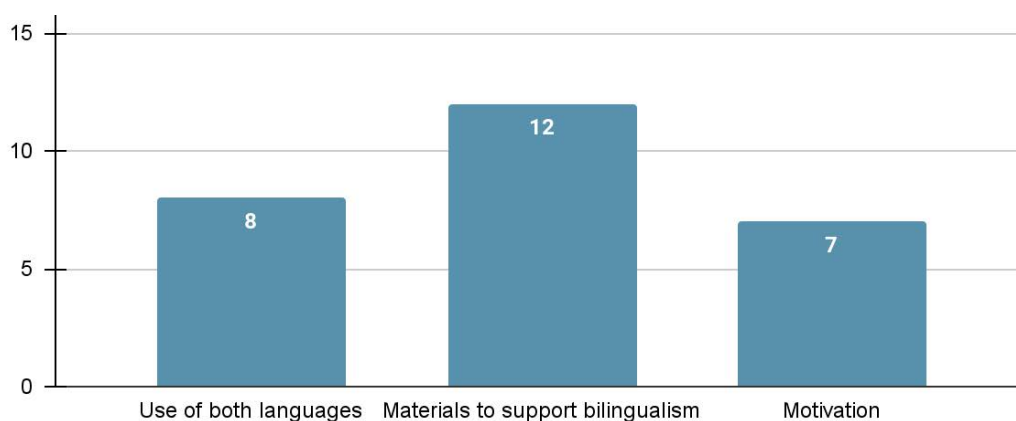
Results are presented in two categories: Observation Reports and Research Papers. In the first category, there is an analysis of the Teacher-Trainees bilingual classroom observations. In the second category, the Research Papers and products from the Binational collaboration among different universities on both sides of the border.

Observation reports

In their statements, the Teacher-Trainees had the freedom to cover any topic regarding the USA visits to schools. Among the conclusions, they came to the importance of inclusion relating to language learning. One of those common threads amongst these reports was to “work with each language’s cultural identity” (RN5-01162019). As it can be seen in Figure 1, several of the teacher trainees agreed on the importance of using both languages so that the binational students feel comfortable and supported, where they can cater to their cultural duality and, at the same time, help develop a better understanding of it with the rest of the learners.

Figure 1

Data from Reports



Another critical observation the Teacher-Trainees made was regarding the materials used to support bilingual education. The "use of didactic materials in Spanish and English" (RCV7-05112018) turned out to be one thing they noticed the most during their observation visits. They associate it with providing extra support for the binational students and a good opportunity for the rest of the learners to acquire vocabulary in English.

The topic of motivation came up in several of the reports as well. Constant encouragement, both visual and auditory (RB4-05112018), is significant for the learner's involvement in class as much as continuous emotional support throughout the learning process (RCV1-05112018). Considering the student's background and interests becomes a focal point for Teacher-Trainees when creating a learning environment that makes them feel comfortable and included.

Research papers

Another outcome from the observation visits in California resulted in two groups of Teacher-Trainees creating their documents for their possible publication at CONISEN (Congreso Nacional de Investigación Sobre Educación Normal). Both groups were made from the participants of the first visits made. They had the support of one of the Teacher-Trainers involved in the project, and this resulted in two academic papers:

- A. Inclusion of learners from Basic Education who speak a language other than Spanish
- B. Reading and writing strategies to favor bilingualism in inclusive schools

Some Teacher-Trainees sent papers as a proposal to be presented at CONISEN, but they were not selected for publication, as expected. Nonetheless, these exercises helped one of the Teacher-Trainees as a framework and starting point and overall experience to create a Thesis project, bringing the English language to her practice group. Her new project eventually accomplished getting a Bachelor's Degree in Kindergarten Education.

English-Teaching Practice

The main focus of the results, from all the variables obtained, is *The Need for the English Language to be Included in the Classroom, The Learning Development*

of Non-English Speakers, and The Willingness of Teacher Trainees to Teach the English Language in the Classrooms. All categories are analyzed by comparing the three stages. Naming the First Stage as KG-EL (Kindergarten and Elementary), the Second Stage as KG-EL2 (Kindergarten and Elementary 2nd practice), and the third stage as IN. ED (Inclusive Education).

The need for the English language to be included in the classroom

Regarding the necessity to teach English in public schools, as shown in Table 1, there are few groups in which the majority of students speak English. Nonetheless, in the first stage, 7,2% of Teacher-Trainees found said characteristics, while 0% in the second stage, and 3,8% in the third stage, which was not expected by Teacher-Trainees in Special Education Classrooms. The majority found out that Classrooms have up to half of their students being English speakers. In the first stage, they found 42,8% of classrooms with up to half of the group speaking English, 70% in the second stage, and 15,4% in the third stage. However, there are still full classrooms that do not have any English-speaking students attending the class. In the first stage, 50% of classrooms did not have English speakers, while 30% in the second stage, and 80,8% in the third stage.

Table 1

English Speaking Classrooms

English Speaking Classrooms	First Stage (KG-EL)	Second Stage (KG-EL2)	Third Stage (IN. ED)
Most St (+50%)	7,2%	00%	3,8%
Few St (-50%)	42,8%	70%	15,4%
No one (0%)	50%	30%	80,8%

Findings showed that at least half of the Kindergarten and Elementary Classrooms need to bring the English language to include some students. Even though most of them are bilingual, some students felt more confident when their teachers started this new class and felt welcomed. In Inclusive Education classrooms, the need is less general. Nonetheless, there are particular cases in which one child enrolls in said environments. Besides confronting their disability, they have a language barrier that the teacher could fulfill and eliminate just by

bringing the language into the classrooms. They, more often than not, do not have that kind of support.

The learning development of non-English speakers

Regarding non-speakers' experiences with this action, Table 2 shows how a significant percentage of students were interested in learning English and having that class regularly. In the first stage, 68% of the students were happy and excited about the English lesson, while 43% in the second stage and 65,4% were interested in the third stage. Some students were somewhat interested but not incredibly excited about it; in the first stage, 30% were in that case, 41,6% in the second stage, and 30,8% in the third. Finally, students that did not enjoy the class and were not interested went to 2% in the first stage, 15,1% in the second stage, and 3,8% in the third.

Table 2

Students' Reactions to the Class

Student's acceptance	First Stage (KG-EL)	Second Stage (KG-EL2)	Third Stage (IN. ED)
Interested	68%	43,3%	65,4%
Somewhat interested	30%	41,6%	30,8%
Not interested	2%	15,1%	3,8%

Development shows that most students are interested in learning this foreign language, independently if it was to fulfill immediate necessities, communicate with their fellow students in English, or have a different and more dynamic class than the usual curriculum. The main difference among stages is that the first stage was conducted mostly from Kindergarten to Elementary first and second. The second stage was mostly in Elementary fifth and sixth; children showed that the younger they are, the better they take the English language. In Inclusive Education, Trainees were not expecting good responses. Even if a considerable percentage were interested, their specific characteristics would

prevent some children from being attentive or react to the stimulus presented, becoming a meaningless effort to include the English language in some specific cases.

The willingness of Teacher-Trainees to teach the English language in the classrooms

Teacher-Trainees' experiences bringing the language to the school were mostly favorable, as shown in Table 3. In the first stage, 67,9% were immediately looking forward to teaching again, while 57% were during the second stage and only 15,4% were in the third stage. Nonetheless, most of the other trainees considered they could keep teaching with support and further training; such percentages are 25% in the first stage, 37% in the second, and 76,9% in the third. A small percentage of Teacher-Trainees expressed not feeling capable or motivated to carry out such assignments again, which corresponds to 7,1% in the first stage, 6% in the second, and 7,7% in the third.

Table 3

Teacher-Trainee Motivation

Teacher-Trainee Motivation	First Stage (KG-EL)	Second Stage (KG-EL2)	Third Stage (IN. ED)
Looking forward	68%	57%	15,4%
Need support	25%	37%	76,9%
Not motivated	7%	6%	7,7%

These responses were directly linked to their students' reactions to the class: those who had a great response felt motivated, while the ones that confronted some limitations did not. After some reflections and feedback, Teacher-Trainees could identify their conflict areas, leading them to agree to try again. Some Teacher-Trainees from Inclusive Education did not look forward to carrying out such assignments because of their students' type of disability, expressing willingness to repeat the task only if they were in a different situation.

Conclusion

There is a necessity for qualified teachers in the English language in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. Even though there is no formal program that aims explicitly at English-speaking migration in Mexican schools, Teacher-Trainers can make similar propositions. They can also establish a collaborative web among Normal Schools and other Universities with similar programs or objectives targeting English-speakers in Mexican classrooms.

It is clear that the English Program for Normal Schools is well intended but lacks consistency, since by now it has changed to have fewer semesters and weekly hours. Nonetheless, if Teacher Trainers continue to conduct practices as the ones stated here, they may help improve Teachers' language skills and self awareness of their teaching obligations to facilitate a more engaging school life to their English-speaking students.

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Exploratory Action Research (EAR), a research option in Escuelas Normales

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Many teachers find doing research an overwhelming and tough task, but what they can be missing is that it is within the nature of teaching. Curiosity, inquiries, understanding failure and success, about what happens in the classroom become part of a teacher's daily life, and it is hard to separate it from the other tasks a teacher has. Taking these questions, the inquiries, and the observations to an organized and systematic analysis, builds up educational research which will be helpful primarily to the subjects involved, but also to similar scenarios where similar situations may be happening.

Through this text, readers are going to explore some reasons why teachers should be doing research and read about one methodology that can be followed to perform educational research as an interactive and cyclical approach where each step will be nurtured by the previous one and where learning and improvement become the main focus on a teacher's role.

Action research has been known as one of the most useful quality methods used for educational purposes. It emerged as a possibility for teachers to understand phenomena related to their teaching practices, students learning, learning outcomes, evaluation processes, and classroom management, among others. It has been a way in which theory and practice get together and empower teachers giving them the possibility to change and improve what is not working and to solve problematic situations that encounter the teaching-learning process.

This vision supports its ideas on the fact that teachers are experts in their areas and also know their students better than any other person or researcher outside the class. This gives the teacher the possibility to find better solutions that fit students' needs and interests.

The research task allows the teacher to try new alternatives, and this also helps them develop professionally and be prepared for future students.

As mentioned by Latorre (2005), we are living in a millennium where there are rapid technological and social changes. These changes demand a renewed vision of education and teachers, concepts that define teachers as researchers, and students seen as active citizens with critical thinking skills and the power to create knowledge as well.

This perspective changes some of the old practices teachers and students had and invites them to look for other ways of understanding educational phenomena within a class.

This new vision sees teaching as a research activity and research itself as a reflexive task performed by the teacher to improve their teaching practices (Latorre, 2005).

It is known that the United Nations has in its Agenda 2030 a set of objectives for sustainable development, which will lead to better being and better living in our world. Education is included in these objectives and it is the fourth of them. Within this objective, several aspects can be taken into consideration to validate another reason why teachers need to become researchers and improve the way they teach:

4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete accessible, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes

4.C By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states. (United Nations [UN], 2023)

Suppose teachers begin to reflect and analyze the reasons for students not to be motivated, why not all of them reach the learning outcomes, or why some students struggle. In that case, they can find some answers, and these answers if taken seriously, could lead to a better teaching approach, that would hopefully lead to a more effective learning. If the outcomes that are the result of educational research are shared in the schools or also with other teachers and institutions, more students could benefit and receive better education.

Several authors have suggested different ways of doing action research. We will briefly explain some of the most important aspects of the process so that readers have an idea of what it is, and then compare it to the other method that we are sharing through this article.

Carr and Kemmins (as cited in Sánchez et al., 2021) consider specific characteristics of action research essential for it to be called action research. The first one is that the project includes a social practice that can be improved. Then, the project should go through systematic planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Last but not least, the project should consider everyone involved in the teaching practice: teachers, students, authorities, etc.

It is essential to take a look at the different steps that this way of doing research includes and to notice that one important aspect is that it is cyclical; therefore, it is not a finished thing due to the nature of the subjects involved and the study object.

As humans, teachers make mistakes, and every year or semester, students change and have different backgrounds and profiles. Therefore, the problems we face may be similar or not, but the actions we need to take are only sometimes valuable for every circumstance. Action research considers these situations and factors that affect the teaching-learning processes and offers the possibility of finding reasonable solutions for each situation, mainly benefiting the immediate community where research occurs.

The first step is to identify a problematic situation where teachers may have the possibility to do something and presumptuously be able to transform. Once teachers identify this situation and relate it to their teaching practice, they plan a series of informed actions to promote changes in how students reach the learning outcomes. After there is a written plan, teachers (researchers) are supposed to put this action plan into practice, and as they are putting it into action, they need to register information that will help them see whether there are significant changes or not related to the problem they want to solve. These actions are thoughtful and controlled by the teacher.

Talking about the observation process, this one should also be planned, systematic, and controlled so that teachers are ready with the necessary tools

and instruments that will help them get information and later be able to evaluate the action plan. These tools and instruments may include an observation journal, a peer-observation guide, video class recordings, tests, and questionnaires, among other possibilities, depending on the information we seek.

Once the researcher has the tools and has begun the action plan, he has to gain all the evidence possible for the later analysis.

At this point, teachers stop and review the information obtained and reflect on the results too. This may be done individually, or, as some authors suggest, it may be a group reflection where other teachers help the researcher analyze the results from an outsider's view. These reflections help the teacher reorganize the action plan to get better results the second time the researcher develops the actions. Of course, the new plan considers the same problem but now finds other ways to solve it, hoping for a better outcome at the end of the cycle.

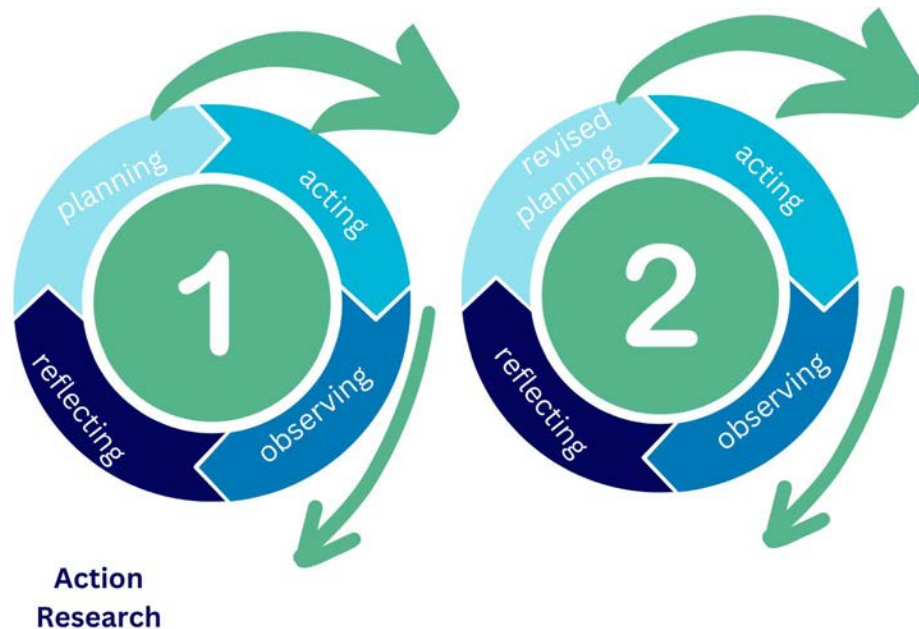
This process may be carried out as extensively as necessary or as required, depending on the teacher, students, school, and time available. Remember that the main idea is for teachers to transform their practice to give students more efficient learning outcomes.

The following figure shows how the different steps in action research link to each other, and how each cycle leads to the next one when referring to the same study object.

It is essential to mention that there are slight changes among some authors, for example, Whitehead, Kummings, and Elliot, regarding the development of the process of action research. Still, they all coincide in the previously mentioned characteristics, like the fact that it requires analysis and reflection and is cyclical.

Figure 1

Action Research



So far, we have explored what action research is and what it implies for teachers who are interested in becoming a source of change in their schools and active subjects who want to create and not only receive knowledge.

It is now turn to explore a new possibility for these same kinds of teachers, but with a twist in the process which will preferably improve the learning outcomes, especially in environments where teaching is done under relatively tricky circumstances.

We refer to exploratory action research, which takes action research fundamentals, but proposes an extra step in the process to make it more complete and directed to reaching the objective of our search.

In 2018, the British Council published a handbook intended to guide teachers from different contexts who were teaching English and wanted or needed to do research. This kind of practitioner research started as a teaching program in Chile where public secondary teachers were struggling to teach English to large classes.

The idea was to show teachers how research could help them understand the situations they were facing and, through this better understanding, be able to come up with solutions suitable to their students.

As mentioned in the handbook, “it enables teachers to better understand their classroom contexts and develop more appropriate ways of teaching without waiting for solutions from outside” (Smith and Rebolledo, 2018, p. 5)

The approach, as was mentioned, started around 2013 in Chile in a joint effort between the British Council and the Chilean government but has proved successful in other countries like Nepal, Peru, and Mexico. This action research approach was introduced as The Champion Teachers Programme, a program provided by the British Council to teachers who need and want to make some changes in their practice. There have been several cohorts subsidized by the British Council itself in several countries where training in exploratory action research has been given, providing opportunities to do some research while being guided by other researchers and more experienced teachers, thus giving confidence and empowering teachers to continue doing research through this approach, and seeing it as part of their job.

In 2019, several English teachers at Escuelas Normales were allowed to participate in the Champion Teachers Programme. They had the chance to turn successful teaching experiences or challenging situations into a research project and be able to share the outcomes with other English teachers at Escuelas Normales and at the annual BBELT 2020, which teachers all over the country attended, proving to be an effective and viable option for research.

As mentioned, exploratory action research is very similar to action research, but this approach adds to the exploration aspect. The idea is not to assume anything but rather go deeply into the situation to determine why certain things are happening before making your action plan. They sustain that if we see a problem and immediately act (as usual), we may solve the situation, but not necessarily since we need to know why this issue is occurring in our class.

Let us take a look at an example. An English teacher in a beginner class has students struggling with speaking and pronunciation problems. Her first reaction is to correct the pronunciation at the time of the mistakes and have them

repeat the proper pronunciation after her. This is something we could usually do as a way of correcting a mistake... but what if this doesn't work?

EAR suggests that we should explore the situation and understand what is happening before considering other possible solutions. Through specific tools that can help us get information, we can better understand our students and then develop a plan to improve the situation.

Taking the example above, this teacher explored with focus group interviews and questionnaires and discovered that students were reluctant to speak because they lacked confidence in their pronunciation and were afraid they could be laughed at. They needed more practice, but they didn't need to speak in front of the whole class at first, but instead in smaller groups where they could feel more confident. After knowing these aspects, she elaborated on a series of actions to help students little by little, promote a respectful environment, and let students gain more confidence, therefore getting better pronunciation and speaking skills according to their level of English.

So, exploratory action research starts with a challenging situation or a successful experience that we need to understand. Then, we plan to gather information and explore why this phenomenon exists. Smith and Rebolledo (2018) insist that :

There are at least three good reasons for exploring a situation before planning action to change it:

1) Before we can decide what to do, we need to understand the current situation. As teachers, we often think we understand what is happening in our classrooms, but this is not always the case.

2) In order to decide whether our action has been successful, we need to compare what happens with the situation as it was before we acted. By exploring the situation and collecting data, we will have enough information about the initial situation to do this. Another, related, advantage is that we often use the same way of collecting data after a new action, making it relatively easy to compare the situations.

3) It may not be challenging to combine exploration in your classroom with your everyday teaching. It shouldn't increase your workload too much and should go well with what you usually do. Exploration means looking at your situation in a different way or in more detail, and this, as we've seen, can be advantageous for a number of reasons. (p.27)

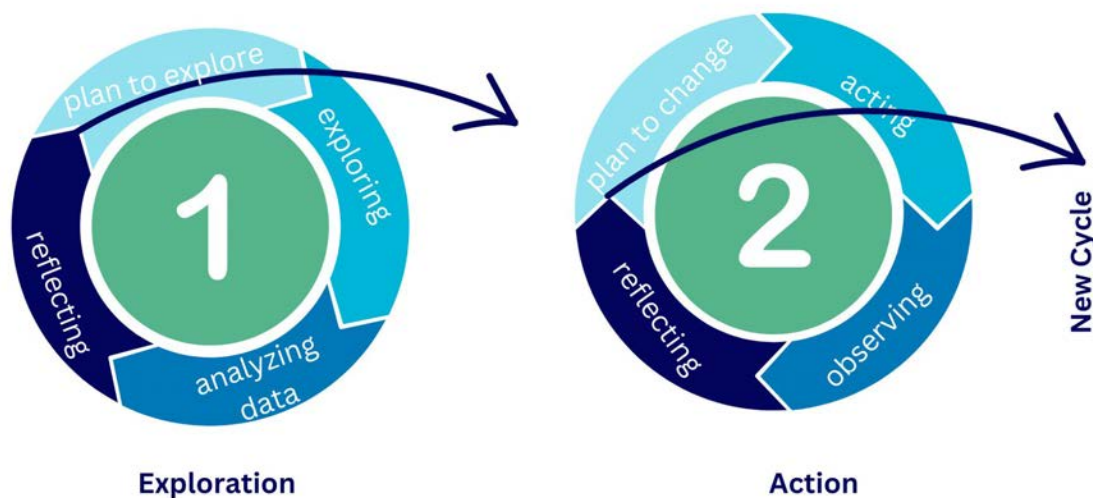
So, the next step in this type of research is to gather the information, get data, and then analyze it. This step requires objectivity, so teachers must focus on the answers provided by the tools, not just on their ideas or assumptions. After the data analysis, it is time to design an action plan that focuses on the problematic situation and not deviates from it. This plan also needs to consider the tools required for observation and future analysis, which may be the same ones used for data collection, as cited before. Once the plan is written, action needs to take place. You collect data either while the intervention is taking place or after it, and you analyze it, trying to be as objective as possible. The researcher here interprets what happened, evaluates the actions, and sees whether something else is still to be done or changed. If there are still issues to consider, the cycle starts repeatedly, as long as needed, keeping in mind that students' learning is more successful as we improve our teaching.

As mentioned, being cyclical is one of the main characteristics of action research, and it is also part of what exploratory action research implies, as well as the reflection process involved.

Figure 2 shows a diagram which exemplifies how EAR works and the different steps that the process implies.

Figure 2

Exploratory Action Research. EAR.



As it can be seen, this approach was thought to help teachers understand phenomena in their classrooms related to areas such as classroom management, teaching materials, particular areas of teaching, students' interest and or motivation, and students' achievement, among other aspects that may arouse teachers' attention.

The mentioned handbook was published, intended for any teacher (English teachers at first) to use as a guide if interested in making research part of their teaching profile. Having such a tool will enable many teachers to be aware of their possibilities and capabilities and make research less stressful. Thus, it becomes necessary to spread this type of material and to socialize information related to educational research, so teachers start looking at it from a different perspective and see an option that will not make them work harder but rather make their lives easier when struggling with students.

After having the chance to participate in Champion Teachers Programme personally, I can say that I was able to see the benefits that exploratory action research can bring to my class and see that "research" is possible and it is something I can do. Before participating in the Champion Teachers Programme, I was far from becoming a researcher and conceived it as complicated. Now, I

understand that research can be done in different ways and that EAR can allow you to work on issues concerning your teaching and your students in a short-term period because of the evidence you get from the tools you apply and the analysis you do.

Besides these, I assumed many things as a teacher. For example, I had the idea that I was teaching pronunciation when, in reality, I wasn't doing it formally and thoughtfully. Therefore, the results I had with my students differed from those I expected, but when I changed my methods and actions, I saw positive changes.

Currently, I am more aware of my students' needs, and it is essential to listen to them and reflect on what they say in order to plan more successful lessons.

Last but not least, I should say that asking for help and advice from other teachers was something I did not do much, and this program helped me to remember that colleagues are there for us to grow and share, and I should rely on them if I want to become better. Their experiences can add up to mine and turn into something BIGGER.

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The Use of Conversifi Platform as a Strategy to Promote Student Autonomy

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Abstract

The use of online platforms has proven useful in a world that is dominated by global, online content. Using authentic communication platforms and materials as a complement to classes enables students to use English in a variety of topics, beyond course lessons and allows them to acquire confidence, intercultural competence, and linguistic and technological skills.

In this paper, we refer to the use of Conversifi, an online platform where college students from enrolled institutions can interact in one-on-one video chats with other college students who happen to be native speakers of the target language thus exchanging cultural viewpoints, lifestyles, the natural grievances of daily life and linguistic points without it feeling like a chore.

Keywords: Conversifi, autonomy, interaction.

We would like to begin with a definition for an autonomous student, since students will need autonomy as part of the set of skills that will allow them to face their world, its inquests, challenges, and troubles, with a thirst for knowledge and determination to succeed, knowing that should the need arise, others will be there to offer support and a helping hand, but not to take over and do it for them.

Being autonomous does not mean giving learners total independence; they must learn to work cooperatively with their peers and teachers, listen to others, and come to agreements. Being autonomous is not a steady state to be achieved, Kumaravadivelu (2003) says that “autonomous learners are likely to be autonomous in one situation, but not necessarily in another, and they may very

well choose to abdicate their autonomy and look for teacher direction at certain stages in their learning.”

For this paper, an autonomous student is a self-reliant individual who can solve problems; quite capable of thinking critically and looking beyond the box: adaptative, creative, confident, and able to use their background, their experience and skills and apply them to every situation; an individual desirous of knowledge and having the initiative to do something about it, someone who won't be waiting to see whether the teacher has something to say about a topic but can pose questions and inquiries, design projects; sets about to find their “own answers and new pathways to success, sets goals and takes steps to achieve them; and knows how and when to ask for help and take advantage of the knowledge, experience, and resources the teacher and the world around him can provide.

Learners become autonomous by becoming aware of their strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and styles, and by taking action in the form of strategic involvement in learning (Brown & Lee, 2015, p 51-52). An autonomous learner adopts learning and embraces the power and the challenges it brings.

Why is it important to promote students' autonomy?

As mentioned above, autonomous learners are the ones who know what they want to learn and have the means to achieve their goals. If they are completely dependent on the teacher, they won't be able to conduct their inquiries or look for new answers; they will become passive receptacles of whatever the teacher gives them and will not be as driven or engaged as those who seek knowledge for their purposes or curiosity. This does not mean that a non-autonomous student will not learn, but the levels of engagement, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and social negotiation achieved will not be anywhere near those gotten by a more independent learner as the latter will find information beyond the one offered within the walls of the classroom, will make new inquiries and walk down surprising paths as he connects everything he knows with his new findings as he pursues new interests further.

Autonomy in the classroom:

1. Creates an opportunity for a bigger scope: it goes beyond the

planned lesson. Autonomous learners do not focus only on a grammar or vocabulary point. They want to use it, to make it their own, so they will comment, merge, and try new forms, exploring language and making it easier for shyer learners to try and use new language. Their bold experimentation and willingness to make mistakes provides cover for those afraid to try and fail.

2. Autonomous learners bring the world into the class: they look for opportunities all around them, so they bring information, questions, enthusiasm into the room through discussions, interaction and rich, engaging, and productive participation. They don't just learn a language; they live it and look for further opportunities to own it. As teachers we need to further develop and embrace this attitude as "Teachers can find ways for students to express their emotions, transfer their prior knowledge and skills, and choose and enact their desirable identities in their target language." (Brown & Lee, 2015, p 101)

3. Autonomous learners can help weaker classmates: since they are so engaged and empowered through their discovery of the language, they tend to take weaker students under their wing and help them achieve class goals. Particularly useful with shy students who feel singled out or fear mockery when they ask for help. Asking another learner instead of the teacher brings a level of closeness and camaraderie and allows for Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development to naturally happen. The Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD, is the notional gap between the learner's current developmental level as determined by his/her independent problem-solving ability and the learner's potential level of development as determined by the ability to solve problems under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers, which exactly means getting that extra push from a peer who is just a tiny bit more proficient and able to carry out the task he cannot do without help (Vygotsky, 1978).

4. It's a contagious attitude - a good one! Once the results of autonomy start to be visible in class, the more dependent students start becoming aware of the impact autonomy has on their learning. They want to be part of that, and soon, little groups of more autonomous students appear in class, and after a while, even the most dependent students start to let go. Soon you begin to hear about students' experiences, interests, and adventures, getting bumps, bruises, and

victories with and through the language.

5. Creates independent individuals: the less students depend on you, the more autonomous they become, the more their independence starts rising. They work on their own, prioritize, solve problems, and use their own experiences to create learning opportunities. They research and build new ideas and bring questions to the classroom, expecting to solve them through collaboration with their peers and the teacher.

All of these are very good reasons to promote autonomy. Considering that our students are college students, 18 years old or older and legal adults, the decision was made to search and implement online strategies to cater to the development of this skill. While using apps and platforms such as Conversifi and Duolingo, aids the students to find their feet and become more autonomous, we also must keep in mind that its use is not devoid of challenges. The Internet offers students an unlimited number of out-of-class learning resources which open the possibilities for self-directed learning. New technologies allow for a degree of freedom and autonomy that emerges through exploration, in contrast to classroom learning which is oriented toward set, predefined goals (Ito et al., 2008).

However, this universality and easy access to information offers several pitfalls. Susceptible students being affected and turned off by the vast amounts of information, and resources available can be prevented by teaching internet safety, correct selection of information and citation. They also need to be taught to use common sense and learn to discriminate and differentiate useful data from SPAM, fake articles, and fluff.

On the other hand, there is a lack of equal opportunities. In Mexico, the digital gap is very real and tangible. There are many students of all ages and levels which cannot properly follow their classes and fulfill their academic requirements and tasks because they have no access to the right technologies and devices. Some live in communities where electricity is not available or where the geographical features of the landscape prevent the internet signals to go through, for instance. Another very real concern is that some of our students - and teachers - are still not digitally literate or strain to fulfill simple digital tasks.

Whether it happens out of lack of knowledge or interest, it is an issue that should be addressed, probably in a follow-up paper.

For this paper, we are considering adult learners who have access to at least one device; be it a smartphone, a tablet, or a laptop/computer with a steady connection to the internet and elemental digital skills such as logging in and out of the platform, posting messages on boards and joining the video chats/conferences.

We decided to use Conversifi to explore and try to instill this thirst for knowledge, confidence, and independence as it offered a very safe environment despite its vast scope, and has a user-friendly environment with clearly labeled buttons and tabs, as well as detailed video tutorials in 3 languages for every step of the process. Conversifi is an online based platform where college students from enrolled institutions can interact in one-on-one video chats with other college students who happen to be native speakers of the target language. It works with French, English, and Spanish as target languages. So, a Mexican student can be both a Spanish expert (aka native speaker) and an English apprentice.

This dual role helps students understand their strengths and shortcomings as learners, as well as understand the learning process and the strengths and shortcomings of the native speaker they're interacting with. None of them are language teachers; both are students helping each other learn a language. "I'm a Spanish native speaker but an English apprentice and my tutor in Conversifi is an English native speaker but also a French or Spanish apprentice".

Using this platform as a complement to classes enables students to use English in a variety of topics embedded in a semi-controlled environment. As teachers can set the topics of the chats, and pre-teach some language, it is not completely free practice. However, the content and the way apprentices and experts navigate, negotiate, and convey meaning is unfettered and dependent on the apprentices' resources, skills, abilities, and previous knowledge.

The use of the platform is not gratuitous, but the cost is quite affordable - 5 USD a token, one token per interaction-, and it offers a wide range of partnerships and scholarships with the enrolled institutions. Escuela Normal Superior de México benefited from a barter scholarship for the year we used it;

for every video call our students took as Spanish experts, they were granted a token to be spent as English apprentices. It allowed the students to increase the number of possible interactions their economies permitted and made it possible for Conversifi to be a great complementary tool without it being a detriment to students' economies.

Another great asset of the platform is not being a public space, which makes it safe. Only students from participating institutions are allowed to participate and all conversations are recorded to ensure the safety of all participants. Said recordings can only be accessed by the participants and the security staff in charge of the platform's servers. A participant may choose to download and share the conversation with a peer or teacher, but they will be automatically removed from all social media.

Every call lasts for 15 minutes and teachers in charge of classes using Conversifi can choose from a range of topics that have been previously prepared and provided by its staff, with ready-to-share materials containing useful language, sample questions, vocabulary, lexical chunks, and cultural interest points to be practiced or reviewed before calling. If the teacher does not set one of the agreed topics, the conversation is free, and the expert chooses the topic and how to keep it flowing. Students taking the role of experts receive a small workshop and sample conversation templates adjusted at different levels of difficulty, so conversations are not circular or stagnant.

At Escuela Normal Superior de México, students are in a vulnerable economic situation, a reason that prevents traveling abroad, so Conversifi is a great way for them to interact with people of the same age from different countries who have similar interests and problems in the target language, turning homework into chatting with a friend.

The administration system allows the teacher to see how many conversations the students have had, the average length, and grade, as the expert rates the apprentice's skills between 1 and 5 stars and can offer some feedback, if desired or considered necessary.

Users can also make small in-platform posts, on a Twitter - now X - like board about what they learnt or how they felt during their conversations and experiences interacting with the native speakers.

The platform is not open 24/7. Every term they release a set of dates and hours in which the interaction spaces will be open, so that the window of opportunity to find a partner to talk to is ensured.

Figure 1

Conversifi sample schedule; September-November 2020

México	Domingo	13/9	12pm-5pm	20/9	12pm-5pm	27/9	12pm-5pm	4/10	12pm-5pm	11/10	12pm-5pm	18/10	12pm-5pm	25/10	11am-4pm	1/11	12pm-5pm	8/11	12pm-5pm	15/11	12pm-5pm
(Zona	Miércoles	16/9	12pm-5pm	23/9	12pm-5pm	30/9	12pm-5pm	7/10	12pm-5pm	14/10	12pm-5pm	21/10	12pm-5pm	28/10	11am-4pm	4/11	12pm-5pm	11/11	12pm-5pm	18/11	12pm-5pm
Centro)	Jueves	17/9	12pm-5pm	24/9	12pm-5pm	1/10	12pm-5pm	8/10	12pm-5pm	15/10	12pm-5pm	22/10	12pm-5pm	19/10	11am-4pm	5/11	12pm-5pm	11/12	12pm-5pm	19/11	12pm-5pm

After using the platform for a semester, a survey was conducted to validate its impact on the community. As a strategy, it was well liked by both students and teachers. Students expressed having developed their vocabulary, their level of proficiency, and their confidence while speaking the target language. Whereas, teachers found it generated interest, engagement and was an easy-to-grade assignment, with almost nothing added to their workload.

Teachers wanting to participate were only required to contact the local program admin - the Area Coordinator - which would give them a code to share with students, much like a Google Classroom Code. That would insert the student into a class, and when said student requested a call, their native expert would visualize the student's name, school and place of origin, as well as proficiency level and whether the teacher had set a topic or not. This system also allowed the teacher to see how many videos each student made, the duration, and the grade awarded by the expert to the same.

Further evidence of Conversifi's impact on the users of the platform cannot be provided at this time, as the database was eliminated from the Cloud during an institutional breakdown and could not be recovered. Likewise, there was no opportunity to launch a comparative study with other platforms, as the bartering trade with Conversifi ended, and the use of other platforms have not yielded significant data yet.

However, there is data from other studies that confirm the efforts made by approaching multiculturalism and immersion through platforms. Santos-Sopena

(2020) argues that plurilingual immersion through this medium fosters language acquisition through communication and problem-solving abilities in multicultural contexts. O'Dowd and O'Rourke (2019) pointed out that virtual exchange such as the one provided by Conversifi, allows students to demonstrate content knowledge previously acquired and be exposed to opportunities for further acquisition.

Conversifi provided a reliable, engaging multicultural experience for our students. Regrettably, our sponsorship ended, and we could not continue the program as it was not affordable for our community. The experience could be replicated through the use of free communicating platforms and social media providers such as Google Meet or Face Time, however, the safety of the students cannot be guaranteed as monitoring systems would not be in place and they could be harassed by third parties.

Using other platforms like Bussu and Duolingo present a good option for encouraging autonomous learner but lack the authenticity of natural communication with a native speaker and, in their free versions not all of their features can be accessed, which hinders the overall experience.

Further exploration of the topic could include the involvement and engagement these other apps generate in our community, and going a bit further how they are affected by the digital gap. Is it a generational matter? A matter of training and digital literacy? Or is the economic gap creating lack of opportunities for our students and teachers?

In conclusion, Conversifi is a reliable tool which delivers good results, and if the opportunity to collaborate again arises, we would most certainly accept it. The use of this platform helps students develop confidence in communication as they find that even at lower levels they can communicate despite having a limited vocabulary, and have meaningful and adequate interactions, which makes them feel empowered and completely in control of the situation. This in turn allows them to be adventurous and explore, using and experimenting with the language rather than repeating the same phrases over and over. Albeit, it may need to be adapted to school's budgets and resource availability, the evidence of this exercise points out to technology being helpful in fostering students' autonomy

by making information available and setting ground for the establishment of personalized study habits and strategies.

Figure 2

Basic data about the platform

Conversifi

Linguistic immersion under demand

What is Conversifi?
Conversifi is a linguistic immersion online platform that enables students from participating colleges to take part in video chats with native speakers of English, Spanish and French in a safe, controlled but not restrictive environment.

Objectives
Oral communication practice and cultural exchange

How?
Through in-platform 15 minute video chats and tweeting.

Advantages
Provides a safe and controlled environment.
Has a teacher's site
Provides materials and prompts
Allows for individual, group and school follow-ups
Peer interaction with native speakers

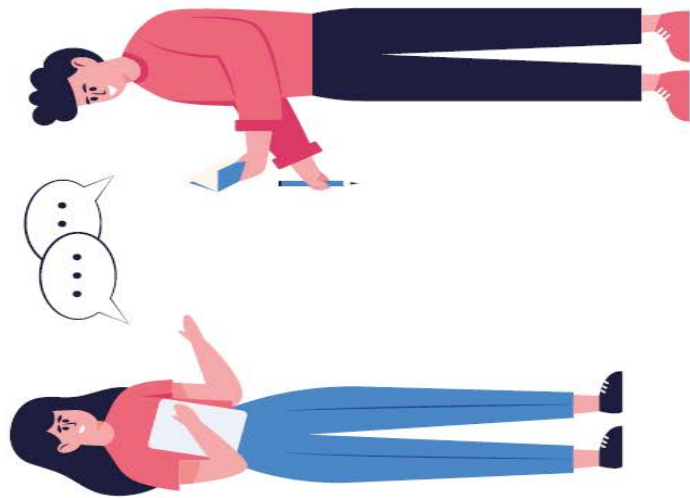
<https://www.conversifi.com>

Figure 3

Students' feelings after using the platform

Conversifi

Linguistic immersion under demand



 <https://www.conversifi.com>

Real life Testimonials:

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Hi teacher!
I really enjoyed Conversifi. It's an excellent tool for us to practice our speaking. It was so helpful for me, y DO NOT loose my speaking level due to conversifi.
I hope we can still working with it

-Gisela, ENSM Student

“

I consider Conversifi an excellent tool for enhancing the english level, but more than that, to really comunicatte and interact with the language on it's roots: Their native speakers and it's culture.
To finish, it motivates you by meeting people and exchanging, heaing, seeing and sharing culture. Not only by speaking but t by emphatizing.

-ENSM Student

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