



A Collection of Experiences

"I never imagined the world had to fight against a virus. Two years ago, I started working in a public rural school surrounded by animals, plants, and pure air to breathe. Classes there are really meaningful. Teachers arrive every day with a different strategy, game, or activity for students. Because of the context, there are not too many technological aids or pedagogical materials related to the area, so what we use the most are things we find in that context. Students arrive to school with many expectations about the classes because at school they feel like they can express themselves freely. They do not have to work as they do when they are at home. Now, everything has changed. The lifestyles we were used to were altered. In my case, it has been pretty much challenging in the sense that most of my students do not have access to an internet connection. The signal is really bad. Some of them do not have a cellphone, and the rural area is at least one hour away from the nearest town. Therefore, I had to start by planning my lessons in a different and innovative way by sharing with my students through the application known as WhatsApp. Through this application, I have been sharing workshops, ludic activities to do at home, videos, audio recordings, and crafts to do with their families. When I call my students, they say it is not the same as in face to face classes, but it is the only way for now, and we are trying to do our best. This makes me think about the conditions of education in Colombia. How can a teacher invent virtual lessons if there are no means to carry out education in this way? I continue reflecting on many things that come to my mind while writing this message, and I also want to say to my students thank you because despite the obstacles, they have been comprehensive and have shown that when they want they can."

Andrea Johanna Galindo Salomón

Institución Educativa San Miguel, Coper.
9th semester Modern Languages Program

"Covid 19 has changed our lifestyles and, at the same time, our strategies to teach to our students. As an English teacher in a private school in Florencia, Caquetá, I admit that today we cannot be doing the same things we were implementing in a classroom before the pandemic. We, as teachers, are pushed to apply technological tools in this new challenging environment. Personally speaking, I teach English to kids from 5 to 10 years old. Parents' presence is fundamental in this new learning process since they are little children, and they do not really know how to be online by themselves or how to fix errors with their computers or laptops. Therefore, parents have played an important role in this reciprocal process since I have evidenced how they are committed with their children's learning process. At the same time, we feel supported by them through their help in class. Being willing to attend parents at any time has facilitated better learning. If they do not understand an activity, they simply call me up or send me a message on WhatsApp for me to explain one more time. Moreover, when children have questions, I schedule a video conference and answer their questions virtually. Finally, I believe my teaching process, of course, has changed a lot, but I would like to highlight a good acceptance and attitude from both parents and students, same as from us both teachers and the school.

Dayro Fabian Perez Cardozo

Colegio Liceo Superior, Florencia, Caquetá, Colombia

Primary English language teacher

"Teaching to first graders during a pandemic has been more than a challenge. I think it has become an opportunity to enrich our pedagogical practices through the sensibilization of our teaching and learning processes. It was clear that Colombia was not ready for a home-schooling system, where working virtually became the main way of communication with our students. It was especially more challenging with the little ones. Teachers started to enhance their creative skills within a short period and adapting technological resources to make sure students received the contents of the syllabus. In this regard, I have to admit that my teaching practice has been more focused now on emotional learning, linking our daily topics on how to endure this situation and how to take advantage of it. Honestly, I feel that something that will help students the most is to guide them on how to be resilient, counting on the support and complicity of our families and all the educational community.



Mayra Lorena Murillo Villa

Colegio Bilingüe Internacional: Gimnasio Campestre Reino Británico

Tenjo, Cundinamarca, Colombia

Docente Integral

"I am a preschool and primary school teacher. I can say that this pandemic situation has taken us by surprise. Becoming a virtual teacher has been a demanding experience. However, I can say I have learned a lot about how to use virtual platforms; for instance, I can grade my students' homework virtually, and I can also manage and ask for participation in a tidy manner. Currently, I can say my job as a teacher depends on motivating my students through dynamic activities. In that way, I help them avoid being distracted while learning new topics. Furthermore, this has shown us how capable we are as teachers to keep teaching, assessing, and supporting our students from home. I would like to conclude by stating that if we use ICTs, we can help our students stay safe."

Juan Felipe Setina Rubiano

Colegio Mis Pequeños Genios, Florencia, Caquetá, Colombia

Docente de Preescolar y Primaria

"Since the very first moment the government announced the shutdown of schools and universities and the plans for home education, we, as public school teachers, started to think about how we could reach out to all of our students, taking into account that they are a pretty diverse population, socioeconomically. I teach in the only urban school in Morelia, the smallest town in Caquetá, and there is just one internet server. Not everybody can afford it, so Zoom meetings and online platforms are out of the conversation. Since virtual education is the only possible option right now, teaching became a real challenge for me. We figured out (sort of) how to use WhatsApp as our communication channel because almost every student or parent has it. It does not consume a lot of data, and it is cheap and affordable. I know it is not ideal, but it is the best we can do in these conditions. This makes me think about how much the socioeconomic inequity stands out in a country like ours, and it is pretty sad since students from private schools are doing just fine because of ... resources."

Andrés David Montes Rivas

Institución Educativa Cervantes, Morelia, Caquetá, Colombia

Biology Teacher



"As it is well-known, the 21st century is based on technology. So, we would think that we, as students, are well prepared to take online classes successfully during this pandemic, not only because most of us are digital natives, but also because nowadays most of the things are related to technology. Therefore, students are very close to those technological devices. Nevertheless, we are not ready to start an online education, unfortunately. This is due to different facts like the lack of access to the internet and technological devices in students' homes. Additionally, students have never learned how to carry out virtual lessons. From my point of view, I consider that virtual education is not enough for us as students because it seems to me that online sessions could never replace the teacher's explanation and face to face interaction among students and teachers. Undoubtedly, we, as students, have a giant challenge during this time, in which we need to learn how to develop online classes and take advantage of those lessons, so that we can continue with our studies."

María José Ibañez Galvis

Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia

Tunja, Boyacá, Colombia

B.A. in Modern Languages Language Student

"Based on my experience during my English teaching program as an English teacher, I have learnt how to prepare a class for different types of students: kids, teens, adults, or elder people. Nevertheless, nowadays, it is not as easy as it seems, especially with virtual classes. For instance, what should a teacher do with students whose parents do not have internet access or a laptop to attend a virtual class? What about those who live in rural places, as it is normal in my province? Since I became an English teacher, I understood that it was not easy; however, the pillar of my vocation as a teacher is to find out the way to give a fruitful education to my students. To achieve it, I cannot give up on any social, cultural, economic or, in this case, sanitary problems. Finally, take into account that most of the times education is the last resource that parents give to their children, and it is our responsibility to motivate them to go on, mainly during these days by not allowing this situation to become a bad memory for them. Instead, it needs to be a moment that they will remember their entire life."

Reinaldo Andrés Rico Artunduaga

Universidad de la Amazonia, Florencia, Caquetá, Colombia

B.A. in English Language Student

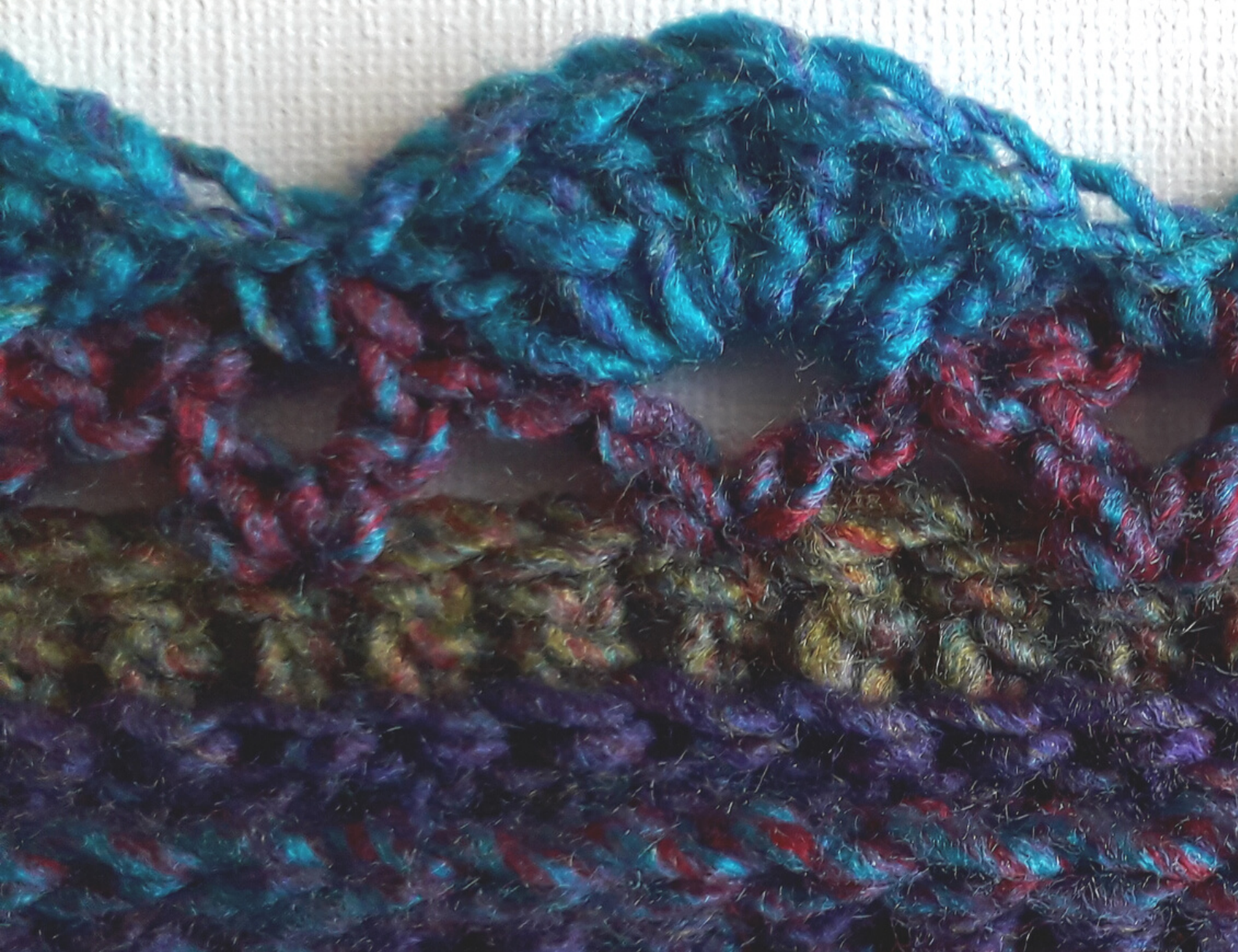


"It is known that the new Covid-19 is a terrible disease that radically affects the lungs of its receptors. Personally speaking from the golden gate of the Colombian Amazon, I expose in a worrying way this unprecedented event that is affecting an entire country and especially our beautiful region. The arrival of this virus to our department was something unexpected for the community in general. However, the protection measures had already been put in place according to what the national government stipulated. I want to clarify that health entities are doing a great effort in safeguarding people, despite the fact that many of them ignore the recommendations that the law demands to prevent the massive spread of it. Consequently, in my case, this isolation has served to unite family relationships, share more time with them, and somehow recover those spaces that had been lost for different reasons beyond our control. Additionally, we have learned to take care of our grandparents, who are fortunate to still be alive."

Cristian Fernando Miranda Ordoñez

Universidad de la Amazonia, Florencia, Caquetá, Colombia

B.A. in English Language Student



Taking our Teaching Labor Beyond the Face-to-Face Interplay

The current pandemic we are living has entailed multiple changes in several fields of life. Education, being one of the most significant and essential components of society and existence per se, was affected as well by such phenomenon. New shifts in education, in which virtuality is playing the main role, have reshaped the way we conduct our teaching practices. Since teaching and learning have moved from the face to face interplay to a completely virtual one, we, as teachers, have had to adapt and reinvent our professional life according to the ongoing needs education is experiencing with the aim of keeping our students engaged and motivated to learn.

Without a doubt, virtuality has proven to be a challenge for both students and teachers. Virtual lessons are not meant to be an exact replica of the actions we can do in-class: reflection, debate, co-discovery, and many other activities that face-to-face interaction fosters. These activities are then left aside when parental support is not enough. Moreover, as teachers, we cannot deny that planning a virtual lesson takes more time due to the fact that we have to prepare a large amount of material on different platforms taking into account students' needs for both synchronous and asynchronous learning.

However, this situation has simultaneously encouraged us to change mindsets and to look for innovative and practical ways to develop our classes and provide solutions to possible issues that remote learning might have. For instance, participation in lessons has become a difficult factor to deal with because of problems with microphones, students' fear of talking, issues regarding connectivity, overlapping, and other aspects that make classes last longer. Turn-allocation, a name random picker, or a chart with names can serve as solutions to enhance a dialogical session. In addition, digital resources designed or adapted by teachers need to be attractive and provide opportunities for interaction due to the fact that when studying at home, students have various distractions that complicate concentration and, hence, learning. Showing ourselves on camera is also an accurate way to keep students engaged. We can make use of body language, keep eye contact, and try to simulate an on-site atmosphere.

Finally, as a very significant remark, this pandemic has also shown us that teaching is more than a mere instructional exercise; this one, being an unrealized factor when it comes to talking about what it really means to be a teacher. One of our main roles is certainly dedicated to instruction, but inside a classroom, there are various circumstances that complement our labor. A teacher listens, collaborates, advises, solves, helps, directs, reflects, and encourages reflection and many other activities that an electronic device is not able to do. All the aforementioned simply corroborates the idea that a teacher never stops learning and that our role continues being essential for social and human development despite the difficulties that life might have.

Erika Alexandra Prieto Wilches & Yohan Sneider Tiria Sotelo

Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia

Language Professors





The First Time Recognizing Myself

“The most important relationship in your life is the relationship you have with yourself. Because no matter what happens, you will always be with yourself”

- Diane Von Furstenberg

This paper comes from my reflection on my learning experience of being in my house for two months due to the preventive measures taken by the Colombian government to prevent the rapid spread of a virus called COVID-19. Through this letter, I narrate how my lifestyle has changed 180 degrees due to the confrontation with myself. Being away from daily routines like going to the university, buying unnecessary things, and hanging out with friends has left me unprotected and exposed to a host of thoughts. I soon began to listen to my body and reconsider the way I lived before the pandemic.

At the beginning of 2020, a highly contagious virus appeared in Wuhan, China. Quickly, it started to spread throughout every single country, and it changed everyone’s lifestyles. In Colombia, almost all the activities stopped. Stores, educative institutions, restaurants, and churches have been closed. In my case, as a university student, I had to study virtually and be in my town with my parents, of course, avoid going out. Only one person has been authorized to go out from each house to buy necessary things, such as cleaning supplies and food.

Before this emergency, I had tried to do exercise many times, and every time I gave up. I blamed the shortage of time. I was always in a hurry, delivering tasks and attending classes. Stress and anxiety became parts of myself. Headaches and stomachaches became something normal and part of a busy student life. Later, during the quarantine time, I had to reschedule my daily activities. I have started to learn how to meditate, which is basically concentrating on my own breathing to avoid negative thoughts. I have noticed that my eating plan was far from a healthy lifestyle. I have become conscious about the food I eat and the importance of drinking water. For the first time, I have been able to keep a daily exercise routine and, more importantly, I have valued being alive and blessed to have family and friends that I have met throughout my life.

As a conclusion, the experience of being at home permanently for an undefined time has been a real challenge, and I admit that sometimes I get desperate because I have never taken time to rest and be conscious of my lifestyle. However, when some time has passed, I have seen this unexpected situation as an enormous opportunity for evaluating myself. I learnt that anxiety was present with body symptoms because of “her” (I consider anxiety to be like a kind of angel). She yelled at me all the time that I should take care of myself, it was not good to eat because of stress, spending hours alone sitting in a chair. My body needed a break. Now, I have discovered that to be healthy on the outside, I have to first check my inside. I am hopeful that I will not forget to take care of myself after this situation is over.

María Camila Vargas Arévalo

Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia

Modern Languages Program

What does it mean to be a foreign language educator?

Unfortunately, today we are facing a tough situation; everyone was forced to stop everything we were used to do and now, we all are experiencing this pandemic in diverse ways. From the way I see things currently, we are now pushed to find ourselves in a different teaching process, which takes us beyond everything we were used to implementing in class. In this sense, I believe we finally understood that being present in the classroom and teaching content was never enough for our students. Being a foreign language educator represents a true meaning of the word: transformation, not only for them but also in ourselves. We play a significant role in every single world we teach, so it is fundamental to get to know their realities and all the ups and downs they go through when learning a language.

It is true nobody taught us how to face this pandemic. However, I can say that we are all being pushed to be in our students' shoes and comprehend that we are nothing without them. We are learning how to create a different atmosphere filled with virtual love and knowledge. Hence, today I have decided to sit and write these words in order to tell my story and hopefully motivate not only my students but also whoever gets the chance to be transported into my world.

I must confess I was always focused on making my students learn and improve every single day, no matter what. Therefore, I consider I encouraged them to believe in themselves and see dreams come true by trying their best in every single step they walk. Nevertheless, once I faced I was not able to be present with them, I felt frustrated. One part of me needed to have a break, but the other half was empty without them in my life. Students become part of our personal and professional growth, just like friends, colleagues, and family. When we lack them, our heart feels uncomplete.

In my case, some of my students this semester were in their hometowns, and they did not have any access to virtual classes due to their absence of technological resources, such as a laptop or internet. I saw how frustrating it was for them to know this semester was still going on, and they were falling behind. To be honest, I did not know what to do, I felt tied up. The first idea that came into my mind was to listen to them and get to know their realities. I was eager to keep supporting their learning processes, but I knew our conditions were not the best.

It has been rough; I admit it. Nonetheless, my thinking walks through that path which indicates that is not okay to stop any learning process. There must be a way out to keep acquiring knowledge without affecting those who unfortunately do not count on the necessary tools to be online. Therefore, I decided to economically support my students who actually were having a bad time. I stayed up late checking their papers and trying my best to make them feel I was there for them. I sent them not tons but the necessary work they needed in order to advance step by step, and above all, I invited them to have this reciprocal understanding of what it is like to face an unknown situation through comprehension. It is not about a grade, but a learning process. Hence, I can say I was there, I am here, and I will always be there for them, my students.

To you, dear reader, do not lose your faith and keep doing your best every day.

Jhonatan Vásquez Guarnizo

Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia

Language Professor