Reflective Essays

Teaching English After Covid-19: The Impact of Interdisciplinary Learning

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Introduction

Learning a second language is often a challenge as it requires a change of logic in the way sentences are built or expressions are transmitted. Thus, it is common to start with the introduction of grammar rules and present new vocabulary to link it with the first or native language of the learner. This can be successful, but it can also be difficult since people usually compare their language composition with the configuration of the one they are learning. As a result, they may feel frustrated, afraid of communicating their ideas in the new language, and insecure about their pronunciation or their abilities in general. Therefore, as a foreign language teacher, it is important to create a stable and supportive learning environment so that students feel confident about their process.

The learning context is not the only one that plays a role in the way teachers build their classes. It is also crucial to consider a review of the tools that are part of the process. Resources such as movies, songs, documentaries, reading comprehension material, and listening exercises, as well as the construction of short dialogues, are still common when preparing a class to teach another language. They are necessary when explaining grammar rules, introducing vocabulary and expressions, and even to introduce the learners to some characteristics about the communities that speak that language.

As a result, English teachers often use many types of tools to prepare students for different tests focused on writing, listening, and communicative skills. Nevertheless, an increase in communication networks, streaming platforms, and information access due to technological advances makes it possible to improve the use teachers make of these resources. Furthermore, more frequent interactions with people from other countries goes beyond the material provided in class for language learning exercises.

Learning During Covid 19

One of the biggest challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic has been teaching and learning. For both teachers and students, the world changed, and both had to adjust to the new reality. On one hand, teachers had to "reinvent" themselves and their class. They had to design a new way of learning that many had not experimented with before. On the other hand, students had to stay at home and cope with learning from their computers or other devices.

A Big Challenge for Everyone

For some, it may be easy to say that studying at home is an easy task; however, it is one of the biggest challenges that the pandemic has brought. It is a task that involves students, families, teachers, schools, governments, and almost everyone. As I mentioned before, teachers and students had to live under the new conditions of confinement. But what about families? Families strive to give their best and promote appropriate environments for homeschooling. At the same time, parents had to continue working from home, completing chores, and being attentive to their children's performance and discipline studying from home. Families had to cope with their daily issues plus these new situations that required their full attention and time.

To have a better picture of this situation, imagine having two elementary school kids studying at home. In addition to their needs, you must work as you usually do and attend online meetings with staff. You have to do all the above from home as you await the pandemic to pass, protect your loved ones and keep them safe from the virus. Many would see this as one of the most demanding and difficult experiences that they have ever experienced. This is especially the case when technology was the only possible way of keeping in touch with routines and learning.

Technology, the Number One Ally

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us precisely how technologies are the key to maintaining job security during quarantine periods, lockdowns, and mobility restrictions

mandated by governments to contain the spread of the virus. In terms of education, teachers around the globe have been challenged creatively to promote efficient learning through virtual platforms since schools were closed in order to protect students' and teachers' health. For instance, teachers needed to find other ways to connect their students with learning through a computer or cellphone by using chats, webcams, or forms that they could review within a specific time period. There were also difficulties engaging students and maintaining their focus on the given tasks online. There was no way to control what they did at home or force them to appear on camera during their participation.

More importantly, it is common to have workloads increase since the concept of time for work and study changed while being at home. This was further complicated by parents wanting to keep their children busy during certain times. Mental health has also been an essential issue to consider since lockdowns and isolations made it difficult for students and teachers to be engaged in class.

Taking this into consideration, is there a way in which students can learn a foreign language such as English during the pandemic without it becoming a burden or a cause for boredom? Why has it been so difficult to change some students' beliefs about learning a foreign

language while it may not have been so troublesome to acquire their native one? This article seeks to answer these questions as part of a proposal to use interdisciplinarity to create a more efficient learning environment that fosters commitment in learners to the world and its problems (such as climate change, human rights violations, racism, corruption, among others), thus helping in the education and creation of better citizens.

From Traditional English Learning to Interdisciplinarity

During the learning process of a second language, a traditional approach centered on the structure of the language and the communicative, listening, and writing skills has been the norm. This traditional approach relies on grammar and spelling as the keys to learning along with exercises in pronunciation as part of the curriculum to help students in their process.

Nevertheless, not every student succeeds or even manages to grasp a complete understanding of the language. Some achieve a medium comprehension due to the repeating process or the fact that they are part of bilingual schools or communities. Students who have better results are the ones who complement their learning with practice conversations and immersion in situations that require them to

speak or write and correct themselves with the help of other speakers. Using a conversational instruction method where a teacher presents a small groups of students with a question and asks them to work out the answer among themselves helped to increase language skills when compared with traditional classroom teaching (Phys.org, 2015).

Since the 1970's, some researchers have found it important to learn English in what they have called a "Natural Approach". This method suggests that English (and other foreign languages) should be learned in a similar way to the natural form in which speakers learned their native language (Rhalmi, 2009). This resulted in a process of imitation and connection to the context that helped students with their speaking and communication skills.

Getting in touch with a language for the first time is not an easy task. The fear of making mistakes and saying the wrong word or not understanding is not a secret to anyone. Being in front of a class and being singled out as the one who did not understand what the teacher said, being completely lost, or not being able to express what we are thinking about, is not a laughing matter. This is especially true as we grow older and are afraid to learn and discover new things. Immersion programs and one on one classes set aside the structured and traditional

methods to teach ESL. These two methods are nestled within a niche and have resulted in students who are happier and learn faster with their new methodologies.

According to the promoters of the Natural Approach, it is more important to practice communicative skills through the immersion of short dialogues. The use of vocabulary in common sentences and in practice is more important than learning the structure of a language. This latter fact is something that native speakers learn later in life, through complementary language education. As a result, teachers can help promote the use of short phrases and help build confidence in the communication of needs, wants, or other purposes, rather than grammar or spelling. Once the learners understand and practice the context of language uses, teachers can focus on the way those words, phrases, or contexts are grammatically structured.

The former situation can be seen in bilingual schools where it can often produce confusion between the native and secondary language in young learners. This problem can be corrected through proper education and guidance. Children tend to use phrases they understand in their native language and combine vocabulary from a second language to communicate. As they get older, teachers help

them with different meanings and structures so they can be successful in communicating their thoughts.

Another scenario to consider is when older children arrive to a bilingual setting. In this case, it is necessary to guide them with commands and instructions that become familiar to them through listening and repetition. This allows them to immerse themselves better than using grammar or traditional ways of teaching that make them frustrated and provide slower results. Similarly, the repetition of these commands in different subjects can help improve their confidence. For this reason, interdisciplinary learning can be more helpful to learn a second language in the form of the Natural Approach, rather than the traditional methods.

Interdisciplinary Learning: Ways to be Citizens of the World

In a globalized world, it is very important to learn about different communities, traditions, identities, and even ways to understand the world. It can help students demonstrate the importance of respecting other people's needs, demonstrating empathy, and the usefulness in finding solutions to world problems which is crucial to becoming a global citizen.

Although schools teach a great number of subjects or disciplines such as history, math, science, language, and physical education, students have a difficult time dividing their time between their interests. As a result, it is common for students to decide which subjects deserve their focus while leaving other subjects to the side. This is primarily due to the fact that students do not have enough time to do well in all of the subjects or do not find some subjects fundamental for their professional future.

This situation is what has made interdisciplinary learning even more interesting for schools and higher education institutions. A complete overview of a problem can provide a better understanding of how to solve the issue at hand. Historical, political, statistical, and environmental factors and developments should be considered together rather than alone to build a better learning environment.

International curriculums and educational perspectives like the one promoted by Teaching for Understanding as part of the Harvard Project Zero (Wilson, 2020), are more aware of how students thrive when given all the perspectives of a problem through projects that include interdisciplinary work. English or any other language can be part of this approach which could provide unique experiences for learners.

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a review of traditional methods in school curriculums. New methodologies had to be developed for teaching various disciplines. Many subjects used videos to elaborate on topics which were then discussed during class as reinforcement. Children can learn about Covid-19 a little bit more in each class than what they have learned through social media or television, but it becomes boring for them as it only increases their workload without giving them away to engage themselves in the topic and learn effectively about it in each discipline.

An interdisciplinary approach to projects related to Covid-19 can be developed with many subjects. This allows students to develop a complete understanding of the pandemic and empower children in their abilities to manage presentations, critical thinking, and team work, while improving their vocabulary and research skills.

The project can present characteristics of the virus, its spread, and the consequences which highlight the use of science, social studies, and statistics. The use of pictures or representations involves the arts and allows children to utilize various subjects to present a specific topic.

Examples of this can be seen in the creation of museums that demonstrate different pandemics throughout history and historic images that highlight how the virus spreads throughout the population using facts from the World Health Organization. The type of project depends on the creativity of the teachers and the resources available to the children.

In terms of English or second language learning, this type of interdisciplinary project helps develop communication skills since it is important to present the facts of the research regardless of if you are a scientist or a politician. Students enjoy the possibility of representing someone other than themselves and this can also help in being empathetic and extroverted. Since it is sometimes easier to express ideas as someone else rather than yourself, projects help make learning fun.

Empathy is always a good way to become better listeners. Paying attention to the context instead of just words helps students to understand every situation and perspective better. During recording exercises, children tend to complete texts by paying attention to the words they listen to without completely comprehending the situation. Using interdisciplinary projects, students can use synonyms or improvise phrases to express their ideas according to what they learn or listen to in different conversations. This situation occurs frequently in debates or UN Models where children are testing their ideas with what they are listening to.

Writing can be useful to practice writing written reports, summaries, or notes that give the teacher a way to assess the progress of every student. This aspect of writing typically requires more guidance since children write as they pronounce words. Grammar and spelling mistakes can be corrected and explained allowing for useful instruction between revisions. To complete the whole process, teachers participating in the project need to organize rubrics for what they are evaluating and incorporate feedback to improve learning.

Reviewing vocabulary, grammar, and conversational skills is a relevant part of learning a language and is more important than a simple grade. Providing feedback to students helps them understand the reasons behind their mistakes and why it is important to correct them in real life scenarios in order to avoid misunderstandings or confusion.

This approach is also possible to use with adult learners. Education in college or secondary language learning in later years has an advantage. People gain personal experiences, develop perspectives, and gain argumentative skills that younger learners are still forming (Dinmore, 1997). These added traits can be part of analyzing texts in any career or its application to broadening knowledge. The experience can sometimes blind people to new perspectives and make them hesitant to new ideas. Projects and teamwork strive to improve listening and communication skills while reducing the workload that can be troublesome when people have jobs in addition to their studies.

Why is Interdisciplinarity Useful in a Covid-19 Context?

The Covid-19 pandemic forced schools, universities, and jobs to be performed in virtual sessions as normal solutions were unfeasible. Social distancing, the number of confirmed cases, and the mutations of the virus led people to work or study from their homes with whatever resources they had. This situation has proven to be a challenge for the economy as many people have lost their jobs due to the difficulties in maintaining the traditional means of production. The pandemic has also caused social problems to emerge as the idea of quarantining is very difficult for many families.

Interdisciplinary work can be helpful if people do not always have access to the internet. Learners can work on their projects with the time given by the teachers and divide assignments. Some can research while others organize the resources and then meet online at an agreed time to exchange information and complete the work. Meetings can be done through various chat or video call programs which allow real-time feedback or feedback through email. The

personal preparation of the task is what has caused many people to utilize more rather than the actual meetings. This allows families with only one phone the ability to utilize this resource equally without hoarding its use.

Interdisciplinary studies make different ways of presenting information possible while still improving language skills. Although the creativity of the teachers is imperative, there are many tools to help them including theater, storytelling, pictures, portraits, simulations, and debates. These activities not only allow teachers to promote the learning of secondary languages or subjects, but also help in the formation of citizens that are empathetic of others' needs and help find solutions to problems. As a result, problem-solving skills are another good consequence of this type of learning.

The mental health issues that have surfaced as a result of the lockdowns or social distancing can create conversations which are conducive to sharing empathy. Tips can become part of classroom dynamics at the beginning of the class and a journal to write thoughts can also be incorporated. This can provide teachers with ways to assess abilities and emotional stability which is something that is more important than ever in order to learn and become a successful person.

Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown other ways to do things and to prove how capable human beings are at adapting to difficult situations in order to carry on with their lives and explore new ways to learn. It has opened a new window of opportunities for workers, teachers, and students. It has shown that interdisciplinary learning is possible and is here to stay. It has also promoted a serious reflection about learning habits, work organization, schedules, and personal commitment to the world. Similarly, the pandemic has shown that it requires governments and international organizations to protect and prevent such events.

After being at home for more than a year, going back to studying in person is not an easy task. People have changed and have become more aware of how they want to spend their time. Before, people used to spend more time away from home due to meetings and deadlines. Education was something we saw as important, but never gave much consideration to how learning was being given. After Covid-19, we understand that teaching should be complete and integrated into our daily activities rather than relying on the traditional method of teaching alone. Interdisciplinary learning is another teaching method that is a more rewarding way of learning which is here to stay.

Teachers must adapt their educational expectations in order to consider these new changes and expectations. Since people started being more informed thanks to the internet, it has become harder to satisfy learning needs. Teaching English is not an isolated topic or subject. It should be seen as an integrated part of daily life within a school setting. It is no longer possible to maintain subjects, or even language learning, that are isolated from global challenges and needs. This compromise can be achieved through interdisciplinary learning which allows a language to be learned through a natural and interdisciplinary approach.

About the Author

Martha Patricia Gonzalez Chirivi was born in Bogotá. Currently, she is studying in the Bilingual Education with an emphasis in the English Language undergraduate program. She is finishing her graduation project, and she hopes to graduate this year. Additionally, she studied a technician career from the Secretary of Bilingualism at the Instituto Meyer de Bogotá. Martha considers herself to be a responsible, loyal, and persistent person. Her goals are to graduate, become a teacher, and one day become a director of her own school. She hopes to give all of her personality and educational experiences to educate and help students become prepared for anything they will face in their professional lives.

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