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## Fostering Reflection in the EFL Classroom

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**Viviana Mesa Solano - Geidy Yohana León Lozada**

Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje-SENA

Institución Educativa Técnica "Plinio Mendoza Neira"

bibyanita1@yahoo.com - leonyohana20@hotmail.com

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### **Abstract**

This article shares a pedagogical experience that attempted to foster reflective and interactive activities in our English lessons development. Besides, it describes some of the resources that learners used to express their ideas critically. From our research experience, it was evidenced that teachers focused mainly in achieving students' linguistic development. The main discussion of this study refers to the necessity of implementing new perspectives of teaching where language is taken as a social practice to foster reflective thinking through our pedagogical practices. Therefore, we as teachers should generate a confident environment in order to promote students' reflection and interaction in a spontaneous way. Those learning opportunities are

### **Resumen**

Este artículo da a conocer una experiencia pedagógica que intentó fortalecer las actividades de reflexión e interacción en el desarrollo de nuestras prácticas de inglés. Además, describir algunos de los recursos que los aprendices usaron para expresar sus ideas de manera crítica. Desde nuestra experiencia investigativa se evidenció que los docentes se enfocan principalmente en alcanzar el desarrollo lingüístico de los estudiantes. La principal discusión de este estudio se refiere a la necesidad de implementar nuevas perspectivas de enseñanza donde el lenguaje es tomado como una práctica social para fortalecer el pensamiento reflexivo a través de nuestras prácticas pedagógicas. Por consiguiente, nosotros como docentes deberíamos generar un ambiente de confianza que

empowered with the development of language and thought as a result of enhancing critical ideas based on social issues.

**Key words:** EFL learning, Interaction and Reflection.

## Introduction

Day by day society changes demand the analysis, the support, the reconstruction and the critical point of view of its citizens, making possible the creation of a conscious community that accepts the difference, develops cultural awareness, listens to other's opinions, negotiates and contributes with the progress of human's relationships. This role as citizens should be taught from home and reinforced by educators and society.

Therefore, it implies to assign an active role to the students inside our classrooms to allow their opinions to be shared and heard by others. Thus, teachers should choose topics, methodologies, activities, and strategies that become learning practices as part of students' interest, considering learners' suggestions, exploring what they like as their hobbies or pastimes and taking into account the context where they live in.

On the other hand, to nurture our daily lessons plans with activities that involve learners with reflective and interaction practices which might become meaningful steps for the development of their thinking

promueva la reflexión y la interacción de los estudiantes de una forma espontánea. Esas oportunidades de aprendizaje son construidas con el desarrollo del lenguaje y pensamiento, como resultado para estimular ideas críticas basadas en problemas sociales.

**Palabras claves:** ambientes de aprendizaje de lengua extranjera, Interacción y Reflexión

abilities as part of their formation as human beings. Therefore, one of the main goals for teachers is to involve critical thinking as an essential topic in English language education (Cheung ,2008 & Van Gelder, 2001). Few teachers have taken into account the importance to assign these skills a privileged role inside the curriculum, the syllabus, goals, materials and assessments that they have created.

The easiest way to teach is to assume the role as provider and receiver, our job as teachers is not just to check students' performance as Pineda (2004) claims "students are not passive recipients and they could become active members of society who can contribute to ameliorate their nations' needs (p. 47).

Bearing in mind this point of view, students as "active producers" draws our attention to the importance to integrate the development of the foreign language competence with the reflective thinking process. Both of them are linked, but unfortunately, school practices focus on enhancing the language skills rather than integrating and exploring them in relation to the thinking abilities.

According to Pineda (2004) “Although we have witnessed changes in the teaching of English, the tendency to emphasize the accumulation of information and the mere mechanization of linguistic structured still prevails” (p.47). In our opinion, language educators should go beyond the mere development of linguistic knowledge, transforming the learning environments in spaces of reflection and interaction where students need to use the foreign language to achieve a communicative purpose.

The main objectives of this article are: to describe some of the resources that learners use to express their ideas critically, as well as to foster a foreign language learning environment for reflection and interaction. Therefore, along this paper, firstly the main constructs that nurture our paper are exposed, then, some reflections describe and support the findings and finally some pedagogical implications and conclusions are stated.

### **Theoretical Background**

With the aim to go deeper in our knowledge of the different aspects discussed through this article. Firstly, in this session we will describe a previous study related to ours and secondly, we are going to conceptualize some theoretical issues.

There is a previous study conducted by Dovros and Makrakis (2012) called “Transforming the classroom into a reflective community: a blended learning instructional approach”. The main aim was to activate pupils’ reflective thinking in order to negotiate the controversial topic of genetically modified food (GMF). It was conducted in

primary schools in Chania, Crete with the participation of 23 pupils. The instructional model took in consideration the new cutting edge technologies, where teachers could organize activities to have an integrated understanding of the issue. This small-scale study showed that the new learning environments included opportunities for acquiring basic skills, knowledge and conceptual understanding, which have to be integrated in order to develop the communicative competence.

This research tried to make learners reflect and think about issues related to their health and the environment, creating a successful learning atmosphere where teachers needed to change their traditional method of teaching as a way to support students in integrating and sharing ideas. In sum, the classroom transformation should warrant knowledge, where everything is put in question and it cannot be achieved inside the four walls of a classroom. (Dovros and Makrakis, 2012)

To clarify some concepts about reflective and interactive environments in EFL, it was necessary to consider the relation between language and thought as a social practice, the conception of critical thinking in EFL, and English learning environments

### **Language and Thought as Social Practice**

This issue has generated a great debate during many generations among linguistics who have discussed if language produces thought or thought produces language and how each one can influence positively or negatively the other.

It is possible to take part of the discussion analyzing language and thought relations from two different perspectives: how language is structured in people's mind and its effect on thinking and vice versa, or from the point of view of its usage. However, these conceptions are also interrelated, structure and use are completely joined, as Krauss and Chiu (1993) state "The ways languages can be used are constrained by the way they are constructed, particularly the linguistic rules that govern the permissible (i.e., grammatical) usage forms" (p. 41).

In spite of adopting any position, we can conclude that language and thought (or vice versa) are completely interrelated since one cannot work without the other one in the production of ideas related to the political, social, economic, cultural and educational human conceptions. Freeman and Freeman (1994) argue that language entails acquiring "a new world view as a way to talk about that world view" (p. 75) and the ability to take different perspectives on the world (Hakuta, 1986).

Therefore, considering language as a tool for the expression and storage of ideas implies that learners can learn English, but at the same time, to use a new code to express their thought to others and to know theirs, allowing them to establish certain kind of social relationship. According to Halliday (1979) human beings have a mental structure that develops the communicative competences, so that function does not have any sense if it does not allow to express their thought and to get others' understanding.

In relation to the previous ideas, language

is a social practice, which is one of the most vital actions made by people in order to communicate with others. Also, it allows comprehending what it is around, how people behave in different ways and interpret the interchange of meanings. As a result, language is not simply as a body of knowledge to be learnt, but as a social practice in which to participate (Kramersch, 1994).

According to Kramersch (1994), language is taken as a reciprocal communication performed by human beings in order to produce, to create and to express meanings and to establish language social practice. Language as a social practice allows learners making collective relationships to begin negotiations as a way to achieve successful communication and made them aware that working cooperatively it helps to learn and to generate different notions about world.

### **Critical Thinking in EFL**

Teaching English language, it is not only to develop students' abilities for expressing words and being understood, but also using those abilities in order to develop students' cultural awareness and knowledge of the world (Harris, S. 2012). Thus, learners can become worldwide citizens that are connected with the world necessities and they can contribute in the advance of some problems.

In this research experience, we have modified our pedagogical practices to guide our participants not only to generate faster and better learning process, but also to create new alternatives that allow them to

get reflective and critical points without thinking in language as a code. As Whorf (1956) states "The background linguistic system (in other words, grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but is itself the shaper of ideas" (p.213).

Creating new environments, students are able to determine and to assess different reasons in order to get a better understanding of an issue (Barry, 1984) and to be able to analyze a situation, to take positions, to make decisions, to negotiate, to accept others opinions, to try to give solutions and to become reflective according to the situation presented.

One of the main goals of teaching and learning processes of the foreign language should be to involve students in genuine practice interactions where the L2 can be learnt as the L1. Therefore, students use English as a tool to communicate their thoughts to others achieving real communicative purposes what requires to let their voices be heard, understood and to be familiarized with the difference, to evaluate others' opinions, to accept that others have the reason, to defend beliefs to learn from others in order to improve argument pattern. Cheong and Cheung (2008) state "Teachers are facing challenges in designing innovative pedagogical approaches with the objective to set young minds thinking and to promote Critical Thinking (p. 556).

### **EFL Environments**

One of the most important factors that influence foreign language learning is the

management of a comfortable atmosphere inside the classroom. It should be enhanced, combining the conditions necessary to motivate learners to participate lowering the high levels of anxiety they could experiment and to learn about listening and respecting each other. From the socio constructivist point of view, a confident environment promotes the exploration of opinions, experiences, previous knowledge, attitudes and abilities and the creation of genuine activities of interest for learners, which are anyway closed to their realities (Ferrero, 2005)

### **Methodology**

This small-scale study was conducted under the qualitative approach. According to De Tezanas (1998), Qualitative Approach plays a significant role because we can study and interpret the reality from the people who we are going to study in a concise manner. Also, it was developed under the descriptive method where we are able to describe, explain and interpret real and current conditions. (Cohen and Manion, 1996). In this study, the purpose of using descriptive research is to examine a phenomenon that was occurring in the classroom. Therefore, in order to collect data we used video recordings and students' artifacts.

### **Setting and participants**

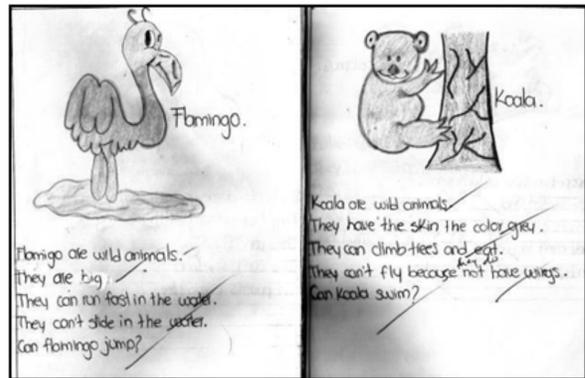
This experience was carried out with 40 seventh graders in a group of beginners, who received few opportunities of English learning during their elementary studies, because they were only exposed to the foreign language one hour per week. This group of learners experienced the

implementation of new pedagogical strategies in order to motivate them to learn English. They belong to a public school in Boyacá.

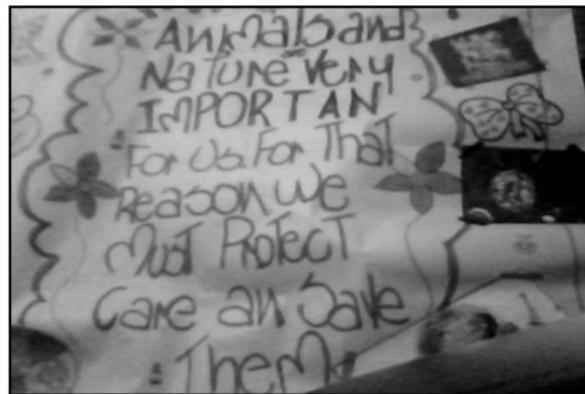
### Pedagogical Design

With the aim of generating students' interaction, opportunities that promote critical thinking situations, we modified the syllabus, linking new activities with the topics students were developing during the term. Those connections were interesting for students, triggering their necessity to express what they thought and negotiated with others opinions.

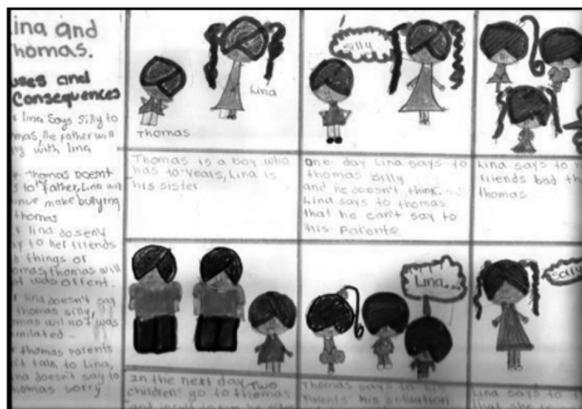
We modified our English lessons, which were delivered during 24 classes in order to enhance reflection and interaction among students. Thus, the first lesson plan called "Animal kingdom" (see appendix 1) was adapted because not any activity involved students' active participation. For instance, the final product planned in the syllabus was to create an animal album where students could describe the main characteristics of 10 different kinds of animals using the verbs Can and To Be. As we can notice, this previous lesson was focused on linguistic achievements. Then, this final outcome did not require any kind of students' cognitive effort, but students' ability to create well - structured sentences. This was the previous expected product represented in a student's artifact:



Therefore, we decided to include a new component that allowed students to participate and to enhance their cognitive and communicative abilities to share opinions with others. As a result of the modifications made to the English classes, we included some new activities, such as: videos about animals in danger of extinction, songs and readings. So, the final product was a discussion, design and presentation of posters, which had messages inviting people to protect animals and nature. As we can noticed in this student's artifact:



The second lesson plan was named “Simple Past”. Children talked about past experiences or anecdotes. So, when we modified it, we bore in mind the recently social situation that was presented in Boyacá Department related to the national popular agrarian strike. So, the new activities included readings about this issue taken from newspapers and magazines, videos where peasants and government argued about the problematic situation and students searched more information through the web. Then, learners discussed the problem with their parents to get other perspectives and they filled in an opinion’s map to state their personal position. Finally, they defended their point of view through an oral debate in class, where they chose and performed as a strike’s main character (peasant, police and government). Learners also made some drawings as the following:



The third lesson plan was focused on the first conditional; as a result students should understand and create causes and consequences in isolated sentences. But, with the changes we did to English classes, students watched the video “Sidney the Elephant- the littlest bully”, they read a comic about bullying in school and looked for some information related to it. The final outcome was to create a comic telling a real situation they had faced or seen in order to establish the causes and consequences of that situation and some conclusions about the importance of respecting others. In a comic session, they presented and shared their work. Finally, they had to come out with different strategies to avoid to be bullies or to be the victim.

### Findings

The process of gathering data was to analyze students’ opinions taken from video recordings and students’ artifacts. Through an inductive process, we identified the main strategies and features that learners used to express their ideas. Finally, we supported the data with theory to validate information.

On one hand, we could identify some aspects related to the study made by Pineda (2004) based on the need that students have to use linguistic resources to get their ideas across. For example at the beginning of the first English class delivered, students were anxious and shy, and then, it was necessary to allow students to talk in their first language. Since, we noticed in some learners’ high levels of anxiety when they tried to express their ideas and in other students a rejection to participate. Afterwards, there was a spontaneous and

interactive section where many learners talked at the same time and it was difficult to make them listen to their partners. As Pineda (2004) concludes “sometimes students struggled with the linguistic resources in the target language to communicate their ideas, and that this struggle prompted their use of Spanish”, (p. 71). In the following example, one student was talking about animals’ protection. He tried to express in his own words and used Spanglish.

**T:** What do you think about animals in Africa Savannah, are they happy?

**S1:** Yes, eh they are happy in the sabana because is your natural ambiente

**T:** environment

**S1:** yes environment

**(Class extract, video 1)**

In the second and the third lesson plan development, students added more words to their speech and used *interlanguage*, for example: “The government is appruping the seeds of country people. The prices of inpots for grow are so expensive in Colombia” (student’s artifact). Students learned single words as a resource to fulfill their ideas, for instance: *false cognates*: dinner, produced and recognize and *new words* to increase their speech: strike, agrarian, government, peasants, taxes, infiltrate, vandals, disorders, block roads, injure, high cost, rights, bullying, gun, insult and so on. As Pineda (2004) states “students attempt to construct more elaborate discourse. There were chances in terms of lexical development. That is, students incorporated more vocabulary and expression in their lexical repertoire” (p.70).

On the other hand, one of the most relevant aspects analyzed during the development of the English classes was the need to generate opportunities in order to help students to interact in a natural and liberal way, expressing and supporting different ideas about a personal reflection of an issue. That is to say, how they assumed the reality and made different readings of the world. As Mulnix (2012) states critical thinking is a process (p.465). Thus, it is necessary to get advantage of all the situations and learning opportunities to develop it.

Those spaces can be just generated inside the English classes’ development, adapting or including some activities, materials in which students can participate giving their opinions, arguments and positions which must be related to real life issues and ages. As Pineda (2004) argues “when the didactics units focused on issues that generate controversy, touched on their reality, were intriguing and challenging, students tend to participate more” (p, 48). So, we could analyze that in the first lesson, students had the chance to go further than to describe abilities of animals to be aware of the importance to protect animals in our planet. “Animals is important in the life” (**student’s opinion**). “Las aves encerradas no tienen libertad para volar, no tienen mucha libertad para construir su nido, y por eso mueren dejando soledad” (**student’s opinion**)

However, we also noticed that students felt very anxious and they did not participate, but when the teacher asked a specific question, they began to talk.

**T:** What is the reason to have a tiger or a bird in a cage? What is the reason?

- S1:** para que la gente los vea  
**S2:** solo para que la gente los vea, nada más  
**S3:** son centro de atracción  
**S1:** para que sea una exhibición::: y la gente pueda ver cómo es que: cómo es que son los animales salvajes o sea verlos de cerca.  
**T:** aja  
**S1:** pero encerrados (**Class extract, video 1**)

Taking the idea above, in the second lesson plan we could infer that using a situation where students felt involved and affected, made them to establish a strong position how was assumed during the national popular agrarian strike's debate, where learners defended different points of view supported in what they had seen, read, lived, experienced, heard and felt. "The country people work every day because they need money for life. The government will not cash good because they are not paid expensive. Other samples "The life of the country people is so difficult but they fight for his lifes every day" and "I agree for the march peaceful because the march is not violence" (**student's artifact**)

In the strike performance debate, they adopted the position of one of the characters' ideology that they felt more identified or agreed. In that process, learners started to argue about what was happening around them and it was a process that showed students were taking positions to provide possible solutions, also they were at some point conscious about that situation.  
**Ss as policeman 1:** why the peasants destroy the supermarkets and block the street because the peasant sad.  
**Ss as policeman 1:** why peasant work, peasant are human and I against because

the esmad and the people destroy the supermarkets and destroy years of work and broken windows"

**SS as Government's position 1:** I think that is better to think solution then the problem

**Ss as peasant 1:** people of Colombia buy products of people of Usa, why?

As part of being aware of the issue, one kid regarded the national popular agrarian strike as benefic for the environment, since there were no cars on the streets and the pollution decreased, "My position is in favor because there were no gasoline and less polluted air". In this opinion, a student offered another look of the situation in terms of the environmental wash back which was not regarded before by the others and assigned her a recognition inside the group.

In the third plan, students had the possibility to go beyond the mere knowledge of first conditional towards the use of this knowledge to accomplish a real communicative purpose. It means, to pass from the creation of linguistic sentences to feel the necessity to use "if" as a way to express their reflections, thoughts and critical ideas about a condition that they are facing every day, like bullying. For instance, a learner said: "if Lina doesn't say to Thomas silly, Thomas will not was humiliated" and "if Corina tells Isa need respect, they will be friends" and "if Jose is good with persons, he has many friends". These examples displayed the consequences of bullying and liked with the value of respect among them. Therefore, students reflect about real situations that they live or know and are able to interpret them making part of their daily life.

Bearing the analysis in mind, we have concluded that decreasing teacher's intervention and encourages learners to continue participating actively, enhance their own awareness of their learning process and avoid the raise of anxiety, fear and stress. Besides, combining real topics in English classes increase students' participation and promote step by step reflective processes generated from the discussions, sharing meanings, negotiation ideas and construction of knowledge from diverse peers.

### **Conclusions**

Considering the aspects studied before, we as teachers should generate comfortable and confident spaces inside our classrooms, in order to encourage our students to reflect and to interact in a spontaneous way by using the foreign language. Those spaces are empowered with the development of language and thought as a result of enhancing critical ideas based on social issues. As Pineda (2004) states "Students bring to the process of learning a second language, not only their personal views but also, knowledge of their own fields of study and of their communities" (p, 58).

Changing the methodology of our lessons is a continuous process that needs to be reevaluated as a way to get better results step by step. So, one of main tasks of the teacher is to reinforce reflective practices as a common part of the English language learning.

We can transform the topics we have planned for our classes in order to involve learners in new situations that make them

reflective and analytic citizens without changing the whole lesson but introducing new activities and strategies to give learners chances to participate. In the same way, language teachers have to work social issues in order to make learners conscious of their communicative purpose to generate new meanings.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

One of the most important aspects to take into account is to consider nurturing our daily pedagogical practices propping critical thinking development is "being convinced of the value of CT" (Bean, 1997). It implies to generate a confident climate inside classroom, where students feel comfortable to participate, to listen to and to respect their partner's opinions. Students also need to be aware about their role in the class as active participants, interested in defending their points of view and to explore other's ways to read and to understand the world.

Another important issue is to plan interesting activities and establishing the goals we pretend to achieve during and at the end of the term, where students go beyond the application of some knowledge. As Krathwohl (1999) states "Teachers can decide where and how to improve the planning of the curriculum and the delivery of instruction" (p, 218) in this sense, one of the challenges for teachers is to design and orient motivating activities which trigger students' participation.

Those activities focused on students' participation change completely the regular classes. It benefits not only students who play an active role but also teachers who

feel motivated to continue with the process, looking for new interesting activities and establishing a close connection with their students. As Bean (2001) argues “professor who successfully integrate critical thinking activities into their courses often report a satisfying increase in their teaching pleasure. Students are better prepared for class, discussions are richer and students’ performance improves” (p.1).

Finally, students need to explore the use of different linguistic resources through their interactions with the objective to use the foreign language as a social practice, thus they can notice the importance of the linguistic competence development as a way to understand and to be understood by others. Therefore, the activities designed and developed must be connected with real communicative purposes that change the normal development of the English Classes.

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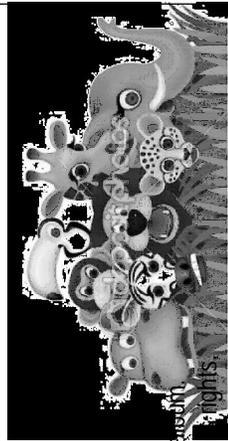
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APPENDIX 1  
LESSON PLAN N°1

Next, we can appreciate one of the plans that was adapted and developed.

DATE: From September 16 <sup>th</sup> to October 26 <sup>th</sup>		LEVEL: BEGINNERS		TOPIC: DESCRIBING ABILITIES: ANIMAL KINGDOM		SUBJECT: English		ACHIEVEMENTS:	
SUBTOPICS		ACHIEVEMENT INDICATORS		ACTIVITIES		RESOURCES		ASSESSMENT CRITERIA	
ANIMALS' CLASSIFICATION	1. Students classify animals according to their specie and habitat.	• Animal Bingo • Classifying animals • Listening • Animals' abilities	• Bingo cards • Photocopies • Video beam	1. Students classify animals according to their specie and habitat.				1. Students classify animals according to their specie and habitat.	
DESCRIBING ABILITIES "CAN"	2. Students get familiar With some verbs to express animals' abilities.	• Charades: guess the animal and say what is it doing? • Exercises: Puzzles-crosswords, Letter soups, Sorting out	• Speakers • Computer	2. Learners do some exercise to reinforce new knowledge as puzzles, crosswords, matching.				2. Learners do some exercise to reinforce new knowledge as puzzles, crosswords, matching.	
ANIMAL KINGDOM	3. Students describe in oral and written form animals taking into account their physical characteristics and abilities.	• Readings from the book "The animals group" • Group work worksheet and socialization	• Colors • Pencils	3. The student reinforces vocabulary and does homework and exercises out regular classes.				3. The student reinforces vocabulary and does homework and exercises out regular classes.	
CRITICAL THINKING	4. Students participate in class expressing their reflections and opinions about the importance of protecting the nature.	• Album creation and presentation • Video Africa Savannah • Song : "Heal the world" by Michael Jackson • Song "what about us?" • Workshop	• Reading book • Workshops • videos	4. Student's participation in class is active. 5. If it is necessary the learner asks for advice on time.				4. Student's participation in class is active. 5. If it is necessary the learner asks for advice on time.	
What's the relation between humans and animals? What do you think about animals in wildlife, at the zoo, at animal's fur? What about animal rights? How can we protect animals?	5. Students listen to others opinions, respecting different points of view and making agreements.	• Video species in danger of extinction • Reading Colombian animal traffic • Discussion • Poster design and presentation	• Bon papers • Markers • Ruler • Glue • Magazines	6. Student makes corrections and improves his/her academic performance. 7. Student creates and shows his/her animal album. 8. They express the importance of having a go treatment with animals. 9. Student shows some examples of real life when he/she can identify any kind of animal damage. 10. Student shares ideas and opinions with their classmates and listen with respect to others points of view.				6. Student makes corrections and improves his/her academic performance. 7. Student creates and shows his/her animal album. 8. They express the importance of having a go treatment with animals. 9. Student shows some examples of real life when he/she can identify any kind of animal damage. 10. Student shares ideas and opinions with their classmates and listen with respect to others points of view.	



#### THE AUTHORS

VIVIANA MESA SOLANO is an English teacher at SENA. She holds a B.A. in Modern Languages Spanish-English and a specialization in I.T. for teaching from Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC). She is currently an M.A. in Language Teaching Candidate at the same university.

GEIDY YOHANA LEÓN LOZADA is a full time English teacher at a public school from Boyacá. She holds a B.A. in Modern Languages Spanish-English from UPTC and she is currently a candidate for the M.A. in Language Teaching at the same university.