

Universidad de Antioquia

Escuela de Idiomas

Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras

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How to promote intercultural awareness in the classroom through teaching vocabulary in
kindergarten 5 at UPB School?

Action Research Report

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June- 2018

Medellín



Abstract

This action-research project pointed at identifying what boys and girls from the kindergarten in a private institution in Medellin make of the creation of intercultural awareness, about their own culture and that pertaining to others, through the use of vocabulary for its fostering in the English class. Interculturality is understood as a dimension where the diversity of people and groups are met and embraced. In carrying out this project, the following data collection methods were used: observations, interviews and questionnaires. The analysis of these data led to the conclusion that the boys and girls understood that there are cultural aspects from other parts of the world that enrich our own culture, with regard to the differences in the language we speak, the garments we wear, the seasons throughout a year and the traditional dishes that identify among others.

Key words: Intercultural awareness, children, vocabulary, English learning, cultures.

Degree requirement

This action research project was carried out during my teaching practicum under the roles of teacher- researcher at Colegio Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana during 2017/2018. It is submitted as a requirement for graduating from Bachelor of Education in Foreign Languages (English-French) of the school of languages at Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my grateful to God for giving me the life and perseverance during this training process.

Secondly, I would like to say thanks to my family, especially to my father and my sister Cindy, who are my guide and support. Besides, I would like to thank my best friend Dayana for her permanent advices.

Also, I would like express my gratitude to my research and thesis advisor Mary Isabel Arredondo for her knowledge, guidance and motivation during my research project.

Finally, it is really important to give thanks to the UPB School for giving me the opportunity to realize my research; also the cooperating teachers and children, who helped me during the development of this project.

Table of contents

Preface..... 6

Context description 7

Problem Statement 9

Theoretical background 11

Research Question..... 15

 General objective..... 15

 Specific objectives..... 15

Development of actions 16

Findings and Interpretation 19

Conclusions and suggestions 21

Reflection 23

References 26

Appendices 28

Preface

This report lays out my action-research project on English teaching in the kindergarten level of UPB School, centered on intercultural awareness through vocabulary teaching. The idea of conducting this research arose from my personal interest in finding about the intercultural competence in the classroom and as a proposal for the strengthening of the process observed in the progress of lessons. In relation to the aforementioned, my main goal was to implement different vocabulary activities to promote interculturality.

This research is addressed to teachers and soon-to-be teachers, who may be interested in finding out how to promote intercultural awareness, its learning and teaching, inside the classroom since the early years of schooling.

Context description

The UPB School is located in the commune 11- Laureles, in Medellin. The UPB preschool section was founded in 1937 by Monsignor Félix Henao Botero, at that time it was a male institution. In 1988, the girls started studying in the preschool.

The UPB School has as its mission the integral formation of students through evangelism of the culture, and a constant search of truth in the teaching and researching processes, contributing to social development. On the other hand, the vision is to be a catholic Institution with educational excellence in the integral formation of students, as people with ethical, scientific, management, and social leadership to service the country. For this reason, the mission and the vision are directed to train competent persons through an integral formation.

The school provides spaces to grow up in different aspects such as: academic, spiritual, sportive, and cultural. Those spaces promote a comfortable and healthy environment for the students. Around the building, there are: libraries, laboratories, technology room, English room, church, playground, pools, green spaces, and fields.

The classroom where the English class is settled down is spacious. It has six windows that allow a good lighting and air circulation. In front of the room, there are: two boards (white board and chalk board), the teacher's desk and the bulletin board with the activities and special days. In the back of the room, there are a television and didactic blocks; also, there are shelves to keep the materials and notebooks. Each student has a chair and a table; they are organized in a horseshoe shape that provides an independent work.

The English department is the biggest one in the school. There are two leaders in this area. One person leads from preschool to elementary school, and the other one leads the high

school. In elementary school and preschool, there are rooms with audio-visual and didactic resources. In the English classes, teachers develop projects such as: spelling competition from first to tenth grade. Vocabulary competition named as “picture bee” designed for the preschool students. In kindergarten, the teachers evaluate through images and the students should practice the vocabulary explored during the classes. It is a way to check the progress of listening and speaking skills

The class that I observed is a kindergarten 5, a group of 19 students (twelve boys and seven girls), between 5-6 years old. It was developed three days per week, from Tuesday to Thursday. The contents were integrated with different subjects of the curriculum, taking into account communicative and pragmatic aspects. In Transition, is important as point of reference, the dimensions for holistic education and the pedagogical strategies for early education such as: art, games, literature, and exploration of their surroundings.

The students in English class are respectful, calm, dynamic and well behavior group. In general, they worked very well, both individually and by groups, helping each other. They are motivated and enjoyed learning new vocabulary through the flashcards, songs, worksheets and hand crafts.

The cooperating teacher holds a degree in foreign languages teaching in Luis Amigo University and she has been an English teacher for twelve years. The teacher plans her classes to have an order to work, she also establishes a time for every moment of the class according to pedagogical strategies for Transition. In addition, she uses different materials to catch the attention and interest of the students, par example: songs, videos, real material and worksheets.

The researcher is a student in foreign language teaching from University of Antioquia. Her role in this practice is to provide the elements and information to the research project from her observations and analyze the class problematic situations. In this case, about the uses of different materials in the English class. She is an open-minded person who is able to recognize her weaknesses and strengths in order to generate changes in her practice, for the benefit of her students. She always has an attitude of respect, kindness and dedication to her students.

Problem Statement

Taking into account the observations and searches gathered during these months, I consider that, it is important to recognize how children acquire their mother tongue in the childhood, how the English teaching process is focused in Colombia, in order to help students to learn a foreign language and also, how is that process developed at UPB School with kindergarten students.

The imitation and creativity are involved as a fundamental process that a child uses to acquire a language. This claim is reinforced by different psycholinguistics such as Chomsky and Skinner (1975), who explain that through imitation, children make some language approximations according with all that surround them. The first type of imitation is the repetition and mime. A constant repetition of the sounds makes possible that the students become familiar with the language as far as find the meaning and significance of the words.

The MEN (1994), joined its purpose to support the second languages teaching-learning process and assessment in the school, with the general law of education 115, argued that “the

linguistic learning is cultural learning”, and in that way, these processes unleash in the development of the country in all the areas since it helps to understand better other contexts.

Therefore, the national program of Bilingualism is oriented to “achieve citizens able to communicate in English, and so, they can involve the country in universal communication process, the global economy and the culture with similar international standards” (MEN, 2006). But, concerning to teaching a foreign language in preschool, the schools have been taking place the basic learning rights of English from transition to 5th grade; it refers these teaching-objectives must be a task from institutions in terms to establish them in the curriculum.

At the UPB school, the curriculum is based on the Ministry of Education, in accordance with the dimensions for holistic education (socio- affective, cognitive, spiritual, ethic, aesthetics, and communicative). All of the above within the suggested curriculum structure for Transition propose a learning experience which main objective is to give students opportunities for exploration and interaction with the world and its different contextual systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

Based on the curriculum and the observations that I have been doing during these days, I perceived that the teacher uses different materials to develop the topics. For example: to teach the vocabulary, she includes music, songs and body language giving students the possibility to understand and associate the vocabulary with their context; as well as she helps them to explore the environment through pictures and concrete materials. “The teacher starts the lesson through the video about the song “put on your shoes” while the students are watching and they listening this video, the teacher pause the song and she explains showing the images with respect to clothes vocabulary”. (Personal journal, August 30th, 2017). Regarding literature, the teacher tells

the students fables in Spanish (or English, if appropriate) or stories about the topic. Finally, she plays with the students using games that involve their expressions and their emotions inside the classroom.

Observing and exploring all those things, I decided to focus my research to engage children to the English class through different human and didactic resources that promote the interculturalism in the classroom. Language itself is defined by a culture. We cannot be competent in the language if we do not also understand the culture that has shaped and informed it. As Rose (2003) points out:

We cannot learn a second language, if we do not have an awareness of that culture, and how that culture relates to our own first language/first culture. It is not only therefore essential to have cultural awareness, but also intercultural awareness.

Theoretical background

Upon every word there is a complete semantic and pragmatic content meaning more than a sign and a represented object. Verbal or not verbal, every built message carries a part of the sense that societies have constructed around it, lately. As pointed out by Kramsch (1998) “language, as a code, reflects cultural preoccupation and constrains the way people think” (p.14). The purpose of pronouncing a message is based on the richness of the language. Therefore, a message must be re-interpreted to its original or closest sense intended by the emitter. As expressed by Daniel (2003, p.1): “los idiomas son parte integral de la identidad de las personas y de la promoción de la diversidad cultural”.

In the same way on the fields of human development, it is very important to take into account the complex fabric of meanings that merge to become culture and the different elements that make us humans. One of the scenarios, where is possible to identify the interaction between these elements, it is the classroom; here there are different people sharing and expressing themselves about diverse things linked to their lives. It is mandatory as English teachers to observe what happens in every English lesson, since there are messages in both, mother and foreign language, and also distinct cultures interacting in the same space, allowing a better understanding of the differences between cultures.

According to Witte and Harden (2011) “culture is a socially produced and distributed dynamic system of rules, which are both explicit and implicit, involving attitudes, beliefs, norms and behaviours”; these play an important role in the societies because they create the identity of the place and the present situation.

Furthermore, Agudelo (2007); Arvizu, Snyder and Spinoza (1980) defined: “Culture is a dynamic, creative, and continuous process including behaviors, values and substance learned and shared by people that guides them in their struggle for survival and gives meaning to their lives.” (as cited in Lessow-Hurley, 2000, p. 95). Consequently, in the scope of culture we move from one space to another without having the elements of the target culture, but the teacher as a representative and the classroom with the conditions proposed by her/him.

According to the foreign country proposing the curriculum, verbal codes are intended to be transported and spread over the classrooms using the music, literature, art, history and popular culture, linked to the target culture and language, and labeled as Contents (in uppercase).

Consistently, there are other contents (in lowercase) that are less visible and harder to perceive: beliefs, behaviors, and cultural values which help to determinate linguistic and paralinguistic elements of communication, either verbal or non-verbal elements (Alonso y Fernández 2013.p.186).

Teaching English as a second language is a complex topic due to the numerous factors that are involved in a classroom, where there is a chance to learn English or to learn about English culture. However, in both cases the semantics of language has to be considered as it has a connotative function, taking into account the context of usage; on the other hand pragmatics of language has also an important role because it charges the word or message with a complete social personal background that modifies the vision of the world, pre-concepts that have been built since childhood. Understanding these conditions of learning is called intercultural competence.

That said, Baker (2009) argued that cultural awareness recognizes the role of the cultural dimension on language teaching as the use of the target language and culture to understand and to be aware of one's language and culture. This comes to be key when it is recognized that English has been working as a lingua franca during some years, and its influence in not exclusive to the different contexts where it is spoken but also to the different places where it is taught. As a consequence, the term of intercultural awareness is presented as an alternative 'non-essentialist' view of culture and speech that better accounts for the fluid and dynamic relationship between them.

When it comes to teaching-learning, intercultural aspects have been promoted for over a century until our days. Foreign languages teachers are seen as people with different skills to interact with different cultures, to research, collect and design curricula to develop similar skills in students. Byram (1997) also remarks the importance of this intercultural awareness as a key factor to increase student's success on intercultural communication experiences and other situation of interaction with different cultures since this awareness assistances to be ready for uncertainty by cultural experiences and the integration of both: competences and knowledge.

Considering Kumaravadivelu (2003, p.273) when proposes that "In understanding other cultures, we understand our own better; in understanding our own, we understand other cultures better. Therein lies real and meaningful cultural growth"; it is possible to understand intercultural competence as the will to train in a foreign language by including a full package of moral, cultural and material goods out of a social community to represent the world.

On the educational stage, when it comes to practice, the MEN (Stands for Ministry of national education) go in harmony to what has been previously mentioned, theoretically. When revising the curriculum for English class on grades from preschool to 5°, they are aligned and defined by Colombia Bilingue (2016); for that the contents are named like health and life, peace and living together, and society a global village. It reflects the ideas behind the contents and the importance given to the natural and human context as well as the presence of oneself and the others.

Additionally, the emphasis lies in how, for these early schooling levels, the ranges of learning standards differ and are thought as the baseline for a holistic training. There are several

learning domains that involve the artistic, bodily, conversational, emotional, behavioural and intellectual aspects and that come into play at this stage along with the use of strategies related to games, arts, literature and exploration of the environment.

In summary, addressing the broader area of culture through the theme of interculturality is very reasonable especially when one considers how closely related it can be to components, pedagogical strategies and the fusion of comprehensive training, plus didactic methods that employ recreation and art-works.

Research Question

How to promote intercultural awareness in the classroom through teaching vocabulary in kindergarten 5 at UPB School?

General objective

To implement different vocabulary activities in class to promote the development of intercultural awareness in kindergarten 5

Specific objectives

- To create intercultural awareness in the students about their own culture and other cultures.
- To analyze the role of vocabulary teaching in the development of intercultural awareness.
- To foster students' intercultural awareness to encourage openness towards a foreign language.

Development of actions

Taking into account the objective of this research, namely, the fostering of intercultural awareness inside the classroom through vocabulary teaching, several actions to be implemented were planned, and these had been conceived from the specific objectives. These actions have been divided into three categories: Intervention activities, data collection instruments and the final phase.

In the first place, a sensitization stage was set in motion; the students hadn't had previous experience with the intercultural topic. To explore these them to the kids, they developed a unit called "Where are you from?" where it was played a video about a world map in order to point the different countries. Additionally, we watched some short clips about independence, the soccer world cup, flags and food. Based on this, we began a conversation about the different aspects observed, and we worked with a map of Colombia as well as some materials to color it. Finally, once the pieces were finished, they were exhibited as a gallery. During the exhibition, the boys and girls had to answer the question "where are you from?" (E.g. I'm from Colombia), and say the colors used (yellow, blue, red). (See appendix A).

In the second place, the students listened a song "where are you from?", so they could later practice the structure previously studied with the aid of flashcards and human face photos with physical treats related to each country (E.g. where are you from? – I am from Colombia) and then classify them. Subsequently, the children used different materials to create their own flags. Finally, the materials were used to design a Memory game. In turns, each boy or girl had to choose a square to unveil the pair of banners. Consequently, we were able to review how to count, colors and words to identify the countries (See appendix B).

In the third place, the topic to be developed consisted in seasons of the year. Initially, through the viewing of the video song “How’s the weather?” the class session started a discussion in relation to the weather of our country and asked about the times of the year. Later, the students classified according to the climate some clothing items related to meteorological conditions. Using these, the whole group role-played behaviors and actions that are common when it is cold or when it is hot. To conclude the lesson, the children received a model of a season clock and materials to build it. Once finished, pupils had to answer the question “How’s the weather?” in accordance with the clock indicated; additionally via the Simon says game, some commands were given to be followed. (See appendix C)

In order to bring this unit to an end, some videos about food were watched to work the grammatical structure “Do you like?”; “I like ____”; “I don’t like ____”. After that, each boy and girl was asked, on the grounds of what they had watched, whether they liked those food items, as well as where they thought each piece of food came from, all while making comparisons and associations with the country of origin.

Next, Kim’s game was done, where the group of peers tasted some food, and in this manner, they discriminated flavors and smells. Finally, students were given several chef hats to wear and some play dough so they could enact said role by creating their custom pizzas. Once the works were done, a language review was made focusing on colors, counting and ingredients description. (See appendix D)

Moving on to the second unit “It’s ok to be different”, we watched a video about family members, and based on this, we began a conversation about how each of their families is made up and the customs they have. Next, we read the tale “the family book”; making use of reading

comprehension strategies such as anticipation and retelling. To conclude the lesson, the kids drew each of their family members and exhibited their work in front of the whole class.

In order to finish with this section, we read the tale “it’s okay to be different” by Todd Parr, where the purpose was to identify the physical characteristics that make each person unique and different. Employing a template, students applied color to face, nose, eyes, mouth and accessories, thereby creating a self-portrait. (See appendix E). As they kept going, I raised some questions as to find out what they thought identifies and distinguishes each person. Lastly, pupils’ ideas about what each of them want to be when they grow up, what they like to eat, wear, and how their families are made up, became the content of a book created by themselves.

Finally, in this research there were used the data collection instruments that are described below, in assessing to what extent those actions had an influence on intercultural awareness through vocabulary teaching. Such instruments were: Observations, journals, a questionnaire and an interview. The first instrument was used for the purpose of identifying students’ strengths and weaknesses in relation to the process of learning a foreign language through interculturality and vocabulary. The second mechanism was intended as a tool to describe and analyze the events unfolded throughout the implementation of the lessons. Then, the third one was used so as to identify the kids’ comprehension level of the suggested theme. Ultimately, the interview had the purpose of finding out what the cooperating teacher thought with regard to the fostering of interculturality in English teaching, in what way she can develop it in her class, and what impact she has observed in students whenever this content has been implemented.

Findings and Interpretation

Once the development of the action plan reached its completion, this part of the research presents the results obtained through the application of four data collection instruments as: observations, journals, questionnaire and interview, before, during, and after the investigation.

First, in intervention number one, children expressed their interests by questioning themselves about the location, customs and language of each country. As the exercises were developed, they expressed; "Why does snow fall in the United States but it does not in Colombia? Is the pizza served at Medellin from Italy? Why do Chinese people have their eyes like that? Why is it so hot in Africa? Why are children black?" (Journal march 14th / 2018). From these questions, the students were anxious to know more about the countries of their preference, in relation to what they eat, talk and dress. In this first contact, through observation I found that students who presented difficulty in their communicative dimension felt encouraged to participate, expressing their ideas and feelings. With respect to this, in 1993 Hart indicated that through participation, motivation is increased and this in turn increases the capacity to design, carry out and execute complex projects if the children feel that these belong to them.

From this concept and maintaining the motivation, was created intercultural awareness in the students about their own culture and other cultures, in the second intervention, the country flags were drawn, making use of different materials and finally a memory & match game was built, which would be used to play and practice what had been studied in class. "The materials are a way through which children can communicate. It is a representation of reality. The use of these gives a close interaction between the teacher, the students and the context, creating a space where the children can discover, invent and build learning" (journal 15th / 2018). In the English

class, the materials are essential to connect one element with another, although in the ideal case they should incite a contact with real life, sometimes, it is not possible and that is where we resort to this series of means and resources that serve us as a link between the teaching-learning process and the real world.

Thirdly, through role play, the group acted out some pieces according to their experiences and using real material as clothing items proposed by them, all while using the vocabulary relevant to this theme. "The game is in itself a representation of culture and society where a construction of the world is evident ". (Journal April 4th / 2018). Concerning this, Winnicott (1982) points out that through game, experiences can be created in a certain time and place as a basic form of life. Therefore, through games where children participate actively, they reach agreements, solve problems and demonstrate their abilities.

Continuing with the interventions and the analysis of the journals, they showed that through sensory information the development of the mental functions of the children is made possible, because the brain activity depends essentially on the stimuli that are given through the senses; since, "during the first years of life the senses are the first source of knowledge ". (Journal April 19th / 2018). The above took place at the time of the exercise of savoring food, where the group was interested in discovering what it was about, as well as relating the foodstuff to other foods that have the same characteristics.

In the next step, the questionnaire was applied to the participants (students) of this research and it was designed with four exercises to follow instructions according to the indications given by the teacher, identifying the use of the vocabulary of each topic, where it was evidenced that all children responded appropriately to each of the questions, which were:

coloring the flags of the United States and Mexico, locating themselves on the map of Colombia, circling places where the four seasons exist, marking a family type, name its members and locate the images of people according to the country. The children used vocabulary as: colors, countries, clothing, father, mother, sister, brother, boy and girl. (Questionnaire, May 16th / 2018) (See appendix F).

Finally, the interview was used as the last instrument of data collection and it was administered to the cooperating teacher. It was about the promotion of interculturality in the teaching of English, how she thinks this subject can be developed in class and what aspects she observed in the students when this content was implemented. During the interview, she expressed: "I believe that the promotion of cultural diversity from the preschool level is a good tool to bring students since they are little closer to other cultures, because when they are in high school they may have the opportunity to participate in exchange programs to other countries and then they would already have knowledge about these. Additionally, I find this theme very interesting and can be developed in class with relation to the contents pertaining to this level using pictures, stories, songs, videos and real material. Finally, I could see that this theme caught the boys' and girls' attention a lot, given that they asked questions about it, made comparisons and relationships as to what they are interested in knowing about each country "(interview, May 22nd / 2018).

Conclusions and suggestions

The development of this proposal prompted an articulation of the contents established both in the syllabus and the curriculum structure suggested by the Ministry of Education for English teaching in preschool, arising from the development of the dimensions of human beings

toward an integral education as well as the pedagogical strategies of early education from a sociocultural perspective. Taking the above into consideration, it was noted that implementing vocabulary teaching such as country names, nationalities, colors, shapes, numbers, seasons, clothing, typical food, family members, and parts of the face; kids to understand cultural aspects which explain how our culture is enriched by other parts of the world, based on the answers given by boys and girls to constant inquiries that arose from the dialogues held during the class sessions, and where they concluded that they are different when it comes to the language spoken, the garments worn, the weather and traditional food.

By means of applying the action plan and performing an analysis of the results obtained from class observations, journals, questionnaires and the interview, it is possible to sustain that implementing the fostering of intercultural awareness in English teaching at the kindergarten level, contributed to the increase of motivation levels, which allowed boys and girls to have the chance to express their previous knowledge, and in turn, account for the acquisition of new knowledge through doubts and concerns that emerged from the participation in the enjoyment of culture, life experiences, the identification of characteristics pertaining to each country, and the tasting and feeling of the flavor of gastronomy.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that the materials used not only allowed to convey information but also served as mediators between students and our reality, putting them directly or indirectly in contact with knowledge.

On the other hand, it became necessary to integrate the guiding activities in order to contribute to the development of all dimensions of the human being, on the basis of children

voices, needs and interests, grounded on everyday experiences typical of the milieu so as to develop an approach toward other cultures, and thus create respect for them.

I suggest that teachers, who are interested in working on intercultural awareness, facilitate those spaces of reflection and sensitization, starting from the acknowledgement and the way of acting in regard to the cultural diversity of the world.

Finally, I can conclude that boys and girls recognize their own cultural identity as members of their own families and their country, appreciating the existing cultural differences by means of learning strategies as the use of flashcards to remember words learned and account for them.

Reflection

During these months doing my practicum, I realized that research is not a bed of roses as we thought, but a thorn-filled one, because while I thought I was progressing in this endeavor, I found some obstacles that set me back and showed me that to provide a response to the question I had posed, it was necessary to constantly interrogate and question myself, and seek immediate answers. Now, I can say that this is a difficult and constant work, but it is also interesting and it enriches the teaching practice.

Teaching in the kindergarten level was a real challenge for me, since in this age children are in the pre-operational stage, where the game is the center of life and the means of learning knowledge. The acquisition of language makes their way of thinking change and so does the way in which they relate to the environment. They begin to be able to express themselves not only with very short words or phrases, but they also acquire the ability to express complex sentences

in their mother tongue. In any case, their conversations are limited to their own experience and the exchange of opinions; and it is there where the acquisition of the second language comes into play, where children start advancing hand in hand with the construction of thought, allowing for the development of more complex relationships.

Due to all of the above the English class had the responsibility to provide sensitive, emotional, playful and communicative experiences, since they learn by playing, touching, feeling, as opposed to sitting in a desk or doing what they are told to do.

Regarding the research project, at first, I was anguished by the fact of not knowing how to implement the theme of intercultural awareness with the children, but thanks to the advice of my teacher and the readings I explored, I managed to create activities that enabled those spaces for reflection and contact with other cultures.

At the end of this research project, I got a significant experience for both my personal and professional life, since day by day; the practicum is that scenario of constant learning. In the first place, I learned how to implement new strategies and didactic methods such as: tales, songs, videos and games, as well as, the selection of different material according to the age and lifecycle that the kids are in, all while planning more dynamic lessons with diverse moments, thus contributing toward a meaningful learning.

In the second place, on a personal level, I managed to be more creative when making use of the resources in the setting, and I learned to inquire myself how I developed the activities, what other ones to propose and how to improve in the language. Finally, I learned to feel pleased

with the results obtained in the development of the proposal, where the students at all times were anxious to know about the culture of different parts of the world.

To conclude, I think that the work of the English teacher today goes beyond teaching the language; it also encompasses getting involved in the process of students, facilitating, promoting, guiding and providing company. It is being able to read local and global contexts that surround you and to respond to the challenges of your time. It is to master its discipline and that, through methodologies, it can offer necessary tools for students to understand the world from different languages apply these to the relationship with others and be competent at them.

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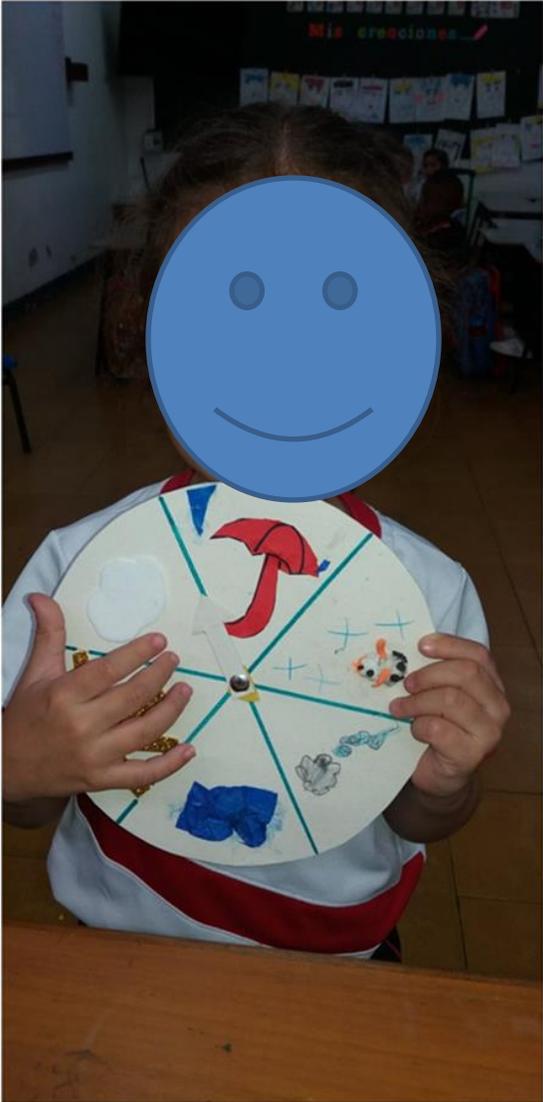
Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C



Appendix D



Appendix E



Appendix F

