

Using Some Notions from Ausubel and Cambourne in an EFL Elementary Classroom to Build
Up Meaningful Learning

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Abstract

This research project was traced from my interest in leading learners to learn meaningfully, and it was done through the implementation of different notions from two authors relevant in this field. This process was carried out at the female school I.E San José located in Itagüí with girls of second grade exposed to a teaching leading them to meaningless language reproduction. Some strategies in the planning and execution of the lessons were implemented and their effectiveness was evaluated with the analysis of the data collected through observations, exams, a survey, a checklist and an interview. The findings revealed that the changes in teaching lead students to make connections, increase their risk taking and meaningful appropriation of the language.

Key words: Ausubel meaningful learning, Cambourne learning conditions, learners' background.

Degree Requirement

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Preface

Encountering myself in charge of guiding students towards learning, after my process of teacher training, led me to bring my knowledge, beliefs and actions together. One of my strongest beliefs was the importance of making students' learning meaningful and I had enjoyed learning about this. However, when I analyzed critically my practice and heard my advisor's vision of it, I realized that I was having troubles for joining this belief with my practice. Hence, I had to deepen and renew my vision of this matter to plan with precision the changes I would implement for accomplishing it.

This was an interesting process of assuming a critical posture of my own practice and making changes in my class planning and its execution. Within this process of implementing the necessary changes in my teaching, it became evident that students take risks insofar as I take risks. Thus, I could see with joy the emergence of a different dynamic in classes reflected in learners' understanding of the language, the quality of their interactions with it and their general advancement in their learning process.

Context

This research project was carried out at the second headquarter of the female school *Institución Educativa San José*, in the municipality of Itagüí where students from preschool to third grade are taught. The building is a large old house remodeled and adapted to serve as school, so it does not count on large spaces for common use. Besides classrooms, the coordinator's office, and teachers' room, the school has a small courtyard used during breaks. In contrast to the main headquarter, this one does not have a cafeteria, a playground, a computer's room, or a library. Despite those limitations, every classroom has a video beam and every teacher has a laptop with access to internet, which results useful for the development of the lessons.

Concerning the ideological matters, the school mission proposes an instruction on ethical values and democratic principles to strengthen cognitive, inquiring, ecologic, technologic and bilingual competences. For the accomplishment of their aim, the school has some '*Proyectos institucionales*' aiming to a constant improvement. Regarding the strengthening of bilingual competences, the school newly doubled the number of English class hours per week in all grades and they count on a group of native speakers to support the teaching/learning process but only for high school. The school syllabus describes that elementary students must start developing grammatical and pragmatic competence, which they describe as part of the main competence the school aims to develop: *The Communicative*. However, elementary grades do not count on any strategy to accomplish the institution goals different from the increase of class time.

In the morning schedule of elementary grades, there are three groups of second grade, and every grade has a professor assigned for teaching all the subjects. For the planning of every subject the three teachers of second grade divide all the subjects among them, so everyone plans

four different courses. The teacher in charge of a subject shares this planning from the start of the period, and every day they have the class, she must pass one of the girls' notebooks to the other teachers, so they can see what they did during the class. The professional training of any of these three teachers focuses on English; however, the teacher in charge of planning this subject plans according to what she considers appropriate and useful. In her planning, she mainly uses worksheets and images from internet to learn vocabulary. She occasionally plans using videos or any of the three English books they have for this and she never plans using the posters with vocabulary of 'Bunny Bonita' (provided by Ministry of Education). Even if her planning is not the ideal for promoting learning, she does her best for accomplishing school's ambitions.

My Cooperating Teacher (CT) in charge of the group in which this research project was carried out was not the one who planned the English class; however, she added some personal strategies to the planning she received because she perceives it as simplistic and not enough for students' needs and potential. In her interactions with students during the English class, it was evident her like and interest for English language and for promoting its learning. In fact, she promoted it using different activities such as the use of songs, repetition of words or relaxing activities. Although her practices improved the planning she received, most of them remained on the level of mere repetition and lacked of elements to make learning meaningful.

The group in which was focused this project consisted of 45 girls from seven to eight years old and their relation with the teacher was pretty good. Concerning the English course, in general students had a good attitude towards the class and contents. In fact, in my role of observer, I never heard a bad comment about English class, but rather when the activities proposed engaged them, they seemed interested and motivated for learning. Most of the students understood and follow a couple of orders given by the teacher, repeated words when they were

asked to do it, and knew some words. Although they participated in class when they were led to do it as a group, few of them appropriate of the information transmitted, take risks for participate individually and had good results in the evaluative tasks.

Statement of the Problem

As a pre-service EFL teacher so many interests could arise from the interactions and situations encountered in the classroom. In my experience teaching English, one of my biggest concerns has been the accomplishment of meaningful learning. I assume this concept according to the description of Ausubel (1983) of it as the construction of knowledge from the observation and recognition of events and objects through concepts already acquired. This interest evolves from a personal belief about the importance of feeling power over the language through its use for expressing ideas, feelings, and representative matters of personal life. Nevertheless, sometimes it is difficult to take our own beliefs into the classroom, and I faced this difficulty.

Firstly, to discover the issue I would work with in this project, I started analyzing the interactions of the students with foreign language. I realized they knew some vocabulary and could repeat it when they were asked to, but they did not appropriate of most of the information they reproduced. This kind of interaction just kept them away from meaningful learning since as it is described by Ausubel (1983) the idea of meaningful learning is contrary to rote learning. In the observation of them during some activities, I noticed that as the learning of some concepts remained in mere repetition of words, they got discouraged and diminished their participation. In a journal entry in which I described that students were singing ‘Head, shoulders knees and toes’, I described a moments in which meaningless repetition and discouragement arose: *‘They repeated the song, but [some] girls pointed at the wrong body part, and seemed lost, so they*

decided to stop participating in the activity.' Obs. #2 First Journal Entry (p. 9). It is evident that there was neither understanding of the objective of the activity nor of the language provoking their lack of engagement and loss of attention. Besides, when this kind of activities were done just before exams, the negative outcomes also revealed flaws in the process of appropriation.

Secondly, I analyzed the interactions of the CT and I with the students because the presence of repetition, discouragement, lack of engagement and bad outcomes in tests are matters related to teachers' guidance towards learning. Through several conversations with my Practicum Advisor, and the reading and analysis of my journal, I realized that in some classes, just like my CT, I developed activities that did not lead students to do anything with the language different from reproducing, repeating or using isolated words. For instance, in my journal a class I was leading I described: "The copies [students had] contained the same color wheel I had drawn on the board. I asked the girls to color the spaces inside the wheel as I had done it in the board" Obs. #9 Fifth Journal Entry (p. 5). This excerpt exemplifies how the teaching of isolated words and the mere reproduction of concepts arose in my practices. Thus, despite my background concerning the importance of leading students to learn meaningfully I was far from achieving it.

Aware of the lacks I had in my teaching practices for fulfilling my interest in lead learners to meaningful learning, I started to analyse what I could do. During one of the Seminar classes my advisor mentioned Brian Cambourne's conditions for literacy learning and I remembered how much I liked what I had learnt from him in the course *Teaching English to Children*. Therefore, I reviewed them, and confirmed the big gap between the theory I had studied and my practices. I did not *immerse* learners in the foreign language, nor did I provide *demonstration* of language use. In addition to this I did not provide opportunities for the

employment of the language. These three make part of Cambourne's conditions (1995) which he describes as necessary to enable language learning. One of the moments in which it is evident that I was not leading them to take risks occurred at the beginning of the activity I mentioned above. In my journal I described that "I drew the color wheel on the board and asked them in Spanish if they knew which the primary colors were. They said yes and started answering in Spanish." Obs. #9 Fifth Journal Entry (p. 5). Later in that class I realized that some girls could have answered in English, but neither were they risking to use English, because nor was I setting an example for them to do it. It is clear that they could not feel that power over the language I mentioned above, because I was not promoting them the adequate example and ambience for it.

Understanding the necessity of making several changes in the planning and execution of my classes, I got in the challenging process of deconstructing and giving a new focus to them. Fortunately, with the guidance of my Practicum Advisor, I could elaborate a set of strategies and implement them little by little to see progress in my practice as well as in students' appropriation of and interaction with English language. I took into account the two authors I mentioned above. First, I decided to take some notions from Ausubel for planning classes differently, integrating and connecting prior to new knowledge. Second, I took the notions I mentioned from Cambourne which I found more decisive and suitable to support that planning. With these changes I expected to provide students with significant input and an ambience of confidence where they could link what they knew to what they are learning and use English language in context.

Research Question

How can the implementation of some notions from Ausubel and Cambourne in an EFL elementary classroom can lead learners to learn meaningfully?

General Objective

To implement some notions from Ausubel on meaningfulness and from Cambourne on Language learning to foster students' access to meaningful learning in an elementary EFL class.

Specific Objectives

- To use Ausubel's Advance Organizers to introduce new sets of information to lead students to connect their background to the upcoming knowledge.
- To design activities for every class drawing from students background knowledge.
- To put into action Cambourne's conditions for language learning of *Immersion* and *Demonstration* providing access to English language through different sources and showing them the form and use of the language.
- To identify possible progress of learners and level of appropriation of the language throughout the different changes implemented.

Theoretical Framework

Aware of the context and problem, I will expose the theoretic basis upholding this research project which is divided into two mainstreams. The first one aims to influence in the planning of the lessons and the specific sections of the class that I could elaborate to lead learners to learn meaningfully. The second one focuses in class interactions that should accompany my planning to enhance that learning. Thus, I itemize below relevant sections of every mainstream concept.

Firstly, I will state the definition of *Meaningful Learning* from Ausubelian perspective and describe two concepts that make part of his basis for meaningfulness. The first concept is

'*Background knowledge*' which he considers as crucial in the construction of meaningful learning (Moreira, 2000). The second concept is '*Advance Organizer*' which is a tool he developed to support the process of connecting prior to upcoming knowledge. Secondly, to tackle my concern about my lacks in terms of risk taking and propitiation of an adequate ambience for meaningful learning, I will explore Cambourne's conditions of *Immersion*, *Demonstration* and *Employment* and describe the ways in which they can be implemented.

Meaningful Learning

When we refer to this concept many ideas can come to our minds and, in my case, I used to relate it to the fact of learning words in full sentences, which was a simplistic conception lacking of a clear basis of what it really is and implies. Ausubel (1983) states that this learning occurs when learners relate new knowledge to the one they have, can evoke it with ease and relate other new information from it. He remarks that new knowledge needs to be substantial, which means that learners *assimilate* it in contexts different from the one in which they acquired it. He describes three conditions necessary for meaningful learning to happen: (1) Material potentially meaningful; (2) Students' background necessary to understand and relate new knowledge; (3) Learner's willingness for relating substantially the new and previous knowledge.

In the minutes from an international meeting on meaningful learning, Moreira (2000) remarks the relevance and suitability of Ausubel's notions on *Meaningful Learning*. In fact, he connects Ausubel's concepts of meaningfulness to the (learning/psychological/cognitive development) theories of four representative authors attached to cognitivist, constructivist and humanist paradigms. He asserts that this concept is commonly used in educative context, but he

remarks that it cannot be trivialized. For avoiding this, he states that the original connotation and implications -depicted by Ausubel- are the support teachers need to promote it in class.

Background knowledge. The main notion exposed by Ausubel (1983) is that achieving *meaningful learning* depends on the extent to which new information can be linked to learner's cognitive structure, which is their *Background Knowledge*. In fact, Ausubel (as cited in Moreira, 2000) asserts that the most relevant factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows, and it is necessary to determine it to teach in harmony with it. Therefore, students' prior knowledge is the crucial variable for *meaningful learning* to occur, and teachers must keep it mind when sharing new knowledge, because new concepts will attach to the relevant information they have acquired.

Even in researches having no link with Ausubel's theory it is described its incidence in learners' improvement. For instance, in a research of 2013 that assessed the incidence of teenagers' background knowledge in speaking development, Shabani affirms that "The background knowledge that students bring with them helps them to perform the speaking task more successfully. This [...] helps them to match new information with what they already know about the topic." (p. 32). Thus, teachers must take into account this aspect when presenting new information for leading students to meaningful learning through its connection to the new knowledge. For guiding this necessary connection, Ausubel introduced the concept of *Advance Organizer* as a tool that is widely known for serving to connect prior new to prior knowledge.

Advance organizer. This is a useful tool developed by Ausubel used for introducing new topics, units, or knowledge in general, recalling students' background knowledge, and linking both sets of information. Basically, it activates the information that learners will need for

acceding to the new knowledge and make connections. Using *Advance Organizers* as a mean for ‘activating’ the prior knowledge becomes a relevant strategy for avoiding rote learning (Ausubel, 1983), and leading learners to learn meaningfully because they do not just memorize but understand and internalize the information they receive.

From researches on the implementation of diverse types of Advance Organizers (Videos, readings, images, etc.) in different contexts to promote the understanding and appropriation of new information arose similar conclusions. Different authors described that this tool increases learners’ level of comprehension of different kind of texts and thus it also helps learners to retain new information (Jafari & Hashim, 2012; Mohammadi, Moenikia, & Zahed-Babelan, 2010). The use of *Advance Organizers* has positive effects in helping learners to connect prior knowledge to new one, and for teachers to keep the focus when planning students’ access to information. However, classroom interactions are not reduced to a specific plan.

The notions of meaningfulness presented by Ausubel point to a deductive learning process in which teacher directly introduce what must be learnt. Therefore, these notions help teachers to a better planning and transmission of specific content. Nevertheless, Ausubel (1964) specifies about his vision of learning as a deductive process that it takes place in that way when talking about adults, because when this process is held in young children, learning happens through discovery and so it is an inductive process. Hence, I used some of Cambourne’s literacy conditions to support the development of classroom interactions with this inductive approach.

Cambourne’s Conditions for Learning

Brian Cambourne (1995) proposed some conditions necessary for language learning, although not for second or foreign language learners but for native English language learners.

However, those conditions have been implemented in ESL and EFL settings reporting good outcomes. Researches from Student-Teachers (García, 2015; Hurtado, 2011; Montoya, 2015) in contexts similar to the one of my project, reported good outcomes from taking into account these conditions in class interactions. From their analysis of student's progress they concluded that those conditions lead learners to better learning and advancement, and some of them described their outcomes as the rise of meaningful learning in students.

Among the seven conditions introduced by Cambourne (1995) there are three that I consider quite suitable for accomplishing meaningful learning as defined above: *Immersion*, *Demonstration*, (According to Cambourne these two generate *engagement*) and *Employment*. These conditions can support the construction of meaningful learning because they lead learners to access and use the language in a contextualized way, understand its function and link it to their lives. This contextualized use of the language, relates to what Ausubel describes as necessary for *Meaningful Learning* because learners context is their main source of what they know.

Immersion. According to Cambourne (1995) it implies the saturation of learners with the language they are expected to learn, so it is related to the input teachers provide. This condition is related to the use of the target language in classroom interactions and it needs to be fulfilled to the greatest extent possible. It does not only imply for the teacher speaking the foreign language, but also providing several types of texts during the class such as readings, songs, videos, guests, etc. Through this condition, learners familiarize with the way in which language sounds and what it represents, which means its form and meaning.

Demonstration. This condition is also connected to input provided by teachers. Smith (as cited in Cambourne, 1995, p. 185) exposes that “All learning begins with a demonstration of

some action or artifact”. Cambourne (1995) describes that learner must *observe* those actions and artifacts, and it implies not only to use the vision but also to hear, witness, experience, feel, study and explore them. Thus, learners need to appreciate the way in which language is used in oral or written way, and some of the materials that compose those artifacts are flashcards, images, classroom objects, other objects, maps, books, videos, etc. Learners need to notice that the language they are supposed to learn is used in a functional way.

The two conditions brought in above have a close relation because as Cambourne (1995) explains it, immersion provides demonstration, and at the same time from them emerges *engagement*. This emerging condition needs three requirements to take place: (1) Students perceiving themselves as capable of performing the introduced demonstrations; (2) Their perception of demonstrations as relevant for their lives; and (3) Learners security of not being punished if they make a mistake. After those conditions are properly fulfilled by teachers, *Employment* makes its way out to emerge in classroom interactions.

Employment. This condition aims to lead learners to *employ* the language, so teachers have a big responsibility providing the ideal guidance. Since “Young learner talkers need both time and opportunity to employ their [...] developing language skills” (Cambourne, 1995, p. 186), teachers must provide these opportunities and giving them the time they will need to accomplish this objective. Teachers can furnish learners with opportunities when ask them questions, ask for help to write something on the board, have small talks, lead them to read or sing along, etc. Accompanying the planning based on students background knowledge and use of advance organizers with the implementation of those conditions can lead learners to learn meaningfully, appropriating of the language internalizing its use and relevance.

Action Plan

It is evident that from Ausubel's perspective one must teach according to what learners already know, therefore I will assess students' background knowledge through a test that will reunite the topics they are supposed to have learnt. I am aware that learners' background is not merely focused on school syllabus, but I will take their prior knowledge of school syllabus just to know the way in which upcoming syllabus content can be introduced with Advance Organizers. Also by the month of October I will assess it again to test the possible growth in their knowledge.

I will design the general planning of the subject content taking into account the Advance Organizer that I will use to introduce every unit, class or set of classes. Along the whole teaching process I will keep my journal that will serve as a source of data for analyzing students' progress, if any, the results from the use of Advance Organizers, the general outcomes from class planning, and, of course, any effects of my changes concerning classroom interactions following the described Cambourne's conditions. Then, I will take students results in the exams of the third term and compare them to their results from second term to see if there was any progress in their results and appropriation of information. Finally, I will conduct an open interview to the teacher to know her perception of students' course and general view of the whole classroom process.

Development of Actions

The actions I took focus in two different fields, but they conserve the same connecting thread. The first actions have a link with the needs described above. They relate to the teaching/learning process that includes the class planning, teacher and learners' attitude, classroom management, promotion of language use, risk taking, etc. The other actions focus on

the research process, which implies the collection of information through different sources to describe the path lived during the development of first actions and outcomes from the process. Thus, the connecting thread of both sets of actions is *Meaningful Learning* because Teaching Actions aim to implement changes to promote its accomplishment and Research Actions aim to evaluate how useful its implementation was. Therefore, in this section, I will describe the actions I took in every field, which includes a change I decided to make upon my first Action Plan.

Concerning the Teaching Actions, I planned two thematic units upholding the content proposed by the school syllabus. I also included the use of four advanced organizers at the beginning and in the middle of the development of every unit. Following, there is a table with the information concerning both units.

Thematic Unit	Syllabus Content	Advance Organizers
<i>Amazing Me</i>	Personal pronouns Colors Adjectives Professions Physical description	- <i>Venn Diagram</i> to see how people can be similar and different at the same time. - <i>Poem 'In the planet of Mars'</i> to lead learners to see the unique treats of everyone, including imaginary characters.
<i>My bond with Animals' greatness</i>	Farm animals Animals description Adjectives Food Likes	- <i>Song 'Bingo'</i> to start the exploration of prior and new concepts related to a farm. - <i>Classification of drawings</i> to relate different food coming from farm animals and the meals in which we eat them.

Accompanying the thematic units, I supported every lesson with students' background knowledge. Concerning this, I had planned to conduct two background knowledge tests focused on school syllabus for establishing their background, but I reevaluated this action. When thinking about the kind of information it will provide, I concluded that I had already gathered this information while observing and writing about students' interactions in class. Moreover, thanks to some conversations with my Practicum Advisor and my reflections emerging from them, I

realized that their main background came from their daily lives and interplays. Finally, I made relevant changes in class interactions and decided to establish some routines, increase my use of English in class, promote interaction through questions, and in general take more risks when teaching them so they could also take some risks, appropriate and use the language.

Now, concerning Research Actions I collected data from different sources using several instruments, and throughout the practicum year. All this for triangulating every the finding and confirming they were valid and reliable. Next, I present a table gathering this information.

SOURCES	INSTRUMENT	OBJECTIVE
<i>Me, (teacher/researcher)</i>	<i>Journal</i>	To keep the track of the development of class interaction and my reflections about it.
<i>Students</i>	<i>Results of second and third term tests</i>	To compare and analyze students results in exams before and after the implementation of actions. For this I used a checklist focusing on qualitative and quantitative traits.
	<i>Survey</i>	To approach to students perception of themselves in terms of comprehension and production in English language
<i>Cooperating Teacher</i>	<i>Checklist</i>	To accede teacher's perception of several aspects concerning role of teacher and students interactions
	<i>Interview</i>	To deepen in the understanding of teacher's vision and perceptions of the whole process of learning/teaching throughout the year.

With the data collected, I started the process of exploring repetitive elements in the information gathered and the patterns in pre-categories leading to the next part of my project.

Findings and Interpretations

After gathering all the data, I faced the challenge of analyzing the information and finding relevant elements that could help me to answer my *Research Question*. By the end of this

process I found some information in common among all the data which I classified into three categories and subcategories. Here I present these findings along with my interpretations.

Background Knowledge Leading To Make Connections

One of the issues in my planning at the beginning of my practicum was that I did not take advantage of the knowledge students had. I did not use what students knew concerning English language, or their daily lives and experiences. When exploring my interest in meaningful learning, I realized how uninformed I was concerning this because learners' prior knowledge (Which I was not taking into account) have a huge relevance for accomplishing it. Since, as Ausubel (as cited in Moreira, 2000) asserts about *Meaningful Learning* that what is taught needs to be aligned with what learners already know (their background), the appropriate understanding and use of *Background knowledge* became one of my main aims in my research process.

When I was figuring out the relevance of this element, I thought that it only focused on what they knew in English. However, through conversations with my advisor, a conscious analysis of Ausubel description on meaningfulness and my reflections around my practice, I became aware of the big relevance of other elements enclosing the main background they owned. These elements are (a) the use of Spanish for supporting knowledge construction, and (b) the integration of learners' daily lives, likes and context into class. From both elements arose positive results reflected in the kind of interactions emerging in class.

Spanish as a Source for Integrating New Knowledge

The first relevant element of their background knowledge is the use of Spanish to support new knowledge construction. It is not about translating at all as it can be observed below, but rather to use mother tongue as a reference and a bridge for understanding the foreign language.

In several classes the use of their knowledge in Spanish became so useful and lead them to understand new information. For instance, in a class this happened:

I showed them some images of a farm, stuck them to the board and asked them ‘Is this a hospital? Is this an office? What place is this?’ They immediately answered ‘Una granja’ I replied ‘Yes! It’s a farm!’ I wrote the word on the board above the images and repeated out loud the word ‘Farm’ while writing it. (Journal Entry, Class 7, p. 2)

I supported their understanding of the language through the use of what they knew in Spanish and they could connect easily a new concept to their background in Spanish. I connect this reality to what Ausubel (1983) explains when asserting that knowing the background is necessary for teachers to lead learners to accede to meaningful learning, but it is not only about knowing the quantity of information learners have, but also the way in which it is organized and how *stable* it is. As Novak (2010) states it, it is not easy to define the knowledge a learner already has, and in my opinion it is even more difficult to determine its stability. However, in my case this stability was evident because girls from seven to eight years old have substantially mastered the mother tongue, so this became an ideal base for acceding to new knowledge.

Besides my perception of the girls making connections between both languages, I also found evidence of this in the vision of my Cooperating Teacher when she described the way in which she could see the integration of new information with their knowledge in Spanish

Les haces una pregunta de algo nuevo y ellas relacionan de pronto la palabra con el español, como ‘Ah eso será tal cosa’. Una relación de significante significado; o sea del sonido de la expresión con su significado. (CT’s Interview, Nov. 3rd, 2016)

The kind of participation reflected in those examples show a clear interaction between Spanish and English in which the elements from their mother tongue serve for accede to the understanding of the foreign language. This use of Spanish in my classes related to the concept that Novak (2010) -referring to Meaningful learning- recalls from Vygotsky describing that in his idea of *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* learning, specifically in children, is limited basically by the ideas they have already learnt and ruled. With the girls from my practicum, it was clear that although they knew some things about English language, definitely it was Spanish the set of knowledge they ruled and the one they could use as part of the working basis for learning English meaningfully.

Students' prior life experiences furnishing class interactions

The second element part of their background for the construction of knowledge is the context in which learners are immersed. Thus, as Moreira (2000) explains, learners cannot be taught as if they were a *tabula rasa* because they have gathered experiences and knowledge throughout their lives; he asserts that all of this can and must be a source to take advantage of for building up meaningful learning. Cambourne (1995) in his literacy learning conditions he exposed that the contextualized use of the language is necessary because learners attach to function and form finding a link with their lives. In several opportunities, class interactions were accompanied by the use of elements that were familiar for students and could generate a link with the new information I was intending to teach them. Next, I present one of the situations that I described in my journal in which I was about to use a Venn Diagram as advance organizer for introducing a unit. I used information of a TV serie they usually talk about and share stickers.

I mentioned them that I had found out that they knew a TV show called ‘Soy Luna’ [...] I showed them the images of two important characters of the TV program and stuck every image next to a circle; then and I asked them about their names. They immediately answered and then I asked them ‘Luna and Amber son similar or different?’ They replied right away ‘Different’, using same pronunciation and intonation. (Journal Entry, Class 1)

In this excerpt, the use of an element relevant for them that made part of their daily lives led them to understand and appropriate of the knowledge transmitted. As Shabani (2013) express it, learners’ speaking performance quality is more fruitful when learner’s prior knowledge led them to match new information. It is clear that the fact that they could express something relevant for them led them to connect with ease and attach to the dynamic of the interaction.

In addition to the use of elements related to their likes that generate an affective link there are also other elements from their daily lives that were integrated to class interactions and serve to contextualize information. My CT highlighted the relevance of integrating aspects of daily life and how in my teaching this factor led learners to make connections and contributions.

Les preguntas qué comieron anoche o qué desayunaron esta mañana y eso pertenece a la vida diaria. Ellas vinculan lo que vivieron en su cotidianidad, y ahí resultan cosas que de pronto no tenías dentro del tema y las dicen (CT’s Interview. Nov. 3rd, 2016)

Learners’ knowledge and context included in class make them more active and engage them in the process of construction of knowledge. During that class, learners suggested the inclusion of some words to the list we were making of food they ate for breakfast and then they recalled those words. This connections is an evidence of the interaction among information that

Ausubel (1983) describes for meaningful learning to happen; he pictures learners relating new knowledge to what they know, evoking it with ease and relating other new information from it.

The examples presented above reflect how the use of learners' background, be it through the use of Spanish or of their daily lives and contexts, can lead learners to appropriate of the language and interact with it making meaningful the learning process. The clear bond with the theory and the events experienced in class described above are focused in the use of students' background knowledge from the planning of the lesson. In addition to those elements in the planning, other interactions have accompanied the process of meaningful learning construction.

Risk Taking: A Contagious Outcome

Among the elements furnishing class interaction with the aim of seeing the emergence of *Meaningful Learning* the assumption of risks became an evident feature in class interactions. Along with the changes in my planning shared in the previous findings, it was necessary to execute changes in the amount and quality of risks I would take. In a conversation with my Practicum Advisor, I was expressing her the lack of risk taking from learners for participating and she led me to think first if I was taking risks and propitiating the ambience for them to risk. Together with the reading of Cambourne, this conversation generated reflections in me, and I decided to make some changes that allowed learners to also have some changes. I classify into three subcategories the changes in classroom dynamic.

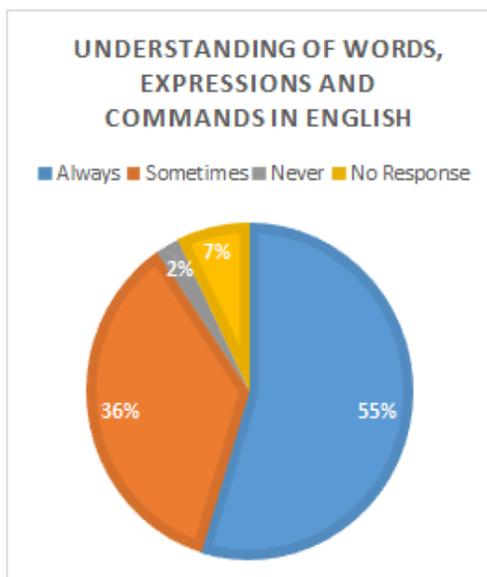
Teacher Breaking Out of Her Mold

For seeing changes in my classes it was necessary to change my own view and interactions in class. At the beginning of my practicum year I overused Spanish and ended up translating or teaching English in Spanish, leading learners to reproduce and repeat isolated

words. Hence, they could neither produce language in an authentic way expressing something relevant for them, nor engage with the learning of it at all. Since, one of the conditions described by Ausubel (1983) for learners to accede to meaningful learning was their willingness for relating the new with the previous knowledge, it was absolutely mandatory to think about their *engagement*. This was faced through the description by Cambourne (1995) of the *Engagement* as a learning condition emerging from *Immersion* and *Demonstration*. Those two aspects became part of the interactions in everyday classes. In an excerpt of the interview I made to my CT, she describes the increase of the input I provided them as well as their comprehension of it:

Ya les estás hablando más en inglés [...] Durante toda la clase, desde la motivación, hasta la finalización, cuando das instrucciones, les preguntas, la orientación de las actividades y el tema. También usas comandos durante el transcurso de la clase [...]

Les estás hablando más en inglés y entienden. (CT's Interview. Nov. 3rd, 2016)



The increase of exposure to English increase also their possibilities of understanding as part of their path to also produce and share information in English by themselves. In a survey about their comprehension of expressions, words and commands when I used them, most of the girls answered positively. More than a half of the group said they *always* understood this kind of input, and less than a half said that they *sometimes* did it as it is shown in the graphic.

Besides the facts described by my CT above, the *Immersion* and *Demonstration* also emerged in class through the presentation of the language through different sources such as videos, songs, a poem, images, flash cards, posters, etc. Boosting learners' *Engagement* with the conscious enrichment of lessons with the mentioned conditions from Cambourne was part of their process of appropriation of the language. The evidence this appropriation beyond understanding is when *employment* arose as it can be observed in the next two subcategories.

Girls Daring to use English

The *Risk Taking* of learners appeared as I started to make changes in my teaching practices. After I assumed a different attitude and stopped being afraid of using English because I was not sure if they were going to understand, they also started to dare to use the language.

As it is described by Smith (as cited in Cambourne, 1995) *demonstrations* are the starting point of learning. Thus, as the girls could observe me sharing the language in a functional way and *immerse* them in its use through different sources, they also started to risk using the foreign language. The Cooperating Teacher shared her view of some changes in girls participation and used the word 'spontaneous' to describe the same situations that I link to '*Risk Taking*'

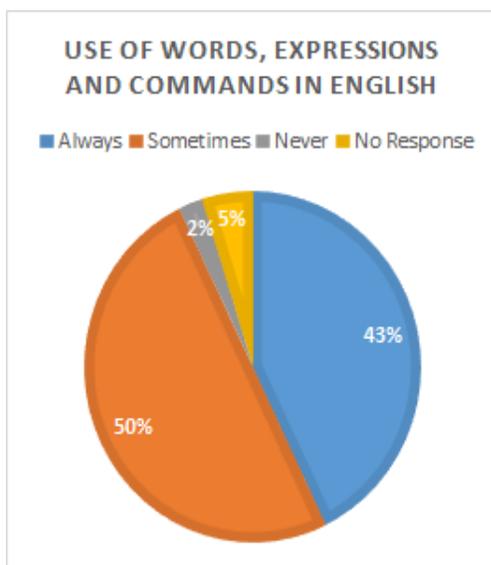
Ellas son espontáneas, ya no les importa y se lanzan, ya son más atrevidas, dejaron el miedo atrás y ya se lanzan al ruedo a ver 'Lo hice bien o no lo hice bien'. Ellas ya son arrojadas, ya no les da tanto miedo... Al principio salían y no se atrevían, ya hay espontaneidad, ya hay un arrojado de las niñas para decir y hablar así no lo digan bien porque si les corrigen se sabe que estamos aprendiendo (CT's Interview, Nov. 3rd, 2016)

Their participation and decision to take risks increased as the time passed and in many moments of class reported in my journal these changes were evident. During a class in which we were listing farm animals, girls participated enthusiastically:

I asked them ‘A cow is a farm animal, a pig is a farm animal, que otro farm animal do you know? Some girls raised their hands to participate; I pointed to them one by one, and they mentioned several names of animals. (Journal Entry, Class 9, p. 2)

Just like in every class, their participation and willingness to speak was a constant reflected in different moments of the class. That same day, they also showed their disposition to participate and dare to use what we had learnt in previous lessons to answer another question:

I draw some lines from different body parts of the cow and started asking ‘What is name of this?’ pointing to one of them. Many girls answered every question at the same time in English, I wrote their answers. (Journal Entry, Class 9, p. 4)



It is clear that my decision to dare to use the foreign language as much as possible, generated positive changes in them. From the survey they answered we can see their perceptions of their own use of the language as it is shown in the graphic. Just one of the students answered that she was never capable of using the language, but the rest of the students answered that they did. Even the ones classified in the section of ‘No Response’ were capable of use the

language since they were situated there because they marked two answers: ‘Always’ and

‘Sometimes’. From their answers it is clear that 98% of the girls also perceived themselves as capable of using the language. They were more active as the time passed and they used the opportunities to participate, since as Cambourne (1995) affirms that time and opportunities are necessary for learner to share their language skills in development.

Fearless Sharing of their Progress

The last finding concerning *Risk Taking* is reflected in their fearless attitude to share what they knew and not only during indoors activities. For instance, for an institutional celebration, they had to make a presentation in front of the whole school with something related to English. When the teacher mentioned them this, and they had to decide who would do it, all of them were willing to participate. Even the ones who seemed shy were pleased to *Risk* to share what they knew. In a class, during the preparation of three songs they would sing in groups for the presentation, their desire to participate remained as I described it in my journal.

Any of the girls remained on the seat without trying to sing one of the songs, all of them went in front of the class although even for me it was a little scary that moment of singing with the look of everyone. [...] We sang the three songs with the choreography several times and all the girls seemed really excited every time they had their turn ‘on stage’.
(Journal Entry, Class 8, p.7)

Their desire for participating in this kind of activity and sharing what they have learnt made me feel so proud of their progress. This progress was more evident in the ones who were easily tagged as shy or silent. In those girls I could see how during activities in which they had to show what they knew they were more participative and active. This pattern in class interactions relates to the condition of learning mentioned above: *employment*. As Cambourne (1995) states,

this condition “refers to the opportunities for use and practice that are provided”(p. 185) I endeavored for furnishing learners with chances and a good ambience for using the language.

All in all, their desire to take risks evolved with the time after having me providing them with the appropriate input (*immersion* and *demonstration*) and opportunities (*employment*) for it.

Improvement and Appropriation

The last finding has a huge relevance in the whole process and has a close relation to all the findings described above. As it can be observed in the previous findings, they appropriated of the different elements of the language like the intonation or the meaning. However, in terms of appropriation I saw a higher level of progress in their quality of language use in exams and in their interactions in class worthy to mention.

Evaluations

As I mentioned in the statement of the problem students results in exams were not positive at all. Hence, with the implementation of the strategies mentioned above I expected to improve their performance in exams. It also required changes in the design of tests so they could have the chance to share their progress in a meaningful way. After comparing the results between the exams from the second and third term, I concluded that 83 % of the girls improved significantly their numerical results. Beyond these numerical outcomes, they improved in terms of meaningful use of the language. Learners expressed in written form to make descriptions, express their likes or portray something they imagined.

Appropriation

Learners were immersed in the process of learning meaningfully and in their attempts and *approximations* (Also a condition described by Cambourne, 1995) it was evident their appropriation of the language. This finding has a clear link with what Ausubel (1983) describes as meaningful learning happening when learners evoke with ease new knowledge. Since Cambourne (1995) described that learners talk “is treated as a legitimate, relevant, meaningful, and useful contribution to the context” (p. 185), their samples of *Meaningful learning* (approximations and attempts) were received with enthusiasm. Many situations that made me feel so proud and I interpreted them as huge contributions and prove of their appropriation and understanding of the language. Next I share two of them that I described in my journal:

When we got to the sentence ‘I want to be a singer, to sing with the birds’ one of the girls said ‘Profe qué es singer?’ Another girl raised her hand so enthusiastic and said ‘Yo sé, yo sé profe’ I pointed at her and she said ‘Singer es dedos’. (Class # 6, Journal Entry P. 8)

‘Si en español son tan similares Granja, Granjero... cómo será en inglés? Farm...’ I waited some seconds for their answers and a girl said with a smile and a confident voice: ‘Farman’. (Class # 7, Journal Entry P. 4)

The quality of their interactions significantly increased and their role became completely different from the one they had before implementing any changes in my teaching. Thus, their improvement and appropriation of the language is evident in many ways and it has been pretty evident the common thread among all the findings which is learners’ access had to *Meaningful Learning*.

Conclusions

Throughout this process I had the concern of the possibility of not seeing any changes in classroom dynamic, but now that I look back at the whole process, I realize that it was worthwhile to implement every change because progress was satisfactory. I became aware of the necessity, for me as teacher, of being critical of my own labor and making the necessary changes for seeing progress in learners' interactions in class and with language use. First, I could appreciate the progress in students' connections and understanding of the language when I supported the teaching with their *background knowledge*. Second, from the data collected I found another relevant progress in the increase of *Risk Taking* of the girls. I realized that this one originated in my own decision to risk more changing classroom interactions. Hence, they became more participative daring to use the language, and losing any fear of sharing what their knowledge. Finally, I could notice the *advancement* in the quality of their use of the language and *appropriation* of it. Learners improved their exams' outcomes, numerically and also in terms of quality of language use because they expressed their thoughts and went beyond reproducing and repeating. They also get to a point of appropriation of the language, showing their ability to create, imagine and express in different interactions.

The possibility of teaching beyond mere repetition and trivial reproduction of language, and leading learners to the meaningful construction of their learning process is something that never must be forgotten. As teachers, we have the responsibility of having a critical view of our own practice and keeping ourselves open to change. Hence, we need to evaluate our practices and never confine them to a static procedure, but analyze the ways in which they can be improved. In a context like the one my research process took place, it is necessary to step out the comfort zone blaming students, their teachers, their contexts, or any other element, for the

deficiencies of the learning/teaching process. We need to start thinking in the possibilities we have in our hands to see the rise of improvement taking advantage of every element that can contribute to this process.

After carrying out this process, and seeing the outcomes, some ideas arise concerning future research in meaningful learning. It would be interesting to deepen in other aspects developed by Ausubel concerning meaningful learning and apply them in contexts different from the one of this project. I consider that the contributions from this author are pretty relevant and have a strong basis that make them worthy of study for assessing their suitability and accuracy in nowadays teaching. In addition to this, I consider that for any teaching strategy or research that focuses on meaningful learning, especially with children, it is useful to review Cambourne's conditions because from my experience they can work synergically with any theory or approach. Finally, from the arduous journey of constructing the theoretical framework, I discovered the technique of conceptual maps, and it is for me a personal challenge to learn about it and implement it in my teaching as a professional with teenagers and adults. This technique was developed by Novak from Ausubel's theory of meaningfulness, and my desire is to determine its usefulness to lead learner to make connection and learn meaningfully.

Reflection

The experience of carrying out this research project has been so relevant and has led me to renew my teaching practices. In fact, the changes I made in my practice also were implemented in my regular working places. It was satisfactory to see that learners did not remained static and waiting for me to fill them with information but used their own views to furnish classroom interaction with their creative contributions. I enjoyed living this experience,

and then reading and reviewing all the situations in which learners' authentic interaction with language happened.

After living this process I could see the relevance of teaching and researching about it. Thanks to this journey I could evaluate critically my teaching practice seeking its improvement and this has become now a belief. However, I know that it is likely that when facing the reality of working for so many hours every day, again the reality and the beliefs can collide.

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