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

Abstract

Teaching and English as a foreign language (EFL), is a difficult task, both for students and teachers. The process of learning could be long and full of pitfalls, and even more complex during Covid 19 times. The challenge of teaching English, as well as other subjects after Covid 19, has changed, and nowadays, teachers need to find more ways for teaching, using technology and combining methodologies, to offer a range of possibilities for students to learn English.

The need to study English as a foreign language has varied since Covid 19 appeared and therefore, this sanitary emergency, obligated teachers to use their creativity and technology to continue the learning process and focus on more effective ways to teach.

Interdisciplinary learning was an exit to learn and become useful during Covid 19. Many people realized that it is possible to learn from a distance and that traditional methods for learning a foreign language, are not always the best answer, and are not made for everyone. Teaching English should be tailored to students’ specific needs, and should be learned naturally, as we learned our native language.

Keywords: Teaching EFL, Covid 19, natural learning process, teaching English, pandemic, interdisciplinary learning.
Introduction

To learn English as a second language is often a challenge as it requires a change of logic in the way sentences are built or expressions can be transmitted. Thus, it is common to start with the introduction of grammar rules and present the new vocabulary to link it with the first or native language of the learner, especially with adults, since they have their cognitive skills developed. This means that essential attributes, such as listening, retaining, understanding, and justifying, among others, are not as fresh as if they are children. It can also be difficult since people usually compare their language composition with the configuration of the one, they are learning. As a result, they may get frustrated, afraid of communicating their ideas in the new language, and insecure about their pronunciation or their abilities in general. Therefore, it is important for EFL teachers to create a stable and supportive learning environment so that students can feel confident about their process.

But not only the learning context has a role in the way teachers build their classes. It is also important to consider a review of the tools that are part of the process. Resources such as movies, songs, documentaries, reading comprehension, and listening exercises, as well as the construction of short dialogues, are still common when preparing a class to teach a foreign language. They are very important to help in the explanation of grammar rules, present vocabulary, and expressions, and even introduce the learners to some characteristics of the communities that speak that language. For that reason, EFL teachers use those types of tools to prepare students for different tests focused on writing, listening, and communicative skills.
Learning During Covid 19

One of the biggest challenges during pandemics has been teaching and learning. For both teachers and students, the world changed, and both had to adjust to the new reality. On one hand, teachers had to “reinvent” themselves and their classes. They had to design a new way of teaching that they probably had not experienced before. And on the other hand, students had to stay home and cope with learning from their computers, or other devices, so their learning habits had to change and adapt to this new method, in school, but at home at the same time.

A big Challenge for Everyone

For some, it may be easy to say that studying at home is not a hard task; however, it is one of the biggest challenges that pandemic has brought. It is a task that involves kids, families, teachers, schools, governments, almost everyone. As mentioned, teachers and students had to live under the new conditions of confinement. But what about families? Families strive to give their best and promote appropriate environments for homeschooling, and at the same time, parents had to continue working from home as well, and at the same time, had to do house chores and be attentive to their kids’ performance and discipline studying from home. Families had to cope with their daily issues plus these new situations that require their attention and time.
To have a better picture of this situation, imagine having two elementary school kids studying at home, while you must work as you usually do, and attend online meetings. All the above from home, waiting for the crisis to pass, protecting your loved ones, and keeping them safe and away from the Covid virus. So, one might see this time as one of the most demanding and difficult people have ever experienced, relying on technology as the only possible way of keeping in touch with routine and learning.

**Technology, the Number one Allied**

Covid-19 Pandemic has shown precisely how technologies are key to maintaining jobs during quarantine periods, lockdowns, and restrictions of mobility that governments have scheduled to contain the virus spread. In terms of education, teachers around the globe have been challenged in their creativity to promote efficient learning through virtual platforms, and schools sent children home since they were closing to protect their health.

This situation, however, presents new problems for teachers and students. For instance, teachers need to find other ways to connect their students with learning through a computer or cellphone, by using chats, webcams, or forms that they can review within a period. Also, there are difficulties to engage students and maintain their focus on the given tasks online, with no way to control what they do at home or force them to appear on camera during their participation. More importantly, it is common to have an increase of workload for both parties because the idea of schedule or time to work changes with teachers and students at home and parents trying to keep their kids busy. Adding to this situation, it has become important to consider the mental
health of people during lockdowns and isolation that can make it difficult for students or teachers to be engaged in the classes.

Considering this, is there a way in which students can learn a foreign language, such as English, without turning this process into a burden, or a cause for boredom? Why is it so difficult to change the logic to learn another language and was not so troublesome while learning the native one? Answers to this can be found in this article as part of a proposal to use interdisciplinarity to create a more efficient learning environment, as well as the learner’s commitment to the world and its problems (such as climate change, human rights violations, racism, corruption, among others), thus helping in the education and formation of better citizens.

**From Traditional English Learning to Interdisciplinarity**

During the learning process of a foreign language, a traditional approach has been used for a long time, centered on the structure of the language and the communication skills. On this traditional approach, grammar and spelling are the keys to learning, and exercises of pronunciation are part of the curriculum to help students in their process. Nevertheless, not every student succeeds or even manages to grasp a complete understanding of the language. Some achieve moderate comprehension due to the permanent repetition exercises or because they are part of bilingual schools or communities. But the students who have better results are the ones who complement their learning with practice conversations, and immersion in situations that require them to speak or write and correct themselves with the help of other speakers. By using a conversational instruction method, in which a teacher introduces a small group of students with a question and asks them to work out the answer among the group, English-language learners may
increase more their language skills when compared with traditional classroom teaching (Glance, 2015).

From the 70s to the present day, some researchers have found it important to learn English, employing what they have called a “Natural Approach”. That is to say, they consider that English (and other foreign languages) should be learned in a similar way to how their native language was taught (Rhalmi, 2009). It would be a process of imitation and the connection to the context that could help to learn communication skills. Nevertheless, getting in touch with a language for the first time is not an easy task. Fear of making mistakes and saying the wrong word or not understanding is not a secret to anyone. Being in front of a class and being pointed as the one who did not understand what the teacher says, or for example, is completely lost, or not able to express what we have in our minds, is not a laughing matter. This is especially true as we grow older and are afraid to learn and discover new things. However, immersion programs or one on one classes set aside the structured and traditional methods to teach EFL found a niche and discovered that their students are happier and learn faster with their new methodologies.

According to the promoters of the Natural Approach, such as Stephen Krasen and others (Richards and Rodgers, 2011), it is more important to practice communicative skills through the immersion in short dialogues, use of vocabulary in common sentences, and practice its context to learn the structure of a language. This latter fact is something that native speakers learn later in life, through complementary language education. In this sense, teachers can help promote the use of short phrases and help learners build confidence to communicate their needs, wants, or other purposes, rather than grammar or spelling. Once the learners understand and practice the context
of language uses, teachers can focus on the way those words, phrases, or contexts are grammatically structured.

The former situation can be seen in bilingual schools, and it can often confuse their native and second language in young learners but is something that can be corrected through proper education and guidance. Children tend to use phrases they understand in their native language and combine vocabulary from a second language to communicate. As they get older, teachers help them with different meanings and structures so they can be successful in their communication and their subjects.

Another scenario to consider is when older children arrive in a bilingual context. It is necessary to ease their process with commands and instructions for them to become familiar through listening and repetition, which allows them to immerse themselves better than while using grammar or traditional teaching methods that get them frustrated for their slower results. What is more when learners practice a language through repetition. And if they use those repetitions and commands in different subjects, it can help their improvement and confidence. For this reason, practicing a foreign language through different class subjects, -interdisciplinary learning- can be more helpful to learn it, this means by using the Natural Approach, rather than a traditional approach that comes from abroad.

**Interdisciplinary Learning: Ways to be Citizens of the World**

In a globalized world, it is very important to learn about different cultures, traditions, identities, and even ways to understand the world. It can help respect other people's needs, be
more empathetic and supportive in finding solutions to world problems as it has become crucial to become a committed global citizen.

Although schools teach a great number of subjects or disciplines such as history, math, Science, Language, Physical Education, and others, it is customary to find them going in their directions and interests, dividing the attention of the students and forcing them to decide which ones deserve their best work, in other to focus on them, while leaving other subjects behind, because they do not have enough time to do well in all of them or do not find some subjects fundamental for their professional future.

Precisely this situation is what has made interdisciplinary learning more interesting for schools and higher education institutions. It can be more helpful to have a complete overview of a problem, for example, considering historical, political, statistical, or environmental factors and developments, than to consider each perspective isolated and disconnected from the others, during the learning process (Bradbeer, 1999; Chettiparamb, 2007; Haapasaari, et al., 2012).

International curriculums and educational perspectives like the one promoted by Teaching for Understanding as part of the Harvard Project Zero (Wilson , 2020), are more aware now of how students thrive when given all the perspectives of a problem by working in projects that include interdisciplinary work. English can be part of this approach, as well as any other foreign or second language, and it could be more enriching to the learners.

Take for example the understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic itself. A traditional disciplinary review in school curriculums would often leave the understanding of the problem to science-related disciplines; however, there could be another approach considering cases for Math classes in the form of statistics or reading about it and practicing vocabulary in an English Class;
A video can be chosen to practice listening and another video or report can be used in Social Studies to write an essay about communities affected by it. Children could learn about Covid-19 a little bit more in each class than what they have learned through social media or television. Nevertheless, the traditional way becomes boring for them as it only increases their workload without giving them a way to engage themselves in the topic and learn effectively about it through other disciplines.

Therefore, through an interdisciplinary approach to Covid 19, projects can be developed in many different subjects (if not all of them) involved, to give a complete understanding of the pandemic and empower children in their abilities to manage oral presentations and critical thinking, and teamwork, while improving their vocabulary, grammar and research skills.

An interdisciplinary project can present characteristics of the virus, its spread, and consequences, useful for Science, Social Studies, and Statistics, and use pictures or representations that can be addressed historically, involving arts and dancing, with every subject focusing on the assessment of their interests and giving time for the children to work on something that can be used for their school process in scheduled deliveries or oral presentations. Examples of this can be the creation of Museums of different pandemics through history, pictures with the family to present the virus in the different stages, or a simulation of the World Health Organization to present facts and recommendations. The type of project depends on the creativity of the teachers participating and the resources the children have to do it.

In terms of English or foreign language learning, this type of interdisciplinary project development helps with communication as it is important to present the facts of the research and even represent a role in the project, whether as a scientist or a politician. Children and even
teenagers enjoy the possibility to represent someone other than themselves and this can also help in being empathetic, more extroverted, and having a respite of their skin. Sometimes it is easier to express ideas as someone else and the projects help as a ludic strategy, to make learning fun.

Empathy is always a good way to become better listeners. Paying attention to the context and not only the words, helps to understand better every situation and perspective, while during recording exercises children tend to complete texts by paying attention to the words they listen to, and without completely comprehending the situation. Through interdisciplinary projects, they can use synonyms or improvise phrases to express their ideas according to what they learn or listen to from different conversations. This happens a lot in debates or the United Nation Models, in which children are testing their ideas with what they are listening to, and the fact that they have information about countries or conflicts gives them the possibility to create other scenarios.

As for writing, it can be useful to ask for written reports, assembly acts, or debate notes that provide the teacher with resources to assess the progress of every student. Maybe this part will develop with more guidance since sometimes children write as they hear the words. Grammar and spelling mistakes can be corrected and explanations can be useful throughout revisions. To complete the whole process, teachers participating in the project need to organize rubrics for what they are evaluating and incorporate feedback to improve learning.

This of course changes the way evaluations are made, as feedback becomes more important for learning than a simple grade. Reviewing vocabulary, grammar, and conversational skills is relevant to learning a foreign language. However, providing feedback to students helps them understand the reasons behind their mistakes and why it is important to correct them in
real-life scenarios; to avoid, for example, misunderstandings or confusion in the interpretations of a context, and misusing expressions.

Additionally, is it possible to use this approach with adult learners as well? Education on language learning in college or high school in later years has an advantage: people have personal experiences and have developed perspectives and argumentative skills that younger learners are still forming (Dinmore, 1997). Those added traits can be part of text analysis in any career or in ways to find new applications to the knowledge. Sometimes the experience can indeed make people blind to new perspectives and make them close themselves in their ways, but projects and teamwork can help in testing oneself, improve communication and reduce the workload that can be troublesome when people have jobs aside from their studies.

**Why is Interdisciplinarity Useful in a Covid 19 Context?**

The Covid 19 Pandemic forced schools, universities, and jobs to study remotely lessons as it was not possible to attend them in a normal way. Social distancing, the number of confirmed cases, and the mutations of the virus led people to work or study from their homes, with whatever resources they had. This situation has proven to be a challenge in terms of the economy as many people have lost their jobs due to the difficulties to maintain the traditional means of production, and also socially as it is hard to stay in quarantine, and not every family has ways to access connection to do what they must.

As such, working through interdisciplinarity can be helpful if people do not always have access to the internet. Learners can work on their projects with the time given by the teachers and divide assignments. Some can research while others organize the resources and then meet online
at an agreed time to exchange information and complete the work. Meetings can be done through chat or video call, and feedback can be given the same way or through an email. What takes more time is the personal preparation of the task and not the actual meetings, so one phone can be used if that is the only resource a family has without hoarding its management.

Interdisciplinarity makes possible different ways to present information and still achieve improvement in language skills. As said before, the creativity of the teachers is imperative, and there are many tools to help: theater, storytelling, pictures, portraits, simulations, debates, etc. Through all these activities, teachers cannot promote the learning of foreign languages or any other subjects and also help in the formation of committed citizens that are empathetic of others' needs and consider a context to find solutions. Thus, problem-solving skills are another good consequence of this type of learning.

Taking into consideration the mental health issues that are part of lock downs or social distancing, empathy can be useful to create reflections about it in conversations. Tips can become part of dynamics at the beginning of the class, and a journal to write thoughts can be incorporated. This can provide teachers with ways to assess abilities and emotional stability, something that is more important than ever to learn and become a successful person.

Conclusions

Covid 19 pandemic has shown other ways to do things and has proven how capable human beings are to adapt to difficult situations and carry on with their lives and explore new ways to learn. Although it is clear that a problem like the pandemic required governments and international organizations and teamwork to protect people and prevent more social issues that
might arise, it has also opened a new window of opportunities for teachers and students, and mostly everyone.

After being at home for more than a year, going back to studying is not an easy task. People have changed and have become more aware of how they want to spend their time. Before, people used to be longer away from home, due to meetings, and deadlines. Before, education was something we saw as important, but how it was given was not considered. But, after Covid 19, we understand that teaching should be complete and integrated into our daily activities and the traditional method of teaching may not be the only one available today. Interdisciplinary learning is another teaching approach and is certainly a more rewarding way of learning, not only during difficult times but for the future. It can promote reflection about learning habits, work organization, schedules, and personal commitment to the world. To sum up, interdisciplinary learning is here to stay.

For this reason, everything teachers do in terms of education, needs to consider these changes and expectations. Since people started being more educated consumers, and more informed thanks to the internet, it is more difficult to satisfy learning needs. Teaching EFL is not an isolated task or subject. It should be seen as an integrated part of a school's daily life. It is no longer possible to maintain subjects or even language learning isolated from global changes and needs. Precisely this compromise can be achieved through interdisciplinary learning. Thus, by learning a language through a natural and interdisciplinary approach, students and teachers are also helping the world to be better.

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