

**TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS
THROUGH VIDEOCONFERENCING**

Possibilities and restrictions

Adriana de los Santos

British Council Uruguay

adriana.delossantos@britishcouncil.org

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to share with all those interested in language teaching and learning, part of our videoconferencing (VC) experience at the British Council Remote Teaching Centre in Uruguay. It is my objective to tackle some issues related to the difference between teaching through VC and the traditional face-to-face fashion. Thus, I will explore some of the common areas between the two and refer briefly to the impact this new technology, and the class management model used to deliver the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme (Team Teaching), have had on the intellectual and emotional experience of some of our Remote Teachers (RTs).

The British Council Remote Teaching Centre Uruguay delivers around 1800 English Lessons per month through videoconferencing to public schools all around our country. We are very young in the project as the centre was launched in March 2015 so our experience is still restricted. All our remote teachers have received training at our centre in order to start off in this new modality but they have all been building their own style as months went by. Some of them have shared their experience for the purposes of this presentation at the *Foro de Lenguas*, evoking some features of the practice of ELT through videoconferencing that seem to be common to many practitioners in the centre. In this context, this article is an account of events, perceptions, ideas and experiences that are worth sharing with the community and not an approach to formal research. It aims at future reflections and might trigger research questions to be developed either by teachers or researchers but its spirit is more social than academic.

Presentation and theoretical background

It is widely spread in the teachers' community that ongoing professional development and teacher education is a must if one aims at succeeding in this career. Also, it is obvious that as the profession develops new challenges appear, so the creative practitioner needs better understanding and more refined strategies in order to tackle the new teaching-learning environments with more confidence. In this context, the British Council in Uruguay works with a staff of almost thirty professionals who are experiencing the shift from face-to-face individual teaching to videoconferencing team-teaching. This has led to some reflections that are worth sharing with the community at *Foro de Lenguas*.

Along the lines of collaborative teaching and learning, and always walking towards the same horizon: teaching English to all the children in public schools in the country, settling down as a cohesive, caring and hardworking team of remote teachers has not been an easy job at our centre. Besides, our main working field has been teaching English through videoconferencing within the *Ceibal en Inglés* project, which entails a lot of responsibility and commitment in terms of class management and coordination with the *Maestra de Clase* (Classroom Teacher / CT). Overcoming the obstacles of this new task has led to the achievement of more experience and knowledge in this new type of language instruction. In this article I would like to share some reflections over the experience gathered in relation to the following items:

- 1- Bonding with children through the videoconferencing equipment: the possibilities and difficulties of working in this new environment
- 2- Sharing the class leadership with a colleague who is not a language teacher but who holds authority in class management and general education.
- 3- Do children really learn English through videoconferencing teaching? Maximizing the input and ensuring practice and production.

The three aspects mentioned above are key elements in the realization of this ultimate goal: teach English to as many children and in as many places as possible around the country. This is accomplished through the delivery of three lessons per week (lessons A, B and C), the first lesson taught remotely by the RT and the other two by the CT. What is proposed in this article is a succinct summary of our practice in relation to these three points and along the lines of a constructivist model of teaching and learning with an emphasis on the humanistic sides of remote teaching.

Bonding with children

The camera in front of the actors in the videoconference lesson, both on the side of the children and Classroom Teacher and on the Remote Teacher's, is said to be making a big impact on many aspects of the class, especially on how the remote teacher creates rapport with those at the other end of the cable. One of the results of being in front of the camera during the class is that the children sometimes imagine that they are famous movie stars projected on the screen so they try to adopt a good-looking posture, sitting up straight, smiling and tidying up their

hair and clothes. This makes them selfconscious and provides a sense of “I look good”, which can generally be taken as positive, but it has implications related to the empathy between the RT and the children, which are worth mentioning.

As opposed to the face-to-face experience, in the videoconference class the RT cannot make eye contact with the students. To replace this invaluable tool in human bonding, zooming in and out with the camera appears to be a good solution to show the student(s) that the teacher is “looking at them”, or focusing attention on them. However, at the other end the camera seems to be a different entity, someone “else” different from the teacher. In other words, the children (and/or the CT) sometimes do not put the camera and the image of the teacher in the emotional place of “the teacher”, i.e. many of the behaviours we can expect in a face-to-face lesson are altered in the VC class. For example, the children sometimes mimic or make funny gestures in front of the camera –which might be interpreted as misbehaviour or odd behaviour in a face-to-face class- without being conscious of the fact that the RT might be receiving the wrong message.

Another hypothesis in our centre is that empathy and bonding depends to a great extent on the quality of the relationship between them and the CT. They agree that the quality of the RT’s connection with the children “is connected to the way you bond with the CT. If the CT is *with you*, there’s more possibility that children bond with you” RT Carolina Carneiro comments. I tend to agree that this is true and there are a couple of good reasons for this. Firstly, in the VC class two teachers do the work that has always been done by one, complementing one another with their specific knowledge and expertise. This leads to the development of a new teacher’s identity on the side of the CT (Maestro CEI) and also of a new figure of authority in the class to which the RT contributes with knowledge of the content area and the CT with the knowledge of the children’s background, performance and character. If we take this new figure as *the* teacher of the class, it becomes obvious that the bond between CT and RT needs to be strong and healthy in order that children are able to “connect” with the RT in the videoconference class: the more RT and CT work on how to bridge the gap created by the physical distance, the better conditions for bonding and thus, for learning. As RT Carolina Carneiro said “you don’t breathe the same air, you’re not there, you’re on TV!”

On a related matter, RTs doubt whether establishing a bond can be taught as a technique. This can be debatable as this teaching fashion is quite *young*, we are actually building this new methodology so the techniques used in the VC environment are under construction. However, there is something in the *unteachable* character of bonding that is undeniable: empathy is a feeling that just *occurs*, either in the face-to-face or in the VC class, the teacher(s) cannot fake it so it would not be an issue only related to the videoconferencing experience.

Team teaching

Teaching English through videoconferencing in the context in which the *Ceibal en Inglés* project is currently developed is hard to imagine without two teachers working together. Along this line, both teachers have been gaining awareness of their role in the class and have been adapting to this new way of teaching. Those who have achieved success, feel relaxed and enjoy the experience are those who have understood what role they are to

play: one facilitates language learning opportunities, the other does the usual class management and gets the group to adopt a learning attitude. RTs in our centre have found out that if the CT at the other end does not understand their role well, they feel tense and insecure because they think that they are supposed to teach what they do not know: the English language.

The relationship between these two professionals requires a lot of understanding on both sides. RTs in our centre feel rewarded when their CT understands their work. There seems to be a gap between what the CTs think the RTs' do while delivering the remote lesson and what the RT actually does. An example RT Carolina mentioned was the design of the presentations RTs use in order to manage the remote class in a dynamic way. Although the materials to teach the class are provided by the British Council (i.e. the lesson plan is ready to be used by the RT), RTs usually compile all the images and videos using Open Office Presentations. Carolina tells an anecdote: *“One day she (the CT) realised how much RTs need to work, she had to prepare a presentation with Open Office and realised how much time it takes to prepare them! She thought all the images just came out on the screen automatically. Once they understand our work better, they respect us more and the relationship gets much better.”*

Final remarks

Do children learn when taught through videoconferencing in the *Ceibal en Ingles* project? The answer is yes, absolutely! Not only do the external official evaluations (“pruebas adaptativas”) show that the results are very good, but also the perception of the teachers is quite positive in this respect. Nevertheless, we are aware of the fact that there is still a degree of suspicion or disbelief in the VC teaching modality, or in its results compared to the face-to-face fashion. However, as time goes by, and as our *Ceibal en Ingles* children start progressing in other areas of education, this suspicion will slowly vanish and we will celebrate the success of hundreds of children educated in our public schools. We know we are in the right track, walking the path of our inner most beliefs, working everyday towards the democratisation of knowledge, in this case knowledge of English and the English culture. Therefore, more than a discussion this is an account of events along the lines of Marcus Aurelius wise meditations:

*Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be.
Be one.
Marcus Aurelius*

Main references

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About the author

Ms Adriana de los Santos is a teacher and teacher trainer, she holds a BA in Education from Universidad de la República (Uruguay) a postgraduate course in Differentiated Instruction from Harvard School of Education (USA) and postgraduate courses in Educational Management from ORT University (Uruguay). She has done Doctorate Seminars in Education at Universidad de La Plata (Argentina) and is currently a candidate at the MA ELT programme at Southampton University (UK)

She has worked in the private and public sector as a teacher trainer. As Head of English Studies she worked in two prestigious private schools and is now Teaching Centre Manager at British Council Uruguay.

She has done research in Philosophy of Education at the Institute of Education (UdelaR-Uruguay) and presented in many academic events in Uruguay and abroad.

She has designed courses and lesson plans for prestigious institutions, including Ceibal en Inglés and British Council.