Uruguay shows the way

Graham Stanley describes the latest developments in a technically innovative project linking classrooms across the globe to teach English

A round 100,000 school kids across Uruguay are being taught English live from Argentina, the Philippines and the UK, thanks to a unique videoconferencing project from the British Council and Plan Cebal.

The Plan Cebal English project was set up in 2012 to deal with a lack of English teachers in primary schools in Uruguay. Despite the distance, the tech-savvy initiative is using HD communications equipment to effectively link up the classrooms across the world. This year the project has offered English via videoconferencing to all schoolchildren in grades 4, 5 and 6 across Uruguay who have not yet had the opportunity of learning English.

The latest expansion to the project has seen the opening of a new purpose-built British Council remote teaching centre in Argentina to cope with the extra demand for classes. Located in the heart of Buenos Aires, this is the first teaching centre to be built to cater for this new type of teaching. It has 35 mini-classrooms, called teaching points, and a team of fifty teachers working full or part time delivering lessons into Uruguay using high-end videoconferencing equipment and a fibre-optic internet connection.

Initially starting with a small-scale pilot in just twenty schools back in 2012, the overall project has expanded dramatically and is now close to achieving the ultimate aim of reaching all primary schools in Uruguay. Apart from its own teachers, the British Council works with partners in Argentina, the Philippines and the UK to ensure lessons are delivered as expected into Uruguayan schools.

Sara Persson, head of English for education systems at the British Council, explained, ‘Connecting people around the world forms the basis of much of our work at the British Council, and this work with Plan Cebal is a fantastic example of how that can be achieved successfully.

‘For teachers to be able to reach and engage with learners thousands of miles away is not just a great technological feat but showcases the vast experience and expertise of the English language professionals involved in this project. In addition to providing a beneficial teaching offer for young people in Uruguay, we have received strong interest in the project from countries across the world, which represents a major opportunity for UK companies to start remote teaching in emerging markets. We are keen to share our experiences for the wider benefit of the sector here in the UK as well as to help ensure more young people across the world are able to benefit from such projects in the future.’

Manu Patel, director of video conferencing for Global Learning Ltd, the organisation that manages and delivers the lessons being taught from London to Uruguay, added, ‘This is the first time the UK has been able to deliver regular lessons which are timetabled in full HD-quality video and audio to support an international curriculum programme. The organisational planning and teaching material from the British Council and Plan Cebal has been outstanding.

‘Our teachers are qualified language practitioners with degrees in teaching or PGCE qualifications. This makes our remote teachers the next generation of language teachers – they are our global workforce of the future. Not only can they teach face to face in schools across London but now they have the skills and technological capability to teach English using video conferencing into any country in the world. This is the future for the delivery of content into classrooms.

‘Analysis of the Plan Cebal project so far has revealed measurable improvements in the English skills of the young people involved. Claudia Breiteto of Plan Cebal said the data is consistent and very robust. We tested children who started the programme in March 2013 and July 2013 and found there were improvements in all grades and in all social contexts. There are also marked differences in the test results in July and December for the groups which began in July. All analyses were carried out excluding children who claim to study English outside of school. All differences are statistically significant.’

Graham Stanley is country director of the British Council Uruguay