

To remember my first class with my students, remote teacher, is like watching a treaded path, is looking back and perceive the effort, everyone's improvement, students, Remote Teacher (RT), and myself.

The first day of remote classes! I need to remember Yica and Jeriz, which brings warmth and nostalgia.

That first day, I was expecting Yica with anxiety, without knowing whether she would be a man or a woman, until we heard the call, whilst trying to remember all we had been told at the orientation sessions in Montevideo, without making any mistakes, press the button that would allow Yica and us be communicated through videoconference. (Email exchanges had already occurred in English and translated into Spanish, for this reason I never imagined she would not speak Spanish).

It was Tuesday 8:15, great expectation, students, teacher, a n immense, thick silence reigned in the room. All eyes watching the screen, intently looking at the movement of the camera, and the initial word that would mean that the RT would appear at any moment. (She was calling from the Philippines).

The moment arrived! My students shouted and screamed as if I was not present in the room, and was not aware of what was going on in the room. I pressed the green button in the remote control, and there Yica appeared, all smiles, so far away and so close at the same time, present in our classroom (borrowed for a while because it was another group's classroom).

Always smiling she shook her hands as saying "hello" and said: "Hello", we did the same and then she began talking English! I had no knowledge of English, neither did my students, and she spoke no Spanish, that day then we used gestures. I never perceived that she was nervous or anxious, but I was! How to understand what she was expressing? (I could only say "hello" and its meaning; I had a couple of courses in English many years before when I was finishing school, and that was over 30 years before this experience!)

Between gestures, body language, nervous smiles from us, the learners, the RT kept up her spirit, her splendid smile throughout the 45 minutes, she found support from a translator in the Philippines, and sometimes what she said to us made no sense to us. She used drawings on a whiteboard she had behind her, and then we managed better communication. It was an achievement gained by us all, the kids looked at me and smiled with full satisfaction, we were making it!

I am the kind of teacher who accepts challenges and who likes offering challenges to my students, making them feel the challenge and that they can accomplish ambitious goals.

The moment arrived when Yica began to finish her class, and shaking her hand once again she said: "goodbye children, good bye teacher" and the screen went blank.

And then I sat down with the children, I had been on my feet throughout the lesson, seats and tables belong to kindergarten, in the afternoon shift the five year olds work there, so that all furniture was too small for us all.

On Tuesdays, the 4th grade teacher would go to another classroom and left the room empty in the morning shift, so we could keep it.

And the comments arrived: “I don’t like it”, “I don’t want to have another class”, but others said “I did like it”, “I did understand”. I felt the matter required some urgency as Yica would be with us all following Tuesdays in virtual presence for 45 minutes. She, from so far away, without knowing the names of my students, without knowing where they come from, what they do after they leave school, how and where they live, it was necessary to create a strong, flexible and warm bond between the students and Yica. (There lied my strong pedagogic intervention, but a little detail could be a deterrent: I did not speak English).

I proposed my students to study where from Yica came into communication with us: I worked with time zones, geographic coordinates, the Philippines, the time difference between the two countries. We understood that she was probably quite tired at that time when it was night in her country, and we admired she still had the energy to teach us, for which reason my students understood it was very important to make her class a pleasant moment.

We studied and did research about everything in the Philippines. This way we felt closer to her country and the person who would work with us throughout the year.

Once back home I wrote an email to Yica, where I told her about my group, the characteristics of the school, where my students came from.

My school is part of the APRENDER programme, *Quintil 1*, 90% of our school population comes from inner cities/ *Hoovervilles*, where parents have no jobs and where the majority of families are single parent families, for whom education is no priority for the adults, but they prefer their children to do some informal work, or simply beg.

I am not that different from them. It is just that when I was a child there were no inner cities, I was raised on my own, in the streets, alone, without any support, in a single parent family, where my mother’s words were: “go and work, studies will not take you anywhere”.

I attended the school where I have tenure; I lived in its classrooms the emotions, sensations, frustrations, and achievements just as those my students live. For this reason when one day I found an official invitation to *Ceibal en Inglés* as open to those teachers who were willing to participate, I simply signed my name without one moment hesitation, and without even asking my students I decided my 6th grade A would study English.

I am a teacher in the Programme *Tránsito Educativo*, a programme which deals with students issues in their path between Primary and Secondary. For this reason I also visit Middle Schools, where I see my students struggle not to quit due to their difficulties with English. It is one of the “filter disciplines”, and I wanted English to become a field of successful learning.

I was the only teacher at my school who agreed to participate in *Ceibal en Inglés*. I had to travel to Montevideo, and communicated with other schools to try and find out who else was travelling from Tacuarembó.

The day arrived and we left on a rainy and cold day. We all arrived full of anxiety, from all over the country, but we were less than a hundred teachers, at least on that day.

All was uncertainty; we talked to each other to see if any had any news to share. We were taken to a room where we had to sit for a placement test; most of us were in Elementary 1, a few in Elementary 2 and even fewer, level 3.

After that they explained to us how to work with the videoconference equipment and the XO's. I remember a very young man, Juan, who explained to us in such speed that did not allow us to finish anything in our computers, whilst he had finished. This generated a great deal of frustration and even anger. The young man finished his presentation, and other people started their, we did not understand much.

With the folder we had been given, and with the little content we had managed to learn, we went back to our *departamentos*.

At the bus station, we all wondered what we were doing there, why we had embarked upon such an adventure. But teachers, primary school teachers, are like that, we like fighting, we make do with what we have, and thus I returned home with more questions than answers.

This was all the knowledge I had to face our first encounter with an RT.

Once I wrote to Yica, she replies immediately, she thanks me for my report on my group and school, and asks me to have a weekly meeting via Skype, an application I did not know.

My use of technology is quite primitive, for which reason we continued emailing each other twice or thrice a week. I would make suggestions, which she accepted: which students would do which work.

Some students after the first lesson came into the classroom and said: "Hello" instead of "Hola" or "Buen día", and I replied "Hello children", our first step forward.

One girl in the group brought a notebook in English that belonged to her cousin, where there were many drawings with words in English, Rosisela, was the girl who learnt most words in English and she would teach her classmates and me.

The first lesson plan that my RT sent me, and all of those in 2013 were 50 pages long, I would spend the whole Sunday reading those lesson plans to know what I would need to do in lessons B-C, this was highly tedious. Around the month of July, Gabriela Kaplan came to visit, and all Classroom Teachers (CT) argued against the length of the lesson plans.

In order to be able to work in English, I created a big planner which I hung on the wall of the classroom. It indicated how work would be organized weekly so that we could have two days in the week to work in English for lessons B-C. It was not easy as each lesson took me far more than 45 minutes. If I pretended to have forgotten to do activities in English, my students would remind me immediately.

When I felt that the bond between my students and the RT needed to be stronger, I suggested she told them about herself. In the second class she showed us her house and she would say in

English: "My house", she also showed us her family: mother, father, grandparents, siblings, those were the first words they learnt. For homework she set for each student to draw his house and or make a mock up to show to her in the following lesson, this is how we began treading our path towards learning, and I thought: "One day at a time", my anxiety level was lowered, I began learning with them, they would correct my pronunciation, they learn faster.

We would not miss an English lesson for any reason; little by little Yica learnt some Spanish and us some English.

The school head was dubious about the possibility of students learning any English, given the difficulties our students had with their mother tongue.

One day when we had English lessons, I felt unwell in the morning before going to school. I called the head and let her know I could not make it to the school and that on that day we had our lesson of English that someone needed to be there to take up the call. The head had to be with the children during that lesson. She was so surprised by all the children had learnt, how they could communicate with the RT. For this reason, after that experience, she makes English mandatory to all teachers working at the school in 4th, 5th and 6th grades.

As the year moves along, we continue receiving lessons from the Philippines. One day we had no class. A natural disaster had occurred in the Philippines and we had no connectivity to communicate. We sent her an email worried about her, she replies saying she is fine, but that many of the inhabitants of the Philippines have been seriously affected.

The class decides to show some kind of support to their RT and in the following lesson when she connects, she sees the group altogether in a big hug (I was also part of the big hug) and the arms begin to open, they get close to the screen, and we say in English: "A caring hug for the Philippine people". The RT was moved and called her peers and the coordinator, so they would see; it was a moment of emotion and tenderness.

The following year, 2014, found me a more certain CT, I knew how to guide my students and how to communicate with RTs, and how to create a bond between my students and the RT.

Again my RT is from the Philippines, and spoke no Spanish, Jeriz, a young woman, active, and we managed to have great empathy, just like with the previous RT.

Maybe because I had already had the experience the previous year, where I had observed great achievement in my students, the expectation was the same, or even higher. I had level 1 again as students had not had the chance of learning English the previous year.

Jeriz not only sent us material for the regular classes, but she also sent us videos about her country, and in this manner she shared her culture with us.

Both RTs, adapted easily to what happened in our school. I remember once we were coming back from a patriotic assembly, it had just finished and we were coming back to class, some students were wearing the typical dresses worn by our school in festivities. Jeriz asked what the occasion was, and the students explained a bit in English and a bit in Spanish the reason for the special attire. Very cleverly, Jeriz begins by asking what colours are the clothes they are

wearing, and what each piece is called in English. Just like any teacher, who if there is something special needs to adapt, so do RTs. They get involved, they show empathy, they achieve good communication with the CT, they make an effort to learn to identify each one of the students; and it is very important that they say something special to each child, for example: “Antonio, you have had a haircut”, with gestures, in their language or ours.

It so happened that the last remote lesson in 2013 and 2014 were very emotional for the RTs, the students and I. We still remember them with kindness, and every now and then an old student comes back to our school to ask about Yica or Jeriz.

With what I have learnt of English, thanks to *Ceibal en Inglés*, I can give active support to students in the programme *Tránsito Educativo* in 1st grade Middle School. I have had the great satisfaction to see how students who finish 6th grade who had had English all accomplish very good marks in Middle School. Not one of my former students ever had any difficulty with English.

The curriculum of 1st grade Middle School is similar to what we do in 6th grade in Primary. Students finish their first course in *Ceibal en Inglés* being able to maintain an acceptable social dialogue in English: they know how to greet, introduce themselves, introduce a friend, describe objects, people, animals, and spell their names and other elements.

Taking into account the homes they come from (sometimes in a whole group only one student has access to internet), for which reason they may not work on the platform. They need to register all their knowledge in notebooks, which they use in Middle School to overcome obstacles.

This year I have again a challenge with my students as they are now in level 2, and we started directly with lesson plans that correspond to level 2, with no revision. For this reason I use lessons B-C to revise, when they correct my pronunciation. For example when saying “can”, if I say it as it is spelled, they say as in a choir: “Ken, teacher”.

Without a doubt they learn faster than I do.

Time has gone by, and there is a way we have tread, we have met people, we have felt tenderness for them, we know they have somewhat changed our lives, or had an influence in it. Yica is working in a hospital, she is a graduate nurse, Jeriz must be enjoying her life with her novel husband; she was getting married last March.

Now we are on a road of learning with Inés from Buenos Aires.

Each one of them has left something very special. Jeriz on her last day was recording videos from the Philippines, at our school a teacher came to take pictures of us, we all got together around the screen, and so we had the RT in the photo as well. Later I sent her the pictures on the email.

It is not easy, but in some magical way RTs become part of the school staff, they are one more of the special teachers who come every week to do face to face gym or any other activity,

students adapt to working with them, and we all reach a pedagogical agreement: RT-students-CT.

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