

## *Ceibal en Inglés*

### COVID-19 Contingency: From Synchronous Remote Teaching to Asynchronous Distance-Learning<sup>1</sup>

*“...When technology only delivers content without a well-planned pedagogical intervention, the results are not particularly impressive.”<sup>2</sup>*

#### **BACKGROUND**

*Ceibal en Inglés* started in primary schools in 2012. The goal was to expand access to English language teaching to all primary state school children in Uruguayan urban schools. The programme was designed for teaching English to children and their teachers in 4th, 5th and 6th grades (ages nine to twelve). *Ceibal en Inglés Primary Schools* is a blend of face-to-face, remote team teaching and distance learning and it provides a technological solution to the scarcity of teachers physically located close to the Uruguayan schools across the country.

Providing 700 lessons per day, this programme, *Ceibal en Inglés*, caters to approximately 70,000 students, more than 70% of the population of students in grades 4th to 6th..

The programme has an aspect of distance learning, an aspect of remote teaching and one of face-to-face learning.

Distance learning is done through the use of a Learning Management System (LMS) called CREA, where all lesson plans in English and Spanish are hosted, and where students can post their work and receive feedback from their remote teachers. This component is asynchronous.

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<sup>1</sup> *Plan Ceibal* understands, both for the case of *Ceibal en Inglés* and for Computational Thinking, that remote teaching is defined as teaching that happens at schools with students and classroom teachers. The remote teacher appears in real time through video conference equipment. Distance learning or E-learning is defined as teaching and learning where neither teachers nor students are synchronously working together.

<sup>2</sup><https://digitalfuturesociety.com/qanda/edtech-education-and-self-regulation-by-cristobal-coho-from-the-world-bank/>

Remote teaching is included in the form of a teacher of English who appears for 45 minutes through video conference once a week in the classroom (always the same teacher at the same time throughout the school year); whilst the face-to-face component is the classroom teacher, who in general does not speak any English, but whose presence is paramount as students respond to her, the person they know, learn to love and respect. These components are synchronous.

The ecosystem of *Ceibal en Inglés* is therefore formed by students with their own teachers at their own schools in their own classrooms who receive the presence of a teacher of English mediated by videoconference technology.

This synchronous ecosystem was devastated by COVID-19.

The team of *Ceibal en Inglés*, like most educational teams in the world, immediately began to discuss different ways to reach out to our students and their teachers when physical distancing became paramount, and face-to-face interactions were not possible. This team is formed by a pedagogical unit, a quality management unit, an administrative unit, and a field-work unit known as “mentors”. These units, which are closely coordinated, became essential in the development and implementation of the contingency plan and in the discussion and implementation of ways to reach all members of our educational community.

## **COVID-19 CONTINGENCY DESIGN**

Given that *Ceibal en Inglés* is a blended learning programme, its successful delivery requires that the students be at their schools alongside their primary classroom teachers, ready to receive instruction from their remote teachers once a week. Synchronous and at-school sessions are also requested two other times in the week when students and their classroom teachers revise and recycle what was taught by the remote teacher.

In order to make the programme work, the two professionals coordinate once a week to provide feedback to each other and decide how to implement the lesson plans for the following week.

At the moment COVID-19 hit Uruguay, on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020, remote lessons had not yet started<sup>3</sup>. Remote teachers had not met their students or the classroom teachers they would be working with throughout the year. This fact clearly made the situation a lot more confusing than usual. This is because education is above all a social activity. Education, whether informal or formal, relies primarily on our ability as human beings to relate to one another, to interact, and to ask questions. The reading of body language and facial expressions is a requisite. None of this can happen without the cementing of a good collaborative working relationship between the instructors and their students. Such a relationship had not yet been established.

The surprise that the sanitary circumstances imposed, *Ceibal en Inglés* devised and implemented a first design. It took into consideration that neither of the professionals involved nor the students had previously met and hence our providers-- the institutes -- were asked to make sure that the first week was devoted to introduction of teachers. At the same time the team designed an emergency plan, which rather coarsely translated the remote teaching programme into e-learning or distance learning, believing that the contingency would last a couple of weeks. This first design had the advantage of practicality, in that lessons would start while the team took a couple of weeks to ponder how best to overcome the pedagogical limitations imposed by the circumstances. Remote teachers were asked to study the lesson plans for the first two weeks and extract from them their main learning outcomes. With these outcomes in mind, they were asked to create an eight minute video per lesson. On top of this input, students would find online in CREA exercises and activities that would allow them to learn by practice.

However practical this first plan was, its coarseness was evident. It simply supplanted the technology of videoconference with the technology of the LMS, ignoring the fact that synchronous and asynchronous learning are by no means interchangeable.

*Ceibal en Inglés* was well aware that this initial contingency plan would not be sufficient, and that a new plan informed by stronger pedagogy was necessary.

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<sup>3</sup> In Uruguay the school calendar starts in March and finishes in early December

## **FIRST STEPS**

The first step was for the programme administrators to list the structural advantages available to Uruguayans well before the pandemic. Unlike other nations, the Uruguayan community relied on *Plan Ceibal*, a governmental initiative which started in 2007 with a clear focus on providing inclusion of technology throughout the educational system. This meant that all students and teachers in the public sector would have a digital device and that connectivity would be installed nationwide. As *Plan Ceibal* developed over time, the focus moved towards thinking of education mediated by technology. Indeed, at the moment the pandemic hit, the fact of *Plan Ceibal's* existence meant that most students had digital devices, access to an LMS, and access to the internet in most of their homes. At the same time, our teachers and beneficiaries had experience in working with technology, as well as in working in some distant form in education, since both students and teachers had had direct experience with *Plan Ceibal*. *Ceibal en Inglés* also had evolved and in doing so had learnt some valuable lessons previous to the COVID-19 outbreak:

- First, we were keenly aware that distance is no hindrance to learning. Our students who learn English remotely attain the same results as the students who learn English through a face-to-face EFL programme in our annual adaptive online test.<sup>4</sup>
- Second, technology works best when invisible, that is to say, when the focal point is education, and the subsequent collaborative creation of problems and solutions, rather than when the attention is on problems posed by the mechanics of using technology.
- Third, autonomous learning is possible with guidance and support, especially when mediated by technology.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://ingles.ceibal.edu.uy/storage/app/uploads/public/5e4/2b4/206/5e42b4206664b488042728.pdf>

- Finally, we had already learnt that community building is essential for the effective delivery of education. The creation of a community has always been one of *Ceibal en Inglés*' central objectives.

Community building is not simple. However, it has always been our understanding that the programme poses challenges for all actors and that these are best overcome when understood together—no matter the physical distance. For this reason, different strategies have existed from the beginning of *Ceibal en Inglés*, such as weekly coordination between the two teaching professionals: the remote teacher and the classroom teacher. This coordination is an effort mainly to establish a “pedagogical pair”, but also to promote the remote teacher as one more member of the school community. Another strategy has been the constant support of classroom teachers by our group of mentors. Remote teachers, on the other hand, find guidelines from our team of quality managers. All these members of the *Ceibal en Inglés* community meet in periodic *Encuentros*<sup>5</sup> (or conferences) in which different members write and present together their analysis of different aspects of the programme, together with productive exchange on CREA.

Another advantage perceived was the experience lived by other nations. The pandemic reached Uruguay well after it had reached other geographical areas. We as such were able to draw from experiences of the virus elsewhere. The Chinese experience proved a very valuable guide in making our first steps. The experience of other nations, as shared in webinars, podcasts, and online articles, fostered a wealth of ideas to reflect upon and to potentially implement. The vast offer of webinars, podcasts and free articles has been evidence that the teaching profession is able to facilitate collaborative efforts<sup>6</sup>. This phenomenon of communication of educators about the challenges posed by the pandemic across borders serves as evidence that these challenges are best met through

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<sup>5</sup> *Ceibal en Inglés* has organized since 2016 *Encuentros Cercanos con lo Remoto en la Creación de una Comunidad Educativa* (Close Encounters with the Remote in the Creation of an Educational Community). These are held both nationally and regionally to encourage community creation and teacher development.

<sup>6</sup> Numerous have been the webinars and podcasts offered by several educational organizations such as TESOL, New Pedagogies for Deep Learning, the World Bank among many others.

collaborative work. It is this interaction that has enabled students to keep learning despite the closure of schools.

## **DRIVING FORCES**

Educational designs follow certain driving forces or central ideas that guide the writing of them. In the case of our programme, those driving forces have been to **keep students engaged**, to make sure that **technology remains invisible**, to find a way to **keep physically distanced but emotionally close**. Being emotionally close, an unrelenting presence of teachers, mentors, quality managers and administrators, though physically distant, is what permits us to respect education as a social activity.

### **1- Keep students engaged**

The Wuhan experience, which is particularly relevant because they had had the chance to learn first where to place educational priorities, made clear that the first order of business insofar as education during the pandemic is concerned is to **keep students engaged**.

For *Ceibal en Inglés* this has meant nurturing children's faith in their capacity to learn, in their intellectual curiosity and in schools being valid vehicles to whet that curiosity. Prioritizing the nurturing of students' confidence in their own capacity to learn and fostering their intellectual curiosity meant setting aside old and deeply ingrained mandates in education, for example, the belief that fields of knowledge are compartmented and are to be transmitted through dry academic content, or that learning may only happen within the walls of the classroom. Learning and teaching had to be reconceptualized and this reconceptualization had to be implemented as soon as possible.

### **2- Invisible Technology**

The population of Wuhan was the first to note the indispensability of technology not only in learning, but also in entertainment, communication, shopping, and in meeting

that population's medical needs under the circumstances presented by the pandemic. Technology under these circumstances proved indispensable to the very continuation of everyday life.

The duty of education thus, was to remind young students that the happenings of life transcend the happenings within our screens—that our universe is broader, richer, and infinitely more complex than anything our screens have to offer.

Our new design mandated that weekly handcrafts or art projects were to become a must for our younger students. Children were invited to create puppets, model towns, or amazing vehicles with what they had at home: old socks, carton, plastic, and wool, would all become valuable material for creation and learning.

### **3- Keep physically distanced but emotionally close, celebrate education as a social activity<sup>7</sup>**

The number of primary school students working with *Ceibal en Inglés* exceeds 70,000, the number of remote teachers in the same programme exceeds 300, and the number of classroom teachers exceeds 3300.

The challenge posed by the need to maintain an emotional proximity with students as well as among teachers and providers was apparent. Effective immediately were daily 9:30 AM meetings with the office team, weekly meetings with our field team, as well as weekly meetings with our remote teaching providers. Our field team as often as possible organized and implemented meetings with classroom teachers and head teachers nationwide to explain the new design and discuss different problems which arose in distance education. Every week our quality management team met with each one of our providers to offer support in pursuing the implementation of the new design which has posed a tremendous ordeal to our remote teachers in their transition from remote teaching to e-learning.

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Clinton- New Pedagogies For Deep Learning [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHhiAc79sMNaPFgnWL73p\\_mJorm2D0r77](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHhiAc79sMNaPFgnWL73p_mJorm2D0r77)

Interestingly, during the first phase of the pandemic, the entire team was certain that having a platform that would permit our remote teachers to work synchronously with our students, thus reducing the distance between students and remote teachers and maintaining that essential emotional proximity between the members of our learning community, would solve all the problems posed by the circumstances of the pandemic. For this reason, a request to *Plan Ceibal* was insistently made for the acquisition of any suitable platform, the purchase was made, and in the second design telepresence was included in the weekly activities.

Reality showed, however, that the health regulations demanded far more creative solutions than the acquisition of a digital tool.

As remote teachers began to implement the second design, which included telepresence, the field immediately and most explicitly showed us that telepresence, even when students have devices and connectivity, competes against the natural rhythm of sounds at home. The English lesson was competing against granny's favorite soap opera, siblings' games, or pets expressing themselves.

On the other hand, and most relevantly in our community, like in the rest of the world, many students could not connect to the platform for various other reasons, such as no connectivity, no access to digital devices, no parental support. COVID-19 has clearly shown that social injustice is endemic. Not all children have the material conditions necessary to learn at home, nor do they all have the necessary emotional support from adults in their homes.

## **EVALUATION OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS**

Evaluation is no doubt one of the most necessary and controversial aspects of learning. For *Ceibal en Inglés*, evaluation is an essential part of our programmes. Not only do our courses invite students to do formative assessment every certain set of units, *Ceibal en Inglés* participates every year in a national online adaptive test, which provides core information about the level of each one of our students, and most importantly about the impact of our educational programmes. The information gathered from each instance of

the online adaptive test has allowed *Ceibal en Inglés* to modify and improve our approach.

During the COVID-19 crisis, however, to even think of evaluation as a means for ascertaining each student's attainment level in the foreign language has been deemed impertinent. Thus, only formative assessment upon the completion of every 9 or 10 units have been implemented as a vehicle for revision and the recycling and creation of knowledge. These "integrative weeks", which close with online evaluation performed asynchronously, have allowed each child to experience some integration of gained knowledge at their own pace.

End of the year assessment is being designed. The main purpose of it is to show each child his or her own achievements.

For the closure of our courses, a final project will be offered with the sole purpose of providing our students the chance to show themselves, their parents and teachers what they have learnt, each one at the level she may have attained.

Along the same lines, quality managers in our programmes have decided to dedicate all of their time and effort to the support of remote teachers in their transition from remote teaching to e-learning. This movement from one format to another has posed immense challenges. The remote teacher no longer shares a classroom with her students and the classroom teacher who offers her support, valuable information, and feedback. Even when the experience of remote learning was at a distance, it still occurred within a school and within a school context.

Taking the new circumstances into consideration with the distance imposed by COVID-19, the lesson design has been transformed from traditional lesson plans, to **challenge-based** work that requires linguistic input through the production of short, clear videos—a complete novelty for our teaching profession. Manifold are the new skills needed for this migration—technological and mechanical skills, i.e. those requisite for the production of videos and their uploading on to CREA, conceptual

skills in order to generate a script and enact it in front of a camera, and interpersonal skills for the creation of the teacher persona who appears in the videos and who provides support to students by personalizing feedback on CREA.

If the above challenges were not enough to create anxiety and confusion among those involved, the creation of a teaching role within this new model of learning, where the interpersonal bond between teachers and students is weakened, has no doubt caused bewilderment.

This is the element of the change produced by COVID-19, which has presented the greatest difficulties for teachers all over the world.

Not only does distance teaching and learning call into question the operational capacity to use different digital tools, it also pushes education into the far more fundamental interrogation of the roles of teachers and students in the learning process. Already in 1993, Alison King was announcing the difficulties inherent in the inclusion of technology in education for the teaching profession:

‘E-learning threatens the role of the teacher in that the modus operandi behind asynchronous work demotes the teacher from her capacity as a ‘sage with a stage’ into a capacity of ‘guide on the side’ within the context of a flipped classroom’.<sup>8</sup>

In this new scenario, the teacher becomes almost a host, ideally a passionate and warm host, who invites students to perform activities that will lead to a certain objective. Students, on the other hand, are liberated from being a captive audience inside a classroom and become guests, who only when offered an appealing activity, will be tempted to execute it if they count with the right tools and the right adult support at home.

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<sup>8</sup> King, Alison- 1993- Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27558571>

*Ceibal en Inglés* understands that whilst both the operational and the conceptual challenges are high-risk roads for teachers in any circumstances, in an emergency when all need to act with or without plans of action, the professional universe becomes far more uncertain and unsafe. For these reasons, *Ceibal en Inglés* has not evaluated remote teachers, but has given all possible encouragement and guidance. A great deal of emphasis has been made on collaborative work between and among remote teachers and quality managers.

Collaboration and cooperation seem to be creating most beneficial solutions to all. Those teachers who are best at thinking and writing scripts for videos can do so, whilst others can be in charge of production, uploading, providing feedback, finding extra material, etc. For this reason, our providers will be assessed while taking into consideration their abilities to promote collaboration and cooperation to all their teachers.

Adaptability and flexibility have been then the rules of the game. Every step taken was validated or rejected by how it worked in practice, and designs, use of platforms, applications, and formats have changed accordingly.

## **THE DESIGN**

The final design of *Ceibal en Inglés* for the COVID-19 contingency consists of synchronous and asynchronous work.

Asynchronous work is challenge-based and has the format of “missions” that children have to accomplish, such as creating and presenting their amazing vehicle, or making and showing their puppet, depending on their school grade and course week. In order to achieve a certain mission, students have to travel through different “stations”. These stations are marked by the language input and the relevant language practice found in CREA as presented by the remote teacher in the videos.

Each mission consists of four videos, each video marks a station and is uploaded on to CREA.

The first video is in Spanish and recorded by the remote teacher to nurture emotional proximity. It presents to the students the challenge for the week. The presentation of the weekly challenge consists of instructions for the completion of the handcraft and a description of the language necessary to reach the final station of the unit and complete the mission.

The second and third videos offer the necessary language input and propose different activities and exercises to be completed in CREA, where students have access to the necessary devices and to internet connection. These two videos may be recorded by the classroom's remote teacher, or by any other remote teacher, fostering collaborative work. The fourth video is recorded again by the remote teacher of each group, and encourages children to finish the mission, record themselves presenting their achievement

Adaptation, when necessary, may imply operational aspects of the process such as videos and work sent through WhatsApp (a mobile messaging app). Many classroom teachers share a WhatsApp group with the parents of their students. In these cases, students watch the videos and do their work, take pictures of their work and these images are sent through WhatsApp for the remote teacher to see and give feedback. But adaptation may also mean that remote teachers adapt to the circumstances of their own homes, institutes where they work and needs from their groups of students—some need more time to learn, others move faster.

Synchronous work lasts fifteen minutes long per week. The main purpose of the short telepresence sessions is for students, their classroom teacher, and remote teacher to meet, to see each other's faces and to practice pronunciation. A few students may present their handcrafts but as the shortness of the encounter does not allow all students to do so, remote teachers encourage children to upload their work onto CREA so that personal feedback can be provided.

The possibility for students and teachers to meet on a weekly basis is most certainly an asset in any educational context. However, not all children are able to make the synchronous sessions and for this reason the core component of the programme has

been asynchronous. Students who have not had the chance to connect and be present have still been able to learn at their own pace in their homes.

## **CONCLUSION**

The impact of COVID-19 in our lives is impossible to fathom at present. In education, its impact has made more evident our vast distance from social justice and from our desire that every child is surrounded by caring adults who value education. It was quite evident before the pandemic that not all had either the physical or the emotional conditions to learn, but this contingency has made social injustices even clearer. Children and youths who do not have the protection and emotional support of an adult even when they count with a device and connectivity, have seen their chances to learn reduced. When communities have been able to offer neither devices, connectivity nor the necessities of life, the situation for each one of these young ones has become very somber and murky.

COVID-19 has also illuminated certain facts: the purpose of education is to keep students engaged and not captive; technology is to remain invisible; evaluation makes sense when it does to the learner; adaptability is imperative, and collaboration among human beings, as challenging as it is, should remain a beacon for all. It has also reminded each one of us that collaboration and cooperation are beneficial bases for healthy, robust and vigorous community building, an indispensable ingredient for critical times.

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