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## **Teaching English beyond Borders during the Pandemic: Transforming Crises into Opportunities**

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### **1. Introduction**

It was in November 2019 that many of us heard for the first time that a new flu virus appeared in China. Little did we know about the enormous and lasting impact it would have on the world and particularly in the field of education.

As schools around the world decided to close or migrate indefinitely to emergency online teaching in an attempt to reduce the risk of infection for their students and staff, students in teacher training programs saw their opportunities to observe and practice teaching practically disappear for the then foreseeable future.

As the spring term of 2021 came, classroom observation and practicum classes at Bethlehem University's Faculty of Education were on pause, waiting for local schools in Palestine to reopen and welcome in-training teachers again.

It was in this context that an innovative educational experience arose in an attempt to afford the SAT (Subject Area Teaching) English-major students the needed access to classroom observation and teaching practice, while at the same time allowing them to have an opportunity to teach internationally, to provide a relevant service to people in need and to take advantage of being part of the international Lasallian educational network.

Well aware of the important place that the English language has in the international scenario today, the professor in charge contacted several Lasallian schools around the world looking for opportunities for Bethlehem University's students to both observe English classes and practice their teaching and, also, to discover the service orientation that is intrinsic both to the teaching profession and vocation and to the Lasallian ethos.

After negotiations and agreements, three institutions were selected:

#### **1.1. Centro de Formación Integral La Salle**

- A non-formal education center for adults located in Tijuana, México (a border city with the state of California in the United States of America).
- The center offers over 600 different courses completely free of charge to largely economically poor and lower-middle-class people.

- Bethlehem University's students were to work in collaboration with Brother Jorge Guzmán, a De La Salle Brother and English teacher in the center who would assign one of his adult students to one or two of Bethlehem University's in-training teachers for them to have one-on-one English conversation sessions where the in-training teachers would coach and help the student from Tijuana develop their English oral skills.

### 1.2. Colegio Regis La Salle

- A K-12 private school in Hermosillo, México, serving economically middle-class and upper-class students.
- The Language Department at Colegio Regis agreed to open their live online English classes in Upper Elementary School, Middle School, and High School levels (grades 5 to 10) to Bethlehem University students for them to observe classes with different teachers and in different grade levels and to help the teachers by taking charge of some classroom activities.

### 1.3. La Salle Kirenge

- A non-formal educational center in Kirenge, Rwanda, that offers educational courses and other activities to economically poor children.
- La Salle Kirenge had students desirous of learning the English language. Students ranged in ages from 6 to 18 years old and were studying in different school grades, many being several school-years behind what their age would suggest. These students had absolutely no prior knowledge of English (they had not taken any English courses in school before) and spoke only Kinyarwanda (the local Rwandese language). Therefore, they shared no language in common with the Bethlehem University students.
- Bethlehem University students were to develop from scratch English courses suited to the students of La Salle Kirenge Center, presupposing the absence of an instructional language in common that could be used as a teaching platform.

Once the agreements were in place, Bethlehem University students of Education courses 212 and 338 in the SAT English program were invited to voluntarily take part in one or more of these opportunities, taking on the commitment that this would entail.

Students were instructed to take detailed notes of their experiences, observations, teaching methods, and results.

This paper presents some of the findings and results of these experiences.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Teacher supervision is an important part of pre-service and in-service teacher training and professional development. A common practice in teacher supervision is realized through classroom observation.<sup>2</sup> In pre-service TESOL (Teaching of English as a Second Language)

training, for example, classroom observation has been highly valued as a learning tool for prospective ESOL teachers to learn how to teach.<sup>3</sup>

A similar value is attached to practice-teaching for pre-service teachers since, as Ulla states in “Pre-Service Teacher Training Programs in the Philippines,”

Practicum teaching is an integral part of any teacher education curriculum since it is a good avenue for pre-service teachers to apply the theories they learned in the real classroom setting.<sup>4</sup>

Practicum and observation are deemed so important and relevant to teacher training that students of teacher education programs are not allowed to graduate until they have completely fulfilled the required time for both of these activities.<sup>5</sup> That is certainly the case in Bethlehem University’s Faculty of Education.

Not only are practicum and development considered vital as preparations for graduation, they are deemed to have a great impact throughout the professional lives of teachers:

Whether it is in the context of an initial teacher education (ITE) course for new/ student teachers or lecturers, a collaborative professional learning project for experienced educators, appraisal or an external inspection, classroom observation is a ubiquitous mechanism that permeates the working lives of all educators from the beginning to the end of their careers.<sup>6</sup>

Student teachers at Bethlehem University regularly attend their classroom observations and teaching practicums in local schools within the Bethlehem Governorate in the Palestinian West Bank; but due to the restrictions imposed in response to the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, basic schools in Bethlehem remained closed for months and, even when they returned to face-to-face or hybrid (part face-to-face and part online) teaching, they were not accepting external visitors into the schools, including university in-training teachers.

The agreement with Colegio Regis allowed Bethlehem University student-teachers to observe English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes from many different teachers on many different levels, as Colegio Regis has a student population surpassing 2,000 and granted access to all groups and English classes for the grades between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> levels, covering upper-elementary and middle-school and even the first year of high school (as understood within the Mexican educational system).

O’Leary states in his book entitled *Classroom Observation* that

classroom observation has emerged as a pivotal tool for measuring, assuring and improving professional skills and knowledge base of teachers and lecturers in schools, colleges and universities.<sup>7</sup>

In a sense, then, the students observing classes at Colegio Regis in México would not be physically present in the classroom; but they would have the chance to observe not only one, but a variety of

teachers and teaching levels, which wouldn't have happened in Palestine even under regular circumstances.

As for the practicum part, the experience granted by the international agreements in this case was also rich. Some students (those participating in the Tijuana experience) would have the chance to teach conversational skills to adults who live on the border with an English-speaking country and are highly motivated to learn. This, in turn, would be an opportunity for Bethlehem University's student-teachers to put their own English-language conversational skills into practice.

At Colegio Regis, Bethlehem University's practicum students were allowed to plan and implement some classroom activities. In some cases, even a full class with the supervision and feedback of an experienced local English teacher was possible.

At La Salle Kirenge, Bethlehem University students would find the greatest challenge as they would have to take full charge of the planning, implementation, and evaluation of an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) course for Rwandese children with whom they share no common language or "teaching language."

Teaching a second language (L2) without recourse to the mother tongue of the learners (L1) is not a new notion in language teaching, but it is a widely discussed and at times controversial one: "Exclusion of L1 from the process of teaching is (. . .) a topic of much debate over the years."<sup>8</sup> Whenever a common language exists between the teacher and the students in an L2 course, that language often arises as the "teaching language" or "language of instruction"; and whenever there isn't one, the teacher is faced with the need to use L2 to teach L2 (e.g., English language through English) which, according to some academics increases the learners' exposure to the target language, which is seen as positive. Other experts, in opposition, look at the lack of L1 reference as a disadvantage and potentially detrimental to the learning of L2.<sup>9</sup>

Harmer, for instance, in *The Practice of English Language Teaching* considers the presence of a common L1 as useful for teaching a foreign language, enabling the teachers to draw attention to differences and similarities between L1 and L2, discussing the needs of the learners in their native tongue and establishing an affective rapport more effectively.<sup>10</sup>

Other authors, like Nijaradze and Zviadadze,<sup>11</sup> believe that having this L1 to rely upon generates a certain comfort in the class that can be detrimental as it facilitates students feeling the class to be under-challenging and letting themselves reduce their concentration. Ultimately, this level of comfort can devolve into laziness, negatively affecting the whole teaching and learning process.

Given the circumstances though, a common instruction language in the case at hand was not possible; and Bethlehem University's student-teachers had to rise to the challenge. To be able to do this, they went back to what they had learned and studied during their 409 course on teaching methods and looked into many English teaching approaches that needed no L1 platform.

Learning English in a multilingual class sharing no language of communication with the teacher increases students' mastery and use of communication strategies, especially

achievement strategies, which can be seen as conducive to improving their overall communicative competence.

Overall, it can be claimed that teaching multilingual classes offers teachers opportunities for expanding their repertoire of teaching techniques, increases the ratio of English versus other languages in class and makes the lesson more communicative, all of which ultimately benefits the students.<sup>12</sup>

### **3. Methodology**

To gather and systematize the findings in this experience, the researchers decided to treat the phenomena in each of the collaborating institutions as Action Research interventions.

Action Research methodology is ideal to investigate the nature and characteristics of an intervention in full respect of its singularity. The three institutions being of different nature and purpose, located in different cities and even countries and offering educational undertakings of a different scope required a more individualized and differentiated approach to their study.

The tools utilized for the collection of data were observation and experience logs filled out by the student-teachers during class observations and also immediately after each teaching intervention.

Once the information from all three interventions was obtained, a comparison of the three was conducted to try to find commonalities in the methodological approaches to English teaching that Bethlehem University student-teachers adopted and/ or observed while immersed in long-distance online international educational projects.

### **4. Results**

#### **a. Concerning La Salle Kirenge Centre, Kirenge, Rwanda:**

##### **i. Selection of topics**

- The student-teachers reported, as a first challenge, the choice of appropriate topics for their lessons and contents from the English language.
- They noted the importance of taking into consideration the rural context of the students.

##### **ii. Online teaching**

- Meetings took place over Google Meet or Zoom.
- Internet connection was not always ideal and became one of the main challenges with which to deal.
- The Centre in Rwanda has no computers. One of the Brothers there agreed to lend his tablet for a connection, and the coordinator of the center used his mobile phone. Connecting these devices to television screens, the meeting was made possible every week.

iii. Language contact frequency

- Teaching English once a week to students with no prior contact with the language proved very limited in effectiveness.
- Bethlehem University student-teachers decided to include as part of their teaching worksheets that they sent to Rwanda via email and were printed for the students to work on along the week, giving them an extra exposure to the practice of the language and their learning of the week.

iv. Use of images and videos

- Another effectiveness enhancer were the educational videos. They proved to be very attractive for the students, and the visual aids helped convey the message and contents of the class.
- On occasion, student-teachers reported that the students in Rwanda requested a different image or picture of a word or concept to make the meaning clear.
- Creating colorful and image-rich power point presentations became an important part of the preparation for every session.
- In their notes, the student-teachers working in Rwanda defined most of their students as “visual learners.” They reported an increased attention and motivation when visuals were in use.

v. Participation and Active-Learning

- In their observations, student-teachers noted that students in Rwanda were very quiet and respectful. This seems to be a cultural trait in the relationship with teachers.
- Over time, student-teachers learned ways to foster more student participation through games, in-class worksheets, riddles, and other active learning proposals.

vi. In-class discussion

- One of the student-teachers in Rwanda opted to lead her class through discussions of topics related to the lives and interests of the students. She described the experience as successful as the students participated more every time and reported to enjoy the experience.
- The students were the older group in age (students in Rwanda were grouped by age and not by school grade since important gaps between one and the other existed).
- Teaching them vocabulary and structures as the students needed them proved useful, making the desire to communicate and the struggle to do so a teaching tool.

vii. Feedback

- All student-teachers agreed on the importance of feedback, whether it was to correct or appraise an oral intervention or to give back a corrected worksheet. Training-teachers reported students learned better when helped to notice and correct their own mistakes.

b. Concerning Colegio Regis-La Salle, Hermosillo, Sonora, México:

i. Use of technology

- Colegio Regis's classrooms all have computers, projectors, and touch-screen boards. Student-teachers noticed the importance of the ease of use of these technologies that both students and teachers manifested during emergency online teaching, these tools being part of their teaching-learning processes since before the emergency situation began.

ii. Participation

- Student-teachers reported many teachers at Colegio Regis required frequent participation from their students in the class and even asked for them to open their cameras (students at Colegio Regis's classes during this time were all at home and distance-learning).

iii. Teaching Methods

- Dialogic Method
  - ✓ Student-teachers reported seeing at Colegio Regis that many classes were class discussions where opportunities for content-oriented conversations in the whole group or in smaller teams were organized and used a teaching tool.
  - ✓ These dialogic classes frequently included in the topics of their discussion elements related to the interests and liking of the students, taking advantage of the self-reference effect.
  - ✓ Dialogue activities were observed to be effective in increasing participation and enthusiasm (motivation) among the students.
  - ✓ Student-teachers also noted that teachers who make a more frequent and effective use of dialogical methods seemed to have closer and more effective personal relationships with their students.
  - ✓ Dialogic methods appeared to help build a more relaxed and enjoyable classroom environment, which in turn helped foster participation in the target language.

- L2-Based Methods

- ✓ Student-teachers agreed that in their observations at Colegio Regis most teachers utilized the English language (Target Language) as the language of instruction and avoided either completely or almost completely the use of L1 (the Spanish language in this case).
- ✓ Several known teaching models are based on L2 and either renounce completely or recommend a very limited use of L1. Students recognized some of these methods in their observations, the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) approach appearing to be prevalent.
- ✓ Gamification was also observed, supported by diverse educational activities and electronic resources, such as apps and websites. In some instances, teachers had even more than one game prepared for the class and gave the students the opportunity to choose among them the one they preferred to play during the class.
- ✓ Traditional Methods were also present, although in the classes of a minority of teachers. These methods were easily recognizable in their heavy proportion of lecturing and teacher-centered activities.

c. Concerning Centro de Formación Integral La Salle, Tijuana, México:

- i. Students in this part of the project were adults ranging in age from the early 20s to the late 70s.
- ii. The age of the students and the fact that this intervention was either one-on-one or in small groups of two student-teachers and one student favored individualization and diversification of methodologies.
- iii. Some student-teachers decided to communicate the expectations and goals of each session to their students, providing them also with an overview of the topic to converse about and the different activities planned. These student-teachers reported their students were thus more able to evaluate the achievement of language goals.
- iv. The lack of a shared language other than L2 also influenced this intervention to favor the use of L2 based methods. Student-teachers mentioned their using simplified English definitions for vocabulary as well as pictures and mimic to convey meanings. Videos were also used to animate and compliment the topics of discussion.

## 5. Discussion

Given the importance of the teaching practicum and observation in teacher training and formation,<sup>13</sup> Bethlehem University students developed these international English teaching interventions to ensure having their practicum and observations even in spite of the closures and



limitations in educational institutions throughout Palestine and the world due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Teaching in these international institutions – but particularly in Rwanda, where students had little to no previous contact with the English language and shared no other language in common with the student-teachers – Bethlehem University students experienced firsthand the positive and negative aspects of this situation described by Nijaradze and Zviadadze<sup>14</sup> and were able to put several teaching methods and approaches to the test and to finally overcome the difficulties and achieve positive teaching results in favor of the students they were serving.

Student-teachers observed experienced teachers at Colegio Regis preferred communicative approaches and L2-based methods and utilized instructional materials such as videos, apps, games, pictures, and others to enhance their teaching. At the same time, in leading some activities at Colegio Regis itself and in teaching English both in Tijuana and Rwanda, these student-teachers were able to discover for themselves the value and need of all these materials and approaches and to put themselves to use in a real teaching enterprise.

The notes, videos, and logs of the student-teachers bear witness to the manner in which this educational intervention in which they partook allowed them to understand through experience the value of methods, theories, materials, and ideas they were taught at the university, endowing them with new and stronger meanings that will keep informing their teaching practices in their future working lives, in confirmation of O’Leary’s statements that consider classroom observation and intervention a “ubiquitous mechanism that permeated the working lives of all educators from the beginning to the end of their careers.”<sup>15</sup>

## **6. Conclusions**

Although many authors discuss the formal importance of teaching practicum and observations for in-training and in-service teachers, few appear to attest to the personal importance teachers themselves attach to this experience.

The professor in charge of this project was pleasantly surprised to see the student-teachers put more hours than required into the planning of lessons and development of materials for their international interventions; some of them even sought permission to continue their classes during holidays in Palestine where suspensions were programmed.

A further testimony to the positive experience of the student-teachers in this project was the fact that other students, who had already taken the practicum courses and were further along in their programs, came to see if it was possible for them to also be included in the project and serve as teachers.

On the other side of the spectrum, the professor in charge recently received emails and messages from collaborators in the three institutions expressing their desire and that of their students, to continue the online teaching.

Student-teachers at Bethlehem University were able not only to make up for the impossibility of local classroom observations and practicum but also gained valuable experience in online teaching (from planning to execution and evaluation) and in teaching to people of other cultures and nations. They were able to see how and why many of the teaching methods and approaches they studied were developed and how they could be put into practice at the service of a concrete educational project and a specific group of students.

Although the three collaborating institutions are very different in nature, location and population served, they all share some characteristics: they are established in non-English speaking countries and teach English as a Foreign Language; they build and operate on the Lasallian ethos and mission; and their served populations do not speak Arabic either as a first or a second or foreign language.

To intervene educationally in teaching English in these institutions, Bethlehem University student-teachers resorted to videoconferencing, email sent materials, worksheet design, educational games and apps, video and image selection as well as oral and written assessment techniques.

Students reported that they feel more confident now to teach English, more competent in choosing, applying and combining methods and selecting appropriate material and tools for revision and evaluation.

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## **Endnotes**

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