

THE ENGAGEMENT OF CHILDREN IN ONLINE CLASSES

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Abstract: This paper brings an experience report about the English remote teaching to children due to the pandemic COVID-19, which affected Brazil at the beginning of March of 2020. The objective is to identify the ways we, teachers, can make students feel more motivated to participate and engage in class. In this experience different online tools were used to try to create better engagement, and at the end of the report, after some observations and the teaching practice, we have the conclusion of the better tools for prompting children participation.

Keywords: Participation; Remote teaching; COVID-19; Motivation; Teaching to children.

O ENGAJAMENTO DE CRIANÇAS EM AULAS ONLINE

Resumo: Esse artigo traz um relato de experiência sobre o ensino remoto para crianças devido à pandemia COVID-19, que afetou o Brasil no início de Março de 2020. O objetivo é identificar as formas *online* nas quais nós, professores, podemos fazer os alunos se sentirem mais motivados para participar e engajar nas aulas. Nessa experiência foram usadas diferentes ferramentas para tentar gerar o melhor engajamento, e ao final desse relato, depois de algumas observações e da prática de ensino, temos a conclusão das melhores ferramentas para induzir a participação das crianças.

Palavras-chave: Participação; Ensino remoto; COVID-19; Motivação; Ensino para crianças.

Introduction

In the year of 2020, we were living a different experience in teaching. Due to the pandemic caused by Covid-19, which started at the end of 2019, we, teachers, had to adapt ourselves to remote education, and a lot of things have changed. In this experience report, we will address the topic of teaching English online to young learners, and our aims are 1) to identify what kind of problems teachers may face in this virtual environment and 2) how we can improve our approaches and ideas to better teach so that students feel motivated. The experiences reported here come from the first author's experience in her 4th year mandatory

internship, during the undergraduate course in Language and Literature in a State University in the South of Brazil.

Online teaching and learning is not something new, since technology started growing and becoming more popular, we have been trying to use it in different ways to help us, including in classrooms. In this matter, [Lim \(2004\)](#) affirms that students in an online environment must control their learning process, and because of that they engage more, but what about kids? Do they also feel that they have control over their learning process? Or do teachers need to guide them?

Before starting the internship, in the beginning of 2020, we observed some lessons in different schools to know and recognize how teachers were working with their young students, and how their methods were. The observation is an activity that is carried out throughout the undergraduate course before starting the practicum¹, for us to see how the school works and the method with which they work. When it comes to a new environment as it was the case due to the remote² classes, observation moments seemed even more important. The teachers always had to guide their students and they get distracted sometimes as in a face-to-face class. [Copland, Garton and Burns \(2014\)](#) researched some challenges with English young learners, and one of them was about speaking. In the observation classes, which preceded the teaching practicum, it was possible to see that the students engage a little more online than in a face-to-face class, but, in some of the classes the teacher had to ask more than once for the students to speak. Discipline is another problem mentioned by the authors, and in an online environment it is more difficult to have their attention, considering that each of them is in their own house with their things, which can be very distracting.

In this report, we report the experience of the first author, under the supervision of the second, when teaching children in a private school context, with students from 1st to 5th grade. Considering the remote environment, the internship happened in a school located in Maringá, a city in Paraná, next to the city we live, Londrina. We will discuss the observations and our way of teaching to see the differences and similarities between what we saw and what we did, what was best for our young students, so we teachers could know how we can motivate students with technology, making them participate and engage more.

This report is organized in 5 sections. After this introduction, we present the main theoretical aspects from previous searches related to the topic that we addressed.

Literature Review

In order to identify studies concerning the main focus of this experience report, we did some research using the terms “online teaching environment” and “teaching English to young learners” on different platforms such as Google Scholar and SCielo and we have not found any paper addressing the focus of the present research, i.e. teaching English to children by means of online environment or remote lessons. From our point of view it may indicate that teaching English to children has not been sufficiently researched. However, recent researches were made about technology and the teaching environment due to the new context the education system faces because of the pandemic ([Kawachi-Furlan and Tonelli, 2021](#)). [Souza and Bezerra \(2021\)](#), for example, discussed the urgency of technology in these new moments and challenges teachers may face during social isolation.

Although [Thamarana \(2016\)](#) does not focus on the teaching of young learners, he defends that the virtual learning environment is one of the most effective and innovative ways to teach English. In his paper he brings several examples of the advantages of using the online environment. Related to teaching young learners, [Nunan \(2010\)](#) reported that the main challenges with the young students are motivation, attention, cognitive development, multi-level groups and assessment. Research about this is very important so other teachers can prepare themselves for the problems they can face during their classes.

Another important aspect we have to pay attention to, when teaching children, is the classroom discourse, the way we talk to them, how we make questions and how we explain the activities. [King \(1994\)](#) researched about this topic and pointed out two strategies/interventions — *guided questions and knowledge construction* — we can use to make students engage. Guided questions are questions made for students while they are doing a task, to allow them to think in a different way, to change their perspective, it can help them with their previous knowledge on the topic discussed. Knowledge construction is linked to guided questions, it is a collaborative process that aims at new understanding on a topic that, without a group conversation, this knowledge would not be achieved.

Games and songs are also important for teaching children. [Ara \(2009\)](#), for example, states that although children have an ability to learn a new language faster than adults, the use of tools, such as games, songs and rhymes, helps the class be less boring for them, creating an enjoyable environment, making them engage and participate more.

Before starting the teaching process, it is important to make a good observation before starting teaching, especially when we are doing our internship, as [Tonelli \(2016\)](#) researched. She carried out a study with her students, who were graduating to be a teacher, to reflect upon this topic. The conclusion was that the class's observations were extremely important to get to know the context they were going to teach. In the following section, the method, we will explain how we did the classes observations.

Method

As the title of this experience report suggests, our focus is on how we can teach English to young learners in an online environment. We will describe and discuss a few classes observed in two different schools throughout the internship experience in a private school context to recognize what influences and motivates children in a good way. As a matter of privacy, the names of the schools will be hidden, and we will name each of them with an alphabetical letter.

Beginning with the observation process, it was carried out in two different schools, the first one will be identified as "A", and that is the one we also did our practicum, and the second one will be named as "B". In both schools, the students were about the same age, around 6 to 11. During the teaching practicum classes we, undergraduate students, with our supervisor, created a checklist (*table 1*) to do a better observation and to help us to recognize what tools and attitudes could be used in classes, to help engage students, which criteria could be important to know before starting teaching. The checklist was developed collaboratively during our internship meetings, after some reading and discussions on the topic.

Table 1 – Observation checklist.

(Continues)

QUESTIONS	YES	NO	OBSERVATION
CLASSROOM			
Is the use of English recurrent in the classroom?			
Is there any use of gestures by the teacher during class for better comprehension?			
Do the students understand what the teacher is trying to say?			
Were there conflicts in the classroom?			
Is there mutual help in the classroom?			
Has the class objectives been achieved after the corrections of the activities?			
Is there any use of imitation or mimic by the students and the teacher for better comprehension?			
Are the activities diverse? (lasts up to 5 minutes)			
TEACHER			
Does the teacher use technological tools in his/her classes?			
Does the teacher use different genres in the classes?			
Does the teacher use music, group plays and games to teach foreign languages to children?			
Does the teacher use routines to guide the classes?			
Does the teacher correct the students by reformulating what was said instead of accusing the error?			

Table 1 – Observation checklist.

(Continues)

Which tool is the teacher using for online classes?			
Is the teacher recording classes so that students can watch them later, if necessary?			
Is the teacher using any other online tool in class? (Example: Kahoot)			
Does the class seem to have been planned?			
Did the classes start on the time proposed?			
Is the teacher being calm and patient with the students?			
STUDENTS			
Do students have any limitations (motor and/or cognitive difficulties with the language)?			
Do students demonstrate the ability to concentrate?			
Is there a good relationship between teacher and students?			
Are students independent in carrying out activities?			
Do students deal well with failures or victories?			
Do students participate actively in activities?			
Do students have difficulty with language understanding?			
Do students show interest in class and activities?			
Is there homework assigned to the students and appropriate explanation?			
Do they have the worksheets, pens, pencils, crayons, scissors that they need for your class?			

Table 1 – Observation checklist.

(Conclusion)

Do students participate and interact in the class?			
Were all the activities done in time?			
Was there any material to be used?			
Do students seem to find the activities relevant?			
Have the class objectives been achieved?			
Is there enough space to get up and move around in case the teacher asks to get up in their houses?			
Is there enough light for students to work on their material?			
Do students share a workspace with a sibling or parent?			
Are some games used in the classroom teaching?			

Source: the authors.

On table 2 the information is related to each school of which we discussed the similarities and differences between them in the discussion section.

Table 2 – Information about schools “A” and “B” on the observation.

SCHOOL	DATES	CLASS OBSERVED	LENGTH	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	PLATFORM
A	September 16th and September 18th	6	30' each class	20 to 26	Google Classroom
B	September 21st and September 23rd	2	30' each class	11 to 14	Google Classroom

Source: the authors.

As already mentioned, the practicum happened after the observation period in school “A”. However, it was different from the ones we observed previously. It was a backup class for students who needed some tutoring in order to understand better what had been taught in the regular English classes, we helped the children with English contents they had previously learned with their teachers. It is important to highlight that in school B they did not have this kind of lessons. The backup lessons in school A were initiated since some of the students were having difficulties in following the remote lessons and also it was a possibility for us to carry out our teaching practicum since at that time, all public schools were closed due to the pandemic and were not having any kind of classes, even remote lessons. The students in our class were from 1st to 5th grade, so we had one teaching practice with each class per week and the internship lasted for six weeks. Considering that they had a certain age difference, some music we played in one class, for example, could not be played in the class with the older students, so each class had their own lesson plan and different contents, and it will be discussed in the next section.

Discussion

In this section, with the help of the data from the tables, we discuss the similarities and differences between the two observations, even though more classes were observed at school A.

The observation checklist displayed on Table 1 was crucial to guide the lessons observation so that we could have a clear aim on what to spend our attention when inserted in the first period of our internship before beginning the teaching as discussed by [Tonelli \(2016\)](#).

With this observation, it was possible to notice more differences between the schools than similarities. In school “A” almost all students were watching the classes alone, not with a parent or any family member in the same room, and in school “B” they had someone with them. About mutual help, in school “A” students answered questions and closed the microphone, different from school “B”, where students were always talking and sometimes helping each other with the questions. And the last thing, but most different, was that school

“B” was a catholic school, considering that, all classes started with a prayer which was unusual for most of us.

About the review on similarities, we could find between the two schools that they have the same length for each class and they use the same platform (Google Classroom) to teach the classes. From our point of view, it indicates that it was the platform schools had immediate access to begin the remote lessons without having enough time to plan in advance. Another feature we noticed was the use of English. The teachers made use of English and gestures all the time to help students understand what was being said. Both schools, also, did not make use of games during classes, only visual and audio tools, which was something we felt could be added in the practicum. Concerning this matter, we will mention it later.

Another aspect worth to be mentioned is the amount of students in the English classes in school A and B. As we can see from Table 2, the number of students taking remote lessons in B was reduced when compared to B which might explain the need for the backup classes.

After observing those classes, we took notes of, from our perspective, were interesting and important aspects to use in our practicum and actions in which we thought we could do differently from what was observed, as well as based on what was studied about engaging children in online classes.

In our experience, since it was a content review, we prepared the lesson plans with a lot of songs, videos and games, to be a less "heavy" class and children would have more fun. Just like [Ara \(2009\)](#) said, those kinds of tools create an enjoyable environment, consequently we thought doing it would make them participate more and focus on class. Considering there were 5 different age classes, each lesson plan has its own kind of activities, games and songs.

We started our lesson plans by using a lot of different tools to see which ones the students would like the most and adapt to them. We used YouTube videos and songs, games on Wordwall and Kahoot, and we also tried activities on Google Docs and the collaborative platform Jamboard. Such platforms were chosen taking into consideration the familiarity both, children and teachers had with them. Based on our lesson observations carried out previously to the teaching practicum, we were already expecting that students would not focus much on long videos and music. However, throughout the teaching we noticed that they lost focus even on the shortest, considering it was a remote class it was not possible to call

their attention while the video was playing. Hence, after some lessons, we stopped using Wordwall to play hangman, word search and quizzes, because it was less interactive considering we had to share our screen and they only had to turn on their microphones to answer, and decided to use more Kahoot, that is more competitive and interactive, and also the tool Jamboard, because they could easily access it and change the images or words to wherever they wanted.

After some time teaching, it was possible to notice that what the students liked the most were games. Sometimes, at the end of the classes, when we were saying goodbye, all of them asked us to bring more games for the next class, and it happened with all of our classes, from 1st to 5th grade. During the weeks, we adapted the activities in the English classes the way we thought it was better for them to participate, including activities they asked and the ones we saw they really liked. At the end of the teaching practicum we could notice that, although the observation period was crucial to get familiar with the kind of teaching we were about to live, it was during the teaching that we could know the students and the ways we would engage them in the lessons improving, day after day, our lesson plans.

Conclusion

The objective of this experience report was to try to identify some ways we, teachers can use to motivate students, more specifically young learners, to participate and engaged in remote classes when teaching English in an online environment, and also, some of the attitudes we could have to improve our classes for a better engagement of the students. In our viewpoint and experience, what engages the most students is when teachers bring different kinds of games related to the topic studied.

Videos and songs are very important to their learning, but it can also be very distracting if it did not catch their attention at first, or if it is too long. Games and colourful images are the best tools to make students interact and engage; children enjoy speaking in order to comment on the images, and they also like to be competitive when playing games.

As our teaching practice was a content review, due to the purpose of the backup lessons, during the weeks we discovered that it would be better to use short videos, colourful images and a lot of games. We saw the difference between their interaction from day one to

the last, when we stopped using those less interactive games, and started using more of the ones that they could play themselves.

In conclusion, it is important to mention that teaching English to children is, by itself, challenging due to the absence of a teacher's education to act in this context. When it comes to remote lessons, the matter is even more unknown, mainly for those who are initiating their careers. Hence, carrying out our teaching practice in the context described in this paper, was crucial to, at least, making us more aware of the difficulties and the possibilities to teach English to young learners.

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¹ We use the term “internship” to refer to the period in which a future teacher develops his or hers teaching lessons and “practicum” to the act of teaching itself.

² [Moreira and Schlemmer \(2020\)](#) explain the differences between some terminologies being used as “online” and “remote” teaching. In this paper, however, we use both terms as synonyms.