

Teaching English during the pandemic

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I think we all agree that being a teacher during this pandemic has proved to be quite a challenge. Regarding my personal experience, I had to change a lot of things in order to comply with the current teaching scenario, mainly because of the context of the school I work in.

I work in Toltén, a town approximately 2 hours away from Temuco. Even though we are far away from the regional capital city, we have around 400 students, from the town and its surroundings, which are mainly rural areas. Prior to the pandemic, I used to work as a co-teacher with some first and second year high school students, while being the main English teacher for third and fourth year high school students. Having two English teachers within the classroom, showing the students some real use of the English language, promoting its use and efficiently monitoring every activity given during class, became a very wholesome teaching and learning experience. Well, the pandemic changed everything.

Firstly, since most of our students are from rural areas, it was almost impossible for us to adopt a virtual class system in which students were permanently connected to video calls and online platform work. Therefore, the system we adopted as a school was to prepare worksheets, printing and delivering them, even at the students' doorstep if necessary. At the beginning, these worksheets were created by each subject teacher, but then we decided to go in a different direction. After realizing it was too stressful for students to develop a handful of worksheets at the same time, we started developing articulated worksheets, or “articulated work plans” as we called them. From the English teaching point of view, it turned out to be a nice opportunity to link the English language to meaningful contents, as it would be in a CLIL approach, so I just went for it.

This methodology has been working pretty well for English teachers at our high school, since we have always focused on the communicative aspects of the language. However, since all articulated work plans were designed and prepared to be printed, it was impossible for me to give the students tasks in which they would listen or express themselves orally in English. Likewise, students would also struggle doing such activities since most of them lack the necessary digital resources and the connectivity to do so. That was the worst part of the pandemic for us, and for them too.

Finally, something else I found rather challenging was monitoring and giving feedback to my students. It is known that communicative tasks need lots of explaining and guiding and the only means by which we were able to communicate were through phone calls and WhatsApp messages. At the end, just a few students with better connectivity had the opportunity to have proper feedback and guidance in their tasks.

I guess my experience as an English teacher during this time of pandemic was a sort of tricky bargain. First, I found a way to make the English language somehow meaningful to students, not just teaching some grammar rules or a random content from the English students' book. Second, due to the students' lack of digital resources and the very little state support they have received, they just haven't been able to develop certain linguistic skills properly and have also been deprived from an effective feedback and monitoring of their learning performance.