

Collaboration as the axis of Ceibal en Inglés





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Montevideo, Uruguay

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ISBN: 978-9915-9704-4-8 (formato electrónico)

Style editing: Alumbra Comunicación

Design and preparation: Alumbra Comunicación

www.alumbracomunicacion.com

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Introduction

Collaboration as the axis of Ceibal en Inglés

«It is not only the familiarity with the technology but the need to solve problems and collaborate with others in order to carry out their job that can be considered a positive side-effect of their involvement with CEI.»¹

Ceibal en Inglés -Primary started in 2012 and has been considered since its inception as a disruptive pedagogical programme for different reasons, such as its pedagogical design, the use of technology, and the partnerships with private institutions abroad and in Uruguay.

Firstly, the design of the programme indicates that students in 4th, 5th and 6th grades dedicate three hours a week to acquiring the foreign language. The first hour, called lesson A in *Ceibal en Inglés*, is taught by a teacher of English who is not physically present in the classroom but appears through the screen of videoconference equipment. The other two instances, called lessons B and C are facilitated by the classroom teacher, who in general is not a speaker of English, but who relies on lesson plans, her remote teacher, and support from the mentors in the programme, to recycle and revise what was instructed in lesson A.

The use of a new kind of technology inside the classroom, video-conference, immediately produced changes in the learning environment. In this programme, the classroom teacher is requested to move from the traditional role of a teacher, that is transmitting content knowledge she possesses to a role in which her didactic and pedagogical abilities become her precious asset to facilitate language acquisition. In this design then there are two teachers

¹ https://americas.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/lessons_learned_from_10_years_of_ceibal_en_ingles_-_full_report.pdf

working simultaneously during lessons A, and one who works on her own with her students for lessons B and C. However, as the two professionals share a clear common goal, that students learn English as a Foreign Language, the most relevant feature of the inclusion of this technology is that they have to work collaboratively. The programme understood this from the start and for this reason, the design of the programme also indicates that the two teachers coordinate each week.

Ceibal en Inglés however is disruptive in another sense, since it has managed to integrate into the public education system over 200 teachers who work in the private sector since Ceibal outsources the service of remote teachers to different institutes both in Uruguay and abroad to cover the more than 700 lessons taught each day. At the

On the other hand, *Ceibal en Inglés* has always reached out to find the best possible partners, these are the institutes that provide remote teachers, especially the British Council since it was the institution which won the international tender in 2011, to provide different services in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to the programme.

Other fundamental partners are other institutes that provide remote lessons, Little Bridge, whose platform *Ceibal en Inglés* uses for lesson planning, and the Centre for Research in English Language Learning Assessment (CRELLA). Each partner has a unique role related to their area of expertise.

Ceibal is an agency for innovation in education, and it works for the public education system, in this sense, the *Administración Nacional de Educación Pública* is another essential partner for *Ceibal en Inglés*.

The reason why *Ceibal en Inglés* came into existence was that there were not enough teachers of English to cover all groups in public primary education. The complexity of the problem, probably not too alien to other contexts, brought a rather complex solution which in-

cludes teachers working in the public education system, classroom teachers, others who work in the private sector, and remote teachers. Still, there are other stakeholders in the programme such as quality managers who supervise and support remote teachers, and mentors who constantly visit schools to give support to classroom teachers. These players are the most concerned with what happens in the classrooms on a daily basis. But other concentric circles seemingly farther away from the classroom are also fundamental for the success of each lesson. Such is the case of platform providers and the consequent close relationship with the pedagogical unit at *Ceibal en Inglés*, institute directors in close contact with the programme management and the quality management units, headteachers, schools supervisors, in close contact with mentors, CRELLA in close contact with the assessment unit; and the British Council who has been deeply integrated into the programme through lesson delivery and remote teachers development together with other EFL institutions providing remote lessons.

Given the number of roles, functions and institutions involved in the successful implementation of the programme, what became mandatory for all persons involved was that we all had to learn to collaborate and work in healthy interdependence, as far from competition as possible. Collaboration inside the classroom is somehow the result of the collaborative strategy prevailing across the board of the programme.

Once *Ceibal en Inglés* managed to understand the programme in Primary Education, supervisors in Secondary and Vocational schools also requested the design adapted to their contexts. In this sense, the Conversation Class programme started in 2015, with other partners appearing like Ready to Run as platform providers, as well as classroom teachers of English working in Secondary schools and Vocational Schools and their supervisors. These classroom teachers are EFL professionals and voluntarily join the programme as it offers a native speaker of English as a remote teacher, thus spicing up the use of English in the classrooms and adding an element of interculturality.

Ceibal en Inglés can be described as a network of professionals and students working collaboratively, in constant interdependence. As in the case of the classroom, all these intertwined nets and webs are possible, among other reasons because each one in the programme understands what their roles and responsibilities are, as well as who and where to go when in need of answers to difficult problems. It is the essential bonds between the parties that make the success of every class possible and a beneficial environment for learning. Even at the classroom level, it is quite compelling to witness the valuable alliances the classroom teacher establishes with her students given her lack of knowledge of the target language in primary. Each classroom teacher in every one of our programmes uses her own strategies, but many times these include asking for the collaboration of the kids who have an innate ability to learn English to model for the rest during lessons B and C in the case of primary; or asking a child with the facility for technology to help others upload homework for the remote teacher to correct, among others in all our programmes.

The shiny glitter of the screen in the classrooms, or the use of platforms are clearly then not the stars of the programmes. Quite on the contrary, human relations are at the essence of success or failure in each group. In this sense, not all dyads in the programme formed by the classroom teacher and remote teacher have managed to work collaboratively even when the potential for such work is possible in *Ceibal en Inglés*, nor has the path towards collaboration between the private and the public sectors been easy and smooth, or with the public education sector. Each step has taken its time and the process has been winding but still rewarding.

Collaboration and cooperation are after all the opposites of competition. Competition is all about making sure others do not perform as well as an individual and that individual will try not to share knowledge, skills or strategies to share with other members of the group or the dyad.

Collaboration, on the other hand, understands that "(its) purpose is to make each member a stronger individual in his or her right and

it plays a vital role in building positive relationships in each setting, whereas competition and individualism will tend to result in negative relationships in each setting" (Johnson & Johnson, 1989, 2005, 2009a).²

In *Ceibal en Inglés*, at the classroom level, collaboration requires that both teachers feel the importance of learning English, that both are able to help, support and assist each other, and that they are both able to encourage and give praise every time praise is necessary, or to express disagreement.

Other elements are also fundamental for collaboration to take place such as being able to develop trust in each other. Trust building is not easy, it takes a few weeks before each member of the dyad sees that the other is doing her task responsibly and efficiently, just as it has taken some time for the private and public sectors to trust each other, or for remote teachers to trust the fairness of quality management; or for classroom teachers to trust that mentors will be there when they are needed. Trust is essential because collaboration grows when interdependence exists. In *Ceibal en Inglés*, this means that the classroom teacher can trust that the remote teacher will teach the best possible version of a lesson plan each class, that she will give appropriate feedback to students, that she will share all possible ideas for lessons B and C, that is for the lessons she has to lead.

For the remote teacher, trust in the classroom teacher means that she believes learning English is valuable, that she will do lessons B and C, that is, students will have revised all language that was instructed in the previous remote lesson, that all unanswered questions will be communicated to the remote teacher so she can help students solve problems.

Interdependence includes helping, assisting, encouraging, praising, and doing one's work to the best of one's abilities. All of these acti-

² Cooperative Learning in 21st Century [Aprendizaje cooperativo en el siglo xxi].

David W. Johnson* y Roger T. Johnson, Universidad de Minnesota, Estados Unidos.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.6018/analesps.30.3.201241>

vities can be difficult but they are still not enough for collaboration to happen. It requests all involved to work horizontally- not reacting depending on the other person's position, it expects that all will take good care of each other and that dialogues develop with respect.

There is one aspect of dialogic collaboration that may produce fear, and that is controversy. Controversy among so many different stakeholders can only be expected. In the case of the classroom, the two teachers involved come from different cultural and educational backgrounds, they may even come from different countries, and they will most likely think and feel differently about education, students, technology, learning English, or even if they agree in all of the above, they may still find controversy in how to deal with one or many situations in the classroom.

Controversy and how to deal with it may become the crucible of collaboration; it may turn interdependence into something trite and dry, the two teachers still talk to each other and seem to be working in collaboration but deep down at least one of them has lost trust, or simply has decided that there is no more room for collaboration and competition may arise. On the other hand, controversy may bring positive results. In controversy, we have to express as clearly as possible our ideas and how to bring them to fruition, which are the main obstacles and how to overcome them. When each partner expresses their ideas and views in a constructive and honest dialogue, then the most innovative ideas will flourish, the most convenient for students' learning, which is always the main focus. Controversy in a collaborative environment is perceived as the excuse for pooling talents, insights and ideas that will benefit students.

Students' learning is at the core of all educational activities, and for this reason, *Ceibal en Inglés* has dedicated time and commitment to our adaptive test in close collaboration with the public administration and CRELLA in the understanding that assessment and pedagogy are part of the same process. An adaptive test is a very valuable tool for *Ceibal en Inglés* but also for the whole public administration as more than 75,000 students take the test every year,

and these students may be studying English with other programmes offered by the system. This has allowed *Ceibal en Inglés* to work in close partnership with different areas of the *Administración Nacional de Educación Pública* (National Public Education Administration) and CRELLA as a strategic partner, and it has allowed all involved to discuss the relevance of evaluation in itself and as part of a whole educational perspective that highly values the benefit of teaching English as a Foreign Language.

This publication brings to light the main ingredient of success in *Ceibal en Inglés*, which is the capacity to learn to collaborate and cooperate at all levels, that is in the classroom and beyond. Readers will find in this book several examples of successful collaboration between teachers, within institutes, between institutes and Ceibal, between *Ceibal en Inglés* and the public education sector, between *Ceibal en Inglés* and our partners in Uruguay and abroad. These articles give clear evidence that collaboration is possible, that it is possible for everyone to learn to work with interdependence, and that once this is attained, excellent educational experiences can be lived by hundreds of students in Uruguay. Each one of the articles in this publication seems to bring home one of the main tenets of collaborative learning “Working together to achieve a common goal produces higher achievement and greater productivity than does working competitively or individualistically”.³

Gabriela Kaplan
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³ *Interdependencia positiva en el aprendizaje colaborativo. Marjan Laal, Universidad de Ciencias Médicas de Teherán, Facultad de Medicina, Hospital Sina, Teherán, Irán*
<https://pdf.sciencedirectassets.com/277811/1-s2.0-S1877042813X00278/1-s2.0-S18770428>

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Why it is necessary to learn to collaborate

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«For some teachers, the journey begins personally. For many others, however, it is more fruitful to think, imagine and project together with their colleagues.» Melina Furman (2021, p. 335)

In this paper, we will share concepts in order to analyse the importance of collaborative work in *Ceibal en Inglés*; a process that is necessary for learning to collaborate effectively in other areas. The stakeholders in this programme need to coordinate with, trust, complement, communicate with and commit to each other in order to move in the same direction towards common objectives. Effective collaboration takes time, and it is necessary to learn to collaborate, but it can be done, as will be shown by the examples in this text of successful strategies and experiences in collaboration, in addition to the benefits that incorporating work with others brings to everyone involved, both teachers and students. Collaboration is not a simple task since it involves more than one professional who has the intention and ability to engage in it. At the beginning, tensions and conflicts may emerge when there is no participation or no balanced decision-making between the stakeholders.

A basic characteristic of collaboration is that it is not possible to establish work protocols, but collaborative work must be tailored to the features of each group and stakeholder so that they will learn more and better within their capabilities, interests and motivations in order to produce satisfactory relationships. The end product will be a joint construction in reciprocity with others and in a context that is institutionally defined with the aim of an outcome greater than would be produced individually. For effective collaboration be-

tween the two teachers in charge of each group, it is necessary to react to difficulties positively, highlight achievements, have appropriate expectations, value oneself and others and show interest.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of education, collaboration in the English classroom stands as an essential component for the comprehensive development of students. This paper explores the theoretical basis for the need to foster collaboration. We the authors understand that, faced with the challenge of collaboration, we can benefit from the perspectives of recognized experts in pedagogy.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM AUTHORS WHO GUIDED OUR WORK AND ENRICHING TEACHING SITUATIONS

Authors such as Vygotsky (1978) maintain that learning is a social process. Interaction with peers makes the act of learning possible, enriches the understanding and assimilation of concepts and enables the development of soft skills such as collaboration. Collaboration is a fundamental catalyst for the active construction of knowledge. Vygotsky states that cooperative learning encourages social interaction and facilitates the joint construction of knowledge while solving problems. It is generally understood that the difference between collaboration and cooperation¹ is that cooperation requires mutual affection, while collaboration calls for respect. In *Ceibal en Inglés*, collaboration – and indeed cooperation – goes hand in hand with practising the language, supporting two virtuous aspects of the “social process of learning.”

¹ *Collaboration: A process whereby an individual learns more than they would on their own as a result of the interaction of the members of a team who know how to contrast and differentiate their points of view.*

Cooperation: The trigger of a number of internal evolutionary processes capable of operating only when the individual is in interaction with the people in their environment and in cooperation with a peer.

The collaboration and cooperation between classroom and remote teachers inspire students to imitate those beneficial behaviours, and in turn, students in both remote and English review lessons are invited to debate and learn to negotiate – whether in pairs or groups – by discussing and supporting different points of view on significant topics in English. The debates promote critical thinking, oral production and the negotiation of ideas. Authors such as David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson (2009) suggest that debates are an effective way to develop communication and collaboration skills. Johnson and Johnson, pioneers in cooperative learning research, advocate positive interdependence as an effective means to improve academic performance and promote social skills. In the *Ceibal en Inglés* classroom, collaboration not only strengthens understanding of the content but also contributes to a positive learning environment, which is essential in learning any language. The effects of working with positive interdependence are clearly seen when teachers decide to work on projects, an opportunity that the programme offers every year on different topics. Project-based work is a strategy whereby students work together towards a common goal, for instance, when working on a play such as *Pocahontas*. According to Johnson and Johnson (1994), this learning promotes collaboration, group decision making, and the development of interpersonal skills. Students were able to research, plan and carry out a project in English as complex as a play, which allowed them to use the language in a real-world context. It contributes to the development of social skills, inclusion and a focus on diversity, since all the children played an active role in completing the project regardless of their specific abilities. To achieve this objective, it is essential to form groups with different characteristics such as performance, reasoning, gender, and special education needs, among others. Sharing knowledge and resources ensures the success of all members, who also learn throughout the process. When learning, we cannot neglect social skills such as confidence, self-control, active listening, communication and decision making, without which it would be impossible to collaborate. The teacher assesses the degree of learning of each student and the dynamics of the group, while the student must self-assess and make decisions to improve. Teamwork requires rules that will help students achieve excellence

and address scenarios. It is extremely beneficial to assign a role to each member, such as reporting, recording, timing, managing materials, and then rotating roles so that everyone develops the necessary skills.

Both the classroom teacher and the remote teacher are the mediators who guide and promote learning. They must also show the essential tools offered by technologies to promote debate, interaction, teamwork, and access to sources of information and knowledge. Students know about technology, but they do not always know how to use it at the service of their learning.

In addition to the assignment of clear and rotating roles, other strategies are used such as collaborative digital tools, Google Drive or Microsoft Teams. They all collaborate online and share resources, ideas and provide feedback. This results in a positive lesson and collaborative environment in which they can feel safe and valued enough to participate actively. It should be noted that when practices are shared and new strategies are explored, collaboration in the English classroom is optimized and the skills necessary to be successful in learning the language are made available.

Swain (1985) addresses the significance of communicative competence in language learning. He stresses that collaboration offers crucial opportunities to practise authentic communication in real situations. In the context of the English classroom, interaction between students not only reinforces language skills but also promotes the effective use of the language in various communication contexts.

COLLABORATION: EXCHANGING OPINIONS

Working with others and being able to seek advice is essential. Intrigued by the phenomenon of collaboration and the benefits it brings to the classroom, the authors decided to look into how other teachers in both Uruguay and the United States feel and think about collaboration. In this regard, it was decided to conduct an anonymous survey.

mous survey among colleagues in Uruguay and the United States. This survey was possible, among other reasons, because one of the authors, Delia Taveira, happened to win a Fulbright scholarship for her work in *Ceibal en Inglés* and met colleagues in the United States. Inputs for this article came from this survey.

One of the questions in the survey was "Why is it important to learn to collaborate?" The respondents unanimously expressed views such as, "Because we can share ideas, learn from others, expand our points of view, enrich our knowledge and learn to be flexible and empathetic", "With others, we always grow, learn, are better and stronger as a team." (See ANNE: Collaboration Survey)

The question about collaborative experiences, on the other hand, prompted varied replies. Some stated that it is easy for them to engage in it when they help others. However, when working as a team on a project, for instance, they find it hard, since it is difficult for them to accept different opinions, and there is also the issue of each person's pace. For others it comes naturally, and they have no trouble helping and getting help. They try to contribute and be positive and share their knowledge and experience. It is worth highlighting the contribution of a colleague from the United States who states, "*I find it wonderful because then I get to learn how other people teach. I can then use their way of teaching and implement it in my own teaching*".

When we asked what it means to collaborate, we got answers that make us proud to be teachers. "It means respecting and taking into account the opinions and ideas of others while contributing your own, enriching the output with the contributions of both." It is clear, both in Uruguay and in the United States, that collaborating involves sharing, helping, and supporting.

The Fulbright scholarship experience and the survey findings illustrate how they work in the United States and how widely technologies are used, but, at the same time, it is also clear that many things can be achieved in Uruguay with fewer resources, and very fruitful exchanges occur that strengthen everyone's practices.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Classroom collaboration is an essential element supported by fundamental educational theories. Vygotsky, Johnson & Johnson and Swain agree on the idea that interaction among students not only enriches the educational process but also prepares individuals to face challenges more effectively in an increasingly interconnected world. At *Ceibal en Inglés*, collaboration is essential for the teaching pair to achieve what the students need; and the project-based assignments which the programme offers and encourages teachers to use are a very interesting door to developing collaboration among students. Thus, in the case of Pocahontas, the students not only developed a better relationship with the foreign language and managed to speak and have fun in English, but they were also able to develop communication, negotiation, confidence, self-control, active listening and decision-making skills.

The ultimate objective of cooperative learning is to achieve autonomy, the freedom to choose the ways and means to tackle cognitive tasks. The commitment to continuous improvement helps to offer students quality education with the aim of preparing them to be global citizens proficient in the English language.

ANNEXE: COLLABORATION SURVEY

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1iZjvC1IMRTQ4vOlrodZE17_d16MQYUi9t27M5v0o8kE

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Teaching english from a perspective of commitment and collaboration

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This paper is an account of the teaching of the English language from a different perspective: that of the classroom teacher who works at schools supporting both groups in the *Ceibal en Inglés* Programme and the remote teacher in each online session.

This process takes place in constant collaboration, one of the main skills for adapting the learning of this language to the motivation of every single student. For this purpose, the remote teacher and the classroom teacher must be in permanent communication, in synchrony, to establish a commitment, a tacit agreement that enables the students' conceptual progress.

This paper highlights the different strategies that are used when fulfilling this commitment of collaboration, in which each of the competencies set out in the National Curriculum Framework and its domains are developed to be achieved.

This approach to commitment and collaboration is key to effective and meaningful learning as educators seek to ensure a learning environment in which students feel motivated and supported in their process of learning English.

In this regard, we not only propose active participation but also rely on digital platforms such as Little Bridge and Kahoot, which allow us to encourage students through games. This addition also allows us to integrate students who, for different reasons, sometimes fall behind in their learning.

Both, the remote teacher and the classroom teacher, always seek to create a collaborative environment where group or pair work is encouraged. This allows students to practise the language jointly and learn from each other. A methodology that has worked for us is to tell students in advance what is expected of them in a certain activity, so that they understand its purpose and this encourages them to strive to improve their level of English.

It must also be noted that each student is unique, so it is important to adapt these teaching strategies to their individual needs; needs that I have identified in various groups, either because those groups have integrated students or included students.

As we know, collaboration in the context of integration or inclusion is crucial to ensure people's well-being and development. However, it must be stated that integration is not the same as inclusion.

School integration is an educational approach that ensures that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have access to quality education in an inclusive environment. This involves adapting and adjusting education to meet students' individual needs so as to promote an inclusive culture in the school and provide adequate support and resources to ensure educational success for all. Instead, inclusion is an educational approach whereby all individuals participate fully and equitably in all areas of society through recognition of and respect for diversity and the removal of obstacles that might prevent them.

Therefore, the objective of this collaboration among different players is to create inclusive environments that will promote access and growth for all individuals. As a result, in lessons B and C with these students, we use different strategies, such as designing routine sheets and billboards on which the different contents can be seen chronologically, and adaptive activities can be fostered.

This commitment also involves being available to students, offering guidance when they need it, and being willing to adapt the activities and the pace of instruction to their individual needs. It is not

an easy task, since this implies being flexible and open to the students' diverse learning styles and rates of progress, but when the work is done collaboratively, the learning environment expands, as if a beam of light came in through the tiny crack in a closed door. Seeing how students learn, help each other, and support each other in this process is something hard to put into words.

The work modality promoted in English classrooms greatly helps not only students with ASD but also those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

Students with dyslexia often experience a lack of self-confidence, so it is crucial that the teacher shows genuine interest in teaching them and helping them make progress. Although sometimes they may go unnoticed, it is essential to acknowledge and value the efforts they make to improve, so it is important to work on their strengths, valuing every little step forward.

These students are capable of acquiring knowledge in a second language. However, it is essential that they are incentivized. They must be provided with the necessary resources and emotional support so that they feel capable, valued, and that their effort is worthwhile. Since these students need more time, teaching of vocabulary and acquiring the techniques and strategies for learning must be accompanied by visual support material (pictograms, mental maps, images, photographs, etc.).

The following are some examples:

- Using memory games with cards that have the picture on one side and the word on the other.
- Listening activities should be less than 2 or 3 minutes long for phonological awareness.
- In speaking skills, the following learning strategies are used: new technologies and interactive activities that improve pronunciation and intonation, and the design of flashcards that help retain the vocabulary learned.

- Regarding reading, the methods used include visual learning of words.
- For writing skills, the resources used include individual whiteboards, games, visual dictionaries, the creation of books and simple short stories, interactive writing and writing letters based on a sample.

Although several examples were mentioned of modalities that we use together with the remote teacher for teaching English, it should be noted that to my amazement I have seen how these children with ASD and learning difficulties (dyslexia) have incorporated this second language more easily than other students, perhaps due to the structure of English - subject, verb and object, also known in linguistics as SVO -, which they find easy to take in.

Spanish language teaching should take some cues from English - English language teaching books with large print, clear pictures and simple vocabulary - or use interactive digital material that taps into audio-visual resources, since this language has developed and implemented techniques and tools with students with different abilities in mind.

All teachers must know the interests, emotions and factors that influence the educational process and integrate these technologies, since they are tools that promote a more inclusive language. This allows learning content to be adapted to students' the characteristics. It is also necessary to use other technologies or resources, such as e-books, blogs, open educational resources (OER), discussion forums, online chat and the technologies associated with web 2.0 in general.

Observation made me question the statement that the second language is harder to learn, as I have seen how students with different abilities take ownership of L2 more easily. Inclusion occurs more naturally, perhaps because cooperating and talking things over with the remote teacher during each online session creates an environment of support and collaboration that facilitates the learning process.

In summary, teaching English as a second language from an inclusive perspective implies an unfailing commitment and collaboration between the classroom teacher and the remote teacher. Different strategies and resources, such as digital platforms, games, group activities, adaptations and visual supports are used to adapt learning to students' individual needs. A motivating learning environment is promoted, and progress - no matter how small - is valued. The incorporation of digital technologies and resources also plays a major role in the teaching process, allowing for a more inclusive and personalized approach. In short, this inclusive and collaborative look at teaching English as a foreign language ensures effective and meaningful learning for all students, and it enables each student to find their own path to mastering the language.

As an educator, I feel the ethical and moral obligation to incorporate everything within my reach to facilitate my students' learning, and as a mother of a student with dyslexia, I am grateful that there are educators committed to improving each of their students' learning.

Consequently, I will always promote collaboration in the workplace and highlight the commitment shown by both the remote teacher and the classroom teacher which is a small but valuable contribution to our students' learning that we make every day.

I sincerely hope that like the seeds that a girl in a story planted along a desolate road until they finally blossomed, our students will thrive in a material world where knowledge opens doors, and the command of the English language is a fundamental tool for their future.

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The butterfly's flight

Natalia Guzmán,
Mentor, Ceibal en Inglés

Did you know that when a butterfly is born in captivity, its genes are modified affecting its ability to fly?

Until two years ago, I had given little thought to the lives of butterflies. I must be one of the few people who don't find butterflies particularly charming. In fact, I've been quite afraid of them since I was very young. Five years ago, I began working as a *Ceibal en Inglés* mentor. Being a mentor requires a great deal of flexibility and adaptability, since we work in diverse contexts. During this time, I've had the opportunity to visit primary schools with different characteristics – urban, rural and SEN – and located in different departments. This has undoubtedly been a great opportunity to see and learn incredible things.

One of my favourite places to work has always been rural schools, perhaps because I was born in Montevideo, far from the countryside and everything it represents. These schools have unique features not commonly seen in urban schools, such as farm animals, large gardens, fruit trees and even museums. I feel they always have something new to discover. Two years ago, I visited a rural school in the department of San José located on the outskirts of Libertad. That day, one of its two teachers invited me to see her silkworms, and several children aged between 6 and 8 years old gathered around me, eager and excited to show me a box. That box was the result of their hard work and dedication. I couldn't explain to them that I had no interest in seeing inside the box because of my fear, as it would have meant destroying their excitement about sharing their work with me. Therefore, I had to muster up the courage and went along with them into the classroom to see those creatures. I entered the classroom, and a child approached me, jumping with

the box in his hands. The panic I felt imagining it could fall on me is hard to describe. I took a step back and looked into the box from a distance. There I saw several cocoons and some butterflies that seemed to have just hatched. They were so still that I wondered if they might fly away but the teacher explained that they could not fly. I didn't understand why so she clarified that as these insects are raised in captivity for silk production, they gradually lose their ability to fly. This caught my attention and that's how I learnt that butterflies raised in captivity – whether for silk production in this case or for research in other species – have their genes modified to the point that their ability to fly is limited or even lost altogether. Why am I telling you all this? Because since I started thinking about this article, I couldn't stop thinking about butterflies.

For as long as I can remember, my mind is constantly flowing with ideas. I always picture thousands of possible scenarios for different situations or problems. However, I've always had trouble bringing them to life.

As I mentioned before, I started working at *Ceibal en Inglés* in 2019. My job involves visiting schools to offer help, support, strategies and even linguistic and technological tools to teachers so that the programme runs as smoothly as possible in each group and each school. Like me, there are more than 20 mentors who are part of the *Ceibal en Inglés* mentoring team; each of them with different skills, knowledge and expertise. The *Ceibal en Inglés* field team – as we are also referred to – meets from February to December one Friday a month. In these monthly meetings, mentors from all the departments across the country reflect, discuss and reframe ways of doing things, but we also meet to ensure we're all moving in the same direction. In these meetings, ideas commonly emerge, leading to the formation of teams to develop them. I must confess that my first year was quite overwhelming. Before becoming a Mentor, I taught English in Bilingual Schools. There, my whole universe was composed of my students and their parents. I seldom worked with colleagues. Designing projects and putting them into practice was a task that I did largely on my own with my students in my class-

room. So, when I found myself in such a large and cohesive team as the *Ceibal en Inglés* one, it took me a while to adapt to working collaboratively, which sounds easy to do but in practice involves having certain skills that I developed over the years and certainly did not have at that time.

You might be wondering what the butterflies may have to do with all this. As we all know, what characterises butterflies the most, is their ability to fly. However, it's a skill that they lose in captivity. If I've learnt anything as a mentor, it's that exactly the same thing happens with ideas. When an idea pops into our heads, there are two possibilities: that it remains like that, just an idea, a dream, a wish, or that the idea becomes a reality. If we keep the idea in captivity, without externalising or sharing it with others, it may see the light but is unlikely to go far, just like the butterflies that hatch in captivity. However, if the ideas are shared with others who have knowledge and experiences different from mine, these ideas will become stronger, grow, transform and fly, just like butterflies that hatch in freedom.

The problem is what follows, is it easy to share an idea? How much does my ego play a role in all this? Once I share my idea, is it still mine? Is it the other person's or is it ours? Does it affect me if it's our idea rather than mine? The reality is that it should not affect us at all. When we share our ideas with others, it inevitably opens the doors for collaborative work and there's nothing that makes us "fly" or grow more personally and professionally than when we can work with others. Working collaboratively is not just telling someone about an idea that I've come up with or dividing tasks. It involves working towards a common goal, nourishing each other with knowledge, actively listening to each other to understand the other's vision, and finding the best way to implement the idea. In essence, it means inviting the other person to make that idea their own and working together to make it work. Ideas developed within a group of people who work together and who believe that they can make a change, improvement or simply that it can make a positive impact, are ideas that blossom and are constantly nurtured.

I learnt all this within the CEI mentoring team. Over these five years, I've managed to put my ego aside and share ideas and projects with both my colleagues and supervisors, achieving results, always better than I had imagined. Moreover, I've learnt and grown personally and professionally through each exchange, each meeting, each joint reflection and each implementation to the point where it has undoubtedly become the practice, I apply the most, because I'm convinced that it's the way to achieve a greater impact.

Something very similar happens when someone makes me part of their ideas. It's necessary I to put our ego aside to be able to offer every possible suggestion to contribute with it, even if that means unearthing ideas that were just beginning to form in our minds but had not yet been "liberated". Ultimately, ideas are nothing if we can't put them into practice, and doing it alone may lead to falling short of our expectations. But all this becomes more complex when it comes to education. Why? Because the beneficiaries of our ideas are the students, other teachers or colleagues, and therefore their impact always relates, in one way or another, to improving learning processes, motivation or professional development. In this regard, we can't be selfish. We must set ideas free, invite others to join us during the development of these ideas so that they can fly as high as possible, thereby becoming solid projects that can be implemented in such a way that the outcomes exceed any expectations we had when the idea first aroused in our minds.

In conclusion, we could say that an idea starts "trapped" in a cocoon. When we share it and allow ourselves to enjoy the pleasure of working in collaboration with somebody else, we are helping that cocoon to hatch and turn into its best version. There is no greater satisfaction than seeing that "butterfly" that we and others have nourished finally take flight. Evidently, in order to achieve this, we must be able not only to trust that the other person will help develop the idea but also to trust that working with others will allow us to see the idea from different perspectives as well as understand and evaluate possibilities we may have failed to consider. In other words, we must trust that if we work collaboratively with others, ideas will blossom as we grow personally and professionally.

Blended: a new paradigm of collaboration and cooperative work

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The Royal Spanish Academy (Real Academia Española) (2023), defines "collaborate" as "to work with somebody else or other people on the completion of an undertaking." Along these lines, Keyton (2017) defines collaboration as "a type of interaction in which individuals, or team or organisational members, work together to reach a common shared goal, activity, or production" (p. 1) and Salvato, Reuer, & Battigalli (2017) as "the act of working together by two or more persons to accomplish something" (p. 963). This brief review shows us that collaboration is often related to teamwork intended to achieve a goal. The very etymology of the term "collaboration", from the Latin "collabōrāre", suggests working together: *co* (with, together) + *labōrāre* (to work).

With this meaning, collaboration applies to a wide range of disciplines, and education is no exception. A noteworthy example can be analysed in the Uruguayan programme for remote English teaching: *Ceibal en Inglés*. Since its inception in 2012, collaboration has been one of the fundamental pillars of the programme, as the project is based on the idea that students' learning of English depends on the collaborative and cooperative work of the teaching duo: the remote teacher (RT) and the classroom teacher (CT). Both teachers work as a team towards the common goal of their students learning the language, and they are jointly responsible for the course content and the activities of each lesson.

For Ceibal en Inglés to succeed, working collaboratively is paramount. Both RT and the CT need to have read and discussed the lesson plan together, participating actively and providing feedback

to each other at the end of the lesson, with the aim of analysing and improving classroom practices to facilitate student learning (Kaplan & Brovotto, 2018, p. 18).

However, collaboration in the programme is not limited to this RT-CT team teaching approach, it involves many other actors that make up a large education community: mentors, quality managers, school management teams, coordinators, and technicians, among many others.

At present, *Ceibal en Inglés* works with thirteen institutes that provide English teaching services with 255 remote teachers responsible for teaching more than 3,500 4th, 5th, and 6th form groups in primary education. These institutes are geographically distributed in Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, and Peru. Until 2020, the remote teachers worked in person from the premises of each of these institutes, where they had teaching points (classrooms with videoconference equipment from where the remote teacher taught classes in different schools).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced *Ceibal en Inglés* to modify the educational model we were used to and move some of the remote teachers to their homes. The pandemic taught all stakeholders involved some valuable lessons and served as a precedent for *Ceibal en Inglés* to launch a pilot programme in 2022 that enabled remote teachers who were familiar with the programme and met certain technical and academic requirements, to teach from their homes. In 2023 this project was renewed, and more remote teachers previously teaching from their teaching points moved to their homes.

That was how collaboration and cooperative work between remote teachers left the face-to-face level we were used to and moved to today's blended ecosystem combining remote teachers working from the same physical space at the teaching points and teachers working from their homes. This paradigm shift pushed us to develop new strategies for cooperative work and collaboration from in-person and online environments. New possibilities arose, but so

did new questions that this article will try to answer based on Conev's experiences and lessons learnt: How do you promote bonding and group cohesion in a blended team? What tools can be useful for remote collaboration? How do you foster a collaborative culture and the joint construction of knowledge in a geographically distributed team?

Conev is a binational educational consulting company with offices in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Montevideo (Uruguay). In 2022, Conev's teaching staff of nine remote teachers taught more than 150 groups through the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme. In 2023, seven of those teachers underwent a certification process to teach from their homes. All remote teachers found the experience of teaching from their homes positive and referred to the convenience of not wasting time commuting to the institute's premises. In this regard, one of the teachers in the team commented, "It allows me to save travel time, be better rested, and have more energy for my classes" (M. Farias, personal communication, 2023). Although working from home offers many advantages to teachers, according to Cabral (2021), it must be pointed out that ties between employees may weaken. Organisations must therefore develop processes and strategies to promote trust, cohesion, and team identity while trying to reduce the impact of isolation on team members.

In this scenario, developing clear and effective communication practices is key to promoting remote collaboration among teachers who do not share a common physical space. First, it is necessary to establish adequate communication channels to allow teachers to maintain seamless regular contact. Two main internal communication tools are used at Conev: WhatsApp and email, the latter being used to disseminate extensive information that is not urgent. On WhatsApp, the institute created groups for different purposes: technical support, academic support, and working-hours management and control. This helps streamline collaboration efforts and save time. In this regard, one of the teachers in the team points out:

In my opinion, having constantly active WhatsApp groups makes communication a lot easier. Besides, they always support us and

encourage us to communicate with each other. One doesn't feel we're all in different places (...). You feel that if there are any questions or problems, you can ask and someone will always help you (L. Iglesias, personal communication, 2023).

Another teacher points out, "WhatsApp groups are definitely exchange groups. (...) I think that having WhatsApp groups with different objectives encourages interaction. Management is one thing, pedagogical issues is another one, and technical support is a different thing. That makes it easier." (M. Gavle, personal communication, 2023). This is why it is also necessary to establish clear usage rules; teachers must understand which channel is for emergencies, and which is for group discussions, among others. It is key to define and communicate these issues from the beginning to avoid confusion and optimise communication. It is also important to encourage two-way communication, creating spaces where all team members have the chance to speak up. Conev also organises follow-up, training, and synchronous exchange sessions on videoconferencing platforms. However, it must be pointed out that these sessions are usually personalised, with one-on-one meetings between the academic coordinator and the teacher. Marcela Galve has been working as a remote teacher for two years, and in the interview, she stressed the significance of considering the creation of virtual exchange spaces. She specifically suggested the implementation of synchronous discussion groups, where teachers can openly share their experiences, challenges, and examples of best practices.

However, promoting clear and effective communication in the team is not enough to develop remote collaboration. It is important to remember the teaching practice is usually regarded as a lonely and individual task, and having a geographically distributed team may compound social isolation. However, in a discussion with CO-NEV's remote teachers, it became apparent that it was possible for teachers to work as a team despite the distance. "There's an interconnection among everyone. That's great. I feel a really engaging, really empathetic group is formed(...) It doesn't matter whether I'm here, in Jujuy or Mexico, because we all work as a great team" (L. Iglesias, personal communication, 2023). To illustrate this, we set

out to compile some experiences of exchange and collaboration between teachers who are not working in the same physical space. Marcela Galve, who works from her home in Argentina, talks about a collaboration experience with a teacher who joined the team this year and worked face-to-face at the office:

Conev suggested implementing a kind of tutoring. We had meetings via Google Meet and shared difficulties that arose in our lessons. Sometimes we would discuss how to address a discipline issue, or how to address some communication with some CTs who weren't very communicative (...) For instance, one of the topics we looked at was how to reduce teacher talking time, encouraging interaction between students with more pair work, proposing, for example, that they greet each other, they ask each other «How are you?»" (M. Galve, personal communication, 2023).

Under this collaboration model, a more experienced teacher supports a colleague on their foray into the teaching practice in the Ceibal en Inglés programme by providing advice and having exchanges about their classroom practices and experiences. However, the collaborative spirit of the teachers is not restricted to this tutoring structure established by the institute, as we have found many other examples arising from the interest of the teachers themselves. The following are other examples:

I had worked with a school last year, and the teacher working with that school this year was feeling somewhat overwhelmed. We were working together to find strategies to deal with behavioural problems, since there are students with very strong personalities. Together we realised that the CT's support was key but it was important to approach that dialogue in a certain way, and we also saw the significance of approaching the class with a dynamic perspective that would force the students to be more attentive and would motivate them (M. Farias, personal communication, 2023).

Rosario Vintoñuke joined the team this year and worked face-to-face in Montevideo. However, the challenges she was facing when working with one of her courses compelled her to reach out to an

Argentinian remote teacher who was working from home:

I was having a hard time connecting with the students in the class I'd been assigned. I didn't know how to motivate them and they were disruptive. I talked it over with the RT they'd worked with the previous year to see what tools she recommended (...) She suggested doing written activities for short periods or asking the children to use their computers and to work more independently from time to time as a means to bring more order and be able to do some activities with oral interaction. (R. Vintoñuke, personal communication, 2023).

These dialogues based on each teacher's class experience allow us to share knowledge and respond to common challenges such as classroom management.

Collaboration also occurs in the exchange of teaching tools or materials. Sandra Prieto, who is working from home, recalls, "I wanted to work with Mystery of Cape Cold, but I didn't know the materials and I didn't know how to approach them. A colleague who was working face-to-face had already worked on the project, and she shared with me the materials that she had adapted" (personal communication, 2023). Marcela Galve recounts a similar situation: "At the end of the year a teacher was using a tool called Padlet, on which children could share their final projects and see their classmates' projects. I wasn't aware of it, and I thought it was a great contribution" (personal communication, 2023).

In conclusion, the experiences shared by remote teachers in this paper confirm the feasibility of building a cohesive team despite geographical distance. The implementation of communication technologies is proving a fundamental component in keeping up a seamless and constant connection among team members. Conev continues to explore and adapt to this new blended scenario while seeking new strategies for fostering collaboration, cohesion, and team identity in this context.

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Seamless communication as the key to the success of the different Ceibal en Inglés actors in Alianza

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INTRODUCTION

Ceibal en Inglés, a cutting-edge educational project in Uruguay, integrates technology and education to improve learning opportunities for both students and teachers. In this context, seamless communication appears as a key element for the success of all those involved in the CEI initiative.

"It's necessary to identify the needs of each audience and create, through communicational strategies, an atmosphere of cooperation in the organisational environment." Pineda Henao, A. E. (2020)

At Alianza Cultural Uruguay-Estados Unidos, provider to *Ceibal en Inglés*, we regard communication as the basis for the success of the programmes we manage. As part of this communicative dynamic, *Ceibal en Inglés* stands out as an example of communication which is not only a means but a crucial actor in delivering classes throughout the country. Through effective communication, a constant flow of information is established to facilitate collaboration, understanding and the achievement of common objectives.

With a 10-year track record in *Ceibal en Inglés*, we have refined different procedures in terms of communication with the various stakeholders. This paper will share the variety of internal and external communication tools that are used daily and facilitate not only interaction but also the anticipation of challenges, collaboration to solve problems, and exploration of new opportunities for improvement.

In the following sections, we will explore how we have implemented this communication process, detailing the tools and strategies used to ensure it is seamless at all levels of our initiative, from the first contact with the schools to internal and external coordination throughout the year. We will share how our dedication to effective communication has helped build strong relationships and increasingly significant CEI achievements.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Effective internal communication in the institute is essential. To achieve this, we use various means of communication, such as face-to-face meetings, digital platforms, emails, and instant messaging, which ensure a constant and timely flow of information. We also promote two-way dialogue for the actors to express their concerns, share their experiences, and contribute to the continuous improvement of the educational process. This effective and open communication sets us apart and allows us to build a robust and collaborative education community in the context of CEI.

It is a fact that this work philosophy helps us achieve increasingly better results with everyone involved. As an example, throughout the year, we organise meetings with staff to share best practices and assess progress towards our objectives. The availability of internal telephones at each TP simplifies immediate communication, whether with the technical service department, coordinators or teaching staff. In line with our open-door policy, we foster an environment where communication flows in an open and accessible manner, which contributes to a collaborative and enriching setting for every member of the education community.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION: AN ONGOING CHALLENGE

Year after year, communication with the schools is a feat, a step-by-step journey towards a more solid and effective collaboration that must persist throughout the school year. As part of our orga-

nisational system, we created the "Communication with Schools" spreadsheet, which, as a kind of "mother ship", outlines the structure of our interactions from the beginning of the school year, spanning initial connections to follow-up calls. The information is shared with remote teachers to benefit their relationship with their teaching peer and their students.

Setting up calls to the assigned schools on the first business days is a tradition diligently maintained by the three programme coordinators. These contacts required by *Ceibal en Inglés* reinforce already consolidated collaborations and establish new relationships with schools. Each exchange is handled in a personalised way, combining responsibility with kindness to build support and trust in the programme and the institution.

During this period, in a friendly atmosphere, we collect essential information such as contact details, communication preferences, Ceibal lesson schedules, school context, special activities and the principals' perspectives. It is essential to convey our commitment to children's learning to the school leaders, always ensuring they have access to our communication channels.

As an example of the above, we believe it is very important to observe and respect the schools' preferences. We are aware that some schools should be contacted in the morning, others in the afternoon, others prefer the telephone as the main means of communication, some only want to be contacted in cases of emergencies, while others provide us with their WhatsApp numbers. The fundamental premise when we reach the different schools and educational centres is to respect their preferences, recognising that they manage much more than English classes, which is why the hard work of principals and those responsible is taken into account.

Based on the above, it is essential to consult previous call logs when contacting schools over the telephone around the middle of the year. Given the number of schools that we manage and our commitment to personalised interactions, the spreadsheet provides us with the necessary data. This practice not only helps to effec-

tively personalise the call but also strengthens the bond with the stakeholders. This year, when we contacted a school for the second time, the principal shared her observations about a group of students whom she perceived to be unmotivated in the English class. She kindly asked us to pass this message on to the RT, so we took prompt and efficient action to address the issue, and a quick solution was arrived at. Given that the relationship between remote teachers and classroom teachers constitutes a fundamental pillar for the programme's success, our top priority was, in this specific case as well as in all others, to promote effective coordination at all times. We are convinced that this ensures an environment conducive to the continued development of the programme.

However, we would like to emphasise that our connection is not restricted to schools only. Maintaining open and continuous communication with the key members of our team, including the management team, the pedagogical team and, of course, our quality manager, is essential. This strategic connection not only strengthens our internal collaboration but also optimises our ability to rise to challenges and seize opportunities. Each team member plays a critical role in the accomplishment of our educational mission, and effective communication with them is essential to the continued development and excellence of the CEI programme.

Upon receiving the communication flow sent by Ceibal, it is our responsibility to always relay the information to the Alianza team, as appropriate. We always reply to messages acknowledging receipt within 24 hours. It is important to confirm that we have read the communications and will take the required action.

Regular contact with *Gestión Ceibal* is maintained; our operations colleagues monitor all groups weekly and report the current situation. When we face a moment of confusion or we need to clarify something, we turn to them and they respond promptly. For instance, this year we requested a virtual meeting because we thought it would be more effective to ask our questions and find solutions for the proper completion of the spreadsheets and use of the videoconferencing system. The meeting was very useful and brought Ceibal and Alianza's teams closer from a new perspective.

We also felt fully supported by the pedagogical team, who were there for us in some virtual sessions with different remote teachers. The sessions were fruitful and made it possible to provide further support to teachers who were facing challenges. We, the coordinators, had meetings with the pedagogical team to improve the teaching practice in pursuit of the intended academic performance. It was certainly very positive to have this team to count on, as they knew how to guide us, and offered the necessary help. We feel the teamwork closed the gap between us and them. It is now safe to say that WE contributed to the achievement of the objectives in a sustained manner.

Our closest link is with the assigned Quality Manager (hereinafter QM). Our communication flows very naturally, which we highly appreciate. The main means we use are email and a Gmail group, which allows us to ask questions, address concerns or anticipate problems. As we mentioned, given the number of groups we have year after year, we can expect challenges to arise daily, and that we will need to resort to the QM. The weekly meeting allows us to address all the issues that came up in the week. We not only discuss these issues but also seek solutions and provide information to the relevant parties. We feel that we can effectively address and resolve problems that arise by anticipating them and obtaining appropriate responses.

For instance, this year we also held short virtual meetings in addition to the weekly meeting. These meetings were held at our or the QM's request, and they gave us the opportunity to discuss issues that called for immediate solutions, such as specific concerns regarding calls, matters related to special projects, or various and urgent issues.

This close and unfailing collaboration provides us with the necessary flexibility and efficiency to quickly adapt to the challenges and opportunities inherent in the CEI programme. Furthermore, it increases our ability to provide strong support to our teachers and staff involved, which undoubtedly contributes significantly to the successful operation of the programme.

CONCLUSIONS AND COMMITMENT TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

One of the most widely read authors in the field of personal and professional development, Paul J. Meyer (n.d.), supports the notion that quality communication is essential when he says that “communication – the human connection - is the key to personal and career success.”

At Alianza, we work every day to foster collaboration, promote effective communication, and pursue continuous improvement. We regard these principles as fundamental in all of our programmes and, above all, essential to the success of *Ceibal en Inglés*, a programme greatly appreciated and valued at our institution. We understand that effective communication goes beyond words. It implies understanding the needs of everyone involved and acting accordingly. We are committed to increasing this understanding by fostering frank and responsive dialogue with the stakeholders and creating an environment where collaboration and continuous improvement are essential.

This perspective enables us to operate efficiently for the benefit of students, teachers, and programme coordinators, identifying and considering the nuances of the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme and looking ahead with the determination to keep contributing to the programme's continued growth and success.

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The three-way collaboration in Ceibal en Inglés

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WHAT IS MEANT BY COLLABORATION?

According to Lumapps' managers (a team that helps employees to meaningfully connect with their company, to feel a sense of "place," of purpose, of belonging in this digital world), collaboration is to work together on a specific task or project. It is a style of work that allows all stakeholders to enjoy the benefits of good practices and perfect the results of their organization. The efficiency of collaboration in the field of education can be traced back to the 1950s in the USA. At those times it was considered "a good teaching practice" to have two teachers assigned to a group of students each sharing her expertise on a specific topic, and thus, guaranteeing good quality in their lessons. In CEI this is reflected in the collaboration between RTs and CTs, whose coordination helps to succeed in the different classes (A, B and C). However, RT-CT is not the only team in the CEI process of English Language Learning, RTs work on a three-way collaborative process with their ICs and other RTs as well. The question that remains now is what makes an effective collaborator?

Chakkol, M., Finne, M. and Johnson, M. in "Understanding the Psychology of Collaboration: What Makes an Effective Collaborator?" (2017) highlight ten individual attributes necessary for effective collaboration at work. Below we are going to enumerate them and spot how relevant each might be in CEI.

IDEALLY ALL COLLABORATIVE WORKERS SHOULD BE:

1. Strategically minded: this attribute refers to the ability to understand the job as a whole and have an overview of the organisation or project. In CEI it is essential to understand the chain in the project and be empathic among all stakeholders (locations and their own characteristics, institutes, schools, QMs, mentors, CTs, RTs, technicians, administrative staff, among others, last but not least, the students and their families). The project involves a great number of people coming from different disciplines and areas and we are all necessary to cater the students with the best English class possible.

2. Team oriented workers: it is in the genesis of CEI to work as a team. The fact that there are two teachers (CT and RT) in each lesson requires coordinated teamwork and collaboration from scratch.

3. Good communicators: as mentioned above the collaboration between CT and RT is essential for lessons A, B and C to take place effectively; however, a fast and fluid communication with the IC can guide the RTs in their daily job as well as help administrative staff to follow special changes in schedule, for example.

4. Open to sharing: When planning a lesson, a team of RTs can share ideas, resources and techniques and, thus, plan a lesson collaboratively, making it possible to adapt tasks and activities to the different groups and contexts.

5. Creative and innovative: To warranty an effective and motivating lesson plan the RTs should be open to innovation, learning, creation and change. CEI offers a vast amount of training capsules that inspire RTs in their daily planning. There is also an offer of projects (like Mystery of Cape Cold along the Riverbanks, Shakespeare Festival, Minecraft Craftaways) through which both RTs and CTs are allowed to introduce innovative tasks in their lessons and also foster their learners' creative and holistic skills.

6. Empathetic: An empathetic worker is ready to understand the needs of others and be ready to help cooperatively. Although there may be many examples of this characteristic in CEI, for reasons of space we are going to mention just one. It is common to find students with special needs in a class. Apart from the help of the CT who must communicate this issue immediately and see to the seating arrangement, for example, RTs must respond humanly and professionally. The help, advice and expertise of the IC provides the point of view of an experienced professional who can shed new light on the issue.

7. Collaboration believers: RTs should see the benefits of collaboration and be willing to take risks to achieve better practices. In the field of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) in the 21st Century this characteristic of believing in collaboration implies being open to new teaching ideas and practices as well as learning and managing technology with pedagogical purposes. Good and fluid collaboration among RTs and their IC is once more present in the programme.

8. Good Listeners: All those in CEI must be sure to listen to others before making judgements to make sure their own judgement is correct. This can be seen at staff meetings and meetings with the QM, especially those in which advice is given and good practices in lessons analysed.

9. Ethical in their job: It goes without saying that moral and ethical values are present in the CEI team. We work with human beings who should be respected and valued. Respect for others and the time and work of others turns out to be a vital requirement. It is crucial to be respectful and kind. One of the most important values present in CEI is kindness. Actually, communication is essential to create a comfortable working environment and therefore, when we write messages to colleagues (CTs and RTs) we should do so with great care. Effort should be made to treat co-workers with respect and show our will to aid the other. In order to let all the staff of an institute know about best practices to write to CTs, messages are always modelled by our IC before being sent to the CTs.

10. Good leaders: Teachers are leaders who know how to motivate and bring people together in a positive manner. As we mentioned in point 1 above the CEI project involves different people from a variety of areas working together for one specific end. It is a must that we all engage in our jobs with a humble, proactive attitude for the common good of the community.

As mentioned above in this article, RTs work on a three-way collaborative process: RT/CT; RT/RT; RT/IC.

In the next paragraphs we are going to describe, in the light of experience, three of the processes of collaboration in CEI. For the purpose of this paper, we have decided to call them: Coordination: RT/CT collaboration, Micro collaboration: RT/RT teamwork and Macro collaboration: RT/IC cooperation.

COORDINATION: (RT/CT)

Let's take first the RT/CT collaboration. Communication between the RTs and the CTs is essential to be able to implement the plan in each course. Pair work and group work in a competitive context, for example, might be very motivating; however, to implement competitions in certain groups of students might lead to disruption and failure. That's why the CT and the RT must discuss from the very beginning the special characteristics of the students and their attitude to competition. We might also encounter that several CTs had groups that are difficult to manage on a daily basis so their most concern is that the group can become disruptive during the English class. In this case, RT and CT communication is influential since together they can help each other and find ways to create a better learning environment by the implementation of a different seating arrangement, by adapting the presentation or by adding other resources that might attract students' attention during the lesson. Adaptation of certain tasks is, thus, a challenge for the RT who must develop her creative skills and flexibility. CEI encourages creativity in projects like Mystery of Cape Cold along the River-

banks, Minecraft Craftaways and Shakespeare Festival as well as the Annual Contests for RTs organized by CEI in the last three years (2021, 2022, & 2023). It is worth mentioning, though, that the voice of the CTs on the implementation of these projects is very valuable since not all groups are ready and willing to step on such a challenge. These projects are to be enjoyed by all stakeholders, they are an opportunity to involve learners and their families as well, that is why the CTs' advice and opinion is to be taken into account as they know the learners and their families better than the RTs. After the lessons (A; B and C) feedback from the CT (about the Projects and in ordinary lessons as well) is always a necessary ingredient for planning and adapting the next lesson plan and making sure the CEI project develops in a virtuous loop. This takes us to the next link in the chain of this project, the RT/RT collaboration.

MICRO COLLABORATION: PLANNING WITH AND ADVICE FROM COLLEAGUES (RT/RT)

In an ideal context and whenever possible it is advisable that the RTs of an institute work together in the planning of the lessons. More than one mind at a task ensures variety, fun and accuracy. Planning can be tough and time consuming so collaboration among RTs also has a lot to do with the economy of time. As we mentioned above each group of learners have their own characteristics so adaptation of each plan still remains the solo job of each RT. But there can be no denying that once the core of a lesson plan is done, its adaptation becomes an easier task. Every lesson plan is perfectly adaptable since the objectives of the lesson are always there. Each RT tailors then the presentation to suit their groups.

RTs can also share issues that can be solved in the light of different points of view and experience. Collaboration is also about togetherness and companionship. When faced with a problem, an RT can seek advice and recommendation from other RTs. We must bear in mind that we learn from experience but also from those that surround us. Very often one's own problems are shared by others

and in a virtuous collaboration scheme, issues might seem lighter, easier and faster to solve. Every RT might encounter a difficulty in her lesson that might be disrupting a student's progress; by asking her co-workers for advice the issue could be smoothly solved. In addition, an RT might be working with some groups that other RT might have formerly had so they can share perceptions and experiences of what activities are advantageous for the group and which activities are not. It is evident, therefore, that communication and collaboration are vital for teaching in CEI. Finally, there are certain times when RTs need the advice and guidance of their ICs.

MACRO COLLABORATION (RT/IC)

Although technology has bridged the gap of distance and online learning is possible and here to stay, RTs work from a distance, some may not have been to Uruguay ever and they see each group of students just once a week and just for 45 minutes. This might lead to difficulties in getting an overall picture of the CEI process and it might be complex for the RTs to be able to solve issues of different kinds on their own. In the theory mentioned in "Understanding the Psychology of Collaboration: What Makes an Effective Collaborator?" (2017), an effective collaborator was established as someone who is strategically minded and a good and empathetic listener. These qualities must be present in all stakeholders but it is the ICs who may probably need the skill the most. It is their task to lead the group of RTs and make it possible for the whole CEI process to jell for the benefit of the students and their learning. Periodical meetings where different aspects of the learning and teaching process can be discussed are strongly recommended. Particular issues must be analysed in these meetings and the ICs may suggest different paths that will lead to a healthy solution. Feedback in a loop shape is also required as it is the RT the one who knows her group and works cooperatively with the CT. That is why these meetings between RT and IC must be carried out on a regular basis, always aiming at a smooth development of the CEI Project.

ALL ON BOARD

As it is evident in the description above, collaborative work is unquestionably applied in CEI as the project involves a large number of staff coming from different disciplines and areas working together for the same aim. There are from scratch two teachers (CT and RT) who activate coordinated teamwork and whose good relationship and constructive communication is essential for effectiveness in lessons A, B and C. But the chain of collaboration (the three-way collaboration) is what makes CEI so special. Can this chain be improved even further? Of course. Welcome on board!

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Sharing knowledge: a positive impact on our community

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Collaboration has a profound impact on teaching practices and student outcomes within the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme. These collaborative efforts have brought about changes within the teaching community fostering a culture of knowledge sharing, skill enhancement, and resource utilization that ultimately enriches both teachers' and students' learning experiences.

This article explores how collaboration is defined in the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme and highlights two examples; Continuous Professional Development (CPD) sessions and the use of "helpers" in the classroom.

Ceibal en Inglés creates a dynamic learning environment by bringing together teachers with different backgrounds, experiences, and areas of expertise. Collaboration in the programme involves sharing ideas, resources, and experiences to improve English language teaching practices within the program. The collaborative approach aims to create an environment where teachers can thrive while empowering students to reach their potential. This collaborative spirit has promoted a culture within the programme that encourages communication, community building, and mutual support among the teachers. Teachers have been empowered to go beyond teaching methods and embrace innovation and creativity as tools for addressing the challenges faced in today's classrooms. Some of the areas where collaboration has made a difference are

innovative teaching approaches. Teachers are more open to experimenting with techniques and technologies ensuring that their methods remain fresh and captivating. Another impact is the sense of community and support; the programme fosters a sense of community and mutual support. Educators feel empowered knowing that they are not alone on their teaching journey as they have a network of colleagues to share insights and solutions with. Additionally, there is increased motivation and engagement: both teachers and students find themselves more motivated and engaged throughout the learning process. Collaborative teaching strategies, such as utilizing "helpers" instil a sense of purpose and ownership in the field of education.

COLLABORATION AMONG TEACHERS

The big question here is: Can collaboration among teachers enhance student achievement? Collaboration among teachers is a positive force impacting the academic community, considering how it substantially influences students' development. Some studies also reveal a positive connection between teacher collaboration and job satisfaction, identifying 'significant emotional and psychological benefits linked to close teamwork with colleagues' during planning, discussion, and collaboration in team settings. Furthermore, findings suggest that a beneficial impact on student achievement is realized when teachers specifically collaborate to discuss or provide advice on student performance. So, we believe that through the exchange of experiences and knowledge, we can bring about effective outcomes for our students.

In our community, the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions work perfectly as an example of this collaborative approach. These sessions play a role in fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange among educators. During CPD sessions teachers come together to engage in enriching discussions, share ideas, and find creative solutions to address the various challenges encountered in the classroom. CPD sessions provide a platform for

educators to share their resources, experiences, insights, and best practices. This two-way exchange of knowledge empowers educators by giving us ideas to adapt and enhance our teaching methods as well as to cater better to the diverse needs of our students. The collaborative nature of these sessions facilitates problem solving which ultimately contributes to the growth of each participant.

HELPERS: AN INSTANT NETWORK ORGANIZATION

First, let's talk about what a network organization is. A network organization refers to an organizational structure or system where different components are connected or linked with the purpose of collaboration, communication, and information sharing, fostering interactions among its members. This term, when applied to the classroom, relates to the creation of a collaborative and connected learning environment where children organize themselves to achieve common educational objectives.

The teachers and children can build a network organization in which both work together to achieve a common goal. The challenge arises when the teacher is not in the classroom physically, as it is in our case, so we need to figure out solutions that work at a distance to meet the objectives. We must consider that in the same class, we have students with diverse backgrounds and learning styles, and we need to follow the requirements of effective online learning environments for children. In the context of virtual education for children, the concept of a network organization goes perfectly with the need for a collaborative and connected learning environment where children organize themselves to achieve common educational objectives. Participating in virtual learning environments becomes a challenge for both children and teachers, so creating a cohesive learning experience that fosters collaboration becomes a significant part of the learning process. Therefore, the concept of a network organization and its collaborative environment aligns with the structure and requirements of virtual education for children's lessons. It emphasizes the importance of creating a connected and

cohesive learning space that supports knowledge sharing and collaboration among students with diverse backgrounds and the teacher.

We had the opportunity to present in the last CPD session at our Institute. This instance provided us with enriching discussions, innovative ideas, and creative solutions to some of the challenges we face in the classroom. One idea that caught our colleague RTs' attention to be implemented in their classrooms, is the use of 'helpers'. In this approach, students take on the role of peer mentors helping their classmates and even supporting the teacher in facilitating the learning process. By assisting their peers and the remote teacher, the students actively engage in their learning process. Moreover, the helper strategy promotes a classroom environment where everyone feels valued and supported. It encourages students to become more engaged in their own learning process by fostering interaction and collaboration with their peers. Besides it contributes to the development of leadership skills enhancing the sense of understanding and belonging. The concept of "helpers" can be adapted according to classroom needs, objectives, and student levels. It is a strategy that can be adapted to different teaching scenarios. In practice "helpers" may involve assigning students responsibilities such as supporting their peers during group activities or assisting the RT with classroom tasks which helps cultivate a supportive learning environment where students work together to accomplish their goals. We believe the use of helpers in the classroom not only enhances students' understanding of the subject matter and their critical thinking skills but also cultivates essential skills such as teamwork, communication, and empathy. This peer-management approach perfectly captures the collaborative spirit of the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme.

Overall, having students as helpers in the classroom is vital for fostering a positive and collaborative learning environment. This technique encourages peer engagement and support, creating a sense of community where students work together towards common goals and where they have to look at each other to complete

a task. The involvement of student helpers also promotes the development of leadership skills and enhances communication and empathy among students. It is heart-warming when you see a student celebrating another student's achievement. This collaborative model benefits teachers by distributing responsibilities and creating a fun and adaptive teaching environment. Finally, the use of students as helpers positively impacts both the learning process and the classroom dynamics, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive educational experience.

In conclusion, the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme fosters a collaborative culture and supportive environment where both teachers and students feel empowered and motivated to share their experiences. Using "helpers" in the classroom and CPD sessions are two examples of collaboration that have contributed to the programme's success. Through the helper strategy, students actively support each other and the teacher fostering an inclusive learning environment. CPD sessions provide opportunities for teachers to engage in discussions and professional development leading to improvement in teaching practices. Through these initiatives, the programme utilizes the combined knowledge and energy of its teachers, paving the way for a brighter and more collaborative future in education. Research has shown that collaborative learning promotes higher-order thinking skills in students while boosting their confidence, self-esteem, and abilities. *Ceibal en Inglés* is a prime example of how teamwork can significantly influence teaching strategies and student outcomes.

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Coordinate with your CT with flying colours

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PURPOSE

Have you ever wondered what makes an effective lesson A? In my experience as a Remote Teacher (RT) in Ceibal en Inglés (CEI), an effective lesson A comes down to coordination and collaboration with the Classroom Teacher (CT) for classes B&C¹. This article focuses on collaborative teaching as an integral part of the CEI Programme and aims to shed some light on the issue at hand from both sides of the room (pun intended) by surveying 13 CTs and 2 RTs. Furthermore, these practices aim to transcend barriers to facilitate the approach of coordination with the CT by suggesting a practical guide for effective and sustainable collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Two heads are better than one; there's power in partnerships; teamwork makes the dream work; there's strength in numbers – we've all heard these phrases many times, often in the corporate world and similar endeavours. Surprisingly, these metaphors are equally relevant in the field of teaching.

Teaching is no stroll in the park. While it is undoubtedly a beautiful profession, it can also be quite stressful. However, what if I told you that you could make your teaching job easier? The key lies in polishing your collaborative skills, especially when sharing responsibilities with your CT.

¹ Classes B&C are delivered by the Classroom Teacher only. Class A is delivered by the Remote Teacher with the Classroom Teacher present in the room.

COLLABORATION

What is collaboration?

Collaboration in education is a powerful concept with broad implications for children's learning and educators' effectiveness.

Collaborative teaching refers to a cooperative and coordinated approach where educators work together to plan, implement, and evaluate instruction. This approach has evolved over time transitioning from traditional individual classroom instruction to more interactive and interdisciplinary approaches that involve multiple teachers, specialists, and sometimes even students. This shift reflects a broader understanding of the complex and interconnected nature of education, aiming to provide students with more comprehensive and effective learning experiences.

Different types of collaborative forms in CEI

In contemporary education, collaborative teaching takes on various forms and involves different stakeholders. In CEI, collaborative teaching examples abound.

- **Lead, Observe, and Assist:** During class A, the RT teaches the students and the CT observes and assists them. In short, the CT has the responsibility of closely watching and monitoring students and assess whether they're doing their assignments properly and if they're struggling with concepts². Then, it is crucial for the RT to ask the CT about their observations and support the CT in helping individual students who are struggling, providing additional explanations, offering differentiated instruction, managing classroom logistics, or addressing any issues that arise during the lesson.

- **Co-Teaching:** During classes B&C, RT, CT, mentors, and more educators collaborate to deliver instruction in the same classroom. This approach allows for the pooling of expertise, varied instructional strategies, and additional support for diverse student needs. For

² (Editorial team, 2021)

instance, one teacher might provide content instruction while another offers support for students with learning differences.

- **Project-Based Learning (PBL):** CEI offers different projects that address real-world problems and themes which enable teachers to collaborate and encourage students to apply knowledge and skills across subject areas. Examples: Minecraft Craftaways, Mystery of Cape Cold: Along the Riverbanks, Shakespeare Festival, among others.
- **Inclusion and Special Education Collaboration:** RT, CT, and special education teachers collaborate to create inclusive learning environments that meet the needs of all students. This may involve co-planning, co-teaching, and adapting instructional strategies.

Why is effective collaboration in education key in 2024?

Effective collaboration is much more than sending the materials at the end of the week, it is the joint effort between all the people involved in the CEI programme to make it as successful as it can be. Effective collaboration recognizes that effective teaching involves a combination of planning, execution, and ongoing adjustments based on student needs. By distributing responsibilities or “sharing the load” among team members, teachers can enhance the overall quality of instruction and contribute to a more inclusive and engaging classroom experience. Martin & Bradbeer (2016) explain this concept as crucial in order to create a synergic team:

(...)move from the ‘I’ space to the ‘we’ space—a critical component of working together in a shared innovative learning environment. For some teachers this is easy to do; for others, it constitutes a more challenging area of personal and professional growth.³

But why should RTs care about collaborating with the CT? Because coordinating and creating synergy with the CT is key to students' development, deepening their understanding and improving their motivation. In fact, “Research shows that teachers who work toge-

³ Martin y Bradbeer (2016). *Creating collaborative effectiveness: One school's approach*. SET: Research Information for Teachers, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, (2), p. 50.

ther and learn from each other are more successful in improving student outcomes than those who work alone".⁴

Other benefits of collaborative teaching include building community:

The reasoning behind this call for collaboration is that feedback, new information or ideas do not only spring from individual learning, but to a large extent also from dialogue and interaction with other people. Moreover, collaboration is assumed to create a learning culture and helps to build a community in which further learning is supported and stimulated.⁵

Creating the conditions for effective teacher collaboration has been seen as a critical component for the success of the CEI Programme. But for this, RTs need to develop effective collaborative capabilities, such as team functions, teamwork, social sensitivity, collective responsibility and shared purpose, efficacy, trust, openness, sense-making, self-awareness, growth mindset, and a focus on the learner, among others.

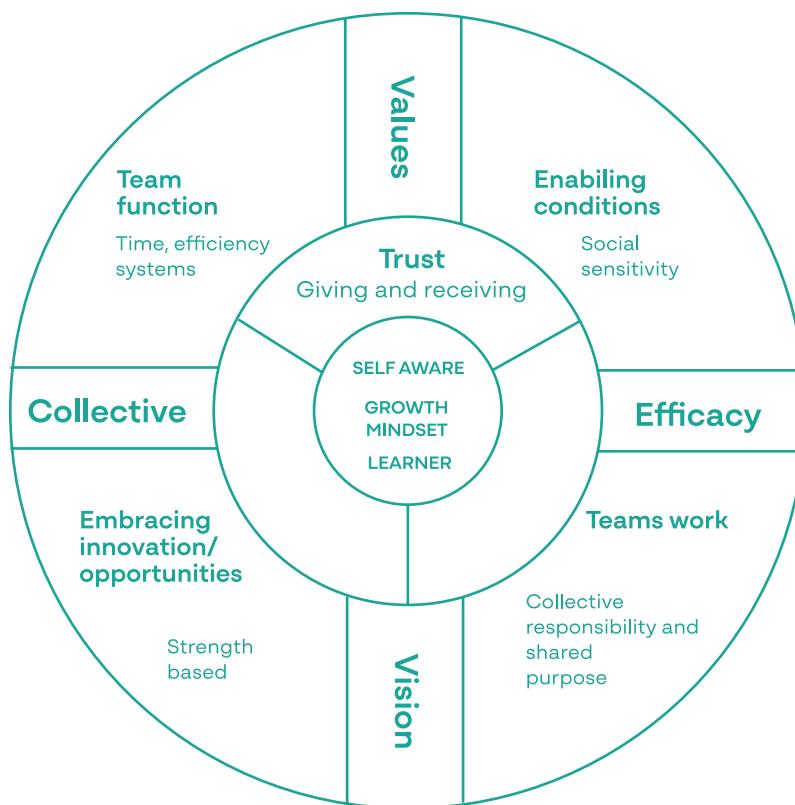
But how do we achieve this type of collaboration? Let's dig deeper into some of the effective collaboration capabilities mentioned by Martin & Bradbeer (2016) and understand: (A) **What** do they mean for RTs? **Why** are they important? and **How do you** develop them in coordination?

⁴ *Through growth to achievement: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools (March, 2018).*

⁵ Kwakman, K. (2003). 'Factors affecting teachers' participation in professional learning activities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 19(2), pp. 149-170, p. 152.

⁶ Martin y Bradbeer (2016). *Creating collaborative effectiveness: One school's approach*. SET: *Research Information for Teachers*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, (2), p. 51.

Figure 1.

COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORK**FINDINGS /
HOW TO COORDINATE WITH YOUR CT WITH FLYING COLOURS**

Source:

Martin y Bradbeer (2016). Creating collaborative effectiveness: One school's approach (crear eficacia colaborativa: el enfoque de una escuela). *SET: Research Information for Teachers*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, (2), p. 51.

TEAM FUNCTION

What: Create an effective work routine.

Why: At the beginning of the academic year, it is vital to set a work routine/system with collaborative planning time that is effective.

How:

- Choose a day for planning: the survey shows once or twice a week is the most common.
- Choose a method for sending the material: the survey shows CTs prefer written messages or audios via WhatsApp.
- Plan your message: Send one message with the number of the week, the PDF material, the tasks they have to do in Little Bridge, or the template for uploading the work in the forum in CREA.
- Talk about the available resources: Talk about the resources available such as the number of computers, internet connection, etc; and plan accordingly.

Result: CT comment: "Mi experiencia siempre fue muy buena. Al comienzo del año establecemos cómo será la comunicación, cómo serán las clases B y C, los materiales. Y después durante el año siempre estamos en contacto."⁶"

TEAMWORK

What: Work as a "We".

Why: Classes B&C usually take more than the 45 minutes that are specified on the plan. We know CTs have a lot on their plate, both inside and outside the classroom. Physical education, computer science, music, dance, breaks, and school events, to name a few of the CTs' responsibilities. Because of this, it is essential to make your CT understand that working together is above everything else.

⁶ "My experience was always very good. At the beginning of the year, we establish what communication will be like, what classes B and C will be like, the materials. And then during the year we are always in contact."

How:

• **Be time flexible:** Let CTs know it is OK if certain work can't be done because of other activities at school/technical issues. Enable the CT to do the B&C classes at any convenient time for them in the week before lesson A.

• Make it clear what is **top priority** for the week:

• "Does this activity take too much time? If so, I recommend you prioritize Y and Z".

• **Ask, ask, and ask!**

• How are you working with classes B&C? How do the children do?

• How do you feel about the materials?

• Do you have questions? Do not hesitate to ask if you need help with anything.

• What material would you need to make the classes B&C more dynamic for students?

• Do you want me to send an audio with the pronunciation of the vocabulary?

• Do you need extra/special material? (this is especially relevant if there are students with special needs or a special school)

Result: CT comment: "*Fue excelente, pudimos coordinar y hablar acerca de las actividades respetando los tiempos de cada uno.*"⁷

ENABLING CONDITIONS

What: Be socially sensible.

Why: CTs are mediators between the screen and the students, so naturally, teamwork is vital. RTs are responsible not only for the material and the learning process of children but also for the CTs' affective filter and time management. Some CTs do not speak English, so there is a double affective filter. Be socially aware and create the conditions to have a successful class.

⁷ "It was excellent, we were able to coordinate and talk about the activities while respecting each other's time."

One CT said: *"Al no manejar el idioma considero de mucho valor el trabajo conjunto con profesor remoto, yo brindo desde mi lugar todo lo respectivo a la implementación de espacios y tiempos mientras el profesor remoto todo lo correspondiente a la asignatura.⁸"*

How:

- **Take the lead:** be the CT guide. Do not be afraid to take the lead and light the way.
- **Be empathetic:** Support your CT. Understanding the cultural barriers of learning another language, added to the low self-esteem of students and their lack of motivation is key to a successful class A.

SENSE MAKING

What: When communicating, if the message isn't clear, try sense-making.

Why: In the realm of modern technology, the importance of sense-making cannot be overstated. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected through digital platforms, sensemaking conversations play a pivotal role in shaping positive and meaningful interactions. Effective communication in this context requires clarity, precision, and an awareness of the nuances that can be lost in the absence of physical presence. The ability to convey ideas, express emotions, and collaborate seamlessly across digital spaces has become a cornerstone of success in various fields, including education.

How: Some ways into sensemaking conversations might be:

- "Can you tell me more about why you think that?"
- "I'm not sure I understand. Could you explain that another way?"
- "Let me see if I'm understanding this. So, you're saying..."

⁸ "Since I do not know the language, I consider working together with a remote teacher to be of great value. From my place, I provide everything related to the implementation of spaces and times, while the remote teacher provides everything corresponding to the subject."

OPENNESS

What: Have difficult conversations and talk openly with your CT.

Why: Coordination should be a safe space where opinions and students' progress are fully taken into account.

How:

Open communication and active listening: talk openly, respectfully, and honestly about issues you both have and try to find a middle ground.

- How do you feel about students' progress?
- What is more difficult to teach in classes B&C?
- Is there anything you need to help students more?
- What do you find most effective for classes B&C?

One CT said:

*“Mantener comunicación constante con el profesor remoto permite que la experiencia de los niños en las clases B&C sea la mejor. En este año fue lo que ayudó mucho en el acompañamiento del grupo.”*⁹

One RT said:

“Les preguntaba cómo se sentían los alumnos en las clases de inglés y me daban devoluciones sinceras. Por ejemplo, había un grupo que casi no participaba al principio y era porque no me entendían casi nada (estaba dando Misterio de Cabo Frío). Entonces tuve que cambiar y dar mucho andamiaje. Para mí, saber si les gustaban las clases y los temas era fundamental, además de conocer qué cosas podía hacer de mi parte para llegar más a ellos. Tuvimos alguna conversación en la que acordamos que lo importante era que todos los alumnos aprendieran y disfrutaran las clases (no sólo los que saben inglés). Estuvimos de acuerdo en que no importaba si cometían errores porque eran parte del proceso de

⁹ *“Maintaining constant communication with the remote teacher allows the children's experience in B&C classes to be the best. This year it was what helped a lot in supporting the group.”*

aprendizaje. Luego la CT les comunicaba eso a los alumnos: que no tengan miedo de cometer errores y a levantar la mano y pre-guntar cuando no entienden.¹⁰”

- Ask for help: the CT knows students best. Ask for her help privately if you need to call out names or pair them strategically for classes A.

FINAL REFLECTION AND CONCLUSIONS

Collaboration is paramount in education due to technological advancements, global challenges, and the demand for individualized learning. The dynamic nature of education requires educators to work together, sharing expertise, integrating technology, and embracing diverse perspectives. Collaborative efforts facilitate personalized learning experiences, prepare students for the 21st century, and ensure adaptability in the face of evolving educational landscapes, including online and hybrid models. Embracing collaboration is essential for creating a holistic and adaptive education system that meets the diverse needs of students in the modern world.

Both personally and professionally, navigating virtual spaces requires strong communication skills and heightened cooperation. Whether in class A, CREA or the telepresence, effective collaboration ensures success and that technology serves as a tool for connection with the CT, not division.

¹⁰ “I asked them how the students felt in the English classes and they gave me honest feedback. For example, there was a group that hardly participated at the beginning and it was because they did not understand me almost at all (I was teaching Mystery of Cabo Frio). Then I had to change and provide a lot of scaffolding. For me, knowing if they liked the classes and the topics was essential, in addition to knowing what things I could do to reach them more. We had a conversation in which we agreed that the important thing was that all the students learned and enjoyed the classes (not just those who know English). We agreed that it did not matter if they made mistakes because they were part of the learning process. Then CT communicated that to the students: that they should not be afraid. make mistakes and to raise their hand and ask when they don't understand.”

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Collaborative expertise

Graham Stanley,

English Programmes Lead, British Council Americas

In 2015, the educational researcher John Hattie stated in *What Works Best in Education: The Politics of Collaborative Expertise*¹ that 'inspired and passionate teachers and school leaders working together to maximise the effect of their teaching on all students in their care' is what has the greatest influence on student progression in learning. This is at the heart of what Hattie calls collaborative expertise, and this collective 'long-term, coherent and focused system-wide attention on student learning' is what Hattie calls for more of, rather than individual teachers working in isolation in their classrooms.

In Uruguay, the experience of more than a decade of *Ceibal en Inglés* shows us that collaboration is key when it comes to implementing large-scale complex education reform projects. A recent evaluation of the programme² (2024) commissioned by the British Council highlighted the innovative nature of this collaborative expertise as well as detailing the benefits.

To begin with, taking a long-term approach to educational challenges has enabled the development of inclusive, quality teaching, learning and assessment of English. It has given time to develop systems to improve quality and standards in Uruguayan primary schools, to transfer insight and knowledge to educators and to take action to reduce inequalities.

¹ Hattie, J. (2015) *What Works Best in Education: The Politics of Collaborative Expertise*. London: Pearson. https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/corporate/global/pearson-dot-com/files/hattie/150526_ExpertiseWEB_V1.pdf

² British Council (2024) Lessons learned from +10 years of Ceibal en Inglés. Available online: <https://americas.britishcouncil.org/programmes/ceibal-report>

There are a number of examples of collaborative expertise in the *Ceibal en Inglés* model, but I want to focus on two in this article:

- The local classroom primary teacher working in tandem with an expert remote teacher of English
- The private sector language institutes working for the benefit of the public sector education system.

Other examples of successful collaboration in the programme include various mechanisms that allow for international collaboration, the different elements of the quality management/assurance system, the team of mentors distributed across the country, and the actors who come together to ensure the design and implementation of the national English adaptive test.

COLLABORATIVE EXPERTISE OF TEACHERS

The team-teaching model developed for *Ceibal en Inglés* is one of the most innovative aspects of the programme. Students receive three 45-minute English lessons every week thanks to the model. In the first lesson (lesson A), the focus is on presentation of new language by the remote teacher. The follow-up lessons (lessons B and C) give the children the chance to practise this new language together.

There are clear benefits to using technology to facilitate this collaborative expertise. More than anything, the programme enables access to English for thousands of learners who would not otherwise be able to learn the language. Working as a pedagogical pair, the local classroom teacher manages the students whilst English language expertise is provided by the remote teacher through videoconferencing.

The team teaching is facilitated by access to lesson plans, the innovative Little Bridge materials, and a learning management system (CREA). Regular coordination meetings are held on a weekly basis between the two teachers to ensure the classroom teacher knows what is next on the learning agenda, and that the remote teacher

can make adjustments to suit the needs of the class, changing the pace of learning, or revisiting aspects of the language that need to be reinforced, for example.

Another aspect of this team teaching which is often overlooked is the intercultural exchange that occurs. This can be international if the remote teacher comes from outside of Uruguay (Argentina, for example), but even there are also beneficial intercultural exchanges to be had between remote teachers from Montevideo and students from other towns and cities in the country.

Finally, the recent evaluation report (British Council, 2024)

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTOR COLLABORATIVE EXPERTISE

In *Ceibal en Inglés*, the collaborative expertise between the public and private education sector has gone a long way to solving the problem of a shortage of English teachers in Uruguayan public primary schools. Currently, Ceibal has contracts with fifteen private sector organisations, offering benefits for both the public education system and the participating language institutes.

As well as offering the private sector language institutes in Uruguay the chance for their teachers to deliver lessons when traditionally there is low demand for private sector classes (i.e., when schools are open during the Uruguayan morning or afternoon), it also gives the organisations an opportunity to be part of an important, emblematic education project that is both innovative and a source of considerable national pride.

Institutional development and knowledge transfer between these partners happen as part of the long-term relationships, with regular continuing professional development being given to teachers as part of their participation in the project. Another benefit is that the teaching quality of the teachers in these institutes improves due to the rigorous attention to quality standards upheld by Ceibal.

This collaboration between the private and public sectors has been highlighted in the *Inter-American Dialogue* (2017)³, whose 2017 report was inspired by *Ceibal en Inglés* when it recommended countries 'look to other learning opportunities, such as private language institutions, universities, and technologies, to offer multiple learning mechanisms'.

Another valuable benefit this collaboration gave private language institutes was during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those institutes involved in *Ceibal en Inglés* were better able to adapt to different online teaching more rapidly than institutes that had not had their experience. It became clear during this time, that the participating institutes have learned a lot over the years about remote and online teaching.

When the private and public sectors work in partnership to share educational and international expertise to tackle challenges, it enables invaluable knowledge sharing and innovations to be introduced. When these relationships are allowed to develop and mature over time, with an effective system of monitoring and evaluation, then opportunities for improvement can be identified and acted on year-on-year.

To summarise, *Ceibal en Inglés* is an example of a long-term educational reform project in Uruguay which has largely solved the shortage of English teachers in the country in part due to an effectively designed and implemented system of collaborative expertise. Recruitment of teachers from the private sector has made its rapid growth possible, and now, with almost all upper primary schoolchildren receiving good quality English lessons, there is surely a lesson to be learned from this implementation of collaborative expertise for other countries facing similar educational challenges.

³ Cronquist, K. & A Fiszbein (2017) *English Language Learning in Latin America*. Available online: <https://www.thedialogue.org/analysis/english-language-learning-in-latin-america/>

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When wisdom comes together: an unforgettable educational journey

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INTRODUCTION

Within the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme, coordination and the constant knowledge exchange between classroom teachers and remote teachers are fundamental pillars that ensure the proper development of lessons considering each group's needs and interests. However, a crucial but almost invisible component is the role of the mentor. In this article, we will detail the role of mentors and their impact in the classroom, focusing on how they support the process of relating content, pedagogical innovations and collaborative work among teachers to motivate and encourage students to grow and explore by using innovative strategies.

THE ROLE OF THE MENTOR IN CEIBAL EN INGLÉS

The mentor plays an essential role as guide and support for classroom teachers who, as part of the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme, find themselves in a role that moves them away from their comfort zone. Their role involves, among other things, guidance, emotional support and promoting the autonomy of both the students and the teacher. The mentor is a valuable resource for the classroom teachers, who offers fresh ideas and effective strategies that respond to pedagogical challenges. In other words, they accompany teachers through a process of empowerment within this new role that they may sometimes find uncomfortable.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Classroom teachers are one of the key actors of the programme. Without whom it would not be as successful as it is. The role of the classroom teacher is divided into their participation in lesson A, their implementation of lessons B/C and their involvement in the coordination together with their remote teacher.

During lesson A, the remote teacher is responsible for the teaching, but the active presence of the classroom teacher is essential. The classroom teacher must monitor and control the students' behaviour, encourage them to participate, help them, when necessary, share strategies and study habits. Students' attitude during lesson A, in most cases, is a reflection of their teacher's attitude towards it.

Communication with the mentor, reflection and strategy assessment help to enhance the teacher's role and improve the implementation of the programme, leading to increasingly better teaching/learning environments and, therefore, better outcomes.

During B and C instances, the classroom teacher's goal is to revisit and review what the remote teacher taught in the previous lesson. The classroom teacher is not supposed to teach English but rather revise the content, find and promote study strategies. During these instances, each teacher works from the place where they feel more comfortable. The role of the mentor involves guiding them in finding the approach that best fits their needs, preferences and interests and those of their students.

Coordination is a fundamental stage where the classroom teacher and the remote teacher meet to talk about how to improve the implementation of lessons and define what to work on and how. Because the classroom teacher knows the students better, he/she must inform the remote teacher what content needs to be reviewed and what questions remain from the previous lesson, depending on what was perceived during the B/C instances.

LINKING CONTENT WITH PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATIONS

The relationship between curricular content and pedagogical innovations is fundamental. The mentor and teacher work together to align content with innovative pedagogical approaches that encourage active student participation and critical thinking. This involves the integration of educational technologies and interactive teaching methods. It is therefore necessary to find the time for meetings between teachers and mentors for reflection and exchange of ideas and opinions on these aspects.

Collaborative and interactive work between classroom teachers and mentors has a significant impact on students. It fosters a learning environment where students feel supported and motivated. Additionally, it gives them the opportunity to experience a range of pedagogical approaches and learn from different perspectives, which also enriches their learning process.

OUR EXPERIENCE

In the thrilling world of education, we often encounter various seemingly opposing challenges, and this is where the role of the mentor and the teacher need to be aligned so as to boost what has been learnt.

On one hand, The Make it Happen contest, part of the project of the same name, aims to help schools reduce the digital divide and promote the responsible use of technology. On the other hand, the 10th Ceibal Olympics invites students to develop programming skills. Two contests, two objectives, two different universes. But what happens when these two paths, which at first seemed independent, intersect?

In this story, fate led two passionate teachers down different paths, only to unite them on a transformative educational journey. One is a teacher with a passion for programming, an explorer of digital

worlds, and an eloquent speaker of English and binary language. The other is an English mentor committed not only to teaching/learning the language but also to educating students about the conscious and responsible use of computers; a guardian of digital ethics.

These two educators, each with their own ideas and goals, shared a common objective: to prepare the future generation for a world where technology reigns and English is a global language. Although their paths seemed to diverge, the collision of their worlds produced a collaboration like no other. The mentor, with her focus on language acquisition and digital responsibility, was committed to nurturing a new generation of responsible digital citizens capable of applying their English skills beyond the classroom. Through a workshop, the mentor, together with members of the Ceibal technical service, taught them to take care of their computers, respect online privacy and be aware of the significance of keeping their equipment in good condition not only to continue studying but also to open up to the digital age responsibly. On the other hand, the teacher was immersed in the exciting world of micro:bit programming, opening the doors for technological creation and encouraging her students' individual creativity.

The magic began to unfold when these two passionate women decided to join forces. The teacher realised that programming was not just codes and circuits but a valuable skill that could enhance digital responsibility, while the mentor raised awareness about technology as a tool that requires ethical and conscious use. and also highlighted the fact that this Olympics could be the perfect excuse to bring English closer to families and the community at large.

As a result, a bold collaboration was forged, where students began learning about device care and then ventured into programming micro:bits. The combination of both disciplines led to the development of a project that exceeded all expectations.

By understanding the significance of digital responsibility, students not only learnt how to use their computers more safely but also

gained valuable technical skills. Micro:bit programming became an exciting way to apply their knowledge in creative and challenging projects and, as if that were not enough, English was included to show that cross-disciplinary work is not only possible but necessary, and that when it happens, better outcomes are possible.

This inspiring story shows us that, in education, the possibilities are endless when we break through disciplinary boundaries. The convergence of two different contests demonstrated that knowledge knows no borders, but rather flows and is enriched when creatively combined.

In a world where technology is constantly evolving, this story reminds us that teachers must look beyond conventional boundaries and seek opportunities to merge knowledge and disciplines. Collaboration between the mentor and the teacher not only resulted in a successful project but also prepared the students for the challenges of an increasingly technological and digital world where English knowledge is highly valued.

This story reminds us that education can be a remarkable journey where the synergy between different perspectives can lead to extraordinary achievements. Innovation emerges from the combination of seemingly disparate ideas, and when fuelled by passion and commitment, it lights the way to a bright, promising future.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the role of the mentor in *Ceibal en Inglés* is a crucial component for improving educational practices. Collaboration and exchange of ideas between teachers and mentors drive pedagogical innovation and collaborative learning, benefiting students and promoting a more effective and enriched teaching and learning process. The experience of linking contests such as "Make It Happen" and the Ceibal Programming and STEAM Olympics showcases the power of this collaboration in shaping motivated and competent students.

More than two in the classroom. The job of teaching and learning

Mariela Rivero,

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It isn't an introduction, but a journey beginning now. Six children and the assistant of a rural school will give you a ticket that will introduce you to a collaborative experience.

Perhaps you'll need to walk down cobblestone paths and unpaved lanes around some swamps or greeting arueras. At times, you may have to rest and recover in the shade of talas, peppercorn trees or some aromatic espinillo. You choose...

You are hereby invited to read about an experience that depicts the chance to participate in an English-learning community, contemplating the uniqueness of education in rural areas.

Teresa was looking forward to the new idea that the children were beginning to build up. She had walked by the dining room – right next to the classroom – when she heard us talking. Talking as I usually did every day with my six students, which enabled knowledge to circulate when I would ask them a question that would lead to us embarking on a new school project. Would it be native fruits that we would choose to include on our school menu? Would we choose new healthy afternoon snacks? Would the butiá be the first fruit to taste?

You've been warned: Teresa was there, waiting to find out what new topic we were going to work on in English class, because she wanted to keep learning with us, be a participant once again.

She's always been part of our school day, but this time she was determined to take on a new challenge: to watch out for the start of English class. To do this, she made sure she started her daily work

far earlier than usual so that at least she would have enough time to participate, ask, correct, make comments... in English!

In our rural school, Teresa was part of the non-teaching staff. She was our service Assistant, and that year she had decided to resume her 4th year of secondary school studies. As she built her house in the city, she weaved new dreams in the rural environment where she was still living. She knew that commitment and effort would be the bridges she had to travel over, as she travelled every mile every day, which in turn also became the milestones along her route.

The English language was the hurdle that at times made her think, "How can I pass the secondary school course?" "What will the English oral term-tests be like?" "What strategies am I going to use to remember words in another language?" "And how will I manage to pronounce them?" There were too many questions. They all came to her mind almost relentlessly.

That day seemed like just another class day, but it was to be a different day. It's just that even though the school was the usual one, it wasn't the same. We were going to start a new project: Finding out what native fruits we could include on our school menu.

An adventure in collective creation that reminded me of the fruit of the palm groves in my country, back in the lands of Rocha: the *butiá*, a fruit with a sharp scent and bittersweet taste with two or three seeds inside.

The hard shared work, the different experiences, and the knowledge that each one can bring are the features of collaborative work and are the fruit of this academic training experience.

There were moments when I could catch a "sharp scent" of change, innovation, and good ideas. At times, the path we decided to take had a "bittersweet taste" because the schedule of the school's organization was tight, and communication in a second language was not always possible.

At first there were only two or three words in English that Teresa could pronounce, but "the seed started germinating." The day came when our school menu was written in English, with details of each food prepared. At the end of each dessert, snack or lunch, Teresa would ask us in English, "How tasty was...?", and the children would answer. Her progress was evident!

It took a lot of imagination and creativity for us to transform and take on new challenges and discover that passion for learning and collaboration are indispensable elements for tapping into surprising capabilities lying within us. It's about turning complex into understandable.

As part of English language teaching practices, this experience in a rural classroom was a unique context that responded to the dynamics of the multigrade approach and enabled the participation of non-teaching staff, who provide support each day.

Upon analysing the didactic dimension that organizes teaching, it is possible to point out that when active methodologies coexist that make it possible to improve learning processes, in which children play leading roles, they contribute to the creation of a learning community in which knowledge and exchanges with different levels of complexity occur.

Furthermore, being able to combine different didactic decisions makes it possible to enhance the circulation of knowledge. In this regard, there is a pedagogical gain to be had by both children and adults based on what each other learns, given the various conceptual levels present in a multigrade classroom.

As a reflection, it seems clear that it is always possible to learn from others, and the classroom is the privileged space that enables encounter, collaboration and the possibility of communicating with each other when we have the desire to learn and different resources at our disposal.

English and spanish: summary and analysis

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«Authentic assessment occurs in
truly collaborative contexts».
Ravela, P. (2020)

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION: SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL - 2023 EDITION

The aim of this paper is to report on classroom experiences as part of the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme, more specifically the 2023 Edition of the Shakespeare Festival project, a proposal that promotes the value of learning a foreign language from a communicative, cultural and intercultural perspective, which was an unforgettable experience for our primary school students.

For this 2023 edition, the 6th grade Primary Education students of school No. 104 in the city of Minas (Lavalleja), where I work as a teacher, had the opportunity to stage an adaptation of a play by William Shakespeare chosen by the students from three options presented by the programme: "Romeo and Juliet," "Hamlet" and "The Tempest." "Hamlet" was their choice.

This collaborative process allowed us to experience how this resource contributes to the development of language proficiency both in the use of Spanish and the command of a foreign language - English in this case - in a specific situation. Each role was fundamental in this path towards the development of the children's proficiency in a language that is not their mother tongue but that they still managed to make their own.

The analysis of these experiences is based on the testimonies of teachers and students who have been an active part of *Ceibal en Inglés* by engaging in coordinated work with the remote teacher as well as with the *Ceibal en Inglés* mentor.

COLLABORATION: THE KEY TO PROGRESS

Well-developed bilingualism improves “cognitive flexibility”¹; that is, bilingual people are better able to see things from two or more perspectives and understand how other people think (key to enabling collaboration). This flexibility and ability to direct their attention makes these people capable of seeing new opportunities and seizing them, even if that means dropping something they were doing. They are capable of changing their priorities depending on their interests.

Creativity is also associated with the abovementioned mental or cognitive flexibility. This constitutes a competence that was developed throughout the process of designing the play and staging it. Enabling collaborative spaces for our students was vital to helping them develop their skills and achieve their goals. It taught them a lot conceptually, no doubt about it, but above all, they developed positive attitudes to collaboration.

The idea of collaborative learning as an innovative learning strategy is what drives this Shakespeare Festival project. The aim was to promote creativity, a competence to be highlighted. For this purpose, a different, innovative proposal was taken as a trigger to encourage its participants to improve oral skills in English. This is mainly due to the fact that in many of our educational contexts in teaching, we forget the importance of teamwork and peer support, which are so necessary for developing the skills of our students.

As established by Scagnoli (2005), “*collaborative learning is the phase of learning that results from the participation of two or more*

¹ In psychology, “cognitive flexibility” refers to the ability to adapt to changes or new situations.

individuals in their search for information or exploration aimed at achieving a better grasp or shared understanding of a concept, problem or situation" (p. 1).

This approach to work provided the opportunity for students to put into practice their oral skills in English through the discussion of various thematic cores that were presented in the play. During the year, we addressed different conflicting manifestations in society throughout history. This encouraged us to tackle Hamlet. In this dramatic play, Shakespeare managed to capture themes such as love, friendship, despotism, loyalty and sincerity, reflected in each of his characters.

Another aim was the development of language skills in a situation that allowed the students to collaborate with each other to achieve common goals and objectives and to be able to grow and help each other.

As Scagnoli (2005) points out, the theory of social constructivism is based on the process of building knowledge through learning from interaction with a group and through tasks carried out in cooperation with others. The objective of this kind of learning is to induce the group of students to build their knowledge through exploration, discussion, negotiation and debate. These kinds of activities not only raise critical awareness of a topic but also open up more opportunities for the optimal development of their language skills. A number of activities were undertaken to promote the development of language skills, with a special emphasis on speaking. In this regard, each student was encouraged to learn their lines based on their uniqueness and was allowed to look for synonyms if that gave them more confidence when delivering their lines.

According to Collazos (2002), the collaborative learning method is based on the idea that students must work together to learn, and, in turn, they are responsible for their own learning and that of their classmates. The aim is, therefore, work based on reasoning, self-learning and collaboration, self-assessment and co-assessment. This ultimately allows for a formative assessment of the whole process.

For this purpose, different didactic strategies were implemented that we could classify as recreational and discussion strategies:

- Recreational strategies are those that aim to facilitate learning in children by using various resources such as games, riddles, and group dynamics, among others. Collaborative sequencing was employed with the remote teacher and the classroom teacher to promote this type of game-based activity. For example, videos or riddles were used to enhance listening and comprehension skills in English through authentic situations.
- Discussion strategies involve group experiences with very different purposes and mechanisms. Furthermore, in the context of English-language literature, this methodology has been widely developed by Krueger (1991), stating that discussion groups are "*(...) a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. (...) conducted with about seven to ten people by a skilled interviewer.*"

In broad terms, collaboration is based on two premises: the search for group consensus with everyone's participation, and achieving commitment and undertaking each of the individual activities that will play a specific group role. Regarding the former premise, a debate was held to design the roles that each of them would take in the development of the project. Each and every one of the children participated. Some were actors, others sound engineers, others costume designers. In short, every fundamental role necessary for the staging of a play was covered.

Both the group of 6th grade students and the teaching staff involved in the project played a crucial role in the application and development of each of the activities or techniques implemented. The group of students, as the main participants in the process, needed to achieve effective collaborative work. The teacher was responsible for supporting the entire process and guiding it in such a way that they, in a sense, were also part of the process, but not the protagonist.

COMPLEMENTARY LANGUAGES

According to Dr. Tali Shenfield of Advanced Psychology Services: *"Research has not found any link between learning to speak a second language and being a "late talker." All kids acquire language at their own individual pace, and they may start speaking, reading and writing earlier or later than normal, regardless of how many languages are spoken in the home."*

Excerpt from an article by Dr. Tali Shenfield, child psychologist specialising in high intellectual abilities, published in July 2016.

Elisa Guerra Cruz states that *"there is ample scientific that supports the idea that a second language is not harmful, even for children who have language difficulties. In fact, it seems to be quite the opposite: being exposed to a second language may actually help children with challenges in their native language."*

Regarding this point, researcher Johanne Paradis writes (as quoted by Elisa Guerra Cruz): *"The research I have conducted with my colleagues suggests that children affected with a language-learning disability can be raised bilingual without serious detriment to their grammatical development. These results call into question the common-sense notion that bilingualism would exacerbate the linguistic difficulties already exhibited by children with specific language impairment (SLI). Therefore, professional practices such as advising parents to give up speaking one of the two languages to a child with SLI do not find empirical support from these studies."* (Paradis, 2007).

The above quote, in fact, accounts for the work of a group of students who usually kept quiet in class or did not actively participate. These students made very good progress in terms of their interaction with their classmates. Working in small subgroups led to an improvement in their self-esteem and their view of their own ability to communicate efficiently. When the children were in each rehearsal session, they activated strategies for using grammatical structures

² BA in Preschool Education with a Master's Degree in Education with a specialty in Teaching-Learning Processes from the Institute of Technology and Higher Studies of Monterrey (ITESM).

and the pronunciation of words and sounds, as correction and assistance from those participating in the activity were encouraged. A great deal of emphasis was placed on accompanying each dialogue with the appropriate gestures and body movements.

In addition to that, vocabulary was expanded, as the repository of words available to a person is, in a way, very personal and limited, and without interaction with others, it is very difficult to enrich it.

Finally, I would like to stress again that another advantage of collaborative learning that I see from my teaching perspective is that it places the student in an active place leading their own learning and that of others. As teachers, we are guides and moderators throughout each stage of the process. It should be noted that all the activities undertaken proved motivating and were welcomed by the students.

We did a metacognition activity and asked the children about the effectiveness of the work method implemented in the process of the play, and all the participants felt that it did work, because "we shared knowledge, ideas, and experiences. It helped to understand our classmates better" and, therefore, they developed values such as respect and empathy.

Human beings rely on contact, collaboration, and interaction with others in order to thrive in society. It makes no sense to keep all our knowledge to ourselves instead of sharing it with others. This premise motivated me to write this text and share with you this wonderful experience I had with my students in 2023.

Those who have taken on the task of teaching languages have been in a constant search throughout history for methods, strategies, and ideas that make their work more substantial, attractive, and meaningful for their students. This explains the vast number of methods and approaches that have been developed. Undeniably, the collaboration that in a way *Ceibal en Inglés* requires is a very valuable strategy for learning foreign languages, developing self-esteem, learning to collaborate and learning one's own language as well.

In short, learning a foreign language is an invitation to build together.

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From utopia to reality. The case of Dylan

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Education is a field of activity marked by change; constant change. So much so that we can compare our activity with an experimental laboratory where the aim is to achieve the best way of teaching.

In this teaching adventure, I happened to be part of an innovation that shook the education community: the fourth-, fifth- and sixth-year groups of all the public primary schools in the country would be part of *Ceibal en Inglés*. I personally loved the idea. This was not the case for long-serving teachers who did not know the language. A moment of controversy resulting from changes, conflicting opinions, the misgivings that changes bring with them and are so typical of human beings. In addition, it involved participating in launch and training workshops, which meant travelling to Montevideo. Changes were made in the school because a room had to be prepared for the "screen", with bars put in to make it a safe place. Early on, the principal called on the fourth-year teacher, Diana Martiniano, and me to be the first to travel and participate in the introductory experience at *Ceibal's* Headquarters. I don't know if the reason for the call was that I knew the basics of the language or that I have always been open to venturing into different experiences. The point is that we had an incredible experience and came back with more questions and expectations than before. The implementation involved three stages, namely lessons A, B and C. One lesson with the remote teacher and two lessons with the classroom teacher. We were looking forward to seeing how it was going to be implemented because, in addition, some materials had come through and we were supposed to access the lesson plans in *Ceibal en Inglés*. Complete shock. Many mixed feelings. As regards the students, some

of them competed using the smattering they had, and those who didn't even have a smattering spoke some gibberish.

In 2013, I worked as a fifth-grade teacher, and then as a sixth-grade teacher for several years. This allowed me to witness the implementation and the progress of learning and appreciate our ability as teachers to improve and support each other. When the day came of the first lesson with the remote teacher, everything was excitement. It was incredible to see how expectant the children were, in utmost silence, quite unlike them. You could have heard a pin drop. A Japanese-born teacher was assigned to our class. The lesson was all in English. I was in my element. I could practise my rudimentary knowledge and encourage the children. The lesson was an experimental section because the principal and the teachers wanted to see how the whole thing worked when put into practice. The children were happy. You could feel the enthusiasm and unity of the teaching staff. It was an incredible experience that yielded very good results. The children who were in fourth year became my students years later, and it was there that the results of these lessons could be seen. Although there were students who attended extra language lessons outside the school, it was surprising how they all had solid knowledge. It was then that I remember Dylan, from Sarandí del Yí. This tiny, shy but bright-eyed little boy who showed up every day with adorable tousled curls really surprised me. By mid-year he was able to produce short texts. Personally, I thought the activities I saw on the lesson plan were rather ambitious and I was under the impression that the expectations of achievement were too high. Well, that very responsible, intelligent and lively little boy was one of those who reminded me that we had lessons B and C. He was also the one who would help those who had the most trouble. What a surprise it was when he had to make a speech. His pronunciation was very good and he was very fluent. I remember him not only because of his enthusiasm for the language but because he always came on his own; there was no adult accompanying him, and we teachers tend to stigmatise situations of vulnerability and associate them with poor academic performance. We try to find every possible justification for limited progress in learning, messy homework notebooks with incomplete assignments and similar

things all too familiar to teachers. I remember his little brown eyes, his innocent look and his soft little voice asking, "Did I do it right?" "Not right. Perfectly." His face would light up. Without a doubt, those moments are the reward for the teacher's hard work. I wish there were more Dylans, more children eager to learn and improve themselves. It is that challenge of arousing enthusiasm and reaping joy that drives us teachers to carry on day by day. Today Dylan is an engineering student, and he visits his city during his holidays. When I visit the city, I look for his face among the young people. I haven't seen him again yet, but I would love to find him or for him to find me and hear him say, "Do you remember me, Miss?" How could I ever forget those students who are the driving force!

My Conversation Class experiences

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According to the *Real Academia Española*, to collaborate means to work with one or more people to accomplish a task. However, when we talk about collaboration in the educational field, the word takes on a vital meaning, highlighting the interaction of all the actors involved to make the teaching and learning process possible. This collaboration is an indispensable tool for achieving and maintaining a positive atmosphere both within and outside educational institutions.

One of the ways to put collaboration into practice is the development of projects. An example of this is the one I will now discuss: Conversation Class.

It all started a few years ago when a colleague encouraged me to try with a group. Since I am always open to new resources and I like technology, I took the chance. Of course, I was besieged by doubts and insecurities. These uncertainties basically boiled down to the fear that I would be unable to achieve effective communication with the remote teacher, and that we would not reach a consensus on the way forward. Adding to this was my unfamiliarity with the videoconferencing equipment to be used, despite my affinity for new technology. However, thanks to the positive attitude and collaboration of the remote teacher in planning the classes, as well as the support from the institute's IT teachers (POITE), with whom I gradually learned how to use the equipment, I felt supported in this challenge.

As I went along, I saw that this is a way of teaching in which the student plays a leading role alongside a remote teacher. During the interaction, a contagious atmosphere is created that engages all

participants, allowing everyone to develop communicative skills that are assimilated almost spontaneously. The students engage in a fluent conversation with the remote teacher, achieving a level of naturalness in using the foreign language that is generally not reached in a traditional classroom setting. Over the years, I have seen that when the student uses the foreign language spontaneously, as they must communicate with someone who speaks little to no Spanish, they take ownership of their language knowledge through this exchange and listening practice. This is apparent in the use of the language to express their thoughts and emotions spontaneously, as is the case when we travel to English-speaking places.

As the first year of the programme progressed, my fears gradually faded as I saw the results reflected in the students' learning compared to other groups of the same level that were not participating in the Conversation Class programme. The change in students' attitudes is evident from the very beginning of Conversation Class, and this is noticeable every year. Their attitude in class changes, and so do their evaluation results. I can confidently say that the knowledge they acquire is reflected in their performance, achieving higher outcomes than other groups in the same institution.

I believe that experiencing another culture opens their minds and makes them dream that they can indeed communicate and share their thoughts with English-speaking people, so they realise the importance of studying this language, whether for scientific, technical, recreational or cultural knowledge.

In Conversation Class, I have observed that this collaborative approach allows each student in the group to work on their strengths while receiving support from the rest of the group, giving everyone the same opportunity. Students find it much easier to remember what they have learnt in these classes due to the interaction with their peers and the remote teacher. Thus, gradually, they gain greater self-confidence in themselves and come to appreciate the value of their contributions. It is the previous collaborative work coordinated between the English classroom teacher – that is, be-

tween my teaching practice and that of the remote teacher – that is clearly reflected in these outcomes, which have strengthened my confidence in the Conversation Class programme.

I would like to highlight the great support and ongoing collaboration from *Ceibal en Inglés*, from whom I have always received reassurance, especially when it comes to delivering the class.

I also want to express my gratitude for the collaboration between the Berlitz Institute, one of the providers of English classes for the Conversation Class programme, and *Ceibal en Inglés* for their contribution to my professional development. The collaboration between these two institutions secured the Berlitz-CEI scholarship, which offers one English teacher per year the opportunity to go on a study trip to a university in the USA. In 2024, after a selection process, I was thrilled to be awarded the scholarship, which has undoubtedly been a milestone in my development journey.

For all these reasons, I believe that collaboration is essential for achieving learning outcomes at all levels, benefiting students, teachers, and institutions as they grow and learn together.

Collaborative synergy: empowering english education through mentor-classroom teacher collaboration in *Ceibal en Inglés*

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In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the impact of mentor-classroom teacher collaboration cannot be overstated. *Ceibal en Inglés*, a beacon of innovation, exemplifies the transformative power of collaborative synergy. This article delves into the multifaceted nature of collaboration, drawing insights from real experiences.

Collaboration in *Ceibal en Inglés* extends beyond cooperation—it's a dynamic interaction among mentors, classroom teachers, and students. It involves shared responsibility, mutual learning, and the collective pursuit of educational excellence.

At the heart of *Ceibal en Inglés* lies a paradigm of mentor-classroom teacher collaboration. Mentors, seasoned educators with a wealth of experience, play a pivotal role in guiding classroom teachers through the intricacies of English language instruction. They provide training, constant support, and encouragement, setting the stage for transformative learning experiences.

To underpin the importance of collaboration, we turn to Michael Fullan, an esteemed educational author and expert. Fullan (2013) emphasizes that collaboration is not just a strategy but a fundamental way of thinking, acting, and being in the world of education. His work on educational change and leadership serves as a guiding li-

ght for understanding the profound impact of collaborative efforts. A cornerstone of mentor-teacher collaboration is the comprehensive training and constant support mentors offer to classroom teachers. The mentor serves as a knowledgeable resource, assisting teachers in feeling as comfortable as possible working with a foreign language they do not speak and motivating their students as well as encouraging them to embrace the challenges learning a foreign language poses. Through regular observations, mentors identify areas for improvement, engaging in reflective discussions that encourage experimentation with innovative approaches.

The ripple effect of mentor-teacher collaboration extends to students' learning processes. Classroom teachers, empowered by mentor guidance, implement new techniques, fostering students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills. Through a student-centred approach, *Ceibal en Inglés* creates an environment that promotes creativity, collaboration, and cross-cultural understanding, ensuring students become active participants in their learning journey.

In 2023, the transformative influence of collaboration within *Ceibal en Inglés* found poignant expression in a Canelones school. At the outset, a 5th-grade teacher exhibited initial hesitancy towards the proposed initiatives. However, the unfolding narrative revealed a compelling example of collaborative innovation that left an indelible mark on both educators and students.

The critical turning point occurred when a mentor, armed with a wealth of experiences, embarked on a detailed explanation of *Ceibal en Inglés*. Of particular resonance was the mentor's emphasis on the potential of Minecraft Educational Edition. Patiently guiding the teacher through the intricacies of the program, the mentor shared impactful experiences from other schools, capturing the teacher's imagination and sparking inspiration.

This initial spark of inspiration evolved into a dynamic collaborative project that transcended the boundaries of the traditional class-

room. In partnership with remote English and computational thinking teachers, the 5th-grade teacher spearheaded an interdisciplinary initiative that extended to involve students in Robotic and Programming Olympiads.

The genesis of the project lay in addressing a specific educational challenge identified through a diagnostic evaluation: students' difficulties in interpreting maps and spatial orientation. The teacher, along with her collaborative team, embarked on a journey to not only overcome these challenges but also provide students with a real-world, purposeful application of the English language.

In collaboration with students from a teaching college (*Magisterio*), the team initiated a project that began with a comprehensive diagnostic assessment. This assessment revealed students' difficulties in giving directions and spatial awareness. Collaboratively, they decided to participate in the Robotic and Programming Olympiads, aiming to address these challenges and integrate language learning strategies effectively.

The project unfolded in stages: students identified the problem, focusing on difficulties in giving directions and spatial awareness. They conceived a final product centred around the school, positioning it as the heart of their context. Students envisioned a scenario where a visitor would navigate to the school.

Two solutions were proposed in this regard: one utilizing only a compass or map, excluding the use of mobile devices, and the other involving the creation of a car named MC Queen. The latter was programmed to bring the visitor from a nearby stop to the school. This intricate proposal incorporated the use of microbits for cardinal directions and a seamless integration of Minecraft Educational Edition for the 3D recreation of a model and its route.

Throughout the entire construction process, involving students, the classroom teacher, remote English and computational thinking teachers, mentors, and students from the teaching college, the colla-

borative project garnered substantial appreciation from the school community and families. The integration of various elements from different academic domains sparked a significant motivational boost among students, who witnessed the real-world application of the English language evolving collaboratively throughout the academic year. This holistic and interdisciplinary approach within *Ceibal en Inglés* exemplified the power of collaboration in creating transformative learning experiences.

The collaborative project received overwhelming positive feedback from the school community and families. The incorporation of diverse elements from various disciplines sparked significant motivation among students. They witnessed the practical application of the English language, constructed collaboratively throughout the course, involving all institutional stakeholders.

The transformative power of mentor-teacher collaboration unfolds in the positive impact it has on both teachers and students. Beyond training and support, mentors foster a culture of collaboration, continuous improvement, and shared responsibility. This sustainable framework strengthens teachers' abilities to address diverse student needs, resulting in improved learning outcomes and increased student achievement. *Ceibal en Inglés* stands as a testament to the program's success, highlighting the crucial role of mentor-teacher collaboration in revolutionizing English language education in Uruguay.

In conclusion, mentor-teacher collaboration is not just a facet but the heartbeat of *Ceibal en Inglés*. Through the lens of collaborative synergy, the program propels success and innovation. The positive ripple effect of mentor-teacher collaboration, as seen in the experiences shared and supported by experts like Michael Fullan, emphasizes its crucial role in shaping the future of English language education in Uruguay. *Ceibal en Inglés* serves as an inspiring example showcasing the transformative power that lies in the collective efforts of mentors, classroom teachers, and students working collaboratively toward a brighter educational future.

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A successful pedagogical pair

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Ceibal en Inglés project was born as a programme to promote the learning of English as a foreign language in all public Uruguayan schools, both rural and urban. Interactive and real-time classes are delivered by a remote English teacher, video-conference technology is used, and the lesson materials are adapted to the specific context of each group. The remote teacher dictates a class of 45 minutes each week (Lesson A), where the target language is presented and practiced, focusing on the learners' oral production. The classroom teacher, who does not need to have previous knowledge of English, is responsible for two more 45-minute classes (Lessons B and C). She helps students practice the language presented in the remote lesson, using handheld devices, technology, and the activity bank available on the language management system CREA and the platform Little Bridge.

I started working as a remote teacher for *Ceibal en Inglés* in March 2021, and that year I was assigned a group in San José, an APREN- DER school (*Atención Prioritaria en Entornos con Dificultades Es- tructurales Relativas*¹) together with classroom teacher Jessica G. Trinidad Macedo, who I would like to specially thank for her constant effort and support. In general, these kinds of schools are located in vulnerable socio-cultural contexts, where there is a lack of resources such as connectivity and devices. Students may have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, which increases the level of disengagement. And it was not until this year, working at this school, that I understood why teamwork between the classroom teacher and the remote teacher is key to the *Ceibal en Inglés* project.

¹Priority Attention in Environments with Relative Structural Difficulties

I noticed that teachers' teamwork means establishing a professional community in which a classroom teacher and a remote teacher of English from different countries have the aim of working together towards the same positive objective: students' learning development and inclusion. Although it was the first time the classroom teacher participated in the project, she was really committed, accommodating to this new venture. With weekly coordination meetings and/or WhatsApp messages, I have helped the Uruguayan classroom teacher prepare the lessons and practise the English to be covered.

At the beginning, these pre-teen students were reluctant to learn English; they were not engaged. I was aware of these unmotivated students, so I needed to make small changes during the teaching-learning process. It was important to deal with small things before they became big problems. So, when I realised that my lessons were not going well, I asked the classroom teacher for information to motivate students, such as what their interests and preferences were and effective teaching strategies that she used with this group.

The classroom teacher stated that this group was interested in drawing and making crafts. Jolley and Rose (2023) affirmed that "Drawing allows children to take their experiences of the world and transform these by making new connections and relationships through their inventive minds". After experiencing teaching in difficult sociocultural contexts in Argentina, I know that children are able to communicate with others by drawing pictures, and even using special colours to express themselves. In addition, in coordination with the classroom teacher, she indicated that some students fought against emotional difficulties. So, I believed that drawing could allow them to show their feelings. What is more, drawing pictures can help children's learning development. Using drawing as a teaching activity can increase children's understanding of the language itself. It is known that drawing improves memory as it helps a person remember it. "A new study shows that drawing is superior to activities such as reading or writing because it forces the person to process information in multiple ways: visually, kinaesthetically, and semantically" (Terada, 2019).

I believed that by knowing the classroom teacher's impressions, knowledge, and perspectives of the learners, early warning signs could be better identified, allowing the team to tackle the problem more effectively and overcome this +complex pedagogical challenge. This helped me to identify which action points would be carried out with the classroom teacher for the planning, discussions of practices and objectives, guidelines on inclusion, guidance on adaptations, and flexibility for the students. What is more, during this process we had a chance to connect with each other too, to share ideas, insights, encouragement, and mutual support, which proved to be more effective than working in isolation from one another. These collaborative efforts and coordinated actions of this pedagogical dyad have functioned as a learning opportunity, not only for students' success but also for us to achieve the common goal.

So, I started the trial-and-error process. I know that individual learners can be quite different in terms of maturity and development. But, in general, pre-teens can concentrate for longer periods and want more independence. So, one strategy involved sketching out ideas to gain a better understanding of the topic. First, as a way of motivating them, before the practice stage in lesson A, I asked them to draw and/or write something related to the content taught in my lesson. The problem was that it took most of the expected time. As they really love drawing, they dedicated too much time to doing that instead of focusing on the aim of my lesson: communicating in English. As a result, I adapted the materials to the specific context of the group, and I provided detailed, step-by-step lesson plans to the classroom teacher to work on lessons B and C to cater for my students' interests. I thought about the following action points: 1) To provide extra material to the classroom teacher to help learners prepare posters with the language taught in lessons A. The topics I provided to my students should be interrelated to the learning objectives. 2) To provide clear expectations for the classroom teacher and for my students. 3) To design authentic material that provides real-world scenarios to engage students to apply what they have learned into lessons A, on both CREA and Little Bridge platforms. 4) To provide the classroom teacher with clear instructions on what I pretended my students should do in lessons B and C. 5) To receive classroom teachers' comments positively and share ideas.

From that moment on, in lessons B and C, the classroom teacher reinforced what we did in lessons A and she acted as a facilitator; she monitored students' work on the platforms and copied the target language on the blackboard for them to write it on their copybooks. Also, I suggested they create posters using the vocabulary and language taught to hang on the walls. As a revision in my lessons, learners proudly shared what they prepared with the classroom teacher's help.

This decision was a complete success. She sent me photographs of their happy faces, drawing and writing in English. From that moment on, they prepared posters or pictures and wrote the target language in their copybooks. In lessons A, as a revision, learners shared the material by reading aloud, and I asked Concept Checking Questions (CCQs) and Instruction Checking Questions (ICQs). It helped me to check understanding and meet my learners' needs, to check whether the learning process happened, and to achieve my goal. They were really motivated. The result was a communicative English course, with conversation practice, written practice, and all the tools available in the face-to-face classroom.

Learning to work with a pedagogical team means growing and developing through continuous practice. It means reflecting on our own teaching and building a shared vision. It means thinking about different alternatives or strategies. It means organising the information, establishing priorities, and choosing the most suitable one. It means designing, preparing, creating, and specifying action points. I consider effective teamwork and collaboration to be important to the students' learning process. It helps us to develop our problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking skills and allows us the opportunity to work with and learn from the classroom teacher and vice versa.

Honestly, this group has been a challenge in my teaching experience. I have to say that I was hesitant about engaging and motivating my students. Nevertheless, I believe that the key to these changes in my students' behaviour and performance was the classroom tea-

cher's commitment and her helpful attitude; the coordination work of this pedagogical dyad, as well as the hard work, which was the best or only way to find improvements in this critical context, and it was essential for good learning results. After this stunning experience, I am convinced that it is key to develop a good rapport with the classroom teacher, to take a positive attitude, and to create enthusiasm and initiative to make things happen.

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A successful cooperation history: enhancing english language skills at Mvd N.º 62 school

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Edwin Boada,
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THE BEGINNING (of Lourdes Betancourt)

I had never ventured into remote English teaching to children remotely before. Let me tell you about my experience in this uncharted territory so far. After more than 30 years of refining my skills in English teaching and coordinating courses, I retired. For personal reasons, I decided to emigrate to Uruguay. Of course, I had to look for a job and reprogram my life. I came across an announcement: We are hiring teachers. I sent my resume and had an interview with the Teacher's Lead Coach and then with the owner of the company. After completing the entire process, I was hired to teach children online through *Ceibal en Inglés* (CEI). I didn't know anything about it but found the project and the method very interesting, so I started to read, watch videos, and gather information about it. I attended Module 1: CEI Primary Essentials course. "It must be easy" I thought, but I couldn't sleep the night before my first class, anxiety was killing me. I had learned to use the equipment, had my presentation ready, and contacted the Classroom Teacher (CT). I must confess that I was very nervous before my first class but, trying to be positive, I convinced myself that everything was going to be alright... Nothing could be further from reality.

THE FIRST CLASS

The call was answered and there were 32 students in the 6th grade looking at me. They could say hello and follow the entrance routine. After a while, they started to talk, stand up for no reason, shout, draw, make signs with their hands, run in the classroom, and do other things. I couldn't see the CT at that moment, and the situation became chaotic. I was more than nervous; I lost the window of the PowerPoint, turned off my camera, and it went blank. I wanted to cry, I felt my hands tighten, but I continued trying to attract their attention, and after approximately 10 minutes, they started to look at me. The CT came back to rescue me, and I felt relieved. I calmed down; they seemed to be very shy. While saying their names, some of them said, "Pero yo no hablo inglés" o "¿Qué tengo que decir?" I followed the lesson plan, finished my class, said goodbye, and thanked the CT for all her help. I was exhausted.

THE PLAN

I felt that I had to face the challenge. It was extremely urgent to be in contact with the CT and talk about the need to implement some rules in the classroom and tell her that I needed her help, especially during the first weeks of the school year, while they got used to them. She agreed that some discipline was necessary and started complaining about the group.

I talked to my Coordinator, Edwin Boada, who suggested an action plan that revolves around maintaining a consistent and strong relationship within the team to achieve tangible results. Simultaneously addressing issues such as classroom behaviour, establishing routines, creating a safe learning environment, and considering students' interests and learning styles were paramount while teaching for 45 minutes in Class A through video conference. It looked beautiful on paper!

For almost an hour, we brainstormed strategies to improve performance and enhance behaviour that permits interaction and the

learning process at the same time. The action plan would emphasize engagement, participation, and interaction. Playful activities that promote social values and foster stronger bonds among students would be designed. Lesson plans would be adapted to make learning more enjoyable and participatory. And the team's constant communication would play a vital role in facilitating the learning process.

HANDS-ON

I said, "Ok, I need a GPS: it seemed to be a labyrinth". I started to search for information about classroom management and took notes. Also, my Coordinator shared some games and activities that involve Total Physical Response (TPR), icebreakers for children, team building, cooperative learning, and many other things. But how to incorporate the changes and put them into practice?

The answer was: what is the most urgent issue to attack, and how is it going to be implemented? It was necessary to be in contact with the CT and ask her opinion because she knew the group and the students better than I did, ask the mentor, the coordinator, and even the opinion of a more experienced Remote Teacher (RT).

I read in CREA, our learning management system, an article about the seating arrangement, and it fit like a glove in the hand. It was crucial, especially with this big group. Students were integrated into two semicircles, with not much space between them. They would always sit in the same place unless it was necessary for any reason to change them. I shared a picture with the CT, and she agreed to cooperate and organize the conference room like that.

The communication

The weekly communication with the CT was vital during the process. After the seating arrangement, we incorporated some tools focusing on the students like name pickers, different interactive patterns, incorporation of games that involve movement such as Simon Says, charades, action songs, guess the animal/sport/place,

hot potatoes, show me a yellow school object, etc.

Students seemed to feel more motivated and eager to participate. After the quality manager observation, we got more tips and suggestions to incorporate into the class. The suggestions of the Mentor were also heard.

THE VISIT

I wanted to meet my students, the CT, the school, and the conference room personally. I told the CT that I wanted to arrange a nice surprise for them. And it was! "Look! The teacher is here!" They couldn't believe I was there. They hugged me, smiled, shouted! They even went to a notebook autograph session. Oh, yeah, I felt like a movie star! They were so cute to me and wanted to show me their classroom, the spaces they have, and so many other things. The face-to-face contact was such a nice experience and a magical moment.

THE END

In the relationship between the remote teacher, classroom teacher, coordinators, mentors, and quality manager, it is crucial to maintain good communication, plan, and help each other to succeed together. Working in pedagogical pairs, we can navigate the challenges and make a difference in the progress and empowering of children in the language learning process. The initial turbulence evolved into a symphony. I was very lucky to have very active CTs! My once shy to participate in class students became very active and talkative. This year they took centre stage in the Shakespeare's Festival, presenting Romeo and Juliet! I couldn't be prouder of them. This time I cried for the emotion of seeing them speaking in English and growing as people, not because of my nerves. This was a transformative journey. The journey from nerve-wracking chaos to the triumphant stage was a testament to the power of resilience, collaboration, and the indomitable spirit of learning.

Collaborating transcending boundaries; a river that binds us together

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The word “crisis” in Japanese is made up of two characters, one meaning danger, and the other meaning opportunity. In this story of successful collaboration, we hope to be able to reflect on a journey which began in 2020 and occurred spontaneously, born from the need generated out of a crisis which gave rise to the birth of an opportunity that resulted in academic, institutional, intercultural and personal benefits and growth. We share our experience here because we believe that building deeper and fuller partnerships is the way to go.

In the expansive landscape of education, *Ceibal en Inglés* emerged in 2012 as a beacon of innovation, promoting a culture of cooperation. This narrative paper chronicles our intertwined journey—ES Argentina in Córdoba and Eureka Uruguay in Montevideo—two service providers for *Ceibal en Inglés*, navigating a river of challenges and weaving a tale of transformative collaboration.

The genesis of our collaboration unfolded in the middle of a tumultuous pandemic era, where adversity served as the catalyst for our remarkable partnership. Within the transformative realm of *Ceibal en Inglés*, our paths converged, despite the distance, distinct in our origins and cultures. Our collaborative journey transcended geographical borders and cultural differences, combining our efforts in pursuit of a common goal: to provide students with the best quality English lessons possible in the face of a worldwide crisis.

It was after an Institute Coordinators meeting that we contacted each other. We saw an opportunity in the middle of chaos. We could foresee that if both institutes joined forces, we would be able to save time, be more efficient and so reach greater goals. It was then that we discovered a deeper connection beyond our professional roles. We did not know then that that was the beginning of an enduring friendship rooted in shared experiences.

We come from different backgrounds. One of us is a businesswoman and owner of a language institute in Argentina that provides lessons to *Ceibal en Inglés*. At the same time, the other is a Uruguayan teacher and the Institute Coordinator for another provider in Montevideo, Uruguay. But we had something in common that helped us sense we were meant to work together: we were both able to work in real unselfish collaboration. For us, collaboration means mutual understanding and shared goals achieved through disinterested exchange of ideas and materials. We believe that for real collaboration to happen, parties need to work as if they were one; it is not a trade and that is how it went.

As challenges mounted, we found solace and strength in each other's company forging deeper connections. We had shared needs and worries, faced similar challenges and struggled to meet the new reality COVID and distance learning had brought to us.

We still remember those endless calls late at night, planning better strategies, testing new apps and what went beyond all that: listening to each other and seeking solutions for our Remote Teachers. We were there for each other, offering our knowledge most generously. We were there to listen to each other and to transform catharsis into action.

Shared criteria and aligned efforts became the cornerstone of our joint endeavours, fostering a synergy that surpassed our expectations. We planned a sharing scheme which defined the work to be done, the institute in charge and the deadline for each task. We had our remote teachers working in collaboration to create videos

and offered teaching development webinars to help them learn the new strategies that challenging times had brought to us. We designed new ways to register work and to control quality standards. Every single idea we had was shared in real time without expecting anything in return.

Our collaborative tapestry wove together diverse experiences and perspectives, forming a resilient fabric that withstood the trials of the pandemic. Through mutual aid and shared victories, our partnership grew stronger, embodying the true essence of collaboration in education.

Our collaborative endeavours yielded significant outcomes, unveiling the power of collaboration and its transformative potential, reshaping how we understand our job within *Ceibal en Inglés*. We defined ourselves as a cluster and created a group on CREA, our learning management system, to post and save everything we did. We were lucky to have been assigned the same Quality Manager. That was a key feature to success. An equilateral triangle that framed a common aim: to provide Uruguayan state primary school students with high-quality English lessons despite the adversity the pandemic had brought to us.

Our journey wasn't lacking challenges; however, these obstacles became stepping stones for us, rather than stumbling blocks. They reinforced our commitment to each other and the mission of *Ceibal en Inglés*. The lessons learned from navigating these obstacles enriched our collaborative spirit, strengthening our bond and resolve. We designed protocols and processes, defined expectations and possibilities, assigned members of the staff to specific roles, and wrote detailed guidelines for our RTs to ensure high-quality standards. We took action together. We could have done the same internally, in-house, and it would have worked for sure, but collaboration amplified power. We cannot say we were not afraid of unveiling our processes but synergy takes courage.

Our narrative within *Ceibal en Inglés* underscores the transformative power of collaboration. After the pandemic, our partnership proved to have transformed into much more than that. We used to be healthy competitors but through true disinterested cooperation, we have become friends. Even when we are back to normal now, and even though we were assigned to different quality managers in 2023, we still phone each other regularly and share materials and ideas spontaneously and disinterestedly. How are you dealing with this? How have you managed that? How can I be of any help today? Those questions are enough to get an instant message with an idea, a template, a source, a plan and a huge smile on the other end. It was because of *Ceibal en Inglés* that our paths met and we can only feel grateful for that. And that is, in our understanding, the main core we got from the project, a programme that teaches not only English but how to work as a diverse, resilient community. We strongly believe this is the way to go in education and thus we humbly invite other Institute Heads and Institute Coordinators to dare to embark on a similar journey.

Our story speaks volumes about the profound impact collaborative endeavours can have in reshaping the way we understand education and work. Our collaboration expanded beyond the confines of our service provision, intertwining our lives in profound ways. The bridge we have built crossing the River Plate is consolidated and its foundations are strengthened even after the crisis that united us has been overcome.

Thus, the river that keeps us apart became the river that binds us together.

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Fostering quality through collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

Collaboration serves as the cornerstone of *Ceibal en Inglés* (CEI), guiding our efforts to deliver high-quality English language instruction to learners across state primary and secondary schools in Uruguay. Defined as “the act of working together with other people or organisations to create or achieve something,” collaboration is fundamental to CEI’s holistic approach to remote teaching. Internally, CEI operates through several units, including Pedagogical, Mentors, Gestión, Evaluation, and Quality Assurance, each playing a crucial role in programme development and implementation. Additionally, CEI collaborates with external stakeholders and policymakers to align programme objectives with broader educational goals. Together, these collaborative efforts form the backbone of CEI, fostering a culture of cooperation and shared responsibility across all levels of the programme.

In this article, we focus on the work carried out by the Quality Assurance unit of *Ceibal en Inglés* and the Teacher Development Management position from the British Council, our largest English lesson provider and partner, and we draw from the framework outlined by Friend and Cook (1992)¹, that proposes that successful collaboration hinges on voluntary participation, equal partnership, shared goals, collective decision-making, resource sharing, and mutual accountability for outcomes. In this sense, we present how our co-

¹ Friend, M., y Cook, L. (1992). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals*. NY: Longman. White Plains.

llaborative work drives the evolution of our training resources and evaluation processes to adapt to the dynamic needs of our beneficiaries and providers.

COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Every year, the Quality Assurance unit carries out a comprehensive evaluation of the programme at each institute and across all institutes. This evaluation process entails gathering insights from various sources including stakeholder feedback, lesson observations, and a review of institutional processes. In addition, the Teacher Development Manager collects the experiences and insights shared by remote teachers (RTs) tasked with delivering *Ceibal en Inglés* lessons, as well as of institute coordinators (ICs) overseeing programme management. Together we gather valuable insights that are shared across different units within CEI, facilitating a culture of learning and knowledge exchange.

Central to our collaborative approach is developing and refining the CEI Handbook, which serves as a guiding resource for our lesson providers. Through this process involving input from various stakeholders, including remote teachers and institute coordinators, we review and update the Handbook at the start of every academic year to ensure its alignment with evolving educational standards and programme objectives. This iterative approach allows us to incorporate new insights and strategies ensuring that the Handbook remains a valuable resource that serves as a foundational reference for all CEI members, including providers and remote teachers, reinforcing our shared commitment to delivering high-quality English language instruction.

In addition, we place significant emphasis on the design of training courses and professional development opportunities, recognising their pivotal role in equipping remote teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary for our programme delivery. Through joint efforts, we engage in the iterative process of designing, implementing, and refining training and development activities that reflect the pedagogy and best practices of *Ceibal en Inglés*.

During the pandemic, we gained a renewed appreciation for asynchronous training and the necessity of accommodating our busy schedules. Since 2022, we have adapted our training initiatives to accommodate all teachers, offering pre-service mandatory training for new remote teachers and a diverse array of non-mandatory asynchronous modules and synchronous sessions for ongoing professional development. At the end of every training, participants are provided with an opportunity to share anonymous feedback with us which is incorporated into our continuous improvement efforts. This iterative process allows us to tailor our training offerings to the evolving needs and preferences of our remote teachers, ensuring that they receive relevant and engaging professional development opportunities.

Furthermore, we continue to work on and improve self- and peer observation schemes. These schemes provide remote teachers with valuable opportunities to reflect on their teaching practices, receive constructive feedback, and collaborate with colleagues to identify areas for growth and improvement. By engaging in these observation schemes, remote teachers enhance their pedagogical skills and refine their instructional techniques, ultimately improving the quality of instruction delivered to our learners.

Additionally, we make revisions to our lesson observation instruments every year to better align with our programme goals and objectives. These changes reflect our commitment to continuous improvement and our desire to ensure that our observation processes accurately assess the quality of instruction and support ongoing teacher development. By refining our observation instruments, we can provide more meaningful feedback to remote teachers and better identify areas for instructional enhancement.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Over the years, the programme's instructional framework that informs the areas of Quality Assurance and Teacher Development has transformed significantly. In its inception, it was largely based

on general English Language Teaching methodology and current approaches to teaching and learning. With time, a collective programme-specific experience-based body of knowledge was built from the bottom up - by *Ceibal en Inglés* and providers observing best practices and areas of opportunity, collecting feedback from stakeholders, educators engaging in reflective teaching practices, and analysing the outcomes of evaluations. At present, the CEI Handbook outlines in detail all the processes and systems that are integral for the programme implementation, as well as the pedagogy of *Ceibal en Inglés* as summarised by the CEI Observation instruments. At the same time, the catalogue of self-access teacher training illustrates this instructional framework, featuring real classroom recordings from different providers, teachers and schools and practical tips and strategies for direct classroom implementation, as well as testimonials from subject-matter experts in the CEI community. Other collaborative development initiatives include communities of practice, knowledge-sharing events and CEI publications.

Most recently, in response to the evolving needs of our programme, we have developed and are piloting an asynchronous training course tailored specifically for institute coordinators in 2024. Recognising the critical role of ICs in program management and implementation, these training initiatives aim to provide ICs with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively lead CEI programs at their institutes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we believe that the collaborative efforts between the Quality Assurance unit at *Ceibal en Inglés* and the Teacher Development Management position at the British Council resonate strongly with the principles outlined by Friend and Cook (1992) steering our collaborative approach to continually refine our training resources and evaluation processes in alignment with the evolving needs of our beneficiaries and providers. As we reflect on our journey, it becomes evident that collaboration serves as a catalyst for innova-

tion and excellence in English language education. Moreover, it is necessary to acknowledge that these achievements are not solitary endeavours but rather the culmination of collective efforts. We extend our appreciation to classroom and remote teachers, institute coordinators, technical support teams, and mentors, whose collaboration has supported our efforts and made our work possible. Thanks to their openness and commitment, we are able to record and showcase real-life lessons, support training efforts, identify and share best practices, improve processes and instruments, and continue adding to the overall efforts that advance and foster positive student outcomes.

Educational synergy: enhancing learning through collaborative work in the intensive CEI programme

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INTRODUCTION

Ceibal en Inglés (CEI) is more than just a sum of its parts. Defining it as the sum of its parts would mean leaving out what makes it unique and innovative. *Ceibal en Inglés* is synonymous with the collaborative work of invisible bridges, the fitting together of pieces of different shapes by different builders who intersect at some point in their constructive work.

This paper seeks to open the way to the experience in a new space that recently emerged in *Ceibal en Inglés*. This is a story based on the experience of the actors involved, who know, sense and commit themselves to the programme.

THE PROPOSAL

In 2022, *Ceibal en Inglés* launched the Intensive CEI programme for 7th, 8th and 9th grades of Lower Secondary Education. This project, which began as a pilot with a few groups, is part of a profound transformation in education whose main objective is to use video-conference (VC) lessons to bring the English language closer to secondary school age groups which, for various reasons, do not have a face-to-face teacher in their school and come to *Ceibal en Inglés*.

from the English Language Inspectorate of the Secondary Education authority.

It must be pointed out that, based on *Ceibal en Inglés*' experience in remote teaching, these groups need to have an adult leader from the school in the classroom. That leader acts as a bridge between the students and the remote teacher (RT) and between the group and the school. According to the specifications of the Public Education Administration, 7th, 8th and 9th grade students work on learning English four times a week with a face-to-face English teacher. The *Ceibal en Inglés* programme is suited to this design, with a remote teacher who appears via videoconference three times a week, and the fourth space being dedicated to students completing activities set by the remote teacher during the weekly cycle.

In 2023, after the design proposed by *Ceibal en Inglés* was validated following class observations and interviews with students, teachers and heads of different institutions and inspectors, the programme was brought to other schools and new departments. Outreach always requires having known the proposed design in the field through observations and interviews to be able to conceptualise the training that may be required for both the leaders, who are chosen by each school in communication with the Secondary School Authorities, and the remote teachers, heads of institutes and students. These training events are held face-to-face for schools, and remotely in the case of institutes. Training in the schools is usually provided by the team of mentors, while training for the institutes is provided by the *Ceibal en Inglés* team of Quality Managers.

In this context, the roles of the Mentor and the Quality Manager support the different actors of the programme: the students, leaders and managers, that is, the territory work in the schools, on the one hand, and the remote teachers and coordinators, that is, the work with the institutes that deliver the lessons, on the other.

In our case, the story is based on the experience of having worked together, Florencia in her position as Quality Manager, and María in her role as Mentor of the department of Cerro Largo, more specific-

cially, the city of Melo, in two secondary schools exhibiting different realities and different teaching staffs. This article is based particularly on the experience of working with secondary school 3 in Melo, which had the aforementioned characteristics that qualified it for CEI work: there was no assigned face-to-face English teacher, the inspectorate believed that this secondary school should be part of the programme, the institution was able to appoint a leader in coordination with the Secondary Education authorities to work with the group in the time allotted with the VC equipment and a remote teacher.

THE ROLES

In the case of the Mentor's role, before the beginning of the year's work, the school's management team is trained in the why and how of educational design, the role of the school's leader teacher, the assessment of students, the role of management, troubleshooting technical problems, etc.

Regarding the work with students, the role focuses mainly on working with them on autonomous learning strategies, on the understanding that although they will have a leader working with them, it is their task to become responsible in their own acquisition of knowledge in a foreign language. In this regard, in order to promote their autonomy in the acquisition of knowledge, the Mentor must:

- prepare and implement platform use workshops,
- prepare and implement awareness and empowerment workshops for autonomous work to teach them the necessary strategies for learning with the tools they have: a remote teacher, educational platforms, and review and reflection materials,
- train students in the use of tools such as observation, reflection, repetition, as well as cultural tools such as dictionaries, maps, memorization of lists, etc.

In the case of the Quality Manager, their main role is to review, assess and analyse what happens in English classes, focusing on the

work of teaching and its impact on the students. In addition, they perform audits of the processes implemented by the institutes and their coordinators in order to ensure quality classes and the correct and smooth operation of the programme. Finally, every year-end, the Quality Manager prepares a comprehensive and unbiased report assessing each supplier institute's compliance with all the project requirements.

From this point of view, the Intensive CEI programme was supported by the Quality Manager mainly in terms of class observation. However, given the characteristics of this project for Secondary Education, the work was not limited to ensuring quality but also included supporting the institute, its coordinators and teachers, with all the stakeholders learning as they made their way through the programme. The Quality Managers involved provided support through in-person and online meetings with different members of the CEI community involved, as well as with training, emails, etc.

Taking into account the responsibilities of the roles of both parties, an agreement was reached before the visit to both schools about how to present the proposal to the managers in a clear and detailed manner.

THE VISIT

The school's management was looking forward to the visit by the Ceibal en Inglés team, not only because it brought a solution to the school's lack of English teachers but also because it involved working with a great innovative component, which implied a great challenge for the school as a whole.

The topics addressed were how Intensive CEI works, the reason for its emergence, the extent of the work system's effect on the autonomy of the students, the role of the remote teacher, their communication with the school's leader, the role of the coordinator of the institute the remote teacher belongs to, and the kind of communication that was expected with the school.

In this regard, as the proposal was explained, the school's authorities shared more and more about their context, opportunities and concerns regarding the students and their relationship with the language, the teacher and particular situations that negatively affected the acquisition of the language in previous experiences at the school.

In the first meeting with the students, the affective filter was high. Little by little, and as they heard the proposal, they became more interested and curious to learn more. The exchange progressed into group agreements that had to be reached and the roles that had to be assigned. In general, the workshop originally planned as a presentation became a space for the exchange of ideas, experiences and opinions. The event motivated the students, and they were looking forward to their workshop with María, the mentor, and her first class.

After the visit, in a workshop with the students conducted by the mentor, the students posed their questions regarding typical structures of the language and the vocabulary they had worked on. Once the strategies had been set out, the students opened a dialogue by making suggestions on how to improve the operation of the programme, which once clarified in the workshop were to be relayed to the remote teacher as proposed in the first workshop, where they discussed the operation of the programme and communication with the remote teacher through the group's delegate. It must be noted that the group's leader teacher stated that she was facing a great challenge due to her poor knowledge of the language, so it was necessary to talk at length about the role of the leader in this proposal and her invaluable contributions to the students given her experience in working with adolescents and her good relationship with this group in particular. The appreciation of the strategies she contributed and the confidence the group perceived in the leader were key to the implementation of the course.

Subsequently, in a second and third session of the Mentor's work with the students, after observing a lesson delivered by the remote teacher, the work with them? focused on strategies such as obser-

vation, reflection, repetition and other strategies for the acquisition of the second language. A group activity allowed the students to speak up and provide their feedback on the programme. Everyone agreed that the remote teacher was the driving force behind the good class dynamics by implementing different strategies to work with students in an innovative way while challenging each student to be responsible for their own learning.

From the Quality Manager's point of view, and adding to all the above, the visit involved something different from what the role entails. For instance, it was possible to learn about other contexts, realities, and needs. Furthermore, it was very pleasant to be able to join a colleague to present a proposal in order to reach more students and be there for them in their last stage of secondary education, as well as the opportunity to speak with principals and assistants and learn about local operations. As regards collaborative work, being able to listen to and learn from colleagues who live in the department and work in the territory and know the situation in the schools with which the programme works is key to understanding the reality of education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a definition applies here which is perfectly transferable to what we hope will happen in the schools visited and the project presented: "Learning collaboratively... working jointly to solve a problem or complete a task towards a common objective and making sure that not only individual performance but that of the whole group is enhanced" (Calvo, 2014, p.1).

The chance to work together on the Intensive CEI programme has proved that collaboration between areas of education is crucial to promoting synergy and mutual enrichment, which leads to the strengthening and enhancement of an educational project. This experience leaves us with the certainty that collaboration is not only a means to an end but also an enriching process that promotes

innovation and continuous improvement in education, fostering the student's curiosity, responsibility for their own learning process, and the teacher's willingness to take on the challenge of encouraging the students to build bridges. In *Ceibal en Inglés*, the invisible bridges between different roles and areas build a path towards meaningful learning and educational transformation whereby the knowledge acquired in educational institutes travels beyond the walls of buildings and becomes learning for life itself.

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Ceibal en inglés and Little Bridge: bridging ELT beyond borders in edtech

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Ceibal en Inglés has been a collaborative programme since its inception. In the beginning, when faced with the question of how to bridge the English learning gap in the country due to a short supply of local teachers, the people in charge conceived a solution where collaboration was at the centre of it all: a remote teacher of English and a classroom teacher working together; diverse teams of people devoted to running and monitoring different aspects of the programme in harmony with each other; and strategic partnerships with English institutes around the world to secure a remote teaching workforce.

The implementation of this model was a success, but in recent years, the matter of educational technology integration became even more prominent in Ceibal as a whole. As a result, *Ceibal en Inglés* realised using technology in the form of videoconference systems to deliver lessons just wasn't enough anymore. In order to provide a language learning experience genuinely adapted to the digital era and drive innovation, an interactive platform that fostered student autonomy was missing from the equation.

The search began in 2019, when an international tender was launched to select a platform provider for the Primary programme that met a series of essential requirements. It had to be attractive for children, promote autonomous engagement and learning, and focus on the development of communication, language skills, and 21st century skills. Little Bridge was chosen in this process, drawing a new line of collaboration in the *Ceibal en Inglés* scheme.

Little Bridge is a platform that "connects children aged 6-12 from around the world to make friends, learn English with award-winning

content, and practise together" (Little Bridge, 2021). It is aimed at schools and institutions, but also at parents interested in engaging their children with a learning community from home. To Ceibal, it stood out for providing a world for learning, complete with characters and narratives; for providing a global community of Digipals, other children who are Little Bridge users and can instant message each other safely; and for being a constantly growing project, which ensures that improvements and any necessary modifications can be collaboratively worked on over time (*Ceibal en Inglés*, 2023, p. 8).

Upon reading that description for the first time, it is likely that any reader believes that integrating Little Bridge to the *Ceibal en Inglés* context was simple; just like downloading an app on your phone or installing new software on your computer. Far from it being a "plug and play" solution, this incorporation proved to be a challenge that couldn't have been overcome without collaboration. It instantly became clear that substantial technical and pedagogical adjustments had to be made to provide a learning experience that was as seamless as possible.

On the technical side, some essential aspects had to be covered, such as access through Ceibal's single sign-on (SSO) system and user allocation matching between CREA, our learning management system, and Little Bridge to make sure that teachers and students were on the same groups in both platforms. Further down the line, custom developments had to be made to suit the unique needs of Uruguay's education system, such as the creation of a sub-group feature to allow for differentiated assignment of contents in classrooms where students from different levels coexist. Throughout this process, collaboration between *Ceibal en Inglés*, the Educational Platforms team at Ceibal, and Little Bridge has been paramount to understand necessities and implement solutions.

Pedagogically speaking, the educational context of the programme required from both teams to walk the road less travelled. Little Bridge originally offers six levels of lessons and interactive contents that range from Pre-A1 to A2 difficulty per the Common European

Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). For *Ceibal en Inglés*, where there are three levels for 4th, 5th, and 6th grade of Primary respectively, this meant working closely with the creators of Little Bridge to define a sequence of contents tailored to this population. This process is ongoing, and so far, input from remote teachers at institutes, classroom teachers at schools, and mentors in the field has been essential to adjust the contents offered through the platform and ensure pedagogical aspirations and learning community realities are closely aligned. Most recently, the pedagogical units at Little Bridge and Ceibal have worked together to source and digitalise extended learning materials from the print books that accompany the platform, such as stories to reinforce reading and listening skills.

Beyond the technical and the pedagogical, there are frontiers where extra collaboration efforts are always needed. For example, the fact that students need to navigate between two platforms to find their course contents and interactive activities required a shift in design in how children are guided in CREA week after week to find and complete coursework in Little Bridge. This relies heavily on the pedagogical pairs and on mentors to monitor student experiences; as well as on the pedagogical team in charge of developing learning materials. Similarly, additional efforts were needed to make sure no child is left behind in contexts where there might be a temporary lack of working devices or connectivity issues. For these scenarios, digital worksheets that can be downloaded and accessed offline were developed and made available to everyone through CREA. These handouts contain pen-and-paper versions of the interactive activities traditionally assigned via Little Bridge.

To continue driving English learning and pushing for the appropriation of the platform among the user base, an idea was born naturally in the community to host an event once a year that acknowledged and rewarded student engagement. The CEI Little Bridge Olympic Games is an event that since 2021 invites students to engage with the interactive features of the platform across different individual and group categories. In 2023, *Ceibal en Inglés* recorded its hi-

ghest participation rates with more than 18,000 active students in the platform throughout the period of the event and almost 45,000 completed activities. Another milestone of that year was the first implementation of the Starting Line and Checkpoint, two activities that aim to measure performance and gather concrete evidence of learning in the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme. The results of that year showed that the average learning progress recorded among students from all three levels who participated in both instances was 25%; relative to their scores obtained during the Starting Line at the beginning of the year.

In this complex yet privileged environment, *Ceibal en Inglés* embodies what Stewart (2016) calls “the collaborative imperative”, a concept suggesting that collaboration stems from grounded endeavours rather than utopian views on education to achieve goals (p. 4). Although at some point in the past it might have seemed impossible to implement a nationwide English language programme where the core teaching happens through videoconference, and where students engage in learning autonomously through gamified activities and interacting with a global community of children, this is a reality today in Uruguay. Moreover, it has all originated from “a practical response to the common problem of there not being enough: not enough time, not enough resources, not enough information and not enough diverse perspectives” in the ELT community in the country (Stewart, 2016, p. 4).

Much like Stewart (2016), we believe that “the speed of change today is inducing a cycle of continuous innovation that compels greater collaboration in nearly all fields” (p. 4). In line with Ceibal’s mission of being “Uruguay’s digital technology centre for education innovation at the service of public education policies” and promoting “the integration of technology to improve learning and foster innovation, inclusion and personal growth” (Ceibal, 2024), all the people behind *Ceibal en Inglés* feel this collaborative imperative spirit to continue bridging the local gaps in English learning. We hope to do it as we have done so far: one bridge at a time with help from anyone willing to collaborate.

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Integrating english learning and artistic expression in SEN schools

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Collaboration in education has emerged as a cornerstone for enriching students' learning experiences and broadening their horizons. This essay delves into the partnership between *Ceibal en Inglés* (CEI) and *Artistas en el Aula* (AA), focussing on their joint efforts to provide Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools in the CEI programme with the unique opportunity of organising an English-language art festival. Alongside local visual artist Pedro "Pepe" Abdala, Classroom Teachers (CTs), Remote Teachers (RTs), and SEN students embarked on a creative adventure that led them to explore and discover materials, objects, and forms with which to create, rework, and reinterpret, transforming these elements into toys. By the end of the experience, students put into practise their knowledge of English to share descriptions of their work within the framework of a specially designed virtual exhibition to showcase their creations. In this sense, collaboration can be defined as a synergistic and shared effort between two groups with a common goal, and it refers to the coordination and joint action between CEI and AA to integrate English language learning and creative skills by using art as a medium for language practice and cultural exploration. Along these lines, the integration of technology, the intersection of English language and art, and the paramount role of teamwork are three pivotal dimensions that shaped this collaborative initiative. By exploring these aspects, we gain insights into how collaboration can transcend boundaries and cultivate holistic learning environments.

One of the key aspects of the collaboration between CEI and AA is the use of technology as a bridge that spans geographical distances and facilitates effective communication (Banegas, 2013). The use of the online platform CREA to host a personalised and tailor-made course, which incorporates audio-visual elements and videoconferences (VCs), -and also integrates accessibility standards to the extent that the platform allows, such as font types, contrast ratio, subtitles, and other accessibility-related aspects- included four different video-challenges on themes such as creating art, generating ideas, and creating a toy born from the students' imagination, sensitivity, and interaction with the world. This succeeded in establishing greater closeness between the students and the artist, acting as a motivating and catalysing factor throughout the process. It was designed in such a way that, from the first VC meeting, students felt like they were interacting with someone familiar, which is an intentional approach in AA. This allowed for smooth interaction among students from eleven groups across six schools and "Pepe" during these VC meetings where they exchanged ideas, shared their progress, and supported each other collectively. This integration of technology not only breaks down barriers but also opens up opportunities for inclusive participation, enabling students with special needs to engage in collaborative ventures that were once limited by physical constraints.

The intersection of English and art offers a unique platform for interdisciplinary learning that caters to both cognitive and creative needs. Multiple studies show that incorporating art into English language classrooms boosts students' motivation, confidence, and satisfaction (Farokhi, 2012; Khater, 2015; Lee, 2014). The collaboration between CEI and AA exemplifies the potential of merging language acquisition with artistic expression. In this context, English is not merely a tool for communication; it transforms into a means of self-expression, enabling individuals to convey their thoughts, emotions, and ideas in a unique and powerful way. After completing the video challenges mentioned earlier, students were immersed in a three-week period where, along with their RTs, they reviewed taught language forms and were provided with the scaffolding to

articulate their thoughts, convey their emotions, and ideas in English, looking towards the virtual art exhibition with which the SEN Art Festival was officially celebrated. The artwork they presented during this exhibition affirmed the power of language as a means of self-expression and a tool for artistic exploration. Studies show that art can open new doors for learning and challenge students to explore themselves and the world around them in innovative ways (Farokhi, 2012). This interdisciplinary approach not only enhances language proficiency but also nurtures creativity, enabling students to develop a sense of achievement, value, and active participation in their school life. Ultimately, the confluence of English and art became a transformative educational experience that empowered students in ways that extended far beyond the classroom.

The success of this collaborative initiative hinges on the importance of teamwork. At its core, this project is a collaborative endeavour that brings together a diverse group of stakeholders, including students, CTs, RTs, Ceibal's teams -mentors, pedagogical assistants, quality managers and the projects coordination team from AA-, and even parents, who come together to create a cohesive and enriching learning experience that goes beyond traditional educational boundaries. Collaborative environments foster knowledge sharing, joint planning, and a shared purpose (Roschelle and Teasley, 1995). By working collectively, the participants of this project gained exposure to diverse perspectives, enhancing their problem-solving skills and adaptability. This diversity of perspectives is a catalyst for creativity and innovation. It allows for comprehensive and holistic joint planning, ensuring that all aspects of language acquisition and artistic expression are seamlessly integrated into the learning journey. In addition, the collaborative setting encouraged mutual support and empathy. When individuals work together towards a shared objective, they often develop a sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding. This, in turn, reinforces a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. Students feel that they are part of a larger community that cares about their growth and development. Through this team effort, students not only acquired language proficiency and artistic skills but also cultivated qualities such as tea-

mwork, communication, adaptability, and empathy. These skills are invaluable for holistic development and prepare students to excel not only academically but also in their future careers and personal lives.

The collaboration between CEI and AA is a shining example of the potential that emerges when collaboration, technology, and interdisciplinary learning converge within the realm of education. This initiative, which weaved together these three dimensions, not only enhanced the educational experiences of SEN students across Uruguay but also played a pivotal role in shaping the ever-evolving landscape of educational practices. First, technology is at the heart of this collaborative effort. CEI leverages digital tools and resources to facilitate language acquisition, making learning more interactive and engaging for students (Banegas and Brovotto, 2020). These technological innovations not only enhance language skills but also provide a versatile platform for creative expression through art. Furthermore, the synergy between language and art is the cornerstone of this initiative's success. It recognises that language is not an isolated skill but a vehicle for self-expression and communication. The fusion of language acquisition and artistic expression encourages students to explore their thoughts and emotions, transcending the boundaries of traditional language learning. Central to the success of this collaboration is the emphasis on teamwork. This collaborative spirit fosters a sense of unity, shared purpose, and mutual support. This reinforces the idea that education is a communal endeavour and everyone plays a role in nurturing student growth and development. In conclusion, as we navigate the ever-evolving landscape of education, it is essential to continue exploring and embracing new initiatives that hold the promise of a brighter and more inclusive future for all learners. Can we afford to ignore the transformative potential of collaboration?

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Citizenship Project: a collaborative promotion of values

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In the realm of education, the holistic development and safety of the teaching community, particularly children, stand as paramount objectives. Recognizing this, a collaborative effort was initiated by educators to reinforce shared principles advocated by the British Council and Ceibal/ANEP. This collaborative endeavour involved key stakeholders, including some British Council coordinators and managers, the *Ceibal en Inglés* pedagogical team and the developers of Little Bridge, who brought diverse perspectives and their expertise to the table. The culmination of their joint efforts resulted in the creation of the Citizenship Project – a pioneering initiative aimed at fostering anti-bullying and digital safety among learners, tailored to resonate with the needs and challenges of diverse learning communities.

The Citizenship Project emerged as a distinctive proposal designed for both remote and classroom settings, encouraging collaborative implementation in primary schools, especially in grades 4-6. At its core, this initiative focuses on instilling and reflecting upon key citizenship values, particularly those of anti-bullying and digital safety. The project unfolds by presenting children with scenarios that mirror both physical and online environments. Through reflection on these scenarios, learners engage in a process of discovery and understanding, laying the groundwork for positive behavioural change.

The heart of the Citizenship Project lies in its emphasis on collaborative learning. Remote and classroom teachers unite to guide learners through the project, encouraging discussions, reflections, and the creation of classroom posters. These posters serve as tangible outcomes, promoting positive behaviours and attitudes within the school and online environments.

The project has fostered awareness of citizenship values among students. The reflective nature of the project helps children familiarise with these values, leading towards a more respectful learning environment. Besides, the emphasis on digital safety equips learners with tools to navigate online safely.

This project reflects the collaboration among diverse stakeholders in education. By bringing together different insights and expertise, this initiative has successfully addressed issues of anti-bullying and digital safety while promoting positive citizenship values. This has been pointed out by diverse members of the teaching community:

"Students loved participating in this project. They shared personal experiences, feelings and understood the meaning and the impact of being mean and kind." Remote Teacher Lorena Sotelo.

"With this group in particular, we were having some trouble regarding behaviour, so we decided to implement it to get the group on a different path. It was amazing how they got involved and we could agree on some classroom rules and so on!"

Remote Teacher Paula Barreto.

"I personally loved working with this project, as it's really necessary to discuss certain topics with students."

Remote Teacher María Capalbo

"I think the stories have a positive impact on learners' lives."

Remote Teacher Mercedes Lazcano

"Quería agradecerte tu disposición, la forma como te has involucrado en el proyecto con los niños. Me ha resultado muy beneficioso ya que con los cambios en la clase en cuanto a lo conductual tuve que implementar aspectos que apuntaran a la convivencia. Con tu apoyo fue interesante ya que ellos desde Segundas Lenguas y con la tecnología vieron una nueva modalidad. Además valoraron que no sólo en el aula presencial se habla y se trabaja sobre la importancia de los buenos hábitos sino que en otras disciplinas. El trabajo con los pósteres les encantó."¹

Angélica, Classroom Teacher Rocha 5 5B.

As we reflect on this collaborative initiative, it becomes evident that the participation of the different stakeholders has successfully resulted in a positive experience. It could be said that the designed project contributes to the holistic development and safety of our learners.

¹ "I wanted to thank you for your willingness, for the way you have gotten involved in the project with the children. It has been very beneficial to me since with the changes in the class in terms of behavior, I had to implement aspects that aimed at coexistence. With your support it was interesting since they saw a new modality from Second Languages and with technology. They also appreciated that the importance of good habits is not only talked about and worked on in the face-to-face classroom, but also in other disciplines. They loved the work with the posters."

Ceibal en inglés and STEAM – collaborative support by Maldonado mentors

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SUMMARY

This article presents a collaboration success story between the *Ceibal en Inglés* mentor and the STEAM territory leader in the department of Maldonado on joint visits to schools and the sharing made possible by these opportunities. This collaboration occurs in a context of flexibility but with pre-set common goals. Joint work with classroom teachers contributes to fulfilling each mentor's objectives while benefiting teachers that bring up problems and queries with both mentors at the same time and discuss the challenges they are faced with in their work with English and computational thinking in the same interview. The social interaction and communication that occurs naturally on journeys to different locations also leads to constructive interaction that helps solve problems in schools, share information, tools and work strategies, and achieve goals that benefit both programmes.

CONTEXT

Mentors Macarena Baridón and Tatiana Gilles have been working for Ceibal since 2017 and 2018, respectively. The former as a *Ceibal en Inglés* mentor and the latter as a STEAM mentor. Our job is to provide guidance and support so that safe, creative and meaningful use can be made of technologies in the classroom and information can be gathered about what changes and adaptations should

be made to the digital tools and plans offered by our programmes in such a way that they can be geared to the educational needs of the schools and their communities.

Despite coming from different territory teams, we both work in primary schools in the department of Maldonado. Three years ago, in keeping with Ceibal's initiative of different areas joining forces, which resulted in the creation of Territory Management, we began to have regular meetings with colleagues from other Maldonado territory teams to catch up on how each of us was working in their schools and where we coincided in order to think of joint actions.

That was how we discovered that our way of working with primary school teachers is very similar, given that the *Ceibal en Inglés* and Computational Thinking programmes have a similar design in terms of the use of videoconferencing for weekly lessons with remote teachers, the challenge for classroom teachers of delving into topics that are as new to them as they are to their students and require them to play a different role from the one they usually play in other subjects, and the need to use *Ceibalitas* computers for the tasks that the remote teachers assign their students.

JOINT WORK

In 2022 we started to come up with specific proposals for joint action in some schools. An example of this was a workshop that we ran at rural primary school No. 12 in Maldonado together with the Global Learning Network (GLN) mentor Macarena García, in which we proposed English review and computational thinking activities that we then assessed by using NPDL tools. The activity proved so positive for the teacher and the students that we decided to repeat it in 2023.

In 2023, as we were better acquainted with each other, we started to make our usual visits to primary school teachers jointly at schools that work with both *Ceibal en Inglés* and computational thinking programmes. On our visits, we interview teachers and discuss how

these programmes are working with the groups they teach, we ask them if they have questions or problems they have identified and suggestions they may have for us. This is useful to the school because it reduces the number of separate visits by Ceibal and does not force them to repeat the same information to different mentors over and over again. It also helps us intervene as one unit (Ceibal) rather than as separate programmes that do not intersect at any point.

In addition to interviews, we sit in on classes and run workshops, but the fundamental part of our job is face-to-face conversations with the teachers we support during the school year and with whom we need to forge a bond of closeness and trust so that they can turn to us and we can collaboratively seek to ensure that these programmes work better year after year and that we offer students a learning experience of the highest quality.

THINKING IN CONVERSATION

The purpose of these face-to-face exchanges is not to present ready-made ideas to the teachers or hear from them a speech put together before our arrival, but to "build a thought in conversation, which is the best way of thinking, because, ultimately, thinking is answering." (Segato, p. 17). This face-to-face thinking in conversation involves the exchange of ideas not only in words but also in "gestures, looks and corporality" (p.17). In this regard, working as a pair of mentors helps to interpret these signs and offer a better response by providing another informed interlocutor who complements the group thinking exercise. Similarly, we prioritize meetings with more than one teacher at a time, if allowed by the school. For instance, we seize breaktime as an opportunity for a round with teachers, who share programmes and can reflect on how these programmes are working in a collective conversation. We also find it enriching to work in teachers' meetings, which we attend whenever the schools invite us, extending the invitation to the NPDL mentor in the schools that are part of the network.

COLLABORATION

The definition of the Royal Spanish Academy for collaborate is "to work with somebody or assist them in the completion of an undertaking." Due to the above, our form of collaboration not only involves working with somebody but also thinking with somebody. We could say that our definition of collaboration is "to think and work with somebody to achieve better results in an undertaking together."

CONCLUSION

These joint visits began as a tentative exercise in coordination which ended up benefiting the way we both work. It has allowed us to identify technical problems that affect the two programmes we represent, find out what the groups we work with are doing in other subjects, make suggestions on strategies that also help improve the two weekly lessons, and also replicate what works for a group with one of their remote teachers and suggest it for another group's work.

One unexpected benefit was that because both of us knew the methodology of the two programmes, we were able to talk about them with schools that were working with only one of the two and encouraged them to join both.

Travelling together to and from different locations in the department also gives us time to talk to each other and exchange views, ideas, tools and information, which we would not have the time to do if it were not for these journeys.

It was the similar way in which *Ceibal en Inglés* and Computational Thinking operate that allowed us to take this approach to work this year, which we intend to keep using in the future. We would like to be joined in this work modality by mentors and trainers from other programmes who can visit primary school teachers with us so as to provide schools with better support.

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Collaboration and community: promoting high-quality educational practices in Ceibal en Inglés

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When teachers play their role as facilitators or mediators, they enhance the search for appropriate teaching strategies for their students, and in order to do so, they must be aware of the learning context and its characteristics. They need to master different ways of playing their pedagogical role and establish collaborative relationships with other educational agents to promote and enhance the educational experience they offer.

Educational practices aiming at quality and lasting learning are linked to their relationship with the concept of community. For a practice to be successful, it is necessary to build and contribute to some aspect of the community promoting the participation and collaboration of all those involved in these practices.

Those of us who have been through the programme for a few years know that this collaboration is essential for students to take ownership of the foreign language and be able to access the content in the curricula as a means of ensuring quality learning.

Collaboration is not merely about getting together and trying to work together. It involves actively building knowledge by promoting skills that will allow better learning, and in addition, it requires a positive atmosphere that will boost participation, learning and self-esteem for all those involved.

Within the *Ceibal en Inglés* (CEI) programme, the collaborative spirit is not simply a facet; it is the backbone that promotes transformative educational practices. In the context of language acquisition, especially in the case of English as a foreign language, the *Ceibal en Inglés* programme in Uruguay has emerged as a beacon of effective collaboration, fostering an environment where students learn not only a new language and where learning occurs not only in the classroom but extends to everyday life and to interactions with the broader environment. This not only strengthens language skills but also provides students with a deeper and more practical insight into the language and culture they are learning.

The *Ceibal en Inglés* collaborative model goes beyond the traditional classroom dynamic. It encompasses a broader spectrum, including the crucial role of classroom teachers, principals and mentors. Classroom teachers take on the challenge of working as members of a teaching pair without speaking the language, positioning themselves as a learning model rather than a knowledge model. The principals understand how the initiative operates and closely monitor its progress within the classrooms, maintaining constant contact with the mentor to ensure the best outcomes. Through their guidance and collaborative efforts, mentors help shape educational practices that resonate beyond individual classrooms, permeating the whole education community. Collaboration and exchange among all stakeholders contribute to the development of lessons and, above all, student learning.

A remarkable aspect of the *Ceibal en Inglés* collaborative framework is its emphasis on community building. Educational practices are not isolated efforts but rather interconnected threads that weave a network of shared experiences. This interconnectedness serves as the foundation for successful language acquisition initiatives, where students are not passive recipients but rather active contributors to a dynamic linguistic and cultural exchange.

Reflecting on the significance of collaboration within *Ceibal en Inglés*, it is clear that the programme not only teaches language skills but also instil a sense of collective responsibility among students,

teachers and all members of the education community. Success in language acquisition is intrinsically linked to the collaborative fabric weaved by teachers, mentors, principals, and students alike. This collaborative ethos not only ensures the students' proficiency in a foreign language but also encourages a broader perspective, preparing them to actively participate in a globalised world.

This collaboration among the different actors involved in *Ceibal en Inglés* necessarily implies reaching agreements among them that will allow lessons to be delivered in the best possible way. The successful completion of joint work by professionals, who may vary in their language proficiency, is influenced by their individual characteristics, the pace of lessons, and their ability to swiftly implement diverse learning and adaptation strategies. These factors enable each professional to effectively fulfil their role and collectively achieve common goals.

There are various ways and means of implementing this collaboration, and each pair or group must find the most appropriate way for everyone to make progress and help students familiarise themselves with the language and engage with it autonomously. Although there is more than one path, it is important to keep in mind that to achieve quality learning, some prior agreements must be reached, such as sharing information on, for example, how this particular group of students learns, being clear about the role that each one plays, and sharing the knowledge that each one possesses in order to enrich and support each other in the undertaking.

As a case in point, we will now outline some experiences that we have shared in our different roles: mentor-teacher, mentor-principal, principal-teacher.

READING CARDS

As a teacher I have been participating in the CEI Programme for many years, and as principal of a primary school in the western area of Montevideo for 2 years. My goal has been for my participation in the programme to allow my students to obtain quality learning and help increase their chances of insertion into today's world. Participation and commitment are crucial to educational work. The development and array of vocabulary are fundamental when it comes to communicative proficiency.

During 2023, we had the possibility of participating in a project designed to improve reading comprehension in English. Most students performed poorly in the end-of-year assessments, and one of the reasons was limited understanding when doing the tests individually.

CEI offered the opportunity to pilot the proposal, and the school head team decided at a coordination meeting to take up the challenge of working with all the classes and monitor the implementation of the proposal. That involved making the proposal known to the teaching staff that would participate in the programme, drawing up schedules of activities and collecting evidence that would help corroborate the findings or indicators of possible adjustments.

Although the initial proposal was for the students to autonomously use the Reading Cards in their free time, it was agreed with the teachers that they would begin with short collective sessions. First, there was a talk with the students to introduce them to the proposal. Then, they began to work using the cards from the least to the most difficult ones. The card was presented, analysed collectively and the reading activities were completed, not only by choosing the right answer but also by identifying the statement in the text that justifies the choice. In addition to the text, the cards show images that help understand what is written. Finally, when analysing the answers, variations of the activity are suggested together with the students by changing some parts of the statements. For instance,

if the card talks about a place, other texts are created by changing the place as well as other words for the consistency of the message and to enhance the understanding of the newly created texts.

In the second stage, the classroom teachers are asked to work in the same way for a week, and then give each of the students' freedom to work with the card they choose the following week.

Throughout the implementation period, positive aspects were noticed, while others required certain modifications. It was found that the students worked better with the cards if they had teacher's guidance, and that not knowing the meaning of a word often prevented them from understanding the rest of the text, which required the use of some comprehension clues and a few key words to make the activity easier.

There was also direct contact with the mentor and those responsible for the activity to give them feedback regarding what we had seen together with the classroom teachers. The exchange of opinions has allowed us to make gradual adjustments to the activity or suggest others that may help the programme.

SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

As a mentor, I began working with the school in 2021. At such a particular moment, the Shakespeare Festival had not returned to theatres yet. However, we always had the possibility of broadcasting the plays in video format on YouTube. At this very important festival within CEI, 5th and 6th grade students perform adapted plays by Shakespeare: Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest and Macbeth.

In 2021, we embarked on the adventure of putting on the play Hamlet among the three fifth year groups that worked at the school. It was a great challenge to amalgamate three groups of students with their respective teachers for a filmed production of the play. In an activity of these characteristics, organisation, commu-

nication and collaboration are fundamental pillars. A good deal of coordination was necessary between the mentor and the teachers, and also between the mentor and the head teacher to arrange for rehearsal days, schedule them and collect image permissions from the students; also, between the teachers to get the costumes and accessories necessary to stage the play, and between the students to make the project a learning event that would also be fun and unforgettable.

The students were always taking care of their classmates: who needed makeup, who needed help learning their lines, where it was best to place the camera for filming, and many other things. It was a collaborative process from start to finish, and that is how all those involved experienced it.

We repeated the experience in 2022, this time with only one group participating, and we were able to re-experience all the aspects above. A significant aspect to highlight is that some students on this course had already participated in the previous performance, so they were a driving force for their peers who were doing it for the first time. Although there were some hurdles, the students' enthusiasm made it happen. Collaborating, on this occasion, was not something that only happened among adult leaders but something that involved the students as promoters of the activity.

CONCLUSION

In these years of working together we have tried to promote our students' learning, it has been essential to organise and coordinate our work – including the exchange of ideas, collaboration and co-operation so that the lessons are useful –, use or adapt pedagogical resources, encourage each other and share responsibility for the students' learning.

We try to enhance the skills of everyone involved (mentor, principal, teacher, students) in order to contribute to our students' growth. There is no recipe or path to follow; only the desire to help students choose the paths that they will find most fruitful counts.

Guardians of the world: multicultural exchanges through technology and the english language

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There are experiences that all of us who teach go through. We know the dedication that planning a project with clear objectives and sequences takes in the aim of facilitating meaningful learning for our students. We also experience that adrenaline rush when we start working on something new with our students and delve into uncharted terrain. Another situation we often find ourselves in, apart from those above, is when our projects sometimes do not turn out as we had planned. But if there is an inherent characteristic of teaching, it is the ability to rethink and, if necessary, start all over again: the teaching experience does not occur without a significant degree of flexibility.

In this story, as in a fictional story, there are main characters, a plot, problems that arise as the story unfolds and an ending that, as in many stories, is open. The story began with the planning of a project between one of the groups of a rural primary school and their English mentor, and the objectives that were met during its development went beyond what was initially planned.

From its inception, the project was based on collaboration, not only among the students themselves or between teachers and the institution's environment, but also from external players. Without collaboration, the project would not have been possible, as achieving the objectives depended on it. The success of the project was directly reflected in the collaboration and not in the quantitative side

of it. The specific objectives of the project took a backseat and we found that the true result was teamwork and the development of skills that will allow us to keep working and plan new ones.

Collaboration was the cornerstone for the success of the project: collaboration is understood as a force that goes beyond physical space and individual actors and whose power is based on the fact that the main creators of this force are the students themselves driven by an education community that supports them. This is in line with Paulo Freire's (1967) ideas that education is in itself a collaborative process in which students take control of their learning processes to take a critical view of the world. Part of having a critical view of the world involves experiencing its challenges and setbacks and taking ownership of strategies to overcome them. Collaboration is a constructive and transformative force that is not about the accumulation of individual actions towards the same objective but about true synergy.

In rural school number 35, a few kilometres from Libertad in the department of San José, the students of the 3rd and 4th year multigrade group together with their teacher and the Ceibal en Inglés mentor embarked on a project that sought to go beyond geographical and language barriers through the digital world. Although the *Ceibal en Inglés* in Primary Education programme is implemented in the 4th to 6th grade groups, in this multigrade group, the 3rd grade students actively participate in the English lessons and learn alongside their 4th grade peers. They took the experience of working with *Ceibal en Inglés* as a vehicle for developing what was to become their annual classroom project. The main objective was to encourage exchange with students from other parts of the world through the messaging feature of the Little Bridge platform, where they were to write about and share their habits and interests to relate that information to the institutional project on sustainability at school. What unfolded was an experience which produced unexpected exchanges involving teamwork, the rethinking of goals and new directions.

The project was based on the collaborative work of not only the students, the teacher, the mentor and the school but also – in part – on the collaboration of other education communities, some of them outside our country.

It was the Little Bridge chat section that kicked off the exchange. In addition to participating in English classes, the group worked in workshops with the mentor to prepare the exchange with the *Digipals* and then begin to interact with them. The early enthusiasm of the students led them to systematically log on to the platform to look for other children with whom to exchange project information. As the weeks went by, they found that they weren't getting any replies and, when they did, they were brief and did not actually help them with what they were looking for.

Far from being discouraged, we came together and devised new strategies and came up with alternatives to carry the project forward. Prompted by the school's Headmistress, the group decided to present the project at the Departmental Fair of Science Clubs, exhibit the process as we had experienced it so far and showcase the hard work behind it.

Preparing for the science fair included putting together a banner on which we put pictures of the students' Little Bridge usernames, the home page, the messaging section, the inbox, and examples of chats with Digipals. Another significant element for the presentation at the fair was the recording of a video that the teacher started with her students and we brought to a close by singing a song that we had written and practised with the mentor.

On the day of the science fair, the students brought computers to demonstrate how the platform worked to those passing the group's booth. And right there, on that day and while there were other students and teachers learning about the project, they happened to get a reply from a *digipal* and were able to demonstrate the use of Little Bridge messaging in action.

Although the project was still far from complete, the group's participation in the science fair caught the interest of other education communities that were also participating in the fair, and the group was awarded a special mention for the originality of the project and having carried it out using English as a vehicle to try to achieve its objectives.

After the science fair, the group gathered momentum and we sought collaboration with other educational institutions. We established communication with a school in Montevideo, which led to a successful exchange whereby both institutions shared experiences and ideas. The beginning of the exchange was in English through the teacher's email, and at that point the group received assistance from their remote teacher in establishing successful communication. The group travelled to Montevideo and met the students they were in contact with. In part, the objectives they had set materialized – in a transformed format – at this meeting.

Year's end was looming, together with other school activities, but the project still lacked the closure that we had initially expected. Over the course of the year and given the challenges that arose, the project evolved into an experience of true collaboration and steadfastness.

In addition to the classroom project, the group worked with the *Ceibal en Inglés* project on bullying, online safety and digital citizenship.

During the last meeting that the group had with the teacher and the mentor, the students voiced their feelings about this project. They revealed that they had learnt much more than English, and that even though the communication with the *digipals* was not what they had expected, they'd been enriched by the experience of learning English, they'd worked as a team, and enjoyed recording the video for the science fair and practising the song in English that served as the group's presentation. They learnt about oral production and rhythm. The children showed perseverance and never

gave up hope of participating, and towards the end, they expressed the desire to work on further projects with *Ceibal en Inglés*.

The use of technological tools was also key in carrying out the project. Little Bridge not only served as a platform for learning English but as a trigger to seek international connections and bond with other students around the world. In addition to practising and improving their English, the students also developed technological skills, gained deep insights into the use of the platform, and were able to demonstrate that knowledge to other peers.

This experience based on learning English highlighted the importance of collaboration on this kind of projects with a focus on social issues, as well as communication and the exchange of ideas. Despite the difficulties, the students were enriched by their work and by the networks they were able to set up along the way. The project highlighted the potential to produce meaningful connections and the value of persevering in the pursuit of goals.

The activities proposed by *Ceibal en Inglés* enhanced the work of the students and the construction and expansion of the education community. There was coordinated work between the school and the mentor throughout the year, and the role of the remote teacher was also essential in the implementation of the project beyond her usual key role of teaching and being there for the students in their weekly English lessons. It was not only through the project that these communions were established but also through the *Ceibal en Inglés* idea of working on cyberbullying and digital citizenship, which the teacher used as a gateway to address situations that she believed must be discussed for good coexistence in the classroom and beyond. The activities proposed by *Ceibal en Inglés*, in addition to inherently implying collaboration, invite and encourage the production of new collaborative connections that will enrich learning and the experience of disseminating knowledge.

We feel that the end of this story is left open because, although the initial objectives weren't met, the group feels that this experience is

a basis for delving deeper into the project and looking for new tools the way they've already shown they can. And now there remains the connection of the ties that were established during the process, the learning that resulted from rethinking and replanning, the experience of sharing with other actors from different education communities, and the moral we recognized and one of the students articulated as "We've learnt never to give up".

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Apollo-CEI experience 2019

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Few activities made the impression that this experience left on me. "Apollo CEI" was the name given by *Ceibal en Inglés* to the project I will be discussing. The funny thing is how it was possible to make emotion prevail in an educational assignment planned by third parties. It is easy to explain: the children became involved in an adventure that they made their own and where they could make their own decisions. Easy to explain but not to do.

5th year at Primary School 117 "*Treinta y Tres Orientales*" in Lavalleja learnt the basics of the Apollo CEI contest organised by *Ceibal en Inglés* and sponsored by the United States Embassy in Montevideo through Mentor Lourdes Keochgerien's platform and invitation. With no great expectations, probably because it was an event very far-off in time given their young age, the students inquired about the 50th anniversary and the event itself. At first, I did not think that someone contemporary could have experienced that moment, but then they worked out that there were many people around them who had experienced it. So, they started the project by thinking of a questionnaire for interviewing people over 60 years old who could share how they experienced the event by reporting where they were and what they remembered about the first manned Moon landing, because they thought that anyone younger would not remember. They discovered that most of them followed the episode via radio broadcasts because only a few households in Minas in 1969 had televisions, along with other curious details, such as a severe storm in the northern part of the department just days before 20 June. It was in that research stage, during an interview with an elderly lady, that one of her friends appeared by chance on a visit and gave a testimony that was key. Margarita Melgar recounted in detail in two

audio clips how the moment was experienced at her home, even that her mother ordered a stamp with which the Post Office was celebrating the feat. That testimony had great weight because of the narrator's enthusiasm. This piqued their curiosity, and they researched the Apollo 11 mission, the Saturn V and the Columbia lunar module (Eagle), as well as the suits worn by the astronauts, the food, the issue of hygiene, and hundreds of other details. They read, watched videos, cross-referenced information, and gradually formed a clearer idea of the historical event in their minds. Then the idea emerged to depict the most significant moments, a script was written, and the initial concept was divided into scenes.

The project involved presenting a family arriving at the neighbours' house to request watching the moon landing on their television, as they were following it on a Spica radio but wanted to see it. There, one of the hosts expressed scepticism about the success of the mission while the others discussed the advancements used in the experience, all very hopeful. The task of setting up the stage, acting, filming, and editing was divided among teams. Each day, more information was found, allowing the scene—after selecting the three children who would portray Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins—to more closely resemble reality as they managed to emulate the movements in space. The base in Cape Canaveral was designed with Ceibal computers and a painted cardboard panel serving as the control panel. The Head Teacher, Miriam Cifuentes, followed the group's activities with curiosity and interest. She got a TV set that, although not from the period, looked old enough to be used. Once the script in Spanish was completed, it was translated into English suited to the group's level, with the rest supported by the mentor, who sent audio files, documents, and visited several times to help improve pronunciation. Next, they looked up pictures to replicate the suits and select possible locations, the final actors were picked and the shooting work was divided into different roles (costume designers, set designers, technicians, scriptwriters, as well as supporting actors). First, they rehearsed with the scripts in hand; this led some children to take on technical roles, while others who had not initially been interested requested to become actors.

Every afternoon, some students would set up the stage (because the school premises are shared with another institution on alternate shifts), and others would dress up and rehearse. The commitment of the families grew, and this is an aspect worth highlighting: they lined a helmet, loaned a nurse's uniform trousers, and drilled a reed so that they could plant the flag in a similar way to what you see in the footage. The entire set and costumes were created at minimal cost: the Moonscape was a side courtyard with white air-laid paper over the windows so that they wouldn't show, the ladder for the Eagle module was taken from a playground set; tunics were converted into shirts by tucking them into trousers, and those who did not have neckties used bows tied in knots to simulate them. The controllers were dressed in really formal attire. For weeks, the routine was disrupted by changes in scenery and recordings that adapted to new ideas emerging daily. There were days of euphoria and others of despair. Unexpected collaborations and disappointments arose, along with arguments and, above all, much laughter. Once the scenes that seemed to have turned out well were recorded, they were reviewed and new aspects to improve were discovered. There came a point when everyone was so exhausted from interruptions and unintentional mistakes that it seemed the task might never be completed, and I doubted whether inviting them to participate in the competition had been a good idea. Fortunately, there was always an optimistic group that managed to encourage everyone to keep trying to improve.

On the final day of filming, despite it being winter, the temperature was very high, and shooting became a race against the clock. The children portraying the astronauts wore nylon jackets and white trousers over their regular clothes, as well as latex gloves and motorcycle helmets, which made them suffer from the heat. The gloves would stick to their hands, and the NASA logos and the American flag (which were photocopied and taped to the jackets, along with the names of the protagonists of the historical episode) kept falling off due to the humidity. The photocopies with the footprints fell apart on the floor and children from other classes were coming through all the time. It was a stressful day, but the children

demonstrated a high level of commitment. Later, back in the classroom, the files were backed up, the best clips were selected, and they were organised into folders; then, the best version of each was chosen. Finally came the editing stage, and assistance had to be sought, first from the student teachers and then from the entire community. Once again, the families stepped up: a student's father, a self-taught editor, came to the school and spent two days in a classroom listening to each group of protagonists—the children—to capture their ideas in the short film. Due to sound issues and to increase the impact, subtitles and music were added, along with an audio track simulating communication interference to make the contact between the astronauts and the Houston base more realistic. The father separated the video from the audio and managed to reduce external sounds, including the song of an ovenbird, which was clearly audible. Several recorded minutes that gave the short a humorous touch had to be removed because it exceeded the allowed time. After that, the credits were added. The children played a key role because they were the ones who chose the font, how each written message would appear, and the colour of each graphic. After proposing various titles, they decided on "Schoolchildren on the Moon." So, once the short had a final version, the creators screened it for the school Secretary and asked her opinion of it. It was a relief to see her understanding it and enjoying it. When other institutions began to upload their short films to the CREA platform, our learning-management system, we saw one so well done that we thought we didn't stand a chance. However, the students won second prize and travelled to Montevideo, where they presented it in English at the request of the Ceibal authorities, which posed an additional challenge.

The creators organised an exhibition for the school members, explaining the event and the competition dynamics, showcasing the costumes, and sharing interesting details about the expedition. This was aimed not only at the parents and individuals interviewed for the special function but also at all grades from K4 to 6th year. To overcome this challenge, they had to adapt and transform their presentation. The support of the community was crucial for both

the costumes and the minimalist set design. The project was a lot of work and required time, but it brought excitement and joy. It allowed each and every child to be, and feel, involved, and fostered knowledge management. Through Apollo CEI, everyone had the opportunity to present orally and refine their contributions, encouraged each other, and incorporated vast amounts of vocabulary and information. Above all, it provided the satisfaction of achieving a high-quality collaborative effort. The school helped, the parents showed commitment, and the children excelled. Although the contest rules established that only the winner of the first prize would travel to LATU, where Ceibal's headquarters are located, the first place in the Secondary Education category was declared void, so the group had the pleasant surprise of being invited to LATU, where they worked on programming, experimenting with video games and the mobile planetarium, practising English, and having a great time through photography and painting, while also learning about the experiences of other schools. When the activity organised by the Embassy and *Ceibal en Inglés* concluded, the group went to Ciudad Vieja and continued the day by visiting places that were sites of the historical events they had studied. It was a day that will undoubtedly be etched in the students' memory and hearts. The project improved vocabulary and pronunciation, but more than that, it successfully integrated various types of knowledge, fostered creativity and critical thinking, united the class, helped the timider students overcome their difficulty with public speaking, and made them feel capable of meeting all aspects of the challenge. As for the neighbours, relatives, other students, and teachers, everyone was present, offering encouragement and support (teacher Norma Martínez loaned her helmet during the weeks of recording) and all the children enjoyed the result. The activity began with a community survey and ended with feedback, as parents wrote messages (which were included in another video featuring behind-the-scenes footage shown at the LATU) expressing their thoughts on the entire process and their feelings about seeing their children overcome the challenge. With little money and a lot of imagination, children from the provinces managed to evolve as students and people. Watching students grow up is a privilege that is seldom visible in

such a short period, which is why having participated in the contest is unforgettable for me. Every second invested in the project was worth it. It was a collective effort, and everyone deserves thanks: the community for their time and patience, the students for their dedication, the families for their commitment, the Head Teacher for her trust, the colleagues for their encouragement, the Mentor for her generosity, the other students for sincerely valuing the task, and the organisers for the idea. Thank you very much!

Sinergia en la elaboración de la Prueba Nacional Adaptativa de Inglés

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Collaboration is a process that calls for the group's support but also involves the need to learn from others and share one's own knowledge in a relationship of positive interdependence and trust in each team member's potential.

Social psychology (Allport, 1954) establishes that three basic conditions must be met for collaboration to be possible. The first is that those who interact must have the same rank, on the understanding that the contributions of each one is equally necessary and important when it comes to achieving the goal; secondly, the goals must be common; and thirdly, a framework must be provided that officially requires collaboration, which means that, within that framework, all members of the project must understand that without the collaboration of each and every one, completion of the project is not possible.

The development of the National English Adaptive Test that is administered on Ceibal's SEA platform and taken by thousands of students every year is a highly collaborative experience. It requires inter-institutional work that involves the participation of Ceibal

- *Ceibal en Inglés* and different departments of the National Administration of Public Education, such as the Directorate of Research, Assessment and Statistics and the Directorate of Language Policies.

The test measures the English learning achieved by students from 4th grade of Primary Education to 9th grade of Lower Secondary Education and helps monitor the educational trajectories of students in that field. The test is administered annually at each of the aforementioned levels, and its objective is to measure the progress of students in the acquisition of the English language and inform classroom teachers and educational authorities. The fact that it is an adaptive test implies that instead of a single test, students go through a bank of calibrated items, and a specially designed algorithm specifies what activity to set to the student based on their answers until their skill level is determined. The input provided by the test is used to improve all educational programs that teach EFL and optimise the learning of the target language towards the achievement of the level of English proposed in the school-leaving profiles for 6th grade of Primary Education and 9th grade of Lower Secondary Education. The fact that it is adaptive and has a calibrated bank of items in the same metric allows each student's progress to be measured by grade. The drafting of the test went through different stages that resulted in the evaluation tool that is used today.

The National English Adaptive Test has been developed since 2014. It was conceived at the *Dirección de Investigación, Evaluación y Estadística* in response to a need to establish strong coordination between the teaching of English in primary education and secondary education. The first stage involved working in collaboration with English teachers from the different subsystems (Primary and Secondary), who prepared items to be uploaded to a platform. The project grew and has now evolved into an English placement tool that involves the active participation of professionals from different fields of knowledge. It was crucial to reach the research stage, led by CRELLA (Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment at the University of Bedfordshire, UK) and experts

familiar with the reality of public English teaching in Uruguay. This was a step forward in the development of specific guidelines for the creation of items consistent with the international parameters set out in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and ensuring that the test reports pre-A1, A1.1, A1.2, A2.1, A2.2, up to B1 levels in Vocabulary and Grammar, Reading Comprehension and Listening Comprehension.

At the beginning, the approach to developing the test was restricted to the individual work of some leading professionals. As the dialogue between the institutions involved progressed, it became apparent that it was necessary to form teams for greater efficiency in addressing each of the processes of the test.

A mass adaptive test such as the National English Adaptive Test involves the implementation of numerous processes: item production, item revision, field calibration, data processing, estimation of psychometric properties of the items, communication before administration of the test, implementation in the classrooms, data processing and dissemination of results. Achieving synergy among all these processes posed an enormous challenge for the professionals from the different institutions involved in developing the test. It became necessary for the different groups to focus on the aspects of the test in which they had the most expertise and share their knowledge, analysis and conclusions with the other groups of experts in pursuit of the common objective: to produce an adaptive English test developed in Uruguay that would be robust and reliable.

Each team took on the challenge and learnt to report what they knew or understood in a language that was understandable to the rest of the participants, who perhaps, due to their own background, did not master the same basic knowledge. The process required developing active listening, accepting differences, understanding the priorities of other experts, and growing in otherness in order to make the other feel confident enough to express different points of view and be brave to ask in order to learn, understand and contribute ideas to the common project.

The status of the test at the moment seems to show that all the teams have managed to grow towards a professional work relationship with positive interdependence, to the point that all the members of the different teams always looked forward to the general meetings to learn about the progress made and jointly plan future work. Collaborative work has generated a synergy of operation that has allowed the dynamics of all processes seamless and profitable. The progress made in the development of a reliable National English Adaptive Test is the result of collaboration.

The next foreseeable challenge is the need to sustain this kind of work over time, regardless of who the people comprising the group are. That is why it is necessary to share the foundations and demands of work of this nature to ensure the continuity and evolution of this measuring instrument produced locally to contribute to enhancing English teaching and learning processes in Uruguay.

It is essential to bring new people into the team who will become familiar with this collaborative work modality for the sake of the continuity of a years-long process that is perceived as essential for the National English Adaptive Test no matter who the individuals working on it are.

We believe that sharing this experience can contribute to consolidating a valuable work dynamic which promotes changes that will sustain the advancement of English teaching in public education.

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Collaboration as the axis of Ceibal en Inglés



Aprendiendo del futuro