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ADAPTING TO ONLINE LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE IN KINDERGARTEN

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Abstract: With very little warning the global COVID pandemic forced schools and institutions around the world to adopt a completely online model, and kindergartens were no exception. This action research is the reflection of how two five-year-old classes in a bilingual international school in Spain moved through various stages of adaptation to reach a full online learning model in a question of several weeks. Conclusions will show that when there are available tools and prior knowledge related to the use of technologies, the transition is possible. The use of platforms and online tools assured continuous and meaningful learning and families felt their children were still connected to their teachers and peers even under these difficult circumstances.

Keywords: English, technology, early learners, online learning.

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2020, a global pandemic changed the way teaching and learning were taking place in schools around the globe. The technology that was being used with kindergarten students to co-construct learning and teaching in the classroom suddenly ceased to be fit for purpose. It was time to put away the robotics, green screens, and augmented reality applications. Teachers and students no longer had access to interactive whiteboards or iPads. Students could no longer collaborate in making stop motion videos nor connect via Skype to classrooms around the world. Educators and students were confined to their homes, but the learning was expected to continue. The following paper will explain how one bilingual school in Southern Spain adapted to this new reality, the steps taken, and the results of the measures adopted.

METHODOLOGY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

Researchers, or in this case educators, are reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) and agents of change (Hammack, 1997). They use the information gathered in research to guide, inform and improve their practices in the classroom. Educators try out the new methodology, collect and analyze data, assess its effectiveness, and then decide on the next steps (Mertler, 2019). The ultimate goal is the optimization of the teaching-learning process in the context of the classroom.

The onset of a global pandemic made the need for action research immediate and required effective and instantaneous decisions for us to continue instruction. This type of research allows educators to systematically look for ways to improve their teaching and learning and adapt to their context. Class observation, checklists, and surveys for parents were used in this mixed-method approach seeking to tailor solutions to the difficulties detected during the online adaptation process.

In this study, the difficulties of teaching English as an additional language online to very young children using computers will be addressed, as will the measures our center adopted to counter them.

FIRST STEPS

The school began by evaluating the technologies and platforms that were already familiar to our parents and children, such as school emails, digital diaries, and blogs. After much discussion and weighing the possibilities of each type of communication, we opted for using the class blog. Parents were notified that we would be sending videos and small tasks to complete through this medium. We requested parents to film their children carrying out the tasks and to email us these recordings, which they did.

NEXT STEPS

The number of recordings received from our families was becoming unmanageable. While it was gratifying for us to see the children's work and to share these learning moments with their peers in the videos we curated, we needed to find a more efficient way to gather and share these evidences of learning. The school bought a license for the video platform FlipGrid and gave all the teachers at the center a training session on its use. We, as teachers, could upload videos for the children and they in turn could upload theirs. The first week was somewhat frustrating as some parents struggled to join the platform and upload the videos, but soon all the students were able to participate and feedback from parents was very positive.

FINAL DECISIONS

The families and students were enjoying using the online blog and sharing their learning through FlipGrid. However, as time went on, we all realized that the online situation was going to be prolonged and we began to pursue new ways to connect with our young students at home. Because of the socio-economic situation of our center, we knew our families had internet and adequate devices and would be able to connect if we arranged synchronous sessions. We drew up a class schedule which consisted of short,

online lessons and sent out emails to the parents advising them of the new sessions.

The teachers were worried that such young children would not be able to connect autonomously to the synchronous modules and that they would not be able to manage the TEAMS platform. It is important to note that while the term "digital native" (Prensky, 2001) has been widely accepted, the idea that young children automatically know how to use technology through imitation, is simply not realistic. Therefore, at our request, for the first week parents sat with their children during the sessions and little by little, they learned how to mute and unmute their microphones and even open and close their cameras. We had some difficulties getting them to speak in turns and dealing with background noise, but after a short period of adaptation, we were able to overcome these obstacles and move on to significant synchronous learning.

The last two weeks of the academic year we dedicated ourselves to doing small-group evaluations and preparing an online graduation ceremony as this was their last year in the Infants school.

RESULTS

The results, based on parental perception (Table 1) and teacher evaluations, were very positive.

64%	<i>Students showed interest in both the blog and online classes</i>
91%	<i>Families found no difficulties with the online learning</i>
62%	<i>Families felt their children improved their level of English during online classes</i>
86%	<i>Parents considered the materials provided sufficient to continue learning</i>
62%	<i>Families said their children could enter and leave sessions autonomously as well as manage their microphones</i>

Note: Main results of the closed questions used in the survey to families at the end of the academic year after three months of online teaching

Table 1. Parental survey results.

Average final score	
Five-year-old group 2018-2019	2.18
Five-year-old group 2019-2020	2.13

Note: These calculations are based on a scale of 1 to 3. 1 being poor, 2 average and 3 excellent. Each child was assigned a numeric evaluation and the averages were calculated after eliminating new students from each group.

Table 2. Comparing end of year evaluations.

Only 14% said that their children were not interested in the online learning which meant the vast majority were following along (86%). 91% answered that their children had no difficulties following the indications of the online classes. When asked about possible problems with the online learning in the open question, most mentioned the issue of noise background noise interrupting the lessons. As for positive aspects, many parents noted the importance of connecting and interacting with the teachers and peers.

If we look specifically at English learning, 62% felt their children were still progressing in their learning, while 38% said that the learning had come to a standstill. None of the families indicated that they thought their children 's level of English was deteriorating.

Teachers conducted end-of-the-year interviews in small groups using checklists and detected that the children had learned the pertinent vocabulary, continued to understand English, and were progressing in being able to reply with short answers to questions posed in English. This is similar to how other students from the previous course had finished their academic year (Table2), which confirmed the effectiveness of the online teaching and learning.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study the impact of online learning with young learners has been analyzed and it has been shown that the students continued to participate in their classes and further their level of English while supporting connections with their teachers and peers.

These are critical ages for learning and attempting to maintain an optimum rate of instruction during online classes with young children was quite a challenge. We were fortunate to have students with stable internet connections and devices at home which allowed them to connect with their teachers and continue their learning.

Moving forward with this type of learning would include having young children practice with online platforms as well as fomenting certain autonomy in their use, always taking into consideration their abilities, needs and natural learning rhythms.

This study opens up many possibilities for future investigations and though the exact circumstances of this action-research may never be replicated, rigorous studies into the effectiveness of online and blended learning and their impact on young learners need to be discussed further.

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