

Thinking outside the box: CSE in ELT

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Abstract

In recent years, teaching English as a foreign language has presented several challenges for teachers. Not only should students learn the language in a meaningful context, but they should also develop critical thinking skills, creativity, communication and collaboration with a perspective on Comprehensive Sexuality Education. The purpose of the present classroom account is to describe two projects that integrated the use of the English language learned throughout the year with students aged between 11 and 13 while developing awareness towards gender stereotyping and representation. This account shows that if teachers question, complement and deconstruct the materials used for ELT with a more inclusive perspective and design didactic sequences and projects accordingly, Comprehensive Sexuality Education flows naturally in the English classroom.

Keywords: Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Gender theory, Stereotypes, Project, ELT

Resumen

En los últimos años, la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera ha presentado varios desafíos para las y los docentes. Las y los estudiantes no solo deben aprender el idioma en un contexto significativo, sino que también deben desarrollar habilidades como el pensamiento crítico, la creatividad, la comunicación y la colaboración con una perspectiva en Educación Sexual Integral. El objetivo del presente relato en base a una experiencia áulica es describir dos proyectos que integraron el uso de la lengua extranjera inglés aprendida durante el año con estudiantes de 11 a 13 años de edad mientras desarrollaron conciencia sobre los estereotipos y la representación de género. Este relato muestra que, si las y los docentes cuestionan, complementan y deconstruyen los materiales utilizados para la enseñanza de la lengua extranjera inglés con una perspectiva más inclusiva, y, en consecuencia, diseñan secuencias didácticas y proyectos, la Educación Sexual Integral fluye naturalmente en el aula de inglés.

Palabras claves: Educación Sexual Integral, Teoría de Género, Estereotipos, Proyecto, Enseñanza del Idioma Inglés

Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language has always been a challenge, even more so in the XXI century. On the one hand, EFL students are expected to learn the target language in a significant and meaningful manner (Ausubel in *Learninbp*, 2019). But, on the other hand, they are also supposed to become critical thinkers who can cooperate with one another through different types of technological media using creativity (*Partnership for 21st Century Learning*, 2019) with an inclusive perspective in biological, psychological, social, affective and ethical matters (*Ley de Educación Sexual Integral*, 2006) for jobs which have not been created yet. In addition, the growing and steadfast interest in gender theory and stereotyping which has been developing for the last years also challenges the materials used to teach English as a foreign language. Gender is not an internal reality but rather a phenomenon which is socially and culturally produced and reproduced all the time, by doing and acting in a certain way (Butler, 2004). This is the reason why including contents from Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in the English classroom poses a double challenge for teachers as they should question, complement and deconstruct texts and images while reflecting on their own beliefs and practices (both

in teaching and in everyday life). Thus, they may detect what their conceptions are when questions about gender representation, diversity, affectivity, rights and body perception are concerned. It is true that achieving all these aims in one didactic sequence is difficult, but it is possible if projects are designed to include as many of the teaching expectations described above, and if CSE is considered a cross-curricular subject throughout the school curriculum.

The purpose of this classroom account is to describe two projects that were carried out in Years 6 and 7 (11, 12 and 13 year-old-students) in a state school in Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina, with five 40-minute-periods of English per week during 2021. In them, CSE contents were integrated with the school curriculum while using language meaningfully. Both projects shared the aim of integrating all the language items seen during the year through the description of a character created by students and, simultaneously, developing awareness towards gender stereotyping and representation. The difference between the two projects lay in the context in which they were presented, as these were in line with the curricular guidelines for the teaching of the English language in the primary level in Ciudad de Buenos Aires (*Diseño Curricular de Lenguas Extranjeras*, 2001).

Project in Year 6: “Year 6 mythology”

The outcome of the project for this group of 11-and-12 year-old students was the creation of a mythological character while deconstructing female gender stereotyping in Greek mythology. The purpose was for students to integrate what they had learned linguistically throughout the year while reflecting on how the representation of women in Greek mythology has reinforced negative female stereotypes in both history and literature. It was conducted for four months during the second semester of the year, at different stages and intermittently.

It is important to mention that the videos shared with students throughout this project were subtitled into Spanish because learners’ level of the language was not enough to understand them in the target language alone. Besides, they needed practice reading subtitles as they generally change the audio settings into Spanish so as not to read captions in the series or films they watch on streaming platforms.

First, students were introduced to the topic through brainstorming by writing “Greek mythology” on the board and they were asked to say anything they knew in connection to this topic. In this way, students’ schemata was activated while the teacher assessed their knowledge on this matter.

Then, students watched a video on the [origins of Greek mythology](#). This was analysed orally and worked in written: students had to put the events of the story in order, answer a T or F, and match the names of the gods and goddesses to their descriptions as well. The focus of these descriptions was on professions, countries and nationalities, age, physical description, personality, family configurations, likes and abilities (both vocabulary and grammatical items).

Later on, students were introduced to the [myth of Medusa](#) by means of a video that was adapted for educational purposes. The linguistic objective was to work on the simple present in its affirmative form for telling stories but, at the same time, the idea of female representation in Greek mythology was analysed, with a special focus on Medusa and Athena’s roles.

Students were first shown five different photos of Medusa and asked if they knew the character:



Figure 1. Celia from *Monsters Inc.* (Disney Pixar, 2001)

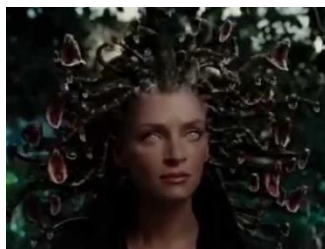


Figure 2. Medusa from *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (20th Century Fox, 2010)



Figure 3. Medusa from *Clash of the Titans* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2010)



Figure 4. *Medusa* (painting by Caravaggio, 1597)



Figure 5. *Head of Medusa* (marble sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 1630)

They also had to provide as much information about Medusa as they could in order to activate their schemata and assess their previous knowledge on the topic.

Once they watched the video and checked their predictions, they put the story in order, solved a word search based on the myth, chose the correct option and completed the sentences with the correct form of the verb. The video was also analysed in terms of female gender representation from different perspectives, such as the objectification of Medusa when she becomes the means through which Poseidon takes revenge on Athena for becoming the patron of the city of Athens. There was also debate about the blame laid on Medusa for Poseidon raping her and Athena's subsequent punishment of turning her into a monster, as well as Athena's jealousy of Medusa's beauty and her allegation that her rape was the result of Medusa's attractive appearance, among others.

By this stage of the project, students wondered why the Greek believed in these type of myths. They considered Greek mythology to be "bizarre" due to its incestuous relationships (Hera and Zeus, Demeter and Zeus); infidelity (Hera by Zeus); characters' birth origins (Athena's birth from Zeus' splitting head), and victim blaming (Medusa). Therefore, students worked on a text about life in ancient Greece and the implications of being a woman and a child in those times while reviewing the simple present (see Figure 6 below).

Around springtime, students watched an adapted video of [Persephone's myth](#). The linguistic purpose was to work on the simple present in its negative and interrogative forms, and Greek mythology was analysed through a comprehensive sexuality perspective again. For example, the extent to which parents can decide on their children's lives or men can make decisions for women without considering their opinions. Other topics discussed were the fact that informed consent is an integral part of people's relationships, and that hostages may develop positive feelings towards their abusers (students were acquainted with the term "Stockholm syndrome").

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN ANCIENT GREEK

A day in the life of an Ancient Greek depends on whether you are a man or a woman. Men ¹**MOVE** (MOVE) freely; they ²_____ (GO) to work and ³**MEET** (MEET) friends. When they go back home, they ⁴_____ (WANT) their house to be clean and the family to be ready to have dinner.

Women ⁵_____ (STAY) at home, ⁶**CLEAN** (CLEAN) the house, ⁷_____ (MAKE) clothes for the family and ⁸_____ (COOK) meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner). They go out when they ⁹**HAVE** (HAVE) men's permission; they ¹⁰_____ (GO) shopping or ¹¹**VISIT** (VISIT) the temple.

A man in Ancient Greece is a citizen; he ¹²**VOTES** (VOTE), ¹³_____ (MAKE) decisions about the city's problems and ¹⁴_____ (MOVE) his family from one Greek city-state to another if he ¹⁵_____ (WANT) to. But a woman isn't a citizen; she ¹⁶**STAYS** (STAY) at home and ¹⁷_____ (GET) everything ready for her family.


A child ¹⁸**GOES** (GO) to school until they are 18. After that, they ¹⁹_____ (HAVE) two years of military school. A child ²⁰**HAS** (HAVE) pets and toys, and ²¹_____ (PLAY) all types of games. Both girls and boys ²²_____ (HELP) at home.

Men, women and children ²³_____ (LOVE) their Greek Gods and Goddesses. Every day, they ²⁴_____ (VISIT) the temple to thank and worship them.



Figure 6. A day in the life of an Ancient Greek

It was after this video that students were suggested to create their own mythological characters in groups, with a more respectful view on gender representation. For this reason, students first worked on Medusa and Persephone's descriptions, with a focus on the structure of the texts themselves as well as the grammatical items to be included (See Figures 7 and 8 below). As the class was already sitting in groups, instructions were given so that each group assigned their members a role. In this manner, there was a student who wrote the drafts, another who made the graphical representation, a different one who looked for information, another who asked questions to the teacher, and another who typed the description on the computer and sent it to the teacher via the [Edmodo](#) platform.



MEDUSA is monster in Greek mythology. She is from Greece. She is tall and slim. She has got big yellow eyes and sharp teeth. Her hair is special: it has got purple snakes. She is independent and dangerous. She has got a mother, a father and two sisters. She can turn people into stone but she can't fly. She usually spends time in her temple because she hides from strangers.

1) *T or F?*

1. Medusa is from Asia.
2. She has got animals in her body.
3. She depends on her family.
4. She has got a special ability.
5. She doesn't like spending time with people.

2) *Complete with information about Medusa.*

NAME:	
PROFESSION:	
NATIONALITY:	
AGE:	
PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:	
PERSONALITY:	
FAMILY:	
LIKES:	
ABILITIES:	
ROUTINE:	

Figure 7. Medusa's description

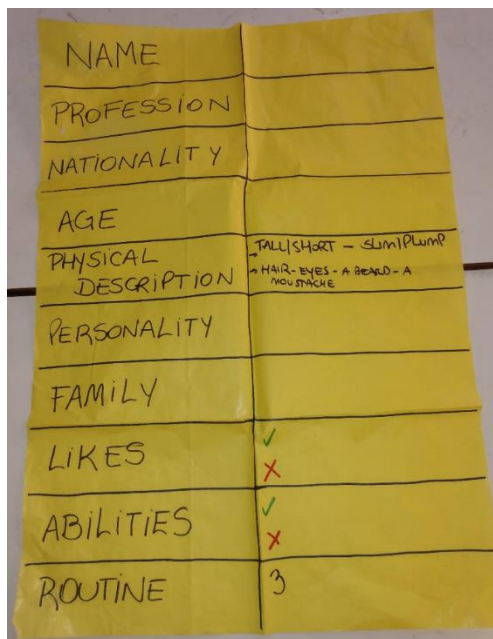
Look at Persephone's information. Write her description.



NAME:	Persephone
PROFESSION:	Queen of the Underworld
NATIONALITY:	Greek
AGE:	immortal (a goddess)
PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:	medium-height and slim - blue hair and big purple eyes
PERSONALITY:	good, loving and sweet
FAMILY:	A mother, a father and lots of siblings - a husband
LIKES:	✓ pomegranates ✗ winter
ABILITIES:	✓ help plants grow ✗ abandon the Underworld
ROUTINE:	She spends six months on Earth and six months in the Underworld

Figure 8. Persephone's description

Each group first completed a chart with the information of the mythological character they were creating. This chart was compiled together with students, who checked the information needed from Medusa and Persephone's descriptions:



NAME	
PROFESSION	
NATIONALITY	
AGE	
PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION	TALL/SHORT - SLIM/PLUMP HAIR - EYES - A BEARD - A MUSTACHE
PERSONALITY	
FAMILY	
LIKES	✓ ✗
ABILITIES	✓ ✗
ROUTINE	3

Figure 9. Chart with information to include in the description

Once the chart was checked, students wrote the description, but first reflecting on what structures they needed to use. A poster was made with students for this purpose as well, eliciting the grammatical items they needed to describe each aspect of their character:

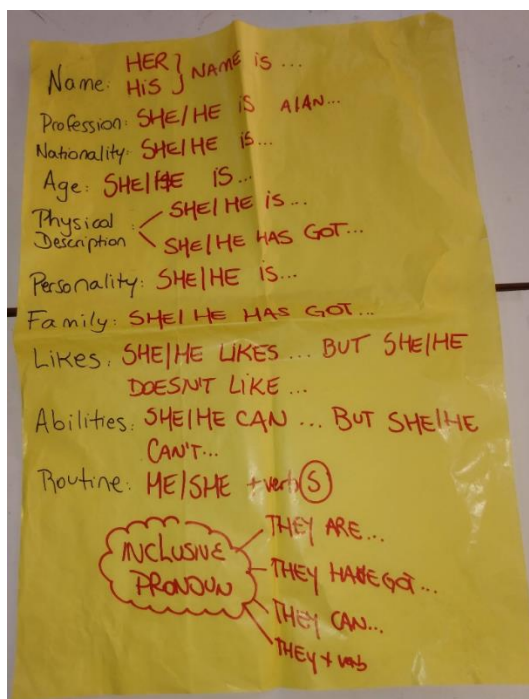


Figure 10. Language to be used for the description

Students were given the possibility of using “they” as a non-binary pronoun if their character was neither female nor male, but none of the groups chose this option.

Students wrote the first draft and when it was corrected, they made a clean copy on the computer and sent it to the teacher via the [Edmodo](#) platform. The teacher printed the descriptions, which were part of the static display for the families at the end of the school year.

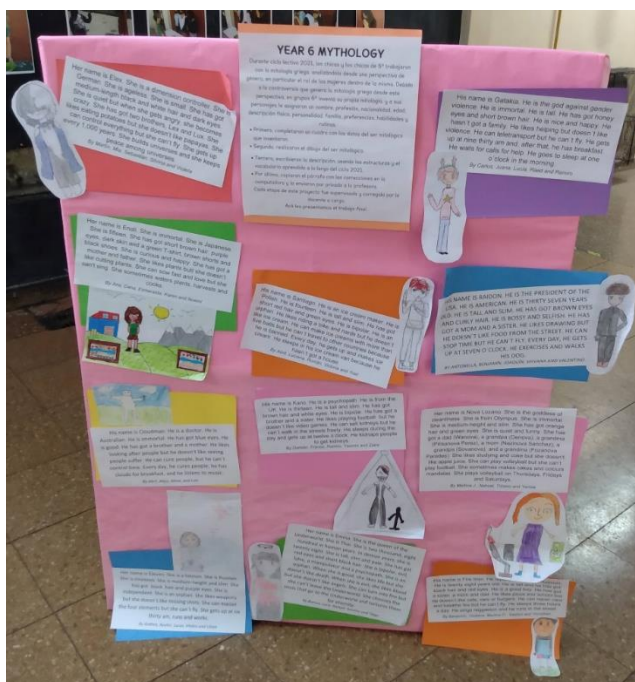


Figure 11. Year 6 Mythology (static display)

After the project was finished, each member had to assess their classmates' performance within the group, assigning a mark to it and an explanation for their choice. This assessment was considered when deciding both the group and individual marks for the completion of the project.

These descriptions will be used for revision during the diagnosis period in 2022.

Project in Year 7: "Emoji-character"

The outcome of the project for these 12-and-13-year-old students was to write the description of the character students created for a sculpture they had made in art lessons based on songs they had analysed in music and English. The purpose was for learners to integrate what they had seen linguistically throughout the year both from the perspective of the use of the English language, and the CSE contents analysed through different materials, with a specific focus on emotional intelligence. This project was carried out throughout the school year, together with art and music, at different stages and intermittently.

At first, the music teacher explained to students the origins of rock n' roll in the 1950s as the history of this type of musical genre was part of the curriculum. Then, in English, students were introduced to different songs from famous rock bands: The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Queen and Backstreet Boys (this last one was introduced as a variation of a rock n' roll band as it was significant for students since one of their choreographies had become a [popular trend](#) in the social app [Tik Tok](#)). Students listened to their songs, and described how these made them feel. After that, they watched the songs with the lyrics on [YouTube](#), and confirmed or changed their feelings about each of the songs.

In art, students were asked to recollect the emotions they felt through the songs already worked in music and English. They had to imagine how the body manifests those emotions, and they had to make a sculpture based on this emotion.


In order to get students to create a character for their statuettes, students were shown the picture of a sculpture from a German artist who makes stick figures:



Figure 12. *The sky ballerina* (sculpture by Hannes Helmke, 2016)

When they were shown the picture, they realised the sculpture was similar to what they had done in art. As students were not provided with the name of this figure, they had to imagine what this piece of artwork represented, describe it and create a character for it. Then, the teacher shared with students the description she imagined for this sculpture. This included their title ("Mx."), their name, their job, their nationality, their age, their physical description, their personality, their family configuration, their likes, their abilities and their routines (both vocabulary and grammatical items). The use of "they/them/their" as non-binary pronouns was introduced here.

Then students were asked to create a similar description for the character from their figure individually. They were told to complete a chart to brainstorm ideas, and then to write the description. The texts describing the sculpture and the sculptor were used as examples for students to create similar posters to the ones used in the project of Year 6 (Figures 9 and 10).



HANNES HELMKE is a freelance artist: he makes bronze sculptures. He is fifty-four years old – he was born on May 10, 1967. He is from Germany. He is tall and slim. He has got short grey hair and blue eyes. He has got a beard and a moustache. He spends the summer months on an island where he creates the sculptures.


1) *I or FP?*

1. Helmke is a sculptor.
2. He works for an art gallery.
3. He is middle-aged.
4. He is from Asia.
5. He makes sculptures with metal.
6. He lives on an island from June to September.

2) *Complete with information about Helmke.*

NAME:	
PROFESSION:	
NATIONALITY:	
AGE:	
PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:	
FAMILY:	
LIKES:	
ABILITIES:	
ROUTINE:	

Figure 13. The sculptor’s description



This is “Mx FREEDOM”. They are a pilot. They are from India and they are twenty-five years old. They are tall and very slim and they have got small green eyes, a small nose, a small mouth and small ears. But they haven’t got any hair. They are funny and intelligent, and they are usually happy. They have got a small family: one parent and one sibling. They like planes and crochet but they don’t like trains or football. They can rollerblade but they can’t dance ballet. Every day, they get up at seven o’clock and go to work by car. They usually have lunch at work. They have dinner at nine o’clock: they usually have meat, vegetables, fruit and water. They go to bed at eleven o’clock.

Complete with information about Mx Freedom.

NAME:	
PROFESSION:	
NATIONALITY:	
AGE:	
PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:	
FAMILY:	
LIKES:	
ABILITIES:	
ROUTINE:	

Figure 14. The description of the sculpture

The last stages of the project were the same as the one in Year 6: students wrote their first draft, which was corrected by the teacher. Then, they made a clean copy on the computer that they sent to the teacher via the [Edmodo](https://www.edmodo.com/) platform. Finally, the teacher printed the descriptions and attached them to the sculptures on the static display for families at the end of the school year. Different types of characters emerged in these descriptions, including a non-binary one.



Figure 15. Emoji-sculpture (static display)



Figure 16. Emoji-character (static display)

Conclusion

It is true that there are multiple demands on EFL teachers these days. However, when a teacher uses their training and experience together with their creativity, there are numerous activities and projects to be conducted that can foster critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity and comprehensive sexuality awareness in a meaningful manner. It is true that not all of these aspects can be included in one single project, but the projects described in this classroom account prove that if teachers reflect on their practice and “think outside the box”, more of these skills can be included in the EFL lesson and not collapse in the attempt.

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