

Humanismo, calidad e innovación

Experiencias en el Departamento de Humanidades
de la Universidad Santo Tomás

*Jeison Andrés Cardona Zuluaga, Kenia Karolina Latorre Cañizares
y Jenny Marcela Rodríguez Rojas*
Editores académicos



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A pedagogical experience in the strengthening of the use of the English language in higher education

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Given the need to understand and assume the impacts of globalization in all areas, it is the task of education to transform its system in the face of recent contemporary dynamics and offer programs that are adjustable to current realities. The Department of Humanities, being aware of this need, has therefore given itself the task of thinking, designing and executing an innovative strategy that involves students' concerns for learning a foreign language and promotes the access to internationalization opportunities offered by the university, to both students and teachers.

Broadly speaking, this innovative strategy consists of implementing a set of concrete English tasks within the subject "Institutional Philosophy." In it, both students and teachers have the chance not only to interact in English with one another, but also, to be able to improve gradually key areas of the English language such as, speaking, listening and writing. Further down, this paper will provide a detailed account of the strategy and its positive impacts in the field of higher education.

Stimulating the use of a foreign language, in this case English, it is vital to stress that today's education has to do not only with training more competitive and prepared professionals for the global labor market, but also with the training of individuals capable of understanding and respecting cultural diversity. This is because the use of a foreign language, such as English, allows interaction between people who come from different ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, this interaction takes on more significance when human beings allow themselves to understand different ways of seeing life and living the world. When a young student takes the opportunity to travel to other countries, this experience is more valuable when he or she can communicate and recognize in their interaction that their way of living is not the only alternative; these are also tools to help accepting the other as both equal yet different. In this way, the accumulation of this type of experience will allow this young individual who is in the process of academic formation to resolve in a better way what Tzvetan Todorov has called "the problem of otherness". The author argues that this conflict is solved when we can accept the other, who is different from us, as equal and as different, although it is known that many times the difference in equality is rarely reached (Todorov 190).

It appears that the strategy contains opposing objectives: on the one hand, to complement the training of competitive young people for the labor market of a globalized world, and on the other hand, the promotion of respect for human diversity. They can be read as opposites because globalization benefits from cultural homogenization, given that difference generates conflict and instability, especially for the prevailing economic model that benefits the few whilst it harms the many.

From this viewpoint, globalization is a phenomenon that serves economic growth more than human beings and their socio-cultural and political development; that is to say, a phenomenon that can be understood as a phase of capitalist development. However, it is neither about training qualified people who serve as part of the apparatus to the economic development model nor about the market. It is rather, as stated by Juan Alexis Parada Silva in his text *Challenges to Current Education in Times of Uncertainty*, "to channel, thinking about the future of future generations, the discourse of the logic of the market,

which only cares about the particular benefits over the collective welfare” (18).

Therefore, the strategy does not respond to an exclusive goal of the university within the framework of the emergence of a global market in higher education. This market is characterized by the competition among the most prestigious institutions worldwide and is increasingly close to capitalist economic forms (Ordorika). Instead, the strategy responds to the motivations that are in tune with the challenge that Parada expresses in the following terms:

Education filled with hope should through practice make serious and precise analysis of reality in which situations are allowed to be seen where people can create and recreate their environments. Where they can strive for their dreams, where they can fulfill their desires, where they denounce iniquities and announce a reunion with freedom. (21)¹

The strategy that began in 2016 intends to assume, through the strengthening of the use of the English language, the challenges of contemporary education that, while promoting the maximum development of the individual's possibilities, must “promote coexistence, tolerance, otherness and joint responsibility” (Parada Silva 18).

This strategy is also part of an institutional policy for promoting bilingualism and constitutes the current state of a maturation process of various previous initiatives that serve as background. Such initiatives allowed to identify several gaps in the activities carried out up to 2014, exemplified by the difficulties of follow-up, the diversity of languages in the didactic proposals of the teachers, the incapability on behalf of teachers to give solid feedback on the activity by virtue of their own

1 Authors' own translation:

La educación colmada de esperanza debe a través de la práctica realizar análisis serios y puntuales de la realidad en los que se dejen entrever situaciones donde las personas puedan crear y recrear sus entornos. Donde puedan luchar por sus sueños, donde puedan concretar sus anhelos, donde denuncien las iniquidades y anuncien un reencuentro con la libertad.

limited competences in the foreign language, as well as a break with the option to promote particularly the use of the English language assumed by the Department of Humanities and Integral Training (hereinafter DHFI) of the Santo Tomás University (USTA).

Finally, the strategy was consolidated through the project described in this chapter and in general terms consists of the integration of activities in English within the curriculum of the subject of Institutional Philosophy, which is transversal to all undergraduate programs of the USTA and is taught in the first semester. These activities can be evaluated by a competent teacher and organized according to the formal structure of the DHFI subjects. It is divided into three semester periods, each of which gives a partial grade with values that are added together at the end of the process.

The proposal became real in the first semester of 2016 with an activity performed in each term. The activity is not carried out by the teacher who is in charge of the subject, but designed, implemented and evaluated by an external teacher, competent in both the subject and in English, and whose evaluation is integrated by the professor in charge in the final grade of each period in the semester. Each part of the strategy aims for a specific purpose that is located in the metacognitive and socio-affective dimensions, according to the classification presented by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), and articulates the concepts of attitude, creativity and autonomy, respectively.

Design and implementation of the strategy

It is noteworthy to highlight that the use of a foreign language in an academic setting like the one that has been implemented in the subject of Institutional Philosophy involves several key aspects: individual and collective effort, team performance, pedagogical and methodological teaching tools and a set of objectives. These crucial aspects play a key role in the construction and development of the project. An illustration of what has been stated above is the creative work of every teacher, whose main goal is to get the student's attention into the importance of using the English language as a means for dialogue, critical thinking

and personal academic growth. By the same token, the communal effort, that is, the team's work, makes it possible to articulate and integrate the goals, strategies and plans that have been designed to be implemented into the project. In this sense, the work of Kaye (1997) becomes central in comprehending the dynamics that take place in a team. He argues that there are a range of factors that can serve as instruments to stimulate and motivate the performance of a team. These features are: commitment to team work, which is describes by the author in terms of loyalty, or rather, the imperative need for faithfulness to the goals and principles set by the team (Kaye). In order to achieve this collective commitment however, it is significant to examine the variables connected to the performance of the team, such as how well the team members get along, what the level of affinity and compatibility among them is, the sort of rewards being given by the organization to motivate and increase the effectiveness of the work, together with the team's accountability and commitment. Likewise, other variables are also important to keep in mind when it comes to a team's work. Such variables could be ethnic diversity, age difference and the role of gender which constitutes an important force for the stimulus and success of the team (Kaye).

It is in this context where important teaching strategies and pedagogical approaches take place. One key teaching strategy is the use of virtual and face to face communication. The use of the Moodle platform, in the case of virtual communication, not only makes the communication between students and teachers both dynamic and effective, but it also allows such interaction to become meaningful and enriching. This is also the case in face to face tutorials in which students are invited to argue and to discuss about key issues related to society, humankind, culture and the importance of having proficiency in the English language. Here it is key to stress the significance of the element of empowerment, a term that has become popular in organizational contexts, as well as in academic settings. In the field of education, empowerment plays a crucial role, as it enables students to appropriate the project that has been incorporated in the subject as theirs. To empower students in this context means the capacity on their part to participate actively and consciously on the project that has been

assigned to them (Kaye). However, the component of empowerment can only take place when teachers have the ability to guide and to accompany student's processes in their academic formation; to guide them along a successful path (which implies promoting innovative perspectives that can redefine the old modes) and encourage them to determinedly commit to the project, its vision and goals, and correct when necessary in a clear and constructive manner (Kouzes and Posner). Therefore, students in this perspective become active and conscious agents on the project they have decided to be part of. In the same way, empowerment from this viewpoint enables students to achieve a better and deeper understanding of the challenges, issues, and uncertainties, together with the positive upsides that the project might have.

In line with the above, the integration of objectives and activities can be described as follows: in each of the first two sections of the subject, the lecturer assigns a class session to a competent teacher in both English and the subject (who forms part of the team of teachers of the Support Group in Foreign Language —GALE, in Spanish—), who carries out an activity in which the use of English is included, but which is linked to the themes of institutional philosophy, which the regular lecturer has been developing in the course of the previous sessions. Although the use of English is taken into account, the activity is directed at and therefore mainly evaluates the following: in the first period of the semester, the attitude of the student faced with using the English language and the activity to be developed; in the second period of the semester the creativity of the student to put into a communication situation his or her own understanding of one or several topics that make up the subject; and finally in the third section, for which a class session is not assigned but is developed virtually via the Moodle platform, the student's autonomy to integrate the use of English to the last activity of the subject, which has the characteristic of an exam. Each activity provides 20% of the final grade of the period of the semester, a significant value that stimulates the students to apply themselves with determination and commitment.

In relation to the nature of work, the first two activities integrate both personal work and teamwork, while the third focuses on personal work. Likewise, the first activity is exclusively face-to-face, the second

integrates both face-to-face aspects and virtual aspects, while the third is completely virtual through the Moodle academic platform.

Institutional Philosophy is a subject which breadth and scope allows them to immerse themselves in wide-ranging ideas that set them along the path of learning about and understanding their roles as human beings both now and into the future in a constantly changing and complicating modern world. The multicultural landscape that is discussed with students in the subject gives a prime opportunity to integrate into the studies the use of a language other than Spanish; our languages are identified with our cultural identities, thus an immersion in another language acts as a gateway towards learning about other cultures and students' place in the current multicultural panorama. The prevalent lack of second language use that marks education in Colombia means that students are not being exposed to foreign cultures and ideas, thereby debilitating the capacity to reach out and understand today's social dynamics and the necessity to be conscious of and understanding towards cultures that differ from our own. Primarily, and in great part due to its dominance as the world language in commerce and the media, the second language in question is English, and it could be argued that this limits student's awareness through a second language to a limited Anglo-Saxon dominated cultural setting. The argument, however, is that such is the commonplace use of the language that it now opens up doors towards an ever greater number of enriching cultural exchanges and learning opportunities; hence the focus in English in the project in a second language in *Institutional Philosophy*.

If we accept that in Colombia opportunities for students are limited in experiencing and understanding other cultures, the project can be defined as a necessary component of the holistic education within humanities of students at USTA. The responsibility to provide this educative experience then lies with the DHFI and the teachers who are willing and capable of carrying out the project. Of key importance to the GALE team is to design and successfully integrate the foreign language project into the *Institutional Philosophy* subject, and to motivate students to participate and be conscious of the fruits of their efforts. Regarding the latter, the idea is to immerse students into a communicative setting

in which the traditional traumas generally suffered by Colombian students in their English language studies is alleviated, the idea being to encourage students to demonstrate a willingness in this area of the *Institutional Philosophy* subject; only with a certain willingness will students reap the benefits of the project's essence (effectively working and communicating in a second language). It is well understood that USTA students have a wide-ranging English level, from low to high fluency, and so the teacher in charge of the sessions, particularly the first session, must stress the importance of attitude and willingness to communicate in English overriding each individual student's ability in the language; indeed, high grades are awarded to students who demonstrate a positive attitude in their approach to the activity and who accomplish the key goal of communicating in another language (regardless of complexity of grammatical structure and breadth of vocabulary which traditionally are the basis for assessing performance in a foreign language).

With this in mind, the design of the semester's first activity is focused on attitude, and is carried out face-to-face with the students in the class. Students are required to speak and express themselves in a new and dynamic setting that in many cases has been denied to them up to this point in their education. As an introduction, the teacher in charge is responsible for sharing with the class his or her own culturally enriching experiences that owe themselves to their efforts in working in a second language. This also allows students to share their own experiences or those they would like to have outside of Colombia. What makes itself apparent to the class are two indisputable factors: firstly, that contact with a foreign culture is enriching and wholly necessary for modern world citizens, and secondly, that a willingness to push oneself and have a positive attitude towards learning English enables the former to be possible. It is important to stress to students how the need to work in another language is fundamentally linked to ideas that they are already studying in their holistic formation within their courses in DHFI, specifically in the subject of Institutional Philosophy, which first thematic nucleus addresses precisely the question of the capacity of the university to respond to the problems of the contemporary world. In this sense, the university's responsibility is not only to prepare its students

to perform professionally in the working world, but also to provide the tools for their personal development and to carry out personal life projects, despite their own circumstances and global reality.

Moving the class on, students are invited to think about reasons on why learning a foreign language is important, and then they are introduced to a video entitled 'Ten Reasons Why You Should Learn English'. Structuring the session in this way allows the essence of the class to embed itself in the students' thoughts, and it inspires a certain amount of creativity in their thought processes, which is a necessary factor for their success not only in the next stage of this first activity of the semester, but also in the other two sessions to come. After reviewing the key points in the short two-minute video and coupling them with their own ideas, students are then asked to put their creativity into action as they prepare themselves in groups of three or four to debate with the teacher on the importance of having the key tool of being able to communicate in English in the modern context. As English levels will inevitably vary greatly amongst member of the group, it encourages students to work collaboratively, sharing their experiences and knowledge in foreign language learning. This twenty to twenty-five-minute preparation time allows students to think in a second language context that many have not had the opportunity to do before; there is quite a wide opportunity of topics and ideas about which they can try to express themselves, and they have to choose what they want to say, and about how they want to say it. The freedom of the activity demonstrates the wide possibility of ideas about which they can communicate having just a limited amount of linguistic knowledge. After the preparation stage, students then carry out their debates in the company of the teacher, showing a willing and positive attitude and demonstrating the fruits of their collaborative work. For some students it may be just presenting a couple or three short sentences on a particular idea, but even this is a significant hurdle overcome by a student who often has had a distinctively negative experience in foreign language learning up to that point.

The idea of creativity, the ability to think freely and productively according to our abilities, is integral to the planned activities. In this sense, the class session planned for the second term opens with an

assessment of the activity carried out in the first session, which allows students to be placed in the context of the activity to be carried out next, around the concept of creativity, first observing a video from the TED platform (TED talks), in which Ken Robinson affirms that schools tend to kill our creativity. From this video, which is presented in English and along with English subtitles, a virtual activity is proposed consisting of a brief individual questionnaire which purpose, rather than to evaluate, is to achieve a higher level of awareness of one's own skills in use of a second language in the academic context (listening and reading specifically), while assuming a critical position with respect to the statements of the lecturer.

The following group activity is explained below, consisting of the construction of a small video clip in English through which each group presents in a creative way their own understanding of some of the themes and concepts addressed in the second controversial nucleus of the subject, knowledge and holistic education within the framework of Christian humanism. This activity allows students to be placed in front of a communicative situation in which the student must, on the one hand, raise what he or she has managed to internalize in relation to the educational project of his or her University and, on the other hand, find ways to communicate it to other students in a creative way. The video will be delivered to the teacher who is part of the Support Group in Foreign Language through the Moodle platform. In this way, the activity planned for the second term integrates both an individual and a group activity, while combining face to face communication along with virtual dialogue.

The third part of the strategy does not constitute a class session. The lecturer establishes the final activity of the subject, which is an examination, and normally takes the form of written work or combines an examination and written work. The strategy in foreign language is integrated to this work, according to its characteristics and at the discretion of each student who decides which component of that final work is to be included in a foreign language. The development of the activity implies an agreement with the regular lecturer of the subject, which is why it demands collaboration between the two teachers prior to the assignment of the abovementioned final task. It also sees them

collaborate together again at the moment of evaluating the work, because it is necessary that teachers perform the evaluation process together. This is precisely one of the aspects that has been most enriching at the teaching level, since it has meant the possibility of establishing a pedagogical dialogue between the regular lecturer and the visiting teacher responsible for activities in a foreign language. For students, it also implies autonomous work in a foreign language, which confronts them with their ability to venture independently to carry out an activity that will involve learning and will also be evaluated and given feedback. Students will also work with absolute independence of the teacher, preparing them in a certain sense to assume tasks related to both their academic and later on professional activities that are mediated by a foreign language.

The implementation of the strategy has had several moments to consolidate itself as described so far. One of the interesting aspects is that the support teachers has varied, some have left and others have arrived, seeking in this process that new teachers who join the team can make contributions to the advanced processes and suggest new approaches or specific activities for each session, in dialogue with the experiences of those who have already had the possibility to confront the strategy with the dynamics of the classroom. One of the important aspects of this fact is that the activities have varied in each semester and that the expectation of thinking and renewing the design of the strategy is maintained, in order to make it increasingly relevant to the objectives sought and more meaningful and didactic for the students.

Monitoring, challenges and improvements

From the feedback obtained from the 2016 measurement, it was demonstrated in the first instance a great commitment from the faculty team in charge of the project, which allowed the establishment of a grand strategy toward its success. It was necessary for the faculty team in charge of the second language strategy to expand their knowledge about the Moodle platform, in relation to the use of the virtual classroom, using all the tools offered by the platform, whose impact is seen in

the students who in the same way are encouraged to make use of it, reaching a positive effect on the results of the activities raised. These activities were aligned with the *Problematic Core* of the Institutional Philosophy Professorship, as a strategy in both content and design.

In connection with the content and design, additional activities were implemented to those established, which provided an opportunity for the students to interact in a second Language (English), more easily. On the other hand, there was greater acceptance and interest towards the project by the professors of the Humanities Department, allowing the team to maximize the potential of the activities in favor of the Neotomasinos students (new students), since the evaluation form supplied to all professors was standardized, allowing them to identify the origin and structure of the components evaluated in the foreign Language (English).

In order to understand the evaluative perceptions, an evaluation was carried out, the result of which has been addressed as an improvement plan, allowing the students and full-time professors working in Institutional Philosophy to participate in the strategy of the use of a foreign language (English) in different spaces of a class where a foreign language can be taught. Similarly, to develop activities that stimulate the interest of students toward the learning of English as a foreign language. Likewise, raising activities that allow students to improve their skills (writing, reading, listening and speaking). And finally, a classroom accompaniment, which allows them to orient and support processes, through two face-to-face tutorials per period: the first tutorial in order to discuss the activity that will be carried out and the way how this will be evaluated; the second in order to give feedback about the previous activity and at the same time to make known the grade obtained by the work completed.

To be in line with the processes of improving the project of Institutional Philosophy in a Second Language for the year 2017, the working group responsible for the project in foreign language of the Humanities Department, GALE, was asked to adjust its planned activities and processes under the planning and quality criteria of the Department. On the other hand, the dissemination and interest in the Institutional Philosophy project, by the all the professors of

the Humanities Department, has allowed a better feedback from constructive criticism. The Department of Humanities and Integral Formation of the Santo Tomás University, continues to make a difference at USTA Colombia level, what led to consideration of the headquarters and sectional, to replicate the project in a medium and/or long term.

Generally speaking, we want to highlight the results of the project, which has constituted for the Humanities Department a significant challenge; motivating students to gradually immerse themselves in the knowledge of the English language, it is a work that requires time and dedication. New academic challenges allow us to create an environment of interest and appropriation by a foreign language (English), which becomes an opportunity for the Humanities Department. We remain at the forefront, in order to meet the needs of our students, as far as the English language is concerned.

Achievements and conclusions

Among the achievements identifiable in the implementation of the proposal is its scope, covering a student population of about 1500 students, which leaves out of the strategy an average of 300 students. This number is particularly significant if one takes into account that the team of teachers of the GALE team has consisted of four or five teachers at various times of the project's implementation (four consecutive semesters since 2016-1). According to the above, the application of the strategy has not reached in any case the totality of first semester students of the University, which is the aim of the DHFI. However, the developments in the definition of activities and in the planning of them allows us to project the coverage for the entire student population in the coming semesters.

It is important to mention among the achievements the acceptance and positive assessment both by the students and by the lecturers who hold the course, an acceptance that has been increasing and that at first was especially reticent on the part of the regular classroom lecturers. This has undoubtedly contributed to the constant dialogue, the possibility of taking into account the suggestions of the regular

classroom lecturers and, in particular, the commitment to design the final activity in agreement with the teacher of the subject. This joint evaluation of this final activity has favored a better understanding of the objectives of the strategy and has opened up horizons in terms of the possibilities to enrich the discourses of each teacher in relation to the multicultural aspects of the contemporary world. The advantages of this integration between the regular classroom lecturers and the visiting teacher in combining efforts in a formative purpose has been evidenced by all the teachers involved.

Regarding the results in terms of English competency development, they are located both in the affective area, according to the proposal itself and as evidenced by the evaluation of the experience made by the students themselves, as well as in the ability to solve problems to access information in English proper to their academic environment. This is a relevant achievement if we take into account that in all areas of science and in each of the professions, both research and cutting-edge information is usually published in this language first, which means that throughout their university life there will be many occasions in which students will be forced to face different types of texts in this language, and they highlight in their evaluations that the development of the activity contributes to the generation of confidence to face that challenge and the necessary skills to carry it out.

Finally, the proposal opens up several horizons in terms of institutional policy on bilingualism, especially the commitment that the DHFI has formulated for itself in terms of contributing to the development of foreign language skills as a fundamental component to achieve the comprehensive training that the university has proposed in its pedagogical project, and with respect to that which it has delegated as an important responsibility within the DHFI.

GESTIÓN DE LA PROYECCIÓN

