



Making a Difference: English Learning, ICT and the School Library Hand-in-Hand

Cláudia Mota¹

Colmeias Joint Group of Schools, Portugal¹

Abstract

Teaching English as a foreign language to students who are 8 to 11 years old (especially when you are used to working with teenagers) can be really challenging, but also highly rewarding. You must definitely leave your “comfort zone” and risk new approaches. Introducing ICT in the scenario and making use of the school library space conditions and resources (books, iPads, digital tools) can lead to countless ideas and initiatives, which arise gradually as time goes by and imagination takes the lead. As an English teacher and librarian teacher of a joint group of schools in the centre of Portugal, I developed this project with about 100 primary school students (plus 20 kindergarten children), in the course of two school years (2016-2018). The project became “Merit Idea 2016”, supported by the Portuguese School Libraries Network. Not to lose its dynamics, it has been reconfigured and further developed with the previous primary students, later attending the 5th (2018/2019) and 6th grades (2019/2020).

In this project, ICT tools are not an END, but a MEANS to learn English and become digitally (cap)able in a modern world. English children’s books and other school library resources are also great instruments to develop one’s vocabulary, pleasure in reading, creativity, sense of citizenship and opinion about the world. Songs, nursery rhymes, videos, English apps and games are also on the core of this project, which I consider worth spreading to other teachers around the world. A lot of effort, but also a lot of pleasure, are definitely involved in the process. There were steps forward and some backwards, but motivation to learn a foreign language and the pleasure of playing and sharing were/are always present in the English classes.

Keywords: *English, ICT, school library, motivation, children’s literature.*

1. Contextualization

Projects are never easy to implement, but are a crucial factor for the development of innovative teaching methods. If this is the case everywhere, projects gain a special meaning if we consider a rural group of schools in the centre of Portugal, split over an area of about 20 kilometres, at middle distance between the two most important cities: Lisbon and Oporto. Eight hundred and fifty students attend these joint schools, from kindergarten to the 9th grade (that means three to fifteen-year-old students). Eighty-eight teachers work in these schools, which are governed by a common administration and have had the same Headmaster since its very beginning, 24 years ago. Needless to say, the Headmaster team always gives a strong incentive to new and innovative projects and highly supports the teachers willing to take up the challenge.

What is my role as the single Librarian Teacher (besides being one of the eight English teachers), within this particular community? Running two school libraries and giving some support to the whole community, especially in what concerns its reading dynamics, is not an easy task. The modernization of the school libraries, trying to link them as much as possible with the curriculum, has been my *modus operandi*, having a certain philosophy in mind:

La biblioteca debe ser un agente catalizador e canalizador de acciones concretas que sin apoyo estable y continuado non podrían fructificar. [...] debe aglutinar como un imán, demandas y necesidades concretas surgidas en las distintas áreas curriculares. [...] Este imán puede y debe, a su vez, iluminar y canalizar, por caminos de corresponsabilidad e interdisciplinariedad, las demandas recibidas, vinculando las herramientas y recursos – tradicionales y digitales – más útiles para su realización, y asesorando en el diseño de propuestas concretas. [1]

2. Introduction

The title of this project, in Portuguese, was initially “Inglês com TICs e (re)toques na BE do 1º ciclo”. As the children grew up, it was later adapted and denominated “Inglês com TIC, (re)toque e



com a BE". It's hard to translate the titles chosen, because some meaning gets lost in translation, but they refer to English learning, ICT and the school library hand-in-hand, as does the title of this article.

Before starting to discriminate some of the most emblematic activities developed and tools used, let me just add, in advance, that the project's philosophy has always had to do with a central word – SHARING:

- sharing ideas with the students involved;
- sharing students' learning experiences with their parents, so that they would be familiar with the project and the children's school life;
- sharing the dynamics with the teachers from our group of schools, hopefully making them curious about certain activities and/or ICT tools;
- sharing resources with English teachers from other parts of Portugal and, now, through this article/presentation, with teachers who live and work abroad.

The intention to combine the recently compulsory English language learning in an early age (seven/eight-year-old students) in Portugal with the dynamics of the school library and the use of ICT tools/equipment was the starting point of this project. It was considered one of the seven national "Merit Idea Projects 2016", financially supported and closely supervised by the Portuguese School Libraries Network (in Portuguese, Rede de Bibliotecas Escolares – henceforth referred to by its abbreviation, RBE).

As an easily accessible sharing/dissemination platform, I created a Facebook group page, where working documents, videos, photos, the description of activities, links and much more are included and regularly updated [2].

3. Main activities

Around 100 students were included in the project from 2016 to 2018. In the first year, English classes actually took place in the primary school library. However, in the second year, the school underwent a major renovation and we had to temporarily move elsewhere.

Parallel to this, I have also promoted an introduction to English learning for 20 kindergarten children. Sessions take place in the main school library once a week since October 2016. Playing with the English language and memorizing some words (and their meanings) is the goal. English picture books, songs, videos and stimulating images help us do that.

From September 2018 onwards, the key group of primary school students involved (that is, the class participating in the project since the moment it started) changed school and are now attending the main school, called EBI Colmeias, which serves about 350 students. The school library resources, such as English books, iPads, films are regularly used. Even robots were tried to revise some vocabulary. From time to time, the English class may take place in the school library, following two of the quality patterns defined for Portuguese school libraries by RBE: school libraries as "places of knowledge and innovation, able to incorporate new pedagogical practices" and "flexible environments, adapted to the technological changes and the users' needs" [3].

Outdoor activities are also privileged. In the first two years, the English class always started in the playground with a vocabulary game, song or nursery rhyme. Then, the students were given the related so-called 'password', which they had to quickly memorize and repeat in front of the teacher when finally entering the classroom. If they had forgotten it, they had to take the last place in the students' queue and repeat it till they could say it correctly. Later it was written on the board and its meaning was explained.

Flashcards, posters, stimulating images and boardgames are frequently used, allying the vocabulary learning to visual representations of the words and the capacity to learn by playing. Good literary titles from well-known English writers, such as Eric Carle, Shel Silverstein, Anthony Brown, Lane Smith or Nick Sharrat, among others, are used for educational purposes or just read for the pleasure of a good story.

Kahoot, Mentimeter, Quizizz, Socrative and Plickers are some of the students' favourite digital tools, allowing them to develop their technological abilities while learning English. They also enjoy working on shared documents on google drive or talking to "Siri", a virtual assistant that is part of Apple IOS system.

Some of the games tried and materials produced (crosswords, little videos, QR codes, Prezi presentations) are also shared with other 6th graders attending another public school, but in a very different context. Their school is situated in Montalegre, in the north of Portugal, about 350 kms away from us. Students call each other "Tech Pals", even if sometimes we exchange letters, postcards or manually produced objects. All these initiatives allow the project to be at full speed for the 4th



consecutive year, also promoting respect, understanding and a strong citizenship sense among teenagers [4].

In fact, the promotion of citizenship and social inclusion has been at the core of the most recent transformation in the Portuguese curriculum. The tendency is also to make the learning process more flexible and the classes' structure not so strict. The content of two or three subjects can be combined and teachers can work simultaneously with a class to try some more practical teaching approaches. Formative evaluation is more valued than summative as well.

In this context of growing flexibility, my students organized a singing reception to a visiting writer in the so-called "National Reading Week 2019". They studied the lyrics of an English song, translated them to Portuguese, rehearsed and then sang "Heal the World", by Michael Jackson, in front of our guest and all the 6th grade classes. The following subjects were involved: English, Portuguese, Music and Citizenship.

In another occasion, students and some of their teachers, including me, dressed up as "lost tourists" and went around the school talking in English (or trying to) and asking for directions to go to the south of Portugal. English, Geography, Portuguese and Arts were the involved subjects. Students had to improvise a lot, establish contact with unknown people, practise the English language and, most of all, they had a lot of fun.

We are now preparing new initiatives of curricular flexibility for this school year, trying to include the school library professionals and resources in the process.

4. Conclusion

It is certain that, in a library context, the "outcomes are the ways in which library users are changed as a result of their contact with the library's resources and programs" [5]. These are very important in this project, as the involved students feel physically and emotionally closer to their school library, valuing and getting to know its resources better. What else? "Outcomes are key but not the whole story" [5].

For me, the process developed in this project is more important than the products and results obtained. Step by step, with some hesitation but also a big enthusiasm, my students and I have built this project because a teacher can't do anything alone. In a complementary way, the interchange with the northern school has represented a significant added value.

With these strategies (and others that come out of a sudden due to the students and teachers' motivation/imagination), learning/teaching English becomes more interesting. These dynamics demand a lot of effort, but are also a source of great pleasure.

To finish, I truly hope that the reading of this paper might inspire other teachers to engage in similar projects, preferably including the libraries as dynamic structures within the school. English learning projects, such as this one, can really make a difference and are a very rewarding educational and personal experience.

References

- [1] Roca, G. D. La biblioteca escolar, hoy - un recurso estratégico para al centro. Barcelona, Editorial Graó, 2010.
- [2] <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1777653969143761/> (accessed September 14, 2019).
- [3] Rede de Bibliotecas Escolares. Quadro estratégico: 2014-2020. Lisboa, RBE, 2013. <http://rbe.min-edu.pt/np4/qe.html> (accessed August 31, 2019)
- [4] López, P. L., González, I. V. Educación para la ciudadanía y biblioteca escolar, Gijón, Ediciones Trea. 2008.
- [5] Hennon, Peter. "Outcomes are key but not the whole story", Journal of Academic Librarianship 28:1/2, 2002, 54-55.