

# After-School Workshops: A total language experience<sup>1</sup>

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The concept of after-school workshops as a tool or methodology in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language is a response to the current realities of language teaching in Mexican schools. Too many times the inflexible grammar-based course guidelines of other eras keep us from providing our students with what experts tell us are the optimal conditions for language learning. Furthermore, even when we and our administrators *are* convinced of the importance of incorporating communicative, content-based and whole-language methodologies into our English programs, few schools have the luxury of a well-trained staff, up-dated materials, physical space, comfortable budgets and curriculum flexibility which would allow us to implement these modern, attractive elements in our classrooms on a daily basis.

Given the economic and methodological restrictions imposed on us, what alternatives do we as teachers have for providing our students with the user-friendly, language-rich environment they need to learn and enjoy a foreign language? The answer requires a shift of perspective and borrows heavily from the cultural values of the American school system.

In contrast to Mexico, the American public school system places a strong emphasis on the value of participating in after-school, club-like activities. The concept of a "well-rounded" individual who has a wide-range of non-academic interests, like sports, music and art, is intrinsic to the idea of a good education.

In Mexican metropolitan areas nowadays, too, there is a growing interest among families in enrolling children in karate, swimming, scouting, and other formal instruction. The social context of such activities encourages the student's interest in his task. For many young people, after-school activities are fun, and not "educational" at all, even when their content is instructional in nature.

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In terms of language teaching, then, we are talking about an approach which places less emphasis on teaching English during the school day, and more on the use of language in an extra-curricular setting. For this, and other reasons, the focus of this paper is on setting up after-school workshops as an attractive way of packaging English classes. The challenge, however, is what kind of curriculum, methodology or approach to package. *The answer, surprisingly, is not to teach English at all!*

### Content-Based Instruction

Outside the isolated language classroom students learn language and content at the same time. Therefore we need a broad perspective which integrates language and content learning. (Mohan 1986: 18)

The truth is that only the tiniest part of what we know about of our own first language was learned in a classroom. Our skills in our native language progressed according to our exposure to increasingly complex needs, situations and contexts. In a sense, the content of our native language learning was...our life itself.

Linguists, psychologists and families with small children who have moved to foreign cultures have observed a correlative behavior in second language acquisition:

It is a common experience that when translated to a town where their native language is not spoken, children will become reasonably proficient in the new language in the space of months. It is an equally common experience that after six years of schooling in the second language, whatever the teaching method, most children emerge with a very poor command of the language. (Macnamara 1977: 96)

The implication is, of course, that when given a context, or content, of compelling enough interest to the learner, be it the art of negotiating on the playground, or singing along with Madonna, or studying a Ph.D. abroad on a scholarship, most language learners will find a way to pick up the code that goes with it any way they can. The need to communicate is crucial. Equally important is having a topic worth communicating, or a content worth teaching.

### *Combining content and language*

Bernard Mohan (1986) has described three types of relationships between language teaching and content teaching.

1. Language teaching **BY** content teaching, in which the focus is on content, and the language skills develop almost incidentally. Language immersion programs are examples of this type.
2. Language teaching **FOR** content teaching, in which students learn the specific language needed for success in various subject areas as quickly as possible. English for Special Purposes operates on this principle.
3. Language teaching **WITH** content teaching, in which the focus is on teaching both language and content. In such an approach the language and content objectives need to be in close alignment. Language teaching **WITH** content teaching demonstrates the principle of a holistic, whole-language approach to language teaching, and as such seems particularly adaptable for after-school workshops like ours, where we can use the best of all worlds--materials from academic content, social interaction from the after-school setting and hands-on experiences provided by the workshop motif--to generate and motivate the program.

#### *Support for content-based instruction*

For the well-informed teacher, one of the added benefits of working with a content-based curriculum is that he/she has the opportunity to mix and match from the entire menu of methodologies and techniques available to him/her instead of being tied to one inflexible model of language learning. Unlike many teaching methodologies, content-based education finds its theoretical justification in not one, but several approaches.

For one thing, content-based teaching is highly communicative. After all, in order for communication to take place, there must be some knowledge or information to be shared. Incorporating subject-content into the second language class puts language in a meaningful context and provides a situation that requires language use rather than just talking about language.

Second, content-based language instruction fills the need for what Krashen calls "comprehensible input." The teacher in a content class surrounds the student with language to which they can relate by means of concrete experiences. The kind of hands-on materials and physically active participation called for in workshop settings combine perfectly to support the development of comprehensible language input. In fact "the addition of subject content to the goals of the traditional language classroom can more than double the effectiveness of second language instruction for each student." (Curtain & Pesoa 1988: 97)

Finally, support for integrating content instruction into the language curriculum also comes from the move towards more holistic education in general. When the

teacher is not dealing with a language that is isolated and reduced to small pieces, students see the language and concepts to be learned as part of an integrated whole, and benefit as well from the opportunities this learning setting provides for the development of critical thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

#### Areas with Potential for Content-Based Instruction

Up to now we have been concerned with justifying the use of content-based instruction as a viable alternative to traditional language class instruction. The next matter, however, is what topics or subjects are most appropriate for this approach. Fortunately, many curricular areas are well suited for content-based instruction, and can easily be adapted for interesting group projects designed for an after-school setting.

1. **Social Studies** is one area which is particularly adaptable for young people of all ages. Some of the appropriate topics are home, community, social patterns and comparative cultures, the latter being particularly meaningful for students studying a second language. Most of the techniques and resources frequently associated with social studies are especially motivating in language teaching; for example, the use of media, the inquiry method, the use of photo, pictures, *realia* and colorful periodicals.
2. Elementary level **Mathematics**, with its computations and concrete problem solving situations can also be adapted for content-based instruction, and may come as a welcome change of pace to students who perceive themselves to be less than gifted in more verbally-oriented subjects. Concepts of size and shapes are easily communicated in the target language. Especially for younger children, the ideas of composing graphs for simple counting and computation activities (e.g., what colors of shoes are students wearing in class today?) is absorbing and a highly integrative use of language. Other mathematical activities of particular utility include: measurement, statistics, arithmetic and geometry.
3. **Science** is especially suited to content-enriched foreign language instruction because of its hands-on, project-oriented nature. For example, entire content-based curriculums can be developed around a single ecological theme. In one instance, a single topic, TREES, has been adapted as the focus of an entire program. (See PLT)
4. **Arts and Crafts**, because of their highly-experimental and visual nature, have long been a staple in elementary school language programs. **Music**, especially popular songs from the English-speaking cultures, are by now a traditional part of most secondary and preparatory English programs.

5. Finally, the study of journalism is a less traditional way of motivating older students to work with English composition. Teenagers seem to find it infinitely more interesting to plan, research, lay out, edit, and produce a newspaper than to compose and rewrite a term paper, yet the process and the academic skills emphasized are exactly the same.

### The Affective Factor

Affective education is effective education. It works on increasing skills in developing and maintaining good relationships, showing concern and support for others, and receiving these as well. Humanistic education is a way of relating that emphasizes self-discovery, introspection, self-esteem, and getting in touch with the strengths and positive equalities in ourselves and others. In addition to all this, humanistic education is fun. (Moskowitz 1978: 14)

In the final analysis, content in language learning isn't only about an academic curriculum. It's about communication and the interaction of human beings. Remember that our first language skills are developed only to the extent that our own experiences with the world and people around us have become more complex and sophisticated. One of the goals of our after-school workshops, therefore, is also to provide the opportunities for emotional and social growth which will correspondingly translate into an ever-increasing sophistication in the student's comprehension and use of the second language. To this end, the affective element plays a major role, and the humanistic component becomes the underlying foundation of our workshop concept.

As students find that their thoughts, feelings, and experiences are regarded as important in this language setting, the language itself becomes more important to them. It is essential, therefore, that the after-school workshop also be a forum for students to relate in a positive way not only with the content, but also with each other and with the educational environment. There must be a concern for personal development, self-acceptance, and acceptance by others, in other words, making students more human. In short, after-school workshops are not school; they are beyond mere school rooms.

It is a live classroom, full of learning activities in which students are enthusiastically and authentically involved. Each student is genuinely respected and treated as a human being by his teacher. The learning involves living. (Browning 1975: 2)

It's easy to make humanistic education our creed as teachers, but not so easy to carry it out. We all know that the hectic demands of the traditional school routine leave little time for noble aspirations. It's fortunate, therefore, that within the informal, less demanding setting of after-school workshops, we have the freedom to integrate some of our favorite humanistic activities. The techniques and activities provided by Gertrude Moskowitz in her book *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class* have a magical way of fitting into almost any content-based settings: In fact, they ARE a content-based curriculum of and by themselves, and we recommend them highly.

### **Reality Check: Putting it all together in after-school workshops**

In this paper we have tried to demonstrate some of the theories and methodologies behind the establishment of complementary, after-school language workshops. Following this text is a brief outline of how two of these workshops programs were included, although, unfortunately have yet to be implemented, in the curriculums of nationally prestigious educational institutions. But before we go on, we'd like to add a few words about practicality, and offer some basic, down-to-earth arguments for setting up workshop programs.

#### *Academic*

1. There is a growing market in Mexico today for young people's English classes. Moreover, the parents of students already enrolled in government or private school English programs are realizing that their children just aren't learning enough, and are looking for complementary programs. The workshop approach offers both parents and administrators a new and more concrete (Projects are completed and kids have something to show off to the family.) option to traditional programs.

2. In addition, parents of students who need *regularización* will probably be pleasantly surprised by their children's change in attitude about studying English, once they are enrolled in a workshop program.

#### *Economic*

1. After-school workshops are geared for study-center-style classrooms. One room and one teacher can facilitate a broad range of language skills and levels. In short, workshop programs are more cost-effective and call for less physical space.

2. Because of the social and general academic nature of the workshop programs, institutions can attract students who might not want English classes *per se*, but are interested in the hands-on, workshop idea.

3. Workshop programs are highly interactive and communicative. In order for students to complete their group projects, they must spend a great deal of time going out among family, friends, and the community, talking about their institution and their projects. This word-of-mouth publicity is the cheapest and most effective kind an institution can ask for!
4. Workshop programs don't cost that much to set up. They utilize school space and resources already available but sitting idle after hours. The initial investment is in curriculum planning and materials, the latter of which can be included in student fees.
5. Finally, after-school workshops are first and foremost concerned with providing quality education for our children, and the public is willing to pay well for quality. Charge accordingly and make money for your institution.

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**Appendix**  
**After-School Workshops in the Preparatory Curriculum**  
**ITESM-CEM**

**(3-hours per week)**

Participation is required and is equal to 30% of classroom participation grade. Workshop function in conjunction with the language and grammar objectives for each level.

**First Semester, English One**

English One students have only just begun to develop their productive language skills; therefore, the emphasis is on manual arts representations based on the themes presented in this course. Students will be offered ever-increasing opportunities to express verbally the significance of their world using description and simple explanations.

During the semester, students will work on three different projects, one per partial period, which correspond to the thematic units studied in class:

1. OUR HOME, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY. Working in groups, students will plan and present their vision and model of a utopian community.
2. FAMILY AND FRIENDS. Students will research and produce individual family heritage trees.
3. SPORTS, HOBBIES AND LEISURE ACTIVITIES. Students will make presentations of their favorite leisure activities.

Workshop hours represent an opportunity for teachers to meet with students in order to explain goals and objectives, to help "hands-on" with projects, and to provide added language and academic support which the students may need to complete oral presentations of their work.

Students will be asked to share their projects in oral presentations with their classmates at the end of each corresponding partial period. The semester will culminate with a "Community Fair" exhibit during the fourth partial period at which time the best projects from each group will be exhibited and evaluated for awards.

**Second Semester, English Two**

Workshop activities this semester revolve around international and cultural themes. Students will have the opportunity to demonstrate their growing oral and writing skills.

1. KNOW YOURSELF. Student-created short videos in English which express their self-image.



2. WHAT IS CULTURE? Role-play representations of Mexican stereotypes vs. reality.
3. TRAVELING IN OUR WORLD. Student-produced travel brochures about Mexico.
4. HOLIDAYS AND CELEBRATIONS. Groups invite classmates to learn about and take part in holiday celebrations from other cultures.

Once again, the purpose of workshop time is to provide students with the teacher support they'll need to successfully work on their projects. The fourth project should be carried out during the fourth period only, and should be composed of a series of parties and social gatherings during which students can truly get a sense of participating in the cultural activity represented.

### **Third Semester, English Three**

Since the English Three content material deals with topics related to mass communication, the workshops for this semester will give students an opportunity to express their growing skills in the production of mass media materials.

1. THE ENVIRONMENT. Planning, promoting and staging a town meeting about local environmental concerns.
2. COMMUNICATION AND MASS MEDIA. Public service announcements about environmental issues.
3. INTEGRATION. A student-produced publicity campaign promoting the ITESM-CEM. Projects will be exhibited and reviewed by campus directors.

### **Fourth Semester, English Four**

Content-based material will be introduced during the course of the regular curriculum, specifically through the use of dramatic readings and the introduction of English for academic use and study skill development. Therefore, the workshop activities this semester are specifically designed to support the academic content of the course, as well as aid in the integration of all language skills.

Students are asked to cooperate in groups to write and produce one-act plays which will be part of a competition during the fourth partial period in an English Theater Festival.

### **Fifth Semester, English Five**

Fifth semester students are focusing on developing their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills in English. The goal of this course is to involve the students in a student-centered environment which gives them an opportunity to use their English skills in a literature-based content class with close teacher supervision.

During workshop hours student will learn the principles of journalistic writing and its applications. Students will work on the planning and production of an original ITESM-CEM preparatory school newspaper.

### **Sixth Semester, English Six**

English Six is an academic writing course. The objective of the course is to synthesize the total range of students' language abilities with high-level reasoning through the production of a university-level research paper.

In order to demonstrate their complete integration of language skills, students will concentrate during workshop time on compiling and producing a prep school yearbook for their graduating class, one which is of sufficient quality and presentation to share with the parents and the community at large.