

English Immersion: an excellent strategy to qualify English language teaching

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This paper is an attempt to share with the reader the experience of being in an immersion in English that helped me to improve my fluency and to understand that teaching English with the purpose of communicating would help our students, our schools and the standards of quality in Colombia. The program is then an excellent strategy to qualify English language teaching and has been very appropriate for the particular situation of our country.

In Colombia, the policies of the State promoted by the National Ministry of Education and in special what is concerned with the national *National Bilingual Program* requires of a well trained Professional in Language both academically and pedagogically. This is necessary in order to qualify the language teaching process as a discipline; and also, to promote speaking in English, as a vehicle of communication, culture and human development.

Knowing that not all the teachers in public schools have the same proficiency in English, I consider it crucial to foster the effective teaching in bilingual classrooms. According to **Tikunoff** (1983), a teacher with limited English proficiency needs to develop three kinds of competences. The first one is the **participative competence** which is the ability to respond appropriately to class demands and the procedural rules for accomplishing them. Secondly, the **Interactional competence** that is the ability to respond both to classroom rules of discourse and social

rules, interacting appropriately with peers when accomplishing class tasks. Finally, the **academic competence** which is the ability to acquire new skills, assimilate new information and construct new concepts to apply in context. Another important aspect we teachers need to improve is the level of listening and speaking in a native – like environment. And the appropriate place in Colombia is **San Andres Island**.

To solve the problem of having teachers with limited English proficiency, the Colombian government has been promoting different kinds of courses in different cities of the nation for the last fifteen years. It has also created “The English Immersion Program”, carried out in San Andres Island. The Program offers to Colombian and International teachers (Panama, Mexico, Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, etc.) the chance of improving their command of English by living for nearly a month in the one and only English speaking environment of Colombia.

During this time, all the participants take an academic English course according to the results of the Preliminary English Test (P.E.T.), used to classify the level of each one. As a participant of this course, I want to tell the reader that I felt very happy in San Andres Island for many reasons: its beautiful landscapes, its sea, its culture, its architecture and especially for its people.

From the very beginning I had a great empathy with Mr. Ambrosse, (our van driver) who received me at the airport, (of course speaking in English), and then he took me to be lodged at a native family: The Gomez Bent, a lovely family. Few hours later, after receiving the rules to stay there, I met my other roommates, people from other cultures: from Quindio, Atlantic Coast, Cauca, Cundinamarca and Antioquia. And the challenge began. Little by Little ice was broken and we started to talk about our places of origin exchanging opinions and forming a society by means of English.

My group was formed by people from the Pacific Coast, from Choco and Nariño departments. As soon as we got together, we began to make an initial performance in order to be presented in public to all the teachers and organizers. The team considered very important to present the song **"We are Pacific"**, By Choquibtown, a famous group from Choco, with which we tried to show the culture of our region in English.

With this presentation we obtained the Third Place, and therefore a prize. A day after, divided in different levels and groups, we took a trip around the Island and we began to learn about the cultural heritage of the Islanders. That is to say that we learnt about the history, life-style, the food habits, typical music, religious and magic beliefs, dances, languages, literature, commerce and a great deal of things related to the sea and the pirates. We enjoyed the activity a lot.

During the development of the Immersion Program, we had excellent tutors and we carried out many academic and cultural activities. In the morning we received classes, emphasizing about formal aspects of English, strategies to the learning-teaching process; games and permanent active participation. The use of TICS was constant too. In the afternoon, we planned activities referred to the final project, consulting libraries, asking for information in institutions and with outstanding people from the Island. In our free time we took a walk by the beaches and also we went to shopping centers and many other important sites. Every Sunday in small or in large groups we visited the cays and the aquarium, and of course the Morgan's Cave.

During the conferences we got the chance to see the typical dances, musical groups and main local songs. The traditional lyrics of **"Take Me Back to My San Andres"** what taught by the family and by the program.

Related to the language, literature painters and educators, is it worthy to make a special mention to the biggest: Ms. Lolia Pomare, Juan Ramirez Dawkins, Hazel Robinson Abraham, Eligio Corpus, Iris Abraham, Carley Jackson, Sonia Rojas, and Mariano Gómez, etc. In my opinion, all of them have played a powerful role within the culture of this community. They have dedicated their lives and their talent to the cultural and intellectual development of the island.

There are lots of things to mention but not enough time. However, if you travel to San Andres Island don't forget:

- To visit Johnny Cay. An exotic place across from the beaches of San Andres
- To enjoy swimming in Rocky Cay and visit the aquarium
- To live the experience of the blowing hole

- To taste the delicious food of the island
- To share with the Islanders

The implications of this programme in my institution have been positive. On the one hand, I have developed more fluency when speaking the language and therefore, the students are more motivated to learn English and to speak it too. I have been implementing more oral activities than grammatical ones, and I have aimed my classes at getting more communicative opportunities.

On the other hand, I have tried to be a motivator; a monitor of my students learning process and a provider of accurate language models. I have also tried to make changes in my classes by providing different kinds of activities such as pair work or group work (learner to learner); practicing with the text (teacher to learner); having free conversations (teacher to learners / learner to learner); having pronunciation exercises (teacher to learners), mingling activities

(learner to learner), and brainstorming before writing activities, among others.

In addition to this, after coming back from the Island, I gave a report to my Director about the advantages of the programme. Then, I met my colleagues in order to share this meaningful experience, pointing out the importance of teaching English with the purpose of communicating in the language than teaching it without clear objectives. Moreover, we have understood that by doing this, our schools would gain standards of quality in teaching English using effective instructional materials and developing communicative competence in all levels.

References

Tikunoff (1983) en **Richards**, Jack C. (1990) "The Language Teaching Matrix" Cambridge University Press