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Community circles in the development of A1 – Speaking skills

Círculos comunitarios en el desarrollo de A1 – Habilidades para el
habla

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Abstract

Students in the A1 classroom are significantly immersed in the everyday performance in a captivated world with the use of technological tools, however, it seems that their routinely way of learning and the traditional teaching styles have put apart the interaction and socialization needed in order to create a good classroom learning environment based on respect, harmony, communication and freedom to express ideas that motivate them to produce skills and sub skills in the target language. Therefore, this study suggests Community Circles as a powerful source of building healthy, supportive, and strong assurance of the language production in the classroom community and it also pretends to show how their use in A1 level provokes a helpful and positive effect in students. Community Circles facilitate teachers a door to enter into the academic, social and emotional needs of their students. The current research is an experimental and explicative process under a deductive method and mixed quasi quantitative - qualitative investigation work which aims to come up with the importance of the use of Community Circles in the ESL classroom. As a result, a set of activities is proposed to rely on the use of Community Circles as a teaching strategy in order to build students' knowledge.

Keywords: circles, community, speaking, a1

Resumen

Los estudiantes del nivel A1 se encuentran significativamente inmersos en su desempeño cotidiano al interior de un mundo cautivado por el uso de herramientas tecnológicas. Sin embargo, al parecer, su rutinaria forma de aprender, sumada a los estilos tradicionales de enseñanza, han dejado de lado la interacción y socialización, elementos necesarios para crear un buen ambiente de aprendizaje dentro del aula, el mismo que debe ser basado en el respeto, la armonía, la comunicación y la libertad a fin de expresar ideas que sean motivadoras para producir habilidades y subhabilidades en la lengua que es su objeto de aprendizaje. Por lo tanto, este estudio propone el uso de los Círculos de Comunidad como una poderosa base de crecimiento saludable, solidario y fuerte dentro de la producción lingüística en la comunidad del aula, y, de la misma manera, pretende a su vez mostrar cómo su aplicación dentro del nivel A1 provoca un efecto útil y positivo en los estudiantes. Los Círculos de Comunidad facilitan a los profesores una puerta de entrada a las necesidades académicas, sociales y emocionales de sus alumnos. La presente investigación es un proceso experimental y explicativo bajo un método deductivo. Es, además, un trabajo de investigación mixto cuasi-cuantitativo - cualitativo, mismo que pretende demostrar la importancia del uso de los Círculos de Comunidad en el aula del aprendizaje del Idioma Inglés como Segunda Lengua (ESL). Como resultado, se propone un conjunto de actividades que se apoyan en el uso de los Círculos de Comunidad, así como estrategias didácticas a fin de construir el conocimiento de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: círculos, comunidad, hablar, nivel a1

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INTRODUCTION

University English Departments are always looking for new learning strategies that are related to students speaking production, which can be determined methods in the learning process. Such strategies are focused in an active and creative way to share information in the target language.

Through the years, the use of Community Circles has started to evolve from traditional indigenous people in South America to solve justice problems and to talk about philosophy principles and values. By the nineteen nineties, they were used to solve problems at schools, and nowadays, Community Circles are used as an instrument to practice speaking skills and sub skills inside English as a Second Language (ESL) classes around the world (Bail, 2019).

Community Circles in the classroom are a new tool used by ESL teachers by gathering together with learners in order to improve their language skills in terms of practicing language skills in a free, relaxing and comfortable environment. In that sense, ESL teachers need to make this tool possible in their classroom in order to acquire a significant learning process, in this case, in A1 Students at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador Sede Ambato (PUCESA).

Students in the A1 classroom worldwide are immerse in the every after day performance in a captivated world of technological tools (Andrew, 2019), it seems that their mechanized way of learning has put apart the interaction and socialization needed in order to create a good classroom learning environment based on respect, harmony, communication and freedom to express ideas that motivate them to produce skills and sub skills in the target language even though there is the use of communicative language approaches (Littlewood, 1981) focused on production, thus, at the same time, they need to cultivate a strong emotional support as being part of the English Language Learners community.

There is the necessity of a classroom environment across our country where students can be able to build a strong peer relationship to produce their second Language acquisition process by leaving apart their actual features of self non - communicative individuals and to be transformed into engaged participants in their environment, this is how the Ecuadorian government has been trying to improve communicative approaches the ESL classrooms. (Judson, 2019)

Community circles can be used in A1 classroom as team activities, current event discussions, sharing of ideas about feelings, success, plans and daily life matters that are part of the learner's life. Students are involved into a familiar environment to share their work with presentations and collaboration in many different areas of life and society. This research work attempts to describe strategies for Community Circles in A1 speaking skills at PUCESA by means of enriching students' vocabulary, fluency and production based on strategies that this procedure incorporates in the classroom. (Lewis, 2018).

The current research therefore tries to answer the following question: How do the use of Community circles foster the A1 speaking skills production in students at PUCESA?

Fundamentals

Philosophical

According to Vygotsky critical thinking must be applied in order to find the basis of a social change by means of planning, execution, evaluation, reflection and systematization in the learning process in order to inspire changes in their learning process, in this case, by identifying the parameters of A1 ESL students by means of a transformational criterion based on participative, open and flexible values (Vygotsky, 1978).

Ontological

Jacques Taminiaux mentions the ontological fundamental referencing to Heidegger stating that reality is in a constant change and transformation by means of cognitive, procedural and attitudinal capacities which matches with the learning process focused in this research study (Taminiaux, 1991).

Epistemological

Educational activities are directly related with knowledge that involves form, goals and procedures, in this case community circles help to develop this pedagogical action (Henderson et al., 2011). This fact is directly attached to the fact that every individual needs a positive and cognitive transformation in the learning process.

Axiological

Values need to be considered in the classroom development in terms of a positive change in society, it is relevant to mention dignity, responsibility and behavior, mostly in university students being part of Community Circles (McDonald, 2004).

Psychopedagogical

Piaget (Piaget and Inhelder, 2019) bases his studies in children, however, emphasizes that each individual identifies his or her own learning during the process, related to accommodation and assimilation which name is stated as constructivism, part of this research study related with Community Circles and Speaking skills.

Sociological

A good reference to talk about a sociological fundamental taken into consideration for the current research is Auguste Comte, who states that a positive attitude carries individuals to enhance life opportunities with significative learning to have a better society (Comte, 1988).

Community

The word "community" comes from the Latin "comunitas", which means "the same". (Merriam-Webster, 2020). A community can be determined by its location, needs or identity or organization.

According to Neely (Neely, 2012), the word "community" has two concepts, the descriptive concept that refers to a collection of individuals satisfying a particular description and the relational concept that refers to a set of members satisfying a particular trait. These two concepts can reach to the conclusion that a community itself is made up of different parts which meet some needs regarding activities or interests which require it to be collaborative, integrative and coordinated among all its members.

Community circles

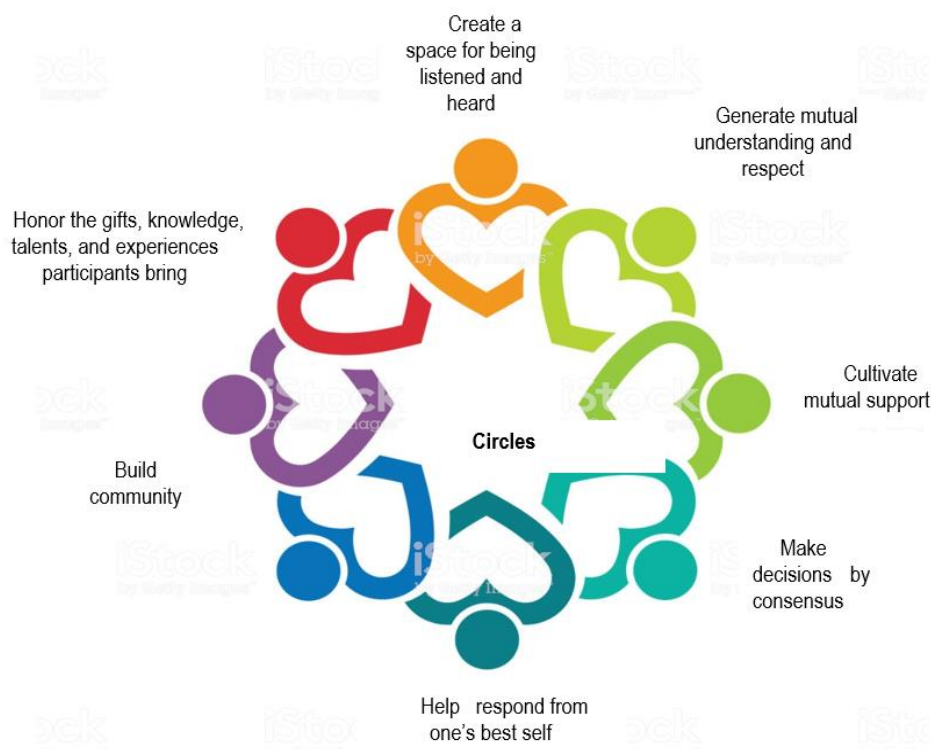
The term Community Circles goes back to centuries ago, specifically to Indigenous people in the area of North America, specifically in The United States of America and Canada, and considered a technique where many important decisions were made in terms of their participants, they are still used until the present.

Characteristics

A Community Circle is more than sitting around and sharing experiences, according to Living Justice Press, it is all about having a sense of togetherness positivism and equality, its features can be recognized in the following figure:

Image 1

Characteristics of Community Circles, (Press)



Elaborated by: Vásquez I. (2022).

Community Circles in the Classroom

As many years of teaching experience, the authors consider that sitting in a circle is a great instrument to foster communication in a direct and open way, eye contact, plus interesting and varied topics can inspire each individual to share thoughts and ideas in the classroom. It is necessary to have into consideration the use of values such as respect and love for each other as individuals. The teacher's role is the one of being a facilitator and listener creating a comforting area, the student's role, on the other hand, is to be active participants.

A good reference that needs to be taken into consideration is Clifford, who provides a list of teachers and students goals in a community Circle inside the classroom that are described in the table below:

Table 1

Community Circles school participant's goals

STUDENTS WILL	TEACHERS WILL	THE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY WILL
Learn to value and regularly use proactive, positive ways to build and maintain a peaceful classroom community. Develop and enhance positive and supportive connections with peers. Learn how to participate in circle dialogues, including the four circle guidelines. Learn to use and respect a talking piece. Learn how to use restorative questions to support conflict resolution and other types of communication. Learn to identify who is affected by misbehaviors, and how. Contribute to developing appropriate ideas for how to make things right when harms have occurred. Learn how and when to ask for a restorative circle. Learn to communicate how they are affected by given situations using affective statements and restorative questions.	Understand the core principles of restorative justice and restorative practices and how they differ from traditional or punitive approaches. Know how to use restorative practices in many situations where punitive discipline approaches might have been used in the past. Know how to introduce and lead circle dialogues. Know how to transition into and out of "circle time" and can switch roles between circle keeper and teacher effectively. Understand the principle of "connection before content" as it applies to restorative circles. Know how to sequence activities to build trust among students so they become more willing to communicate authentically. Know restorative questions and how to use them. Understand affective communication and will experience how it supports classroom discipline and community building.	Have established agreements about how to participate in a circle. Share a sense of responsibility for maintaining agreements and many members will do so proactively during circle time and at other times, including out-of-classroom time. Identify specific issues to address and will have honest, authentic discussions about these issues. Procedures will be established for calling attention to issues and conflicts and for requesting help. Procedures will be established for engaging in restorative dialogues around issues and conflicts. It will be emotionally, psychologically, and physically safe for students to share concerns about conflicts, issues, and behaviors that are affecting them. There will be high participation by students in circle dialogues, with little or no passing.

Note: Adapted from Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles (Clifford, 2020).

METHOD

The current research is an experimental and explicative process under a deductive method and qualitative quasi quantitative investigation work which aims to come up with the importance of the use of community circles in the ESL classroom. (Dudovskiy, 2011). It is, besides, based specifically on real observations and descriptions that defend the idea that Community circles foster the A1 speaking skills production in students at PUCESA.

It is quasi quantitative because it uses one item from the collection and analysis of data obtained from a mixed questionnaire applied to A1 level students of English at a Second Language at PUCESA, based on the state of the art and the objectives set and aimed at a greater understanding of the need of the use of community circles for increasing the speaking skill production. The design of the investigation was experimental, whereby the questionnaire was after the intervention phase of each student and the criteria of some teachers.

The development of the state of the art was produced by a bibliographic, audio visual and documentary together with permanent research of ideas that could help develop the process of using community circles activities in a creative way.

Moreover, the research area helped significantly in the development of the survey among A1 students at PUCESA during face to face classes and, then, later, in virtual classes as the COVID 19 pandemic period started, gathering data according to contents and activities used by teachers in order to design alternative solutions to the situation.

This research development started from the intention of emphasizing speaking development activities in community circles with an active and permanent participation of students through motivation and adapting to a closer environment and coexistent environment among A1 students at PUCESA; it is an observational experimental modality. (Paler-Calmorin, 2008)

This is an observation research modality because it does not try to change the effects in a group of students who are exposed to a particular purpose, thus, it is an experimental research because a group of students is exposed to an intervention to reach a common purpose.

According to Dawson (Dawson, 2019), this research involves an exploratory, explanatory, descriptive scope. In other words, the types of study were:

Exploratory

The authors of this study wanted to collect data to explore previous studies about the use of community circles in the classroom and to fit in the best process inquire information by means of asking specific questions to both teachers and students in order to reach a better view of their expectations by means of experiences, needs and opinions of their previous knowledge about the topic.

Descriptive

Another purpose of investigation was to label a particular fact, which involves understanding a process based on specific information by describing it and by defining aspects of the analysis and by means of keeping track of the student's performance.

Explanatory

It was remarkable to identify causes and effects of the current study by answering questions of the process and creating a theoretical setting through explanatory information. They refer to any collection of a particular group that can also be recognized as the universe, this population includes a group of individuals being part of a finite or infinite one, whereas a sample is a partial

group of individuals chosen from the complete population. Both population and sample help consequently to study and get data with mutual features and results of observations from the variables established.

The current research has a limited population, there was no calculation for the sample, consequently, the population was chosen based on 25 students of A1 level being participants of the English Department at PUCESA; and an additional number of 7 experienced teachers, which shows that the research was carried out with the entire population previously established.

Table 2

Teachers' population

Level	Men	%	Women	%	Total	%
A1 (experimental group)	1	14,29%	6	85,71%	7	100

Table 3

Students' population

Level	Men	%	Women	%	Total	%
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Note: Elaborated by: Vásquez, I. (2022).

An open questionnaire was applied to A1 students at the end of the academic term, after a process of observation starting in February and ending in June 2020, this instrument facilitated the exploratory, descriptive and explanatory study in order to fulfill the planned research Project about the uses of Community Circles in the classroom (See Annexes Section). Such an instrument was presented as evidence in the Moodle Platform by students and on e- mail by teachers This process was made in a virtual way due to the fact that by the end of the process classes changed from face to face to online due to the COVID 19 pandemic.

A total of ten questions were prepared in the instrument, the first part included the students' data and date, the second section contained five questions about the beginning, progress, and final opinions about the use of Community Circles in the classroom; the following five questions were related to the speaking process and student's personal appreciation of their own confidence production of their language acquisition.

Table 4

Variables' Questions - Teacher's questionnaires

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	DEPENDENT VARIABLE
Background knowledge	Importance of speaking
Probabilities to teach in a Community Circle	Current strategies perception
Aim of a Community Circle sharing	Speaking production improvement
Acquiring experiences	Online classes speaking performance
Expected values	Future expectations

Table 5

Variables' questions - Students' questionnaires

IND INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	DE DEPENDENT VARIABLE
Bac Background knowledge.	Bac Background.
Beg Beginning self performance.	Beg Beginning speaking performance.
A Acquisition.	Imp Improvement.
App Appreciation.	Current situation.
Rec Receptiveness.	Final Production.

RESULTS

There are some aspects that need to be highlighted considering that the main objective of this research is to develop a set of Community Circle Activities to be applied to A1 ESL students of PUCESA.

Speaking skills importance

Speaking production is a relevant aspect of the learning process at A1 levels, and, even though, some students do not have the same ability in managing the language accurately, there is always a need of creativity putting aside traditional ideas for activities in the learning process, aside from the tools teachers can have from technology and online activities, there is always a self-inspiration to motivate and improve the second language acquisition by breaking the pause of delayed students into a whole community with equal results and acceptance.

A relevant criteria of Koran (Koran, 2015) Speaking is the best way to measure language learning for students, their success of performing the language in the outside world is meaningful to develop self-confidence and consistency, which is fully based in continuous interaction in which a teacher sets the best environment to participate and students feel free to express the language in community where the best values can be shared and learned altogether in a friendly formal, informal and respectful place called the English classroom.

Teacher's role

A very natural way of communication that goes farther and beyond from projects, pair work, group work and so forth, however, a cozy place where being shy, quiet, speechless, anxious or bored is not a goal to reach. The teacher has a great responsibility at this level, to inspire learners' interaction in terms of real and unreal situations and lots of encouragement.

This research proposal consists of 12 activities inspired in the use of Community circles. Each class plan has its objectives, stages, materials, participation, sharing time and appreciation for what it has been learned. The strategies and techniques are encouraging for learner's day after day. The researchers made use of the National Geographic Learning Book Life 2 (Stephenson, 2021) to accompany their purpose due to the fact that this is the material to be used as a requirement for ESL courses at PUCESA. At the same time, the Community circle strategies and activities were completely adapted and done by the researchers in order to fulfill the main goal of the current research process.

Before the whole observation process started by the beginning of the course, students were required to permanently sit in a circle, and believe that this is home, a safe place where everyone will be a member of the family and has the right to participate constantly.

Proposal's main findings – teachers

Most teachers mentioned some topics that could be shared in a community circle, such as authenticity, traditions, debates, routines, projects, cooperation and confidence as well as the idea that a community circle classroom is a safe place to share student's relevant information, awareness of students' needs, consciousness of learning cooperatively, togetherness, empathy, and teamwork, besides other positive and new ideas.

Regarding ESP (English for Specific Purposes), when it is time to talk about confidence in speaking, mostly among a community circle, all teachers share the criteria of being a process through which students will have the opportunity to feel inspired by learning from each other, and feeling motivated or supported in order to be more participative.

Proposal's main findings – students

When students started being part of the welcoming into community circles they had a mixture of feelings, some felt nervous, not open to experience something new, insecure, surprised, happy, perfect, intrigued and a bit uncomfortable. However, after some class sessions they changed their mind about working in a community, they have learned that living in a community is not only a matter of accepting each other, but of appreciation, respect, equality, fellowship, friendship, security, punctuality, freedom and most of all being themselves in the classroom in a cozy environment.

Sharing personal stories, learning, coexisting, being independent and a better person, sharing notes and opinions, lack of discrimination and guidance. Appreciation embraces are some other positive incomes.

Regarding students' speaking performance, some students felt afraid and nervous, which demonstrates that not all students were open to this new experience with the language. On the other hand, some others felt confident but they also mentioned the attitude of the teacher to involve them in the atmosphere. Furthermore, they have gained more vocabulary based on permanent participation and pronunciation corrections which brought their ability to communicate in a very natural way.

Finally, students expressed their negative opinion about the beginning of the pandemic, which, in a way, interrupted in person's classes to virtual classes, thirteen students say that this situation had affected their speaking English production.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the investigation let us think how important is the development of speaking skills and how relevant is to find and use strategies that can really encourage students to express their thoughts and ideas. The teaching and learning process has been changing through the time. The students we used to have years ago learned in such a different way and nowadays technology has changed the way teachers teach and students learn. However, the way we communicate our ideas, feelings and thoughts when we are face to face with others will always be motivated by the level of confidence with our environment.

Based on the results from the experimental time sharing and applying the community circles strategy it can be said that the lack of communication, the inhibition to speak and dealing with the situation that not all students feel like talking in the classroom are aspects that in a great

average has improved. The effects that were evidenced during and after the community circles strategy application are students who participate more often in the conversations and debates, they felt an environment of trust and confidence as well as the freedom to speak without being judged.

The teachers' role has played an important part in the process since they need to be well prepared to deal with a variety of students' reactions while the application of community circles to encourage students to speak. It is mandatory to plan very well each session, thinking in advance all the possible reactions students would have regarding any topic. The selection of the topic will definitely set the pace of the conversation and the level of students' participation.

It is important to highlight that educational activities are directly related with knowledge that involves form, goals and procedures, in this case community circles help to develop this pedagogical action (Henderson et al., 2011). This fact is directly attached to the fact that every individual needs a positive and cognitive transformation in the learning process.

Community Circles unfold harmony, solidarity, sharing, assertiveness, familiarity, comfort, contribution, and relaxation base in a meaningful environment where feelings and voices are accepted in the classroom community itself. These features inside the classroom are focused on the building of trust and respect by giving students the opportunity to speak and listen to each other, therefore, it is important to emphasize that community circles facilitate teachers a door to enter into the academic, social and emotional needs of their students. This strategy is also used to solve some social problems that the community may face inside a classroom such as bullying or discrimination.

The use of community circles in the ESL classroom can finally be a base for critical thinking and meaningful dialogues, in the second language acquisition.

CONCLUSION

Further than researching and stating the origins, characteristics, uses and final results of using community circles in the development of A1 speaking skills, it was demonstrated, by exploration, explanation and description that using this proposal was a successful strategy among English language learners' processes together with class contents according to their level. Community circles have demonstrated that they support students' performance on a daily basis, they have the power to build self-confidence in a positive way; furthermore, it is not only a matter of building relationships and sharing personal experiences, but also creating potential results in A1 English learners' language production. Indeed, both A1 level students and teachers' contributions to develop speaking skills in the classroom created a peaceful and safe scenario appreciated by the whole community in terms of trust, respect, and harmony. Spontaneity and empathy offer, moreover, the perfect environment in community circles development by bringing individuals together in a continuous class building performance.

In this article, it was intended to offer a set of activities based on teachers and students' personal experiences, expectations and results involved in spontaneous intentions to unfold speaking skills.

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