Constructing sense of community through Community inquiry and the implementation of a negotiated syllabus[1]

Construyendo sentido de comunidad a través de la investigación comunitaria y la implementación de un programa de estudios negociado

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Abstract

The following paper describes the outcomes and insights of the first stage of an action research study aimed to explore ways in which CBP and NC strengthen sense of community and provoke actions to benefit that community is a public school located in a rural area. This work emerged from a needs analysis study in which students gave their opinions about the importance of English as a foreign language. Implementing CBP and Negotiated Syllabus as means to involve and foster students to be aware of their responsibility for the preservation of the school facilities, as well as educating the surrounding community, demonstrated the development of sense of community in the students. Throughout the use of questionnaires, surveys and journals, the outcomes revealed that students felt more motivated when they are taken into account in making curricular decisions. In addition, this study showed that a commitment from the entire academic community is possible when some academic and personal goals are established collaboratively and efforts are made to generate important changes.

Keywords: Sense of Community; Community Based Project; negotiated syllabus; needs analysis; critical pedagogy.

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Resumen

Este artículo describe los resultados y hallazgos de un estudio de investigación cuyo objetivo fue explorar cómo a través de la implementación de tres pilares: Pedagogía basada en la comunidad (CBP), Plan de estudios negociado y Sentido de comunidad se fortalece el sentido de comunidad, así como generar actitudes y acciones que beneficien a la comunidad. Este trabajo surgió de un estudio de análisis de necesidades en el que los estudiantes dieron su opinión sobre la importancia del inglés como segundo idioma. Implementar proyectos basados en la comunidad y la negociación de un plan de estudios como medios para involucrar y alentar a los estudiantes a tomar conciencia de su responsabilidad en la preservación de las instalaciones escolares, así como educar a la comunidad circundante, lo que evidencia desarrollo de sentido de comunidad de parte de los estudiantes. Mediante el uso de cuestionarios, encuestas y diarios, los resultados revelaron que los estudiantes se sintieron más motivados cuando fueron tenidos en cuenta en la toma de decisiones curriculares. Además, este estudio mostró que es posible un compromiso de parte de toda la comunidad académica cuando se establecen colaborativamente algunos objetivos académicos y personales, y se aúnan esfuerzos para generar cambios importantes.

Palabras claves: Sentido de la comunidad; Proyectos basados en la comunidad; plan de estudios negociado; análisis de las necesidades; pedagogía crítica.

Resumo

Este artigo descreve os resultados e descobertas de um estudo de pesquisa cujo objetivo foi explorar como através da implementação de três pilares: Pedagogia baseada na comunidade (CBP), Plano de estudos negociado e Sentido de comunidade fortalece o sentido de comunidade, bem como gerar atitudes e ações que beneficiem a comunidade. Este trabalho surgiu de um estudo de análise de necessidades no qual os estudantes deram a sua opinião sobre a importância do inglês como segundo idioma. Implementar projetos baseados na comunidade e a negociação de um plano de estudos como meios para envolver e animar os estudantes para tomar consciência da sua responsabilidade na preservação das instalações escolares, bem como educar a comunidade circundante, o que evidencia desenvolvimento de sentido de comunidade por parte dos estudantes. Mediante o uso de questionários, enquetes e diários, os resultados revelaram que os estudantes se sentiram mais motivados quando foram levados em consideração na tomada de decisões curriculares. Além disso, este estudo mostrou que é possível um compromisso de parte de toda a comunidade acadêmica quando se estabelecem de forma colaborativa alguns objetivos acadêmicos e pessoais, e se reúnam esforços para gerar mudanças importantes.

Palavras chaves: Sentido da comunidade; Projetos baseados na comunidade; plano de estudos negociado; análise das necessidades; pedagogia crítica

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Introduction

Over time, schools have been seen as the places where learners receive knowledge and get instructed in specific areas which will help students to acquire certain skills, attitudes and aptitudes that allow them to become participants in a competitive world (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). As a result, students have been considered as objects, containers that need to be filled with content knowledge, and teachers are those who own the knowledge and have the responsibility of transmitting it to their students (Larson, 2014). Currently, the students´ passive role has been transformed into a more active role and the goals of schooling are more concerned with the dispositions that students present and the identities they form as well as the "content" of the curriculum that they are required to achieve; thus, it is clear that the activities in which they engage cannot be focused simply on the acquisition of basic skills and knowledge. Thereby, schools should be the places in which students are apprenticed into a way of living, thinking, feeling and acting as well as the dispositions and knowledge they will need to play a part in transforming societies (Wells, 2002). Besides, students' opinions and interests have become a very important part of their learning process and they have been considered in the designing of school's syllabuses. Therefore, Community Based Pedagogy is an educational practice that has become a framework in which teachers and students can explore and work for their communities. Sharkey (2012, p.11) asserts "Community based pedagogy is an asset-based approach that not only recognizes the importance of the curriculum standards that teachers need to address in their lessons, but also emphasizes local knowledge and resources as starting points for teaching and learning". Under this theory, students and teachers work together to identify issues that affect their communities and look for alternatives that allow them to deal with them and find possible solutions to those issues.

Being aware of the importance of changing our perspectives and points of view regarding the new roles of teachers and students, and the relevance of including students' needs, expectations, and desires in the construction of a negotiated syllabus, we conducted a needs analysis in a public school to be included in the design of a curricular unit that allows to encourage students to have a voice in the decision-making process regarding their learning process. Through the application of the instruments for gathering the information (a questionnaire and interviews), we could notice that students felt their opinions were considered as they were asked how they would like to be taught. The results obtained after the application of the instruments showed that students gave special relevance to the learning of a foreign language, as they consider it is important for their future professional lives and it will give them the opportunity to interact with people from other countries. In addition, despite they do not dedicate too much time to their learning process, most of them

consider they have good and regular performance on the subject. Besides, the majority of the interviewees assert that the classes should be more dynamic, for instance they should include games and projects to be developed in group work, and that the classes should be focused on the development of the language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking), but linked to topics related to their daily lives.

The main outcomes of such analysis lead us to design a curricular proposal based on the communicative approach, through which students could express meanings that were important to them and their lives (Brown, 1995). In other words, the communicative approach permits students to use the language for a real purpose, that is, to communicate relevant ideas in regard with their context. In addition, the negotiated syllabus needs to be oriented toward the design of a layered or mixed syllabus that combines the topical with the skills-based syllabus. In this vein, the topics chosen by students were used as a starting point to define the activities students needed to follow in order to develop the different language skills. Finally, the use of the communicative approach and the set of this layered syllabus, which included students' preferences and expectations, allowed students to be more confident within the classroom, to take a more participative role, and to enhance their performance in their learning process, and finally, turned into better results regarding their knowledge acquisition.

Literature Review

Through the years, the philosophy of education has been taken a social touch in order to revolutionize education in the traditional way, advocating a view of teaching as a democratic act, rejecting the imposition of knowledge, and bringing to the classroom principles of social justice in the teaching and learning process (Giroux, 2007). The aim of this research is to transform our classrooms to awake the critical consciousness of the students in order to encourage them to become agents of change in their world through social critique and political action.

Critical Pedagogy and Negotiated syllabus

Paulo Freire's philosophy of critical pedagogy is a learner-centered approach that is focused on problem posing in which the students engage in critical dialogue. In critical pedagogy problems are posed by the learners, who determine the main content of the lesson; this is what Freire called "problem posing". Freire's problem-posing educational method includes three stages: listening, dialogue, and action. These three stages require critical thinking in the sense that involves participants´ reflections in order to stablish some

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changes in the curriculum design: In the first step, the teacher has to listen to the learners and identify their needs; then the teacher must provide some options based on the students´ needs to dialogue; the last of these steps involves praxis, which consists of an ongoing cycle of reflection and action (Larson, 2014). In this way, we can design a negotiated syllabus regarding these critical thinking steps, which are close, related to the process of designing a curriculum.

Designing a negotiated syllabus is time-consuming due to it implies not only contributions based on our experiences as teachers but also, and most important, it implies student's needs analysis. Taking into account students voices is what makes negotiated syllabuses successful due to the fact that it develops learner´s autonomy. According to Nation and Macalister (2009) "A negotiated syllabus involves the teacher and the learners working together to make decisions at many of the parts of the curriculum design process" (p.149). In this way, we give recognition to students´ voice by providing the opportunities to decide some activities and topics of their interest. It also means contents are organized and developed according to students' needs and interests (Ortiz, 2006, p.11).

Figure 1. Negotiated syllabus involves three steps: negotiating the goals, content, forms and assessment of the course; implementing these negotiated decisions; evaluating the effect of the implementation in terms of outcomes and the way the implementation was done and this would lead to a return step (Nation & Macalister, 2009, p.152-153).

On the other hand, action research involves four phases in a cycle that may become an ongoing spiral of cycles which repeat until the action researcher has achieved a satisfactory outcome and feels it is time to stop. One cycle in action research has four phases that include: planning, action, observation and reflection (Burns, 2009).

In this sense, implementing a negotiated syllabus seems to agree with action research, because both are cyclical processes that seek for continuous improvement according to the way it is implemented and evaluated. Setting a parallel between negotiated syllabus and action research, the phases that compound each cycle are related as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Parallel between Negotiated syllabus and action research.

Phases that compound each cycle	**Negotiated syllabus**	**Action research**
	Negotiation	Planning
	Implementation	Action
	Evaluation	Observation and reflection

Community Based Learning and Community Based Pedagogy

Community based learning refers to a variety of methods, programs and strategies that educators conduct to link the curricular aspects to the surrounding communities, including local institutions, scholar subjects, cultural aspects and natural environments (Abbott, 2014). This type of learning is motivated by the belief that every community has intrinsic educational assets that can be used for educators to improve students' learning experiences. According to Cooper, He, and Levin (2011) Community Based Learning is an action-oriented method to help teachers to educators learn more about other cultures, especially the home communities of their students. This pedagogical strategy not only links theory to practice, but also allows educators to immerse themselves in cultures different from theirs. In this sense, this strategy implies educators and students working together in pursuing a common goal that has a positive impact in their communities. In addition, Community-based pedagogies are practices that give important relevance to the role of the educational community members with regard to the identification of different issues that affect them, the planning of certain strategies and actions to deal with such issues, and the execution of a resulting plan in order to intervene the identified issues. Besides, it is an asset-based approach that not only recognizes the importance of the curriculum standards that teachers need to address in their lessons, but also it emphasizes local knowledge and resources as starting points for teaching and learning (Sharkey & Clavijo, 2016). In other words, community-based pedagogies allow teachers and students to be more aware of their social responsibility regarding the different issues that affect in a certain way their communities, and make them active participants in the problem-solving process of those issues.

With the implementation of community based learning and community based pedagogies we seek to engage and empower students in issues that affect

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their community and use those issues to contribute in their learning process. Finally, it is also necessary the involvement of the surrounding community as an integral part of the educational institution in order to make them guarantors of the preservation of the school facilities.

Sense of community and sense of belonging

According to Rovai (2002, p.322) defines sense of community as the feeling of belonging that members have, a sensation that they are important to one another and to the group, that they have duties and obligations to each other and specially to the school, and the expectations that members have in common and turns out that educational needs will be met through their commitment to shared learning goals. This definition has four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections.

According to McMillan (1996) these four elements and attributes are triggered once there is a threat in the community; for example, the school community is threatened by the damage that people from the town are doing to the school facilities. In the sense that we can empower our students to have sense of community towards their school, they will feel the necessity to take actions to protect it and seek for possible solutions to the problems they are having at school. Moreover, Fandiño-Parra, Y. J., Bermúdez-Jiménez, J. R., & Lugo-Vásquez, V. E. (2012) assert that teachers, students and also parents need to propose alternatives to promote the construction and consolidation of new identities, relationships and collective practices in and outside the classrooms and the institution itself, which leads to the construction of the sense of community.

Additionally, Hall (2014) refers to sense of belonging as a "human need", just like the need for food and shelter. A sense of belonging to a greater community such as the school improves people's motivation and engagement.

Methodology

This study was conducted at a public school in Planadas Tolima, during the second half of the academic year 2017. The municipality is located in the south of the department of Tolima, in the foothills of Cordillera Central, branch of the Colombian Andes. It is located eight hours by car from Ibagué. The municipality has 36,000 inhabitants, of which 11,000 live in the urban area. 33% are children and 21% are adolescents; regarding the educational level, coverage in primary education was 100%, while in secondary education it reached 76% according to 2014 statistics (Caracol Radio, 2016).

This institution hosts a great number of students which included our participants who were fifteen students from 10th and 11th grade who attended English class three hours per week. The students' ages ranged between 14 to 18 years old. Their English proficiency is limited due to the lessons they had attended over previous years had been taught by teachers that did not manage the language. In addition, it has been known that the majority of students from public schools have a low English level in relation to private schools due to the superiority of private over public schools regarding quality of education (Sanchez Jabba, 2013). For that reason, action research came up with the desire to improve students learning of a foreign language through Community Based Projects. We also believe that action research combined with Community Based Projects contributes to the engagement of students in collaborative relationships, opening new 'communicative spaces' in which dialogue and development can flourish, and target language can be used in a meaningful way, seeking to address issues of significance concerning the flourishing of the students, their communities, and the wider ecology in which we participate. In addition, action research cannot be predetermined but changes and develops as those engaged (teachers, students and local community) deepen their understanding of the issues that concern them and develop their capacity as co-inquirers both individually and collectively (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 4).

Furthermore, the implementation of a negotiated syllabus allows students to take an active and participative role within the planning process as they act as contributors by giving their ideas and suggesting the way they would like to be taught. Davies (2006) suggests the use of questionnaires to gather students´ opinions on what kind of activities and topics should be taken into account for the design of a negotiated syllabus; they are relatively easy to implement and students feel that their opinions have been considered and put into action. As a result, their level of commitment has improved and they have become more aware of their learning process in order to achieve the stated objectives.

Pedagogical Design

The pedagogical design involves the different stages and activities that were considered important to achieve the goals of this study. A first stage consisted in the application of a questionnaire, in which students chose responses to questions related to their interest about the language, its level of importance for them, aspects to be included in English class. In the second stage, we designed a proposal which included different topics to be worked on class, the students' participation was a key factor in the selection of the topics they wanted to learn; the teacher presented a table which contained suggested topics, skills to be developed, and activities as shown in Table 2.

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Table 2. Suggested topics, skills to be developed and activities for the negotiated curriculum.

TOPICS	SKILL	ACTIVITIES
The environment	- Reading: Matching - Writing: Copying - Speaking: Conversation - Listening: For the main ideas	- Photos session - Brochure - Conversation - Song - Game - Role play - Poster
Fears and phobias	- Reading: Predicting - Writing: A personal paragraph - Speaking: Word games - Listening: for the main ideas	- Describe your phobia (s) - Game - Poster - Conversation - Video
Inventions	- Reading: Some history - Writing: An innovative invention - Speaking: Describing an	- Talk about the most important inventions in the world - Poster

Afterwards, the students made some suggestions about how those topics should be carried out and they gave several ideas for the activities that each topic had to include in order to have a more dynamic class. A third stage was focused on the design of a curricular proposal in which the opinions and suggestions of the students were considered and included, also the proposal had to be aligned to the national standards and the basic learning rights. At this point, the evaluation was done as a formative process, implementing Proactive Classroom Management strategies in which the teacher facilitated learning and focused on students´ achievements and development of academic skills (Shecter, 2010). In addition, the class included teacher´s observation in order to make the necessary adjustments to guarantee the accomplishment of the final goal of the proposal. Consequently, at the end of the subunits it was established the procedure in which the intervention of students was reflected and it served as a description of how the unit had to be addressed. This procedure was used as a way to evidence the high role of participation that students had to develop within the proposal, as well as it allowed us to identify the key factors that had to be evaluated.

Finally, a fourth stage corresponded to the implementation of the proposal in which the teacher and the students worked together to set-up the different activities and the development of the skills contained in the proposal through the selected topics by students as vehicles to achieve the learning goals. As mentioned in the previous stage, the evaluation was done through observation to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of the curricular unit, thereby adjusting those issues that required any modification.

According to Macalister & Nation (2013, p.127) "the evaluation looks for strengths and weaknesses but it is naturally the weaknesses that cause concern" which means that we had to pay more attention to treat those weaknesses that students presented from the evaluation. Thus, the evaluation for this curricular unit was focused on identifying the quality of learning and teaching, the quality of the curricular unit, and the students-teacher's satisfaction (Nation & Macalister, 2009). The quality of learning was done through class-observation and interviews to students. Regarding the class-observation we used a rubric to measure the students´ weaknesses and strengths in order to give more assertive feedback to them and also to register the advances they achieved during the implementation of the project. On the other hand, interviews to students were done in order to listen to their opinions about their feelings and perceptions about the curricular unit implementation.

Findings

In this section, we present the findings and discussion of the information collected during the application of Community Based Pedagogy and negotiated curriculum in our English class. Those findings can be pooled in three main aspects: Students' raising awareness, taking action by students and the community, and students' language improvement. A first aspect to be analyzed has to do with the students' awareness. Since they were involved in Community-based pedagogies and their opinions and thoughts were included in the course design, their perception and feelings about the purpose of education changed significantly. They began to see their neighborhoods as the place in where they could embed the knowledge they received in their classes with different aspects and issues of their communities. For instance, during the mapping of the community, most of the students found interesting the fact that they could use English as a tool to express their feelings about the different issues that affected their community. Besides, they started to be conscious of how the level of effects of those issues swayed their communities and they posed possible alternatives in pursuit of solutions for those issues. An aspect to analyze during this stage has to do with a growing willingness of most of the students on changing their minds about the way the class was directed as shown in *Figure 2* and *Figure 3*. They understood that the course contents can

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be acquired using a non-traditional method and the issues in their community can be used as an alternative manner to address those contents.

Figure 2. Statistics from the needs analysis, where the majority of the students expressed their learning preferences.
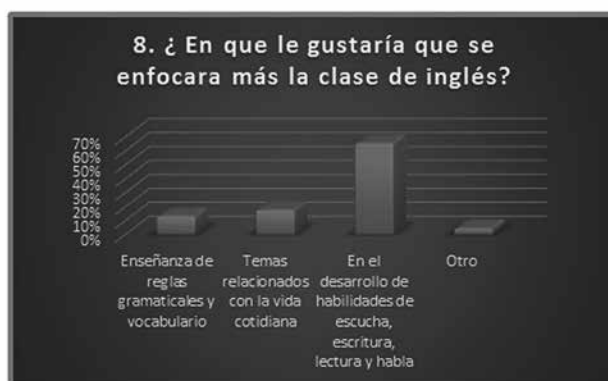

Figure 3. Statistics from the needs analysis survey, where students expressed that they wanted their English class to be more focused on developing language skills.

The main outcomes of such statistical analysis lead us to design a curricular proposal based on the communicative approach, through which students can express meanings that are important to them and their lives (Brown, 1995). In other words, the communicative approach allows students to use the language for a real purpose, that is, to communicate relevant ideas in regard with their context. In addition, the negotiated syllabus was oriented toward the design of a layered or mixed syllabus that combined the topics with the skills-based syllabus as shown in Table 2.

Table 3. Curricular unit

Thematic Focus	week	Lesson tittles	Communicative competence	Skill/Sub-skill	Resources	Evaluation
The environment	1-2	**Environmental problems** - Erosion - Deforestation - Carbon dioxide emissions - Air pollution - Waste management	- Expressing rejection/opinions/ regret - Describing places	**- Reading** Predicting, skimming **- Speaking** Responding to visual clues, problem solving **- Writing** Describing a picture **- Listening** Dictation	- Videos - Related reading - Paper and pen - Images	- Posters
	Procedure: During the first 20 minutes, students will see a video about the main environmental problems in Colombia. Later, students will go around the school and they will map the environmental issues of its surroundings. After that, students will use those pictures to make a brief description about their findings and in groups they will set an action plan to counteract each issue. At the end of the first two weeks, they should present their proposals to their partners and socialize them in other classrooms.					

In this vein, the topics chosen by students were used as a starting point to define the activities students´ need to follow in order to develop the different language skills. Finally, the use of the communicative approach and the set of this layered syllabus, which included students' preferences and expectations, allowed students to be more confident within the classroom, to take a more participatory role in different aspects of their daily educational process, and to enhance their performance in their learning process, which might turn into better results regarding their acquisition of a foreign language.

A second aspect is related to students' taking actions. After having focused on one of the issues that were strongly affecting their community, in this case the waste disposal, students began to take actions inside the school by themselves. As a result, one of the first activities proposed by students was to carry out some cleanup days. Before, some students were chosen to be the leaders of that activity and those leaders assigned specific roles to each member of the class. For instance, some groups of students were in charge of organizing groups of people to do the cleaning in a specific area of the school. Other activities included garbage collection, the washing of reservoir tanks, the embellishment of green zones, and the washing and cleaning of walls and floors. In addition, another group of students sent letters to the mayor in which they demanded him to allocate the resources required to enclose the school facilities due to the school's fences were broken and there were security and health problems that affected the normal activities of the institution as it is shown in *Figure 4*.

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Unfortunately, they did not get any written response to their request, despite they asked for it many times. A final group of students went around the school and they were in charge of going door-by-door to explain to the surrounding community how their inadequate waste disposal was affecting their school facilities and their health. For us, it was exciting to see the level of engagement that most of the students showed during the development of the different tasks and how they were internalizing some of the premises of Community-Based Pedagogies to build a certain grade of sense of community as shown in *Figure 5*.

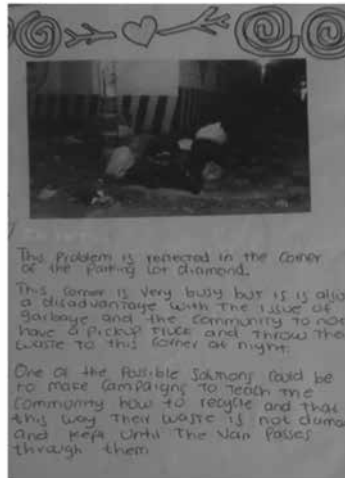*Figure 4.* Proposal sent to Planadas Mayor

Figure 5. Students' mapping their community

A final aspect to be analyzed is related to students' language improvement. Accordingly, through the development of different artifacts and the use of the language in different scenarios, such as presentations, speeches, and controlled practices, we could notice that the level of effectiveness of implementing negotiated syllabus through community based projects was beyond the expected results due to the fact that most of the students showed a notorious improvement in the use of English to communicate ideas and also to relate that language in a meaningful way in the sense that it was connected to their realities and their community. Community Based Pedagogy and Negotiated curriculum also served us as mediators for taking actions to solve a community problem and at the same time to strengthen the use of English to communicate with others instead of seeing it as an isolated subject as shown in *Figure 6*.

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Figure 6. Students presentations about environmental concerns to the whole school.

Conclusions

Firstly, we have noticed the importance to consider the students´ voice at any moment of their learning process, starting from the syllabus and the planning of activities as well. As they become direct participants of their educational process, they need to be directly involved in the decision making, due to the fact that their opinions and beliefs are crucial in the construction of meaningful learning of English as a foreign language and consequently contribute to the improvement in classroom environment and their achievements in the class. In this specific case, we could notice in our students that involving them in the decision-making regarding their learning process, to the point they became more participative and engaged towards the English class.

Secondly, the proposal designing is a cumbersome and a time-consuming process that requires to consider many of the aspects of the curriculum development and to predict its possible outcomes. Nevertheless, it has to be done because it surely helps not only to teachers, but also to students to be more aware of the importance of considering their conceptions, thoughts, beliefs, expectations and experiences, in order to enhance the classroom interactions, classroom environment, and finally the students' performance in class.

Thirdly, we believe there is a quite important relationship between the theory and the practice in terms of students' needs, students' inclusion, negotiated syllabus, evaluation, student-centered classroom, new conception of learners and teacher, among others. As a result, this theory was used as the base of the proposal and a point of departure for the design of new tools, which includes students' expectations and desires, in other words, a syllabus for inclusiveness.

Finally, the implementation of a curricular unit based on the communicative approach that included students' preferences and expectations, allowed students to improve their confidence in using English to communicate ideas due to the fact that they used the language for real purposes, also their participation in their learning process increased in the way that they were more engaged with every activity proposed in the curricular unit, and finally, they obtained better results regarding their language use, fluency and mistakes awareness.

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