

# Incorporating Values into the English Classroom

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This paper intends to report a study in which the teacher illustrates the way to incorporate values into the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class. It highlights the important role teachers play in the education of new generations nowadays. It states that language forms can be used to contribute to the fostering of values in a given society when they are taught in a learner-centered curriculum approach as well as with a cross-curriculum view. Examples of the activities teachers can carry out to achieve this goal are taken from the experience that the author has had in her teaching in public schools.

*Key words:* Values, EFL class, learner-centered curriculum, cross-curriculum

Este artículo reporta un estudio en el que la autora ilustra la manera como los valores se pueden incorporar en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera. En él se enfatiza el rol tan importante que actualmente juegan los maestros en la educación de las nuevas generaciones. El artículo establece que las formas lingüísticas pueden usarse para contribuir al fortalecimiento de valores en una sociedad cuando se enseñan con un enfoque centrado en el alumno al igual que con una visión transversal de la clase. Se presentan ejemplos de las actividades que los docentes pueden llevar a cabo para lograr este objetivo con base en la experiencia que la autora ha tenido en su trabajo en colegios públicos.

*Palabras clave:* Valores, clase de inglés como lengua extranjera, currículo centrado en el alumno, transversalización curricular

## Introduction

In the new trends in education, the role of the teacher “has become more one of facilitator than teacher, which requires a completely different set of tactics in the classroom” (Emery, 1999). As the author proposes, teachers as facilitators of learning need to create the right atmosphere, observe the students’ responses, and, consequently, respond to their needs in an appropriate manner, with a clear linguistic focus, and keeping in mind that there are always attitudes and values to promote among the learners by means of the language taught.

After some decades fighting traditional practices in the classroom which emphasized grammar and memorization, the teaching and learning of English in Colombia have progressively changed to a more relaxed atmosphere in which both teachers and students find a real reason to get in touch with a foreign language (Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN], 2004). But after this long struggle against language-related issues, new concerns arose from what a class is expected to provide the learners with, no matter the subject, which led the Ministry of Education to promote cross-curriculum policies. The examination of these issues dates back to 1999 when the curriculum guidelines stated criteria for the teaching of foreign languages (1999) and, as a national policy, the cross-curriculum trend has been fostered by various proposals in other subject areas such as citizenship competencies (2004). In response to those policies in a society going through a serious axiological crisis, the English class should be another means to reinforce the values students need to become better citizens. This particular concern motivated me to look at my own classroom and try to find a way to teach my students language and values at the same time.

In my experience as a public school teacher, I have noticed how the students' behavior and attitudes have changed, and each day teachers struggle to keep their attention and interest in the learning process. This concern was the starting point of my research project in the Master's program in English Didactics at Caldas University, *The Value of Respect on the Basis of Cooperative Learning* (Ramírez, 2004), with which I got more convinced that another important role of my classes was the fostering of values to help my students live together in peace and strengthen their self-esteem. After conducting my research, I began reflecting on the way I had been working and realized that I had been putting into practice simple but powerful lessons to teach English and promote values at the same time. I decided, then, to systematize some of my teaching strategies in order to share them with my colleagues. The outline of the teaching proposal this article is about will be presented and explained in further sections.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The learner-centered curriculum proposed by David Nunan (2003) provides teachers with the theoretical and practical principles they need to make their syllabus interesting for their learners, adapting it to current trends of language teaching and to educational policies. The process of building up a curriculum, a syllabus, or a lesson

plan includes different components that combine educational, cultural, and linguistic goals; this process goes from needs analysis to evaluation, including goal identification, objective setting, content selection, learning activities (task selection) and materials and resources selection; it also needs to take into account interaction in the classroom (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, as cited in Tsui, 1995) and how students are to be involved in the use of the foreign language for communication purposes. The needs analysis stage is fundamental for the success of any teaching attempt because students are the best source of information for teachers to build the upcoming actions that lead to learning. Nunan (1989) clearly differentiates traditional and communicative approaches in language teaching and states that lesson planning should focus on communication, and the attitude toward errors should consider partially correct or incomplete utterances as such and not as wrong performances. The same author (1989, p. 130) refers to the integrated language lesson as a “way of incorporating a range of desirable characteristics into a communicative lesson format” which implies principles (Brown, 1994) of authenticity, task continuity, real-world focus, language focus, learning focus, language practice and problem solving, as well as affective factors having influence on the learning process (Arnold, 1999); this frame ratifies the importance of considering the language focus of a class which gives the students the opportunity of benefiting “from a systematic exposure to the language system” (1989, p. 130) with which they are enabled to identify patterns they can use to express their views of the world and their values (Biehler & Snowman, 1982).

## **Values and Cross-Curriculum Policies in the Colombian Educational System**

In recent years, due to the high levels of violence in Colombian society, the Ministry of Education started a national program intended to promote citizenship competency among young learners; the national standards, *Estándares Básicos en Competencias Ciudadanas* (MEN, 2004), state that “to be a citizen is to respect everybody else’s rights” (p. 152) and this statement became one of the most important guidelines in the whole educational system. Other premises in the same document consider the importance of social and state rules, and the recognition of other people’s rights as the basis of peaceful living together; in other words, “the relationship among all members of a society with the State, constitutional and human rights, and citizen behavior in public life are fundamental” (p. 150).

To achieve these standards, schools are expected to promote learning experiences in which the students can grow as persons with values and abilities to interact with others (Carreras et al., 1997); as a matter of fact, the MEN claims that it is necessary to change “the traditional education in citizenship and values in which the transmission of knowledge was privileged, into an educational process in which the learners develop emotional, cognitive, and communicative competencies.” (2004, p. 154). To work on such integrative approach, it is necessary to work on values, not in the traditional way, but teaching the learners how to reflect on their own views of the world in order to resolve potential conflicts. In this matter, the MEN also states that “in the real world, decision-making involves more than one value, various values and factors that might be in conflict; for example, emotional ones [...] it is important that schools provide opportunities for students to practice situations in which various values conflict (moral dilemmas) so that they develop the necessary competencies to resolve those dilemmas responsibly.” (2004, p. 159).

In this view of education, the teaching of values is not the responsibility of ethics, social science or philosophy teachers any more (Isaacs, 1974; Mora, 1995), because they are built in permanent social interaction; as part of the teaching of citizenship competency, the MEN also states that “every daily life situation is an opportunity to educate in citizenship [...] in every subject area, activities, reflections and enriching discussions can be promoted” (2004, p. 163) and values are therefore implied.

Suarez (2002, p. 5) suggests some principles and guidelines to be taken into account when dealing with values, defining those as core beliefs, thoughts, judgements that guide or motivate people’s actions and attitudes; he proposes the following:

- To give the learners opportunities to express their opinions without fears or hypocrisy.
- To promote awareness in each daily life act.
- To be open-minded to varied or different points of view.
- To be coherent in values and actions.
- To be reflective in the analysis of family, school, and society issues.
- To be committed to your society and yourself.

## **Values in the Language Class**

Both young learners and adults face problems and decisions in everyday life; “students ponder over what and how to think, believe, behave. So often what

goes on in the classroom is irrelevant and remote from the real things that are going on in students' lives" (Simon, Howe & Kirschenbaum, 1995). This states a reason why teachers need to find the way to connect their classes to their students' interests; they expect a "classroom atmosphere of openness, honesty, acceptance and respect. If students feel that something they say about their beliefs and behavior is going to be ridiculed by their peers or frowned upon by the teacher, they will not want to share their thoughts and feelings about values issues" (p. 25). This statement implies that the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator who leads the students to the construction of that atmosphere by means of teaching and learning strategies that make them feel that the class is about them. At this point, values arise as a key component in class preparation, since they state the way people think, behave, and react in social interaction as stated by Simon, Howe & Kirschenbaum (1995). Among the most important values teachers are expected to promote in their classes are respect, honesty, love, and self-esteem.

**Respect:** According to the Association for Living Values Education International (ALIVE, 2008), "respect is an acknowledgment of the inherent worth and innate rights of the individual and the collective"; this acknowledgment must be not only taught but modeled and encouraged by adults in daily actions, including classroom actions and activities.

**Honesty:** "...is the awareness of what is right and appropriate in one's role, one's behavior, and one relationship. With honesty, there is no hypocrisy or artificiality which creates confusion and mistrust in the minds and lives of others" (ALIVE, 2008); by promoting honesty, teachers help learners be themselves and open their minds to others.

**Love:** ALIVE (2008) also states that love is the "principle which creates and sustains human relations with dignity and depth [...] Love is the bedrock for the belief in equality of spirit and personhood"; it is quite necessary to develop, within a teaching proposal, the strategies to raise awareness of the importance of this value in living together.

**Self-esteem:** Refers to the way people see themselves (Klare, 1989) and it "affects every possible aspect of behavior, motivation, ability to learn, capacity to grow and change, choice of friends, mates, and careers" (McGough, 1976); this value of the self most of the time determines the way in which learners approach the class and how they respond to the input provided by the teacher and peers.

## Research Questions

How can an EFL teaching proposal have an influence on the students' practice of values?

What is the role of the EFL teacher in a cross-curriculum educational system?

## Research Design

This study was conducted inside the case study approach. Journals, observations, and student artifacts were used to determine the impact of a teaching proposal intended to foster social values in the English class. The information was collected in regular English classes (average 35 students per class) taught in a public school in Manizales at the middle school level for three years. The same activities were conducted with sixth and seventh graders in each school year. The observations were conducted by student-teachers from Caldas University and a colleague in the same school according to the data collection procedures suggested by Quintero et al. (2003). While classes were taught, the teacher completed her own Journal on a weekly basis. Similarly, samples of the students' artifacts were collected in order to analyze the way in which the influence of the proposal was reflected in the students' language production and attitudes; the information was submitted to data analysis by means of Bernard and Ryan's (2003), Freeman's (1998) and Spradley's (1980) *a priori* approach and pawing technique for data codification. The following three main categories were pre-stated in response to the research questions: student self-awareness, student value-awareness, and teacher role. The three categories were looked at when the students performed activities intended to foster the values of respect, love, honesty, self-esteem, self-concept, and sense of belonging. Consent forms were signed by parents in which they were informed about the research study and the use of the class artifacts to report its results; in this report, names of students and the school are protected according to research code of ethics.

## Context and Participants

This study was conducted in a public school in Manizales. The population of the study consisted of sixth and seventh graders whose ages ranged from 10 to 14 years old. Throughout the three years in which the study took place, the school went through various educational policy changes such as teacher transfers, budget

cuts, and curriculum adjustments, among which the teaching of English was supposedly fostered with an increase of a weekly class-hour in grades six, seven, and eight, becoming, thus, a three-period-a-week subject. The school serves its surrounding low-class neighborhoods, and most of the students belong to one-parent families with very low academic backgrounds. The school currently has an Educational Project (PEI – *Proyecto Educativo Institucional*) oriented toward environmental awareness and values. Although the school has a very well-structured handbook, most of the disciplinary problems among the students deal with a lack of respect and low self-esteem, among others (Liceo Cultural Eugenio Pacelli, 2004; Ramirez, 2004).

## Teaching Proposal

The teaching proposal presented in this study deals with the fostering of values in the English class. It is framed as follows in a three-stage lesson planning design: first, stating the learners' needs; second, connecting the language to the learners' experiences; finally, conducting class activities that help foster values according to students' needs.

### *Stage 1. State the Students' Needs*

According to Graves (1996), every time teachers start a course they are expected to state the students' expectations and needs regarding the target language; of course, they also need to state their necessities in terms of social interaction and personal growth. At this stage, students are asked about the kinds of things they are willing to share with the class and also the ones they prefer to keep for themselves. This way, teachers can plan the activities in such a way that nobody's susceptibility is hurt. Needs analysis may be conducted through informal talks, questionnaires, interviews, surveys, or any other kind of instrument of data collection that better fits the class (1996). The Appendix presents a short survey administered on a yearly basis in this study. As part of teaching, this research procedure implies a real interest on the part of the teacher to know what the students want or like about the English class in order to meet their expectations and achieve their pedagogical goals and standards. This initial stage of a course or a lesson is intended to establish negotiations between teacher and students in relation to the learning process and it should consider activities, tasks, materials, evaluation, content, and time, among other important aspects.

### ***Stage 2. Match Language Contents and Students' Context and Experiences***

Considering the LCC principles, the stated standards for the teaching of English (MEN, 2006), and in order to make students feel important, teachers are to focus the lesson on students as the center of the process, so they need to relate every single language form or function to their experiences, expectations and feelings. This means to have them use the target language to express what they think, feel, or expect about the topics brought to the class. For example, when working on past time language functions, you can ask students to share experiences from their childhood, school life, and so on, and reflect on the good things they did and those they would like to forget.

### ***Stage 3. Encourage Interaction among Students***

Once students have put their own lives into the frame of the language content of the lesson, teachers are to encourage them to share their experiences with the class placing emphasis on the values those experiences might reflect. At this stage, any strategy is welcome if it fits the preferred grouping: peer work or group work (Gómez, 2003); what is important is the way students are involved in a harmonic sharing of personal views of the world (Williams & Burden, 1997).

## **Activities that Have Worked in the Fostering of Values**

The activities presented below correspond to the most frequent and successful activities in the public school where this study was conducted. They were included in the book *Meaningful activities to elicit language production in the EFL classroom* (Ramírez, Umaña, & Zuluaga, 2006) after having proved effective.

### **ACTIVITY 1: WORKING WITH MEMORIES**

Related values: Respect, love, honesty.

The following activity illustrates the way students can be encouraged to recall their memories related to the people they love, like, or admire, having, thus, the opportunity and the need to express themselves in specific linguistic forms:

1. Form groups of three people and ask them to relate to their mates the situation in which they met their boyfriends/ girlfriends/ best friends, etc. Tell them to provide details of the circumstances under which things happened.
2. Give students a copy of the following chart in order for them to fill in the information they get from the group:

Where did you meet?

Name	When/where	What happened	How did you feel? Why?

3. After group work and discussion, volunteers tell the class some of the stories they heard from their classmates, emphasizing why the person is important for them and what they felt or learned from their experiences in terms of values.

### ACTIVITY 2: MY CHILDHOOD

Related values: Respect, love, family union, sense of belonging

This activity promotes creativity and imagination among the students. Have them use different colors and encourage them to come up with any kind of picture.

1. Give the students a card with the following on it:

○	—	□
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2. *Ask the students to complete the drawing in each box with a picture representing things they remember from their childhood.*
3. *Ask the students to meet in groups of 2 or 3 and share their memories from childhood based on the pictures they drew.*
4. *In turns, choose students at random and have them explain to the class their or somebody else's pictures and the stories behind them with special emphasis on what they learned about life in terms of values.*

### ACTIVITY 3: DESCRIBING MYSELF

Related values: Respect, self-esteem, self-concept

1. *Have the students reflect on their qualities.*
2. *Give some prompts to make them consider their qualities in relation to the values promoted in the school.*
3. *Tell them to write and talk about themselves with the aid of a picture.*

## Findings of the Study

### 1. Students' Self Awareness

The class activities observed during this study reported high self-awareness among the students. Most of them were aware of what they were like and were willing to talk about their qualities and weaknesses with the class. According to the observation schedules completed by the student-teachers, there was a general tendency to talk about themselves in terms of what their family and teachers thought about them. It was very common to find students talking about “my mom says that...”, “my teacher says that...” The students also talked about themselves in relation to family and school, reflecting, thus, a strong sense of belonging. Photo 1 shows a student's mini-poster illustrating her qualities in a sixth grade class.

The students' confidence and self-esteem grew when they saw their language production and shared it with the rest of the class or school, as they did with the *Love and Friendship Contest* among sixth graders in 2006. Students certainly felt proud of themselves and were more motivated to participate. Photo 2 shows what they wrote.

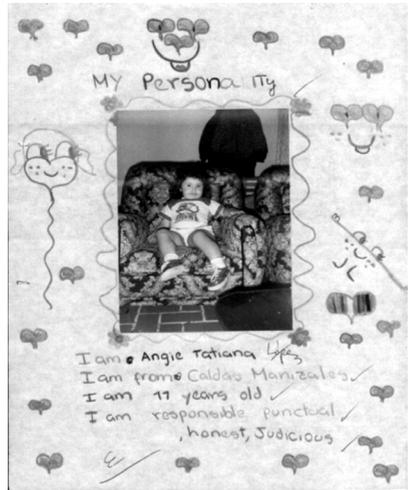


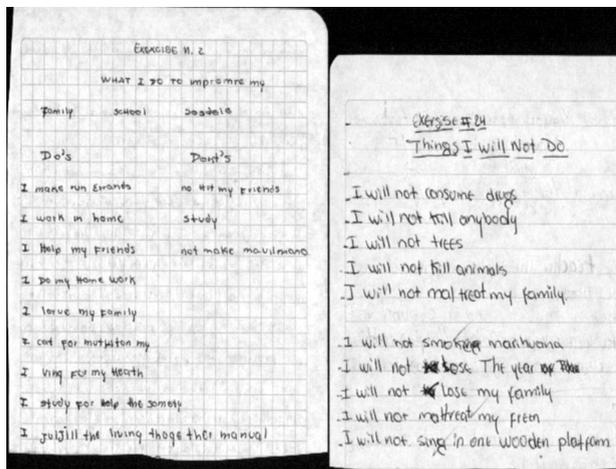
Photo 1. A sixth grade talks about herself and her values in the EFL class.



Photo 2. Students' ideas about their values in a language contest.

## 2. Students' Values Awareness

This study also reported that the students at the middle school level were aware of and knew very well the values that both the family and school promoted. There was a clear understanding of what was good and what was bad, and students were able to distinguish the things that society expects from them in terms of values. The example below shows what a student wrote when the class was asked to refer to their future:



**Photo 3.** Students' artifacts reflect their views of the world in terms of values.

The students reported an awareness of what parents and teachers teach them. Again, their linguistic production showed how they have effectively been given clear concepts of positive and negative things in their social context. Some examples of their linguistic production are taken from the artifact above in which the student expresses his concern about the family, nature, and health:

- I will not maltreat my family*
- I will not kill animals*
- I will not consume drugs*

Students reported knowing what their role in the family and society was; they were clear about the things people around expected from them. These are some of their statements when working with expressions to talk in the present tense:

- I help my friends*
- I love my family*
- I do not hurt my friends*

### 3. The Role of the Teacher

In this study the role of the teacher went beyond the teaching of a foreign language. It was found that every activity in which the students' participation or

language production was expected demanded a strong emphasis on value-related issues on the part of the teacher. The role of facilitator, guide or motivator (Graves, 1996) demanded extra efforts in finding a way to get students to see the importance of reflecting on themselves as human beings to give sense to what they do in the classroom. That reflection on values was permanent in the teaching learning process. Values were referred to implicitly or explicitly; they were always there.

## Conclusions

Our society faces serious social problems which require some kind of intervention from all the agents in the educational system; foreign language teachers as facilitators can easily promote values in their classrooms on the basis of a learner-centered curriculum in which students can negotiate the components of the teaching learning process with value-oriented lesson plans in which they can interact with others in peace. Teachers are expected to design their lessons in a systematic way so that they know exactly what they need to do to meet the students' needs.

Teaching a subject matter in an isolated way is not effective any more; teachers need to incorporate other perspectives into their syllabuses so that they can meet students' needs, expectations, and interests. Relating the content of the English class to values contributes considerably to the construction of a better society, since it makes students aware of their responsibilities as members of a community that expects from them attitudes and behaviors that comply with stated social rules. It is the teachers' responsibility to make connections between their classroom and the world in general and their students in particular in order to enable learners to succeed in their academic and personal growth.

A cross-curriculum approach to the teaching of foreign languages helps teachers get closer to the students in terms of interests; this is very important in the public sector where social and family crises call for a value-oriented education that gives the learners a more positive and motivating perspective of the classroom. Teachers are to share responsibilities in the teaching of values which are part of everyday life and adapt their classes to what students need in order to be good citizens.

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## **Appendix:** **Survey Used to Conduct Needs Analysis** **at the Beginning of Each School Year<sup>1</sup>**

Apreciado estudiante:

Cordialmente te solicito responder las siguientes preguntas de una manera sincera y concreta. La información recolectada tiene propósitos estrictamente investigativos que buscan el mejoramiento continuo del proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje y es completamente confidencial.

1. En tu experiencia como estudiante de inglés, ¿cual habilidad te ha presentado mayores retos?  
Lectura \_\_\_\_ Escritura \_\_\_\_ Habla \_\_\_\_ Escucha \_\_\_\_  
Por qué?
2. Como estudiante, ¿cuáles son las estrategias que mas utilizas para el aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera? ¿Por qué?
3. ¿Cuáles son las actividades que prefieres realizar en la clase de inglés? ¿Por qué?

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1 Survey is administered in Spanish in order to guarantee comprehension.