# What do children say about peace?
## Integrating peace and EFL teaching in the classroom

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## Abstract

The socio-cultural realities in Colombia have generated different proposals and projects in several fields –education, health, etc. - all of them seeking the wellbeing of the population.  In the case of the education field, two projects are taken in this paper as the core of the proposal whose research question is *what is the role of teaching EFL to children in the implementation of a national project based on peace?* The first one, the *English National Program 2015-2025: Colombia very well!* and the second *The Chair of Peace[1]*. Unfortunately, these two projects are being assumed in isolation in spite of sharing issues posted in the main objective they pursue. Through a qualitative research approach and an ethnographic methodology, this pedagogical initiative seeks to integrate those two projects in the classroom and to understand children as active participants in this process by promoting a creative writing focus. Thus, in the first stage of this work some EFL activities were developed with children from last year of elementary (9-11 year-age) in five cities of Colombia (Bogotá, Cali, Popayán, Pasto and Timaná); those activities gave insights about children's voice in regard to peace and they also allowed to work with children´s English proficiency level as well. The second stage in the process consists of promoting students reflection on peace through a *Story Contest* in which they will have the opportunity to tell and share their thoughts, feelings, ideas, etc. about peace; at the same time that they will work on their writing skill in an upper level. Follow–up stages of the instructional and research design are already planned and in a process of development.


**Key words:** *English National Program*: 2015-2025 *Colombia very well,* The Chair of Peace, children's voice

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[1] Original text in Spanish: *La Cátedra de la Paz* (Ley 1732 del 1 de septiembre de 2014)

## Introduction

English teachers in Colombia are doing their best at providing the students with meaningful and innovative options to learn this foreign language. This is precisely the main pedagogical objective this proposal pursues based on the research question *what is the role of teaching EFL²* *to children in the implementation of a national project based on peace?* This question arises from the educational need to integrate two national projects that are being carried out in Colombia known as *English National Program 2015-2025: Colombia very well* and *The Chair of Peace.*

These two projects share the national goal of the Ministry of Education which refers to offering students a better education, an education of quality at the time these attempt to comply with the Colombian National Law of Education: an education for justice, peace, democracy, solidarity […] in sum, a school formation based on human values (Law 115 of 1994. Art. 14 literal *d*)

Implementing the Chair of peace in schools and other educational institutions is not optional as stated by the Law 1732 of 2014 and established by the Decree 1038 of 2015. Besides, the area to develop the project may concern subjects such as social studies, natural science and environmental education, history, geography, political constitution and democracy and ethics education (Law 115 of 1994.Art. 23).

As read before, English is not an area listed in the article 23 of Law 115. However, I strongly believe that our social role as EFL educators demand us to take active part of this Chair of Peace since this is a really meaningful issue that all Colombian are responsible for.  Thus, this paper considers appropriate to propose a pedagogical intervention that integrates language and peace learning  bearing in mind the main objective of the Chair of Peace which determines that: the Chair of peace will encourage the acquisition of knowledge and skills related to culture, territory, economic and social context and historical memory in order to rebuild the social fabric; this will promote the general prosperity and guarantee the effectiveness of principles and rights enshrined in the Constitution. The contribution to the learning process, the reflection, and the

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² English as a Foreign Language

dialogue will be fundamental objectives of the Chair (Decree 1038 of 2015. Art. 2,) The previous idea is reinforced by the Law 1651 of 2013 known as Bilingualism Law which specifies that the educational institutions should guarantee the learning process of at least one foreign language (Law 1651 of 2013. Art. 3, 4, 5)

Likewise, the English National Program (ENP) considers three aspects to identify the proper intervention and English progress: the school context, the English teaching model and the English proficiency level (ENP, 2015-2025 P.45,). Basically, the relationship between those three aspects can be applied to the curriculum as: the more meaningful time you are exposed to the foreign language, the more meaningful learning you get. Nevertheless, the characteristic of being the time and learning meaningful ought not to be merely understood as the progressive inclusion of other subjects to be taught in English, the teaching training or the promotion of immersions to English native speaking countries.

As an option to teach English to children based on an interdisciplinary and meaningful way, this project entitled *What do children say about peace? Integrating peace and EFL teaching in the classroom* has been structured.

## Methodology

This proposal is being developed with 75 students (9-11 year-age) from fifth grade of primary[3] school section in five Colombian institutions located in Bogotá, Cali, Popayán, Pasto and Timaná; 15 students per school. According to the document Curricular Reorganization by Cycles[4] (COC) children of 10-12 ages are characterized by being in a stage of human development known as social interaction and construction of possible worlds (COC, 2012 P. 40) whose thematic axe is the inquiry and experimentation defining a step forward towards the pre-adolescence. The previous lines are the main reasons why this population was chosen to apply this proposal.

As part of that construction of possible worlds feature, children at the school not only talk about them or the others, they also talk about the situation their country faces nowadays; they talk about peace. Hence, bearing in mind that "ethnography is the study of social interactions, behaviors and perceptions within groups, teams, organizations and community" (Reeves, S., Kuper, A. &

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[3] This is the last year of elementary school in Colombia.
[4] Original text in Spanish: Organización Curricular por Ciclos.

Hodges, B.D. 2008 p. 512) children's opinions, ideas, experiences and similar are highlighted in this study as the unit of analysis pointed out as the children's voice.

This proposal is considered mainly qualitative due to the nature of its principal objective which is in agreement with Merriam´s definition of a qualitative study as: "in a qualitative study [the researcher is] interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experiences […] an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives" (Merriam, 2009. p 5). Coherently, some principles of the ethnography methodology are part of the research design underlining the words of Hammersley, (1992): "The aim is to 'get inside' the way each group of people sees the world." On the other hand, quantitative processes like the use of percentage were also important for the data analysis.

In regards with the pedagogical implementation, 4 activities were carried out during the EFL classes in the schools (5) to accomplish the first stage. These activities served to the data collection process as students' artifacts where the linguistic focus was on vocabulary as described below.

The first activity was named *what is peace for you?* In it, children were asked to write their own definition of the word *peace.* The second, *words of peace* and the third *places of peace* supporting the contrasting analysis by listing a set of words and places that children consider are closely related to peace. Finally, as a writing project of their class, children made up a newspaper around peace as the central topic. As explicit, the activities aim to promote writing production and beyond, writing creativity respecting the Common European Framework (CEF) descriptors of level A1-A2, which is the range of knowledge children are working on at school. At the same time, the activities comprising this and the remaining stages of the project foster the  an active participation of students " not just as future language users, but as language learners who are involved in developing a certain competence in [social] interaction with a given set of [language] teaching procedures and learning activities" (Tudor, 2001). In my words, language is a mean to express and beyond, a mean to construct the world and children are tremendously talented when using the language to read the world and to write the world.

Apart from the students' artifacts as data collection instruments, interviews and field notes were tools to gather information to be analyzed and none of them interrupt or cause disturbance to the already established English program of each school.

# Results

*"For me peace is so live, act and think like a child, far from the world of adults"*
Daniel, 10. Pasto, Colombia.

There are different texts and authors who define the word *peace*. However, for this project it is crucially important, as the starting point of the phases, to "hear" the definition of such word from children. Particular definitions of peace like the one opening this section were given by 75 students in Bogotá, Cali, Popayan, Pasto and Timaná. The most common answers to the question *What is peace for you?* are shown in the following table.

Table 1. Definitions of peace

| PLACE | MOST COMMON DEFINITONS |
|---|---|
| Bogotá, Cundinamarca | "for me peace is my family, my word, Jesus" <br> "for my peace is a beautiful world" <br> "for me peace is that we all to share and live together" |
| Cali, Valle del Cauca | "for me peace is respect with peoples" <br> "for me peace is: there are not wars" <br> "peace is there not war and not animal mistreatment" |
| Pasto, Nariño | "I think peace is to accept differences. Live in harmony with me and others" <br> "I think that peace is to live in values such as listening, dialogue, understand and tolerate" <br> "I think that peace is to do for others what I want them to do for me" <br> "for me peace is not being afraid of the world" <br> "For me peace is so live, act and think like a child, far from the world of adults" |
| Popayán, Cauca | "peace is to live in harmony, to here the world, to live in peace with the world" <br> "for me the peace is the benediction of God and I like to be with parents and friends" <br> "the peace is to love a all the world is the tranquility y to use to love y always to share" |
| Timaná, Huila | (vivir en un mundo major) "to live in a better world" <br> (vivir en comunidad y unidad) to live in community and unity" |

As mentioned paragraphs above, this pedagogical proposal aims to integrate two national projects in order to understand children as active participants by promoting creative writing and

the table portrays some sources of writing students made use of to communicate their thoughts. For instance, it can be observed that in Timaná, Huila, the main tool was translation since they wrote their definition in Spanish and then in English; in Popayán, Cauca children used Spanglish -as they explained the combination of words in Spanish and English-.

In most of the cases, the answers were concrete and short. However, those answers go deeper in personal meaning and social implications since first, children used expressions such as *for me* and *I think.* Second, they express a need for changing when answering "live in a better world" (Alexa,11) or "not to be afraid of the world" (Camila,10). Even, children demand their own space and time to grow as they are "peace is so live, act and think like a child, far from the world of adults" (Daniel, 10).

Then, the following activities allowed answering the question about the places of peace as listed below.

Table 2. Places of peace

| WORDS OF PEACE | | PLACES OF PEACE | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ▪ Solidarity<br>▪ Friendship<br>▪ Silence<br>▪ Work<br>▪ Dialogue<br>▪ Sincerity<br>▪ Family<br>▪ Generosity<br>▪ Responsibility<br>▪ Union<br>▪ Comprehension | ▪ Prayer<br>▪ Comprehension<br>▪ Order<br>▪ Father<br>▪ Mother<br>▪ Obey<br>▪ Humor<br>▪ Laugh<br>▪ Goodness<br>▪ Beauty | ▪ Cinema<br>▪ My house<br>▪ My school<br>▪ The beach<br>▪ My class<br>▪ My church<br>▪ My neighborhood<br>▪ The video games<br>▪ Castle<br>▪ Zoo | ▪ The park<br>▪ Me<br>▪ My music<br>▪ My bedroom<br>▪ Art gallery<br>▪ Mall<br>▪ Street<br>▪ Cemetery<br>▪ Restaurant<br>▪ Library |

Through these vocabulary-focused activities children were able to put into practice their EFL lexical competence as well as list more than a dozen ways and places that answer the *how* (especially through values) and *where* (especially the places considered their own) peace can be achieved. When children listed the places of peace 35% of them emphasized on the possessive adjective *my* and 15% used *me* as a place of peace which means that peace is not just a matter of external but also internal actions.

In a contrasting analysis, it can be matched a logical connection between the three first activities where students mention "not animal mistreatment" as part of peace definition and then list "zoo" as a place of peace. Connections like that are also explicit in terms of the family, its members, activities and values; the school, its members, activities and values; students' friends, their activities and values; religion, its place and values.

As observed, students produced sentences rather than paragraphs or more complex texts for the first writing activities. Therefore, for the last activity of the first stage of the project, they were asked to write a newspaper article. Once again, it was possible to establish a connection between the compositions and the activities 1, 2 and 3. Students wrote not only about the main sections of a newspaper such as culture, sports, entertainment and health. They wrote about war, best places to live in peace, school and peace, gender, children and peace. EFL learning and its relation to peace was one of the several headings children gave to their articles.

The content of the articles represents children's positions as classified next:

Table 3. Contents of the articles

| Against | Neutral | In favor |
|---|---|---|
| ▪ Racial discrimination<br>▪ Children, animal and woman abuse | ▪ Recent peace process<br>▪ Opinions about peace<br>▪ Health and peace<br>▪ History of peace in Colombia<br>▪ Coexistence and peace | ▪ Places of peace<br>▪ Entertainment<br>▪ No more violence<br>▪ Youth and peace |

For a more complex writing like the newspaper students' sources of writing in the classroom were the teacher, the dictionary and for some, the textbook; at home were their parents or relatives and google translator. Such complexity was identified in the grammar mistakes, vocabulary misuse, spelling and punctuations mark; categorize as *writing weaknesses*. The use of connectors and verbs in simple past and past participle were, on the contrary, *writing strengths.*

Although those writing weaknesses and strengths as part of the language form are essential to communicate a message, an idea, etc. for this project it was more significant the language functions and not merely the Jacobson's functions of language like the referential or emotive[5] but the social function of language that allow children to participate actively in these two national projects as social actors in a "human environment" (Halliday, M.A.K. 2006. p 165)

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[5] 80% of articles were descriptive and the reminders 20% were emotive.

# Discussion

"Children THINK about writing, and their thinking is interested, consistency, validity and extraordinary educational potential. We must listen to them. We have to be able to hear them from the early writings babbling (simple doodles, according to some, contemporaries of the first drawings made).

We cannot reduce the child to a pair of eyes that see, a pair of ears that hear, a vocal tract device that emits sounds and a hand squeezes awkwardly a pencil on a sheet of paper. Behind (or beyond) the eyes, the ears, the phonatory apparatus and the hand there is a subject who thinks and tries to incorporate their own knowledge to this wonderful means to represent and recreate the language that is writing, all writings. "

(Ferreiro, E. 2000 p.7)

Emilia Ferrero's words symbolize the core of this pedagogical proposal which focuses on understanding the children as active social actors in a human environment who, through their writing compositions, can construct and reconstruct the language and the world. And so if we take a look at a simple conversation like the one recorded in the field note[6] dated May 25th, it is possible to notice that children really matter their past and immediate reality.

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FIELD NOTE, May 25th.    CLASS MOMENT: Closing

1. **SPACE:** English classroom
2. **ACTOR:** Julian & Sergio
3. **ACTIVITY:** informal dialogue
4. **OBJECT:** worksheet
5. **ACT:** conversation

    S: I don´t like wars.
    J: ¿por qué?
    S: Because is history
    J: Nooo! I like history…lo que pasa es que en la historia hay muchas wars.

6. **EVENT:** words of peace
7. **TIME:** English class
8. **GOAL:** giving opinion, discussing
9. **FEELING:** agreement, disagreement

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In a more general aspect, it can be said that the national projects can satisfy social needs through an interdisciplinary view that will allow students to learn in a more meaningful way. It is the case of the English National Program: 2015-2025 Colombia very well! and the Chair of Peace. However, as it was highlighted lines above, due to the fact that areas different from English are

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[6] The field note format was taken from Spradley J. (1980) in Reeves, S., Kuper, A. & Hodges, B.D. (2008).

legally in charge of developing initiatives of peace promotion a few experiences are known about the integration of those two national projects.

Although the ENP and the Chair of Peace consider their objectives to be in favor of children healthy social and personal development based on a high-quality level of education, these are not assigning the valuable role to children`s voice and the EFL classroom is a crucial space for school to bear in mind not only as a place to learn a foreign language and culture, but to promote reflection about our own reality.

Fostering creative and contextualized writing in the EFL classroom contributes to awaken in children a desire of learning the language and in teachers learning about children's possible worlds. Bringing creative and reflective writing to the classroom will engage students' participation not only as language user but beyond, as social creator.

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