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CYBERL@BKIDS: A TECHNOLOGY- ENHANCED LANGUAGE LEARNING RESOURCE FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN COSTA RICA

CYBERL@BKIDS: UN RECURSO MULTIMEDIAL PARA EL APRENDIZAJE DEL INGLÉS A NIVEL DE PRIMARIA EN COSTA RICA

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Allen Quesada Pacheco[1]

Abstract: *This paper makes an analysis of the literature that supports the creation and implementation of CyberL@bKids. CyberL@bKids is a digital platform designed for teaching and learning English according to the curriculum of the Ministry of Education in Costa Rica. It was created by researchers at the University of Costa Rica (UCR), in order to meet the needs of I and II Cycle of public education in the area of English. The design and structure of this digital platform are student-centered. Within this paper, there is a description of the representative colors and characters for each grade (1st to 6th), examples of interactive activities, samples of the presentation of vocabulary, illustrations of the presentation of grammatical structures in context, and examples of the integration of skills, among others. The literature emphasizes the use of meaningful learning strategies, task-based and content-based teaching methods for the teaching and learning of English as a foreign through the integration of technology (ICT). This platform was piloted by the Ministry of Education for a year, and since 2012, CyberL@bKids is used by all primary schools in the country.*

Key words*: DIGITAL PLATFORM, TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH, STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING, INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES, INTEGRATION OF SKILLS, TASK-BASED LEARNING, CONTENT-BASED LEARNING, ICT*

Resumen: *Este ensayo hace un análisis de la literatura que sustenta la creación e implementación de CyberL@bKids. CyberL@bKids es una plataforma digital diseñada para la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés de acuerdo al currículo del Ministerio de Educación de Costa Rica. La misma fue creada por investigadores de la Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR), con el propósito de cumplir con las necesidades de la educación del I y II Ciclo de Educación Pública en el área de inglés. El diseño y la estructura de esta plataforma digital están centrados en el estudiante. Dentro de este ensayo se describe los colores y personajes representativos para cada grado (primero a sexto grado), ejemplos de actividades interactivas, muestras de la presentación del vocabulario, de las estructuras gramaticales en contexto, y de la integración de destrezas, entre otros. La literatura enfatiza la utilización de estrategias de aprendizaje significativas y métodos de enseñanza basado en tareas y en contenidos auténticos para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera mediada por las TIC. Esta plataforma fue piloteada por el Ministerio de Educación por un año, y a partir del año 2012, es utilizada por todas las escuelas primarias del país.*

Palabras clave*: PLATAFORMA DIGITAL, ENSEÑANZA Y APRENDIZAJE DEL INGLÉS, APRENDIZAJE CENTRADO EN EL ALUMNO, ACTIVIDADES INTERACTIVAS, INTEGRACIÓN DE DESTREZAS, MÉTODO BASADO EN TAREAS, MÉTODO BASADO EN CONTENIDO, TIC*

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Introduction

Teaching English as a second or foreign language to children is synonymous to caring for their own development and learning. It involves shaping the way we teach regarding children´s motivations, needs, interests, environment and social activity. The best practices in teaching children involves bringing meaning to the English language classroom; in other words, the English language classroom should become an extension of children´s personal life and experiences to foster a natural setting for the acquisition of this new language. Children are like sponges: they incredibly absorb everything that is brought to them, especially language. They pick up new words, phrases, and grammar structures very quickly if they are immersed in the English language through age-appropriate DVD's, videos, songs, interactive games, attention-getting books, hands-on activities, among others.

During the early years, curiosity characterizes children. Every new activity motivates students especially if discovery and exploration is involved. A resource that is extremely attractive to children is the computer. The computer is even a more eye-catching activity than any other hands-on activity if what they do with the computer is fun for them. The interactive use of computer-assisted language learning has changed the trends for the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language. Nowadays young children are surrounded by technology at school, at home, in their community, and increasingly, in second language education. Software designed for children to learn English have incorporated music videos, games, thinking and hands-on activities where children learn by doing. This is the case of CyberL@bKids, a web-based software or digital platform designed by ESL professionals from the University of Costa Rica to meet the needs of Costa Rican students from first to sixth grades around the country.

What makes CyberL@bKids unique is its virtual presentation on the web: a colored platform for each level (blue for first grade, green for second grade, orange for third grade, red for fourth grade, yellow for fifth grade and purple for sixth grade), an animal character that represents each grade: a dolphin for first grade, a raccoon for second grade, a reindeer for third grade, a monkey for fourth grade, a turtle for fifth grade, a tucan for sixth grade), its integration of skills around authentic content based on the syllabus form the Ministry of Education of Costa Rica, and state-of-the activities that makes learning an enjoyable experience for kids.

This article describes the characteristics of children learning English as a second or foreign language. These characteristics serve as a groundwork that supports the "why and the how" of producing CyberL@bKids as it is. Insights are developed regarding the use of multimedia tools for the teaching of English to kids. An analysis is made about the importance of blended learning and constructivism when teaching languages to children. Hsiao (n.d., cited in Stevens, 2006) has explained that the constructivist approach to learning emphasizes authentic, challenging projects as well as the creation of learning communities that are closely related to the collaborative practice of the real world. Learners assume the responsibility of their own learning, develop metacognitive abilities to self-assess their learning and performance, negotiate and generate meanings and solution through shared understanding. Based on this, a thorough description of CyberL@bKids components is provided.

I. Characteristics of Children learning English as a Foreign Language

According to Moon (2005), there are some conditions that motivate children to learn English as a foreign language: using language creatively, going for meaning, using chunks of the language, joining in the action, talking their heads off, having fun, and feeling at home. To do this, the right learning environment should be created. First of all, there should be sufficient time for English by providing exposure to English with a variety of comprehensible and meaning input with a focus on communication. That is, children should have opportunities to experiment with the new language. These opportunities will create a real need and desire to use the English language.

Secondly, children should be provided not only with plenty of opportunities to practice and use the language in different contexts, but also with a friendly atmosphere in which children can take risks and enjoy their learning. However, learning is not just facilitated but immediate feedback on their learning is compulsory (Moon, 2005).

On the other hand, Pinkley (2010) has explained that there are individual differences among children in any given class and becoming aware of these differences can maximize their learning potentials. These differences are closely related to their multiple intelligences, a theory supported and developed by the psychologist Howard Gardner which enlightens a "multi-faceted intelligence of nine separate but interrelated areas that, taken together, provide children with the capacity to solve problems…" (p. 10, cited in Pinkley, 2010).

According to the multiple intelligence theory, children develop strengths in different activity types. Those children that are strong on the verbal-linguistic and visual spatial intelligences excel when they read comic book stories, learn with picture cards, play with game boards, participate in cooperative groups, work with films, posters, graphic organizers, posters and collages. Kids that have developed the musical intelligence learn English more quickly with content or created songs and chants, and choral or echo readings. In regards to those children who possess the logical-mathematical intelligence, English becomes a facilitating process when children work with puzzles, mazes, counting tasks, Venn diagrams, sequencing, categorizing and use CD-ROMs. When students learn English through role-play, mime, dance, movement, race games and the manipulation of cards, the bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is enhanced. Getting students acquainted with the study of farm and wild animals, the description of weather, the study of insects and sea creatures, healthy food, the caring of plants and the description of the city and the country, the naturalistic intelligence is promoted. Children learning languages develop three other intelligences: the interpersonal, intrapersonal and the existential one. The activities that facilitate the learning of English through the use of these intelligences are self-reflection, visualization, and problem solving as well as group work, class projects, pair work, and questioning, among others (Pinkley, 2010).

Definitely, it is important for ESL teachers to know the different intelligences which children possess in order to integrate the different activities mentioned above to provide learning opportunities that can facilitate the acquisition of the English language. Added to this, Carlton (2003) has elucidated that motivation plays a very important role in children´s learning of a second language. The author establishes a difference between extrinsically motivated activities and intrinsically motivated ones. When a parent or any other adult, as a teacher, for example, tells a child to do something, he or she develops it to please the other party. The result of the effort is extrinsic and it is not a long-lasting because the reward comes from the outside world. However, if the child progresses in the new language because he or she is internally motivated, intrinsic motivation provides a more permanent retention of the new knowledge because it is self-rewarding and pleasing for him or her.

Carlton (2003) has clarified that the behavioral characteristics that trigger higher motivation in children deal with persistence, choice of challenge, less dependency on adults, and emotion. Through persistence, highly motivated children will stay on a task for longer periods of time. The more challenged children are, the more risks they take, and they want to

be kept challenged, so other tasks are welcomed. This gives them satisfaction, appropriateness, and empowerment. Likewise, children with very high motivation can work by themselves instead of being watched constantly by an adult. They become independent and their curiosity, creativity and self-discovery becomes part of their daily tasks, especially when they discover how to work and interact with the English language. Children even start understanding vocabulary by their own and the construction of new knowledge builds naturally and unconsciously over their previous knowledge. Emotion plays an central role and characterizes children with a series of satisfaction and growth in the new language because they have become risk-takers. Children with a positive display of emotions show a low affective filter that can be described as enjoyment as they learn the new language.

II. Teaching English to Children through multimedia tools

The information and communication technologies (ICTs) have provided educational benefits in all the fields, and the field of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) is not an exception. Computers, as well, have impacted children when learning a foreign language like English because computers have offered children a creative world to explore. The basic assumption is that children learn through play. Additionally, ICTs in ESL contexts have formed positive student attitudes, have enhanced higher self-esteem, have fostered more student engagement, and have increased student achievement. Wheeler (2001) has enlightened the involvement of computers in the life of young learners in learning a language by stating:

> …computers have the capability to offer greater autonomy in learning. Young students can also learn how to access, manipulate, store, create, and retrieve information (2001). Technology can offer students an opportunity in which they can collaboratively learn with others in their own environment and abroad (2001). Wheeler goes on to report that computers also offer students an opportunity to make connections between internal thinking and external social interactions through the computer keyboard. (cited to Mole, 2004, p. 11)

By all means, learning a language through computers brings up the CALL acronym or Computer-Assisted Language Learning. A direct reference is made to the third phase of CALL which is the integrative one. Integrative CALL connects multimedia computers and the Internet.

> Multimedia technology - exemplified today by the CD-ROM - allows a variety of media (text, graphics, sound, animation, and video) to be accessed on a single machine. What makes multimedia even more powerful is that it also entails *hypermedia*. That means that the multimedia resources are all linked together and that learners can navigate their own path simply by pointing and clicking a mouse. (Warschauer, 1996)

Warschauer (1996) has clarified that through integrative CALL or through the use of hypermedia, authenticity is enhanced by integrating the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the case of listening, students can both hear information and see what the information is about instantly just as it is experienced in the real world. Added to this, autonomous learning is fostered because students work and learn at their own pace, and when information is misunderstood, students can go back and forth around the areas, topics, content, and skills they need to reinforce.

According to Quesada (2005), socio-cognitive or integrative CALL, ultimately has revolutionized communication making it more authentic and meaningful. Learners no longer interact with computers but with other humans with the computer as a tool or resource. In accordance, Ravichandran (2000) has underlined several advantages of CALL in ESL settings: novelty is promoted through attractive and different ways in the presentation of language by using games, animated graphics, problem-solving activities and interactive techniques; an offering of self-instructional tasks as an individualization means to meet class and course objectives based on the students´ needs; the participation in activities that connect with the learning styles which are compatible to the students´, triggering interest, motivation, and excitement to learn; assurance of an optimal use of academic learning time by allowing learners to acquire meaningful information and by letting students to practice specific skills in a variety of settings; and last but not least, provision of immediate feedback that encourage and reinforce students´ development during the performance of the different tasks.

III. Blended Learning at the elementary level

Blended learning is defined as the combination of multimedia elements on a computer with classroom instruction with teachers and peers where computer-assisted language

learning is incorporated and language interaction in a classroom setting occurs working together as a whole (Graham & Parry, 2007).

Blended learning has been an option in EFL settings for many reasons. First of all, when students are present in their classroom settings, the EFL teacher makes sure they practice the language in many different ways. Secondly, when students are in front of the computer, it offers supplementary ways for learners to dedicate extra time to huge amounts of comprehensible input through listening activities, video and many other multimedia sources to practice the English language. Learning becomes meaningful because of the great amount of pictures, games, puzzles, mazes, pronunciation and interactive practices that can be integrated in one place and that students can go over them every time they want, need, or are interested. Learning also becomes authentic because students will get in contact a great variety of texts related to their daily lives and culture, and will have the opportunity to hear a wide range of voices from the different media that is incorporated. Again, students can go back to their classroom and continue with class activities, and the EFL teacher can assess their progress and make changes in class to ensure that they are engaged in interactive tasks that can help them become more successful when they are assisted by the computer. Through blended learning there is lots of assessment during classroom interaction and lots of responsibility and autonomous learning when students work by themselves with the computer.

IV. Interaction through Tasks in CyberL@bKids

The language-learning tasks found in Cyberl@bKids have been designed to engage learners in three types of interaction: interpersonal communication, learner-computer, and intrapersonal (learner-mind) (Chapelle, 2003; Ellis, 1999). The latter, intrapersonal communication, deals directly with the use of mind tools for language learning. Mind tools represent a constructivist use of technology, as explained by Jonassen, Carr and Yueh (1998):

> Constructivism is concerned with the process of how we construct knowledge. How we construct knowledge depends upon we already know, which depends on the kinds of experiences that we have had, how we have organized those experiences into knowledge structures, and what we believe about what we know. So, the meaning that each of us makes for an experience resides in the mind of each knower. This does not

> mean that we can comprehend only our own interpretation of reality. Rather, learners are able to comprehend a variety of interpretations and to use each in constructing personal knowledge. (p.36)

Indeed, through interactive tasks, learners are encouraged to interact with their partners in problem-solving or information-gap activities and games. They have to work collaboratively in computer-supported activities relying on both computer-mediated and face-to-face communication with other students. Besides, learners have opportunities to negotiate meaning and to focus on form as they speak to and get feedback from their partners and teachers.

V. Instructional Design of CyberL@bKids

The instructional design model which serves as a framework for the platform is the ADDIE Model whose acronyms stand for Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation. These five elements are the phases that ensure instructional designers to obtain achievable objectives, effective instructional products and efficient creative processes in a digital platform (Schiffman, 1995). During the analysis phase, the instructional designer is focused on collecting data that will impact the design of instruction such as the need and goals for instruction, the characteristics of the target audience, the skills and knowledge to be learned, the contexts of the instruction and the performance environment.

The design phase, on the other hand, represents the "blueprints" of the instructional involvement. That is, an outline of the instructional experience is organized which include the objectives of the instruction, incorporation of motivational strategies, preliminary presentation of the content, presentation of sample lessons, practice activities, feedback mechanisms, testing and evaluation strategies, and materials needed. In the development phase, the visual design of the instructional platform is produced with the instructional materials and activities. During the implementation phase, the aforementioned phrases are grouped into one and the instruction stage is put into practice and students gain knowledge and practice through an educational resource. Finally, the evaluation phase answers if the resource provided or designed fulfilled the objectives of the instruction, if it was attractive and applicable in real-world settings. This phase allows for improvement of activities and materials depending on the results of the instructional experience (Schiffman, 1995). This instructional design model

is commonly used for language labs, teaching and learning software, multimedia programs, and computer-assisted learning experiences.

VI. Uniqueness of CyberL@bKids

CyberL@bKids is a technology-enhanced language learning software that was developed underpinning the Ministry of Education syllabus for the teaching and learning of English at the elementary level. Each level is starred by an animal from Costa Rica´s fauna. Table 1 shows the animal and the color that represent each of the units.

Table 1
Animals and colors that represent each grade

Grade	Color	Animal
First grade	Light blue	Dolphin (Delfín)
Second grade	Green	Raccoon (Mapache)
Third Grade	Orange	Deer (Venado)
Fourth Grade	Red	Monkey Mono)
Fifth Grade	Yellow	Turtle (Tortuga)
Sixth Grade	Purple	Tucan (Tucan)

- **Colors and animals are shown in the snapshots below.**

Figure 1. Snapshots of CyberL@bKids 1st to 3rd grade

Figure 2. Snapshots of CyberL@bKids 4th to 6th grade

Each unit in CyberL@bKids is organized as follows:

a. First to Third grades:

- Warm-up
- Vocabulary
- Pre-Listening
- While-listening
- Post-listening
- Practice

b. Fourth to Sixth grades

- Vocabulary
- Warm-up
- Listen
    - Pre-listen
    - While-listen
    - Post-listen
- Language Study with practice activities
- Read
    - Pre-Read
    - While-Read
    - Post-Read
- Write
    - Pre-write
    - While-write
    - Post-write

CyberL@bKids content is based on the Ministry of Education Curriculum for the teaching and learning of English as a Second or Foreign Language. Each unit that was designed in CyberL@bKids Digital Platform encompasses the topics as follows:

- First Grade: Socializing, My body, My Nuclear Family, My Interests, My Classroom, My Community, My Environmental Education

- Second Grade: Socializing, My Physical Appearance, My Extended Family, My Likes and Dislikes, My School, My Community, My Environmental Education
- Third Grade: Socializing, Body Health, My Home, My Preferences, My School Community, My Community, My Environmental Education
- Fourth Grade: Socializing, Keeping Healthy, Family Ties, Social Life, Holidays and Celebrations in My Region, Costa Rican Identity, Environmental Education
- Fifth Grade: Socializing, Taking Care of My Body, Family Relations, Costa Rican Traditions and Customs, Holiday and Celebrations in my Country, Costa Rican Beauties, Environmental Education
- Sixth Grade: Socializing, My Physical Changes, Families around the World, Costa Rica and the English Speaking Countries, Holidays and Celebrations in English Speaking Countries, Costa Rica: a green paradise for the rest of the world, similarities and differences between Costa Rica and other countries, Environmental Education

The integration of skills, the selection of materials, the choice of tasks, and the contextualization of information around real-life situations are the basic premises of CyberL@bKids. Besides, it is supported by the Total Physical Response Approach, the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) and Task-based Language Teaching methodology (TBLT).

A. CyberL@bKids: First to third grade

The development of CyberL@bKids basically integrates two skills: listening and speaking. The teaching of listening is divided into the three stages: pre-/while-/post. Previously, before students are engaged in listening, they participate in a warm-up and vocabulary practice. Finally, when students finish practicing the post-listen stage, they are expected to wrap-up their knowledge in a practice stage.

Figure 3. Snapshot cyberlabkids 1 to 3

Young learners have short attention spans and they come to class with lots of energy. Their connection to the world is through their senses, especially their eyes. As Scott & Ytreberg (1990) have described, "Their own understanding comes through hands and eyes

and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times." Based on this, Asher (1977) has explained that with the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method, children have opportunities to listen to and follow through physical responses a series of instructions by the teachers or through other techniques with storytelling and with songs that teach language related to any kind of movement or physical action. Children have fun with movement, and the more fun for students, the better they will remember the language learned.

This methodology of teaching has been merged in CyberL@bKids from first to third grades when students hear the instructions, play and learn with the activities, throughout the listening practices, when the unit is introduced and when the unit ends by engaging students in a integrative practice. Brightly-colored images, puppets, toys, animated videos, songs, play-do / show-and-tell activities, and physically-involved stories have become the motivating elements that link the children´s surroundings with learning through individual actions, experimentation and exploration. Piaget (1970) has explained that children are active learners and thinkers, no matter their age, and children construct knowledge from actively interacting with the physical environment in developmental stages.

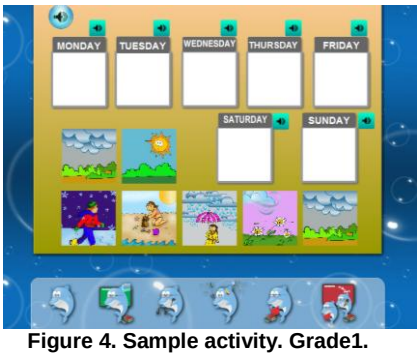


Figure 4. Sample activity. Grade1.

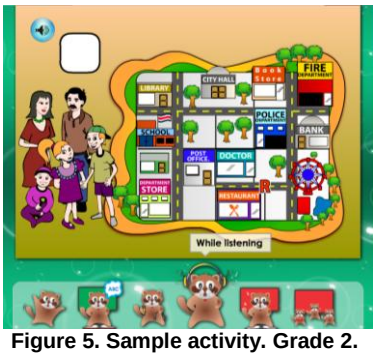


Figure 5. Sample activity. Grade 2.

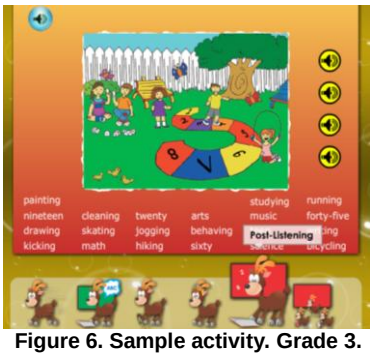


Figure 6. Sample activity. Grade 3.

Very young learners like children between the ages of 6-8 years old, acquire a second language (L2) through hearing and experiencing as similar as possible as they do their first language (L1). They also learn through playing and as in their L1, the process is unconscious. Words, phrases, and expressions are acquired through a game and if they are imitating sounds or pronouncing and repeating words and phrases, they are visually and mentally involving and connecting what they are hearing and seeing, with their real environment outside the classroom setting.

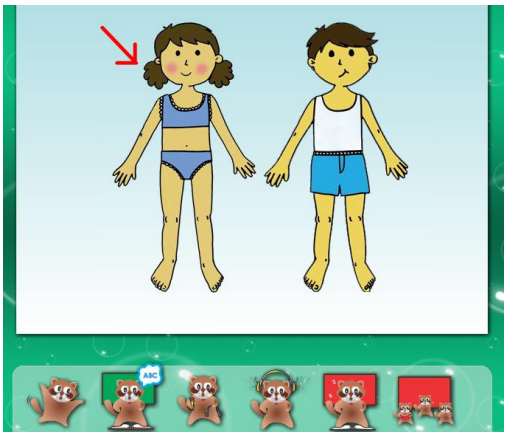


Figure 7. Game of different types of clothes

Figure 8. Bingo game of the parts of the house.

One of the characteristics of very young learners, whose ages are below or at seven years old, is that they are not able to read or write in the L1. That is why it is not advisable to make very young learners to read and write in L2 either. For this reason, CyberL@bKids (first to third grades) is centered in the acquisition of English through listen – talk – play. Students not only learn to listen, but they also listen to learn. For example, in grade three, one of the units is called My Home. First of all, students do the warm-up and vocabulary sections. Then students do the pre, while and post listening tasks. Students start with the pre-listen task. The first thing that students do is click on the Instructions Icon. It is a bingo game. Students have to choose a bingo card and click on the white ball to listen to the vocabulary word. When they hear the word, students drag the small yellow ball to the corresponding picture. Students do the activity through trial and error but the previous warm-up and vocabulary practices prepare the children for the pre-listen stage. In the while-listen stage, students click on the speaker icon for the instructions. The instructions say that students have to click on the speaker icons and listen to the question. Then students respond to the question by dragging the hand to the correct room in the house. Students receive immediate feedback like "good job" or "oops, try again". In the post listen stage, children should drag the parts of the house to build their own house. When students drag the parts of the house, they hear the names of the parts of the house that they are dragging.

Unquestionably, language-games, hands-on exercises and a great amount of listening practices in the computer are challenging, motivating, and provide supplementary practice and language workout for children. Instead of focusing the lessons in merely repetitions which demotivate very young children, lessons should be focused on what learners can do to

remember the English language (use of words and meaning in context) for the purpose of building little by little children´s capabilities for learning by themselves with short and long-term results.

B. CyberL@b Kids: Fourth to Sixth Grades

Figure 9. Snapshot grades 4th to 6th

CyberL@bKids also considered children whose ages ranged from 8 to 11 years old or children who were studying English as a second or foreign language. The integration of skills and tasks is based on the methodological principles of Communicative Language Teaching and Task-based Language teaching or Instruction. Doughty & Long (2003) have exemplified the principles or features as being facilitative in second language acquisition. One of the principles is the use of tasks as an organizational principle particularly for negotiating meaning, for practicing grammar in meaningful contexts, for providing comprehensible input (Krashen, 1983; Richards et. al. 1985; Brown, 2000), for sharing information and for receiving feedback on the learners´ production of the language. These tasks can be both pedagogical and real world tasks that interconnect form, meaning and use of the language in authentic contexts. Lessons should be planned around pre, while and post tasks. The second principle promotes learning by doing through hands-on activities and authentic tasks: ESL learners con construct their own knowledge by working on tasks by themselves or with the help of peers. The third principle indicates that input needs to be rich, rich and comprehensible enough, that allows for experiential learning. This rich input or exposure to the second or foreign language should be associated to phrases, chunks of the language and realistic use of the language exposed to the learners from the teacher, from multimedia resources, from videos, DVDs, tapes, media or online resources to maximize native-like language skills.

According to Doughty & Long (2003), another important principle is the one related to materials. Materials need to be authentic and should reflect real-life situation and contexts, such as, newspapers, extracts from radio and television broadcasting, announcements, messages from answering machines, photographs, video selections, both from text or audio-visual based resources. In order to develop communicative competence, an important feature that should be fostered through task-based language instruction is the promotion of

cooperative and collaborative learning. Both pair and group work are heightened. These types of activities generate both interaction and negotiation of meaning from the input received from peers. Social interaction is promoted and learners are empowered to produce language without the help of the teacher. The classroom becomes more student-centered than teacher-oriented (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Task-based language teaching favors learning grammar in context through communicative tasks. Doughty & Long (2003) distinguish focus on form and focus on forms. The latter refers to teaching grammar explicitly which represents a traditional approach. However, focus on form deals with engaging learners into real contexts where the application of grammar aspects is done by connecting form, meaning and use meaningfully and communicatively. Task-based language teaching also entails the importance of corrective feedback as one of its principles, so the application of appropriate and positive corrective feedback is necessary for the success of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Finally, the affective filter is a determining factor in second language acquisition. Students with high motivation, low anxiety, high self-esteem and self-confidence tend to have a better attitude towards learning a new language and they are categorized as high-riskers (Doughty & Long, 2003; Krashen, 1983; Nunan, 1991).

Indeed, CyberL@bKids for fourth, fifth and sixth grades was designed under these principles aforementioned.

Figure 10: Entry page for cyberl@b kids 4th to 6th

CyberL@bKids for children whose ages range from 8 to 11 years old keeps in mind the integration of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Nunan (2003) has highlighted that when teaching listening it is necessary to consider the following principles: a)

expose students to different ways of processing information: bottom-up vs top-down; b) expose students to different types of listening; c) teach a variety of tasks; and, d) consider text, difficulty, and authenticity. An example of top-down processing in the teaching of listening is the one related to the function "listening to personal information" (see Figure 10):

Figure 11. Pre-listen activity. Grade 4.

This snapshot refers to the pre-listen activity related to finding out personal information.

The pre-listen activity follows the top-down processing for teaching listening (awareness of the kinds of information used in a given situation; Long, 1989)

Figure 12. While-listen activity. Grade 4.

This snapshot refers to the while-listen activity related to finding out personal information.

The post-listen activity follows the top-down processing for teaching listening (awareness of the kinds of information used in a given situation; Long, 1989)

Students listen to get the general idea of the conversation and do a comprehension activity.

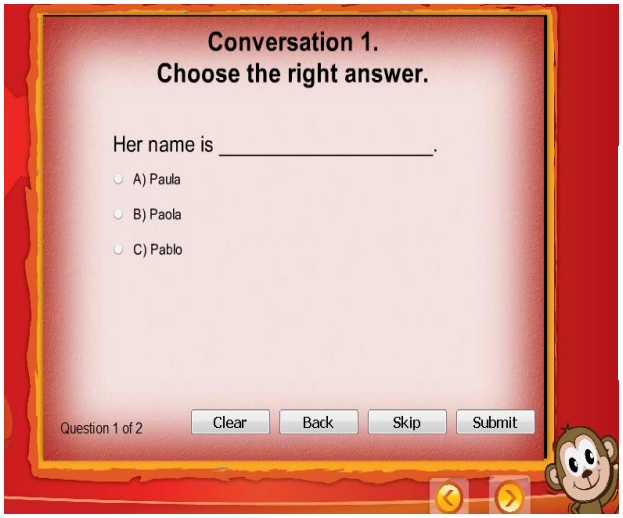
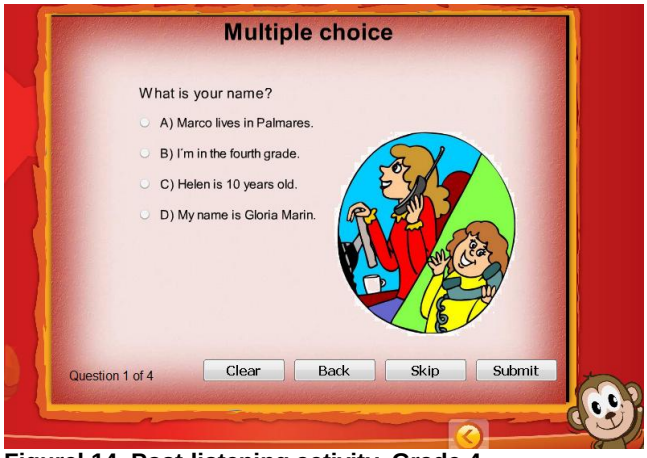


Figure 13. Listening-comprehension activity. Grade 4

This snapshot refers to the comprehension activity which is related to what students listened in the while-listen stage.



Figurel 14. Post-listening activity. Grade 4

This snapshot refers to post-listen stage following the top-down processing for teaching listening.

In this post-listen activity, students wrap-up their knowledge through a multiple-choice activity, simulating a conversation between two persons.

The same type of integration of skills and activities was developed for bottom-up listening. These examples can be found in the following url: http://cyberlab.ucr.ac.cr/

Reading was strenghtened throughout CyberL@bKids (4^{th}-6^{th}) as well. The best readers (Stanovich, 1980; Murtagh, 1989, Nunan, 2003) are the ones that can integrate both bottom-up and top-down strategies for reading comprehension. If both models for the reading process are mixed authentically and purposefully, the two processes (top-down / bottom-up) mingled together are using the interactive models for the teaching and learning of reading comprehension. Nunan (2003) has made clear that the interactive approach to reading included aspects of both extensive and intensive reading. Likewise, it is paramount to engage the ESL learners in the three stages for the teaching of reading: pre-reading, while-reading,

and post-reading. If these stages are implemented in a language course like ESL / EFL, some principles should be considered: a) exploitation of the reader´s prior knowledge; b) building of a strong vocabulary base; c) using the text for comprehension; working on developing an increasing reading rate; d) involving students in reading strategies; e) encouraging learners or readers to transform those reading strategies into skills; and f) building assessment and evaluation in the teaching learning process of ESL / EFL.

CyberL@bKids (4th – 6th) has taken into consideration these principles. For example, one of the first tasks that children develop when they enter CyberL@bKIds is working with vocabulary in context though visuals and audio. Children have the opportunity to click as many times as they wish on the different vocabulary items, phrases, chunks of the language, and longer texts, and even practice pronouncing each of them. Vocabulary is also acquired through other sections: warm-ups, videos or movies, and through the listening activities found all over the platform. Reading strategies are applied in this section because students are able to work with concept mapping, previewing, predicting, guessing from context, skimming, scanning, using titles, subtitles, looking at maps, diagrams, graphs, constructing semantic webs, among others.

An example of a reading sequence in CyberL@b Kids is provided below:

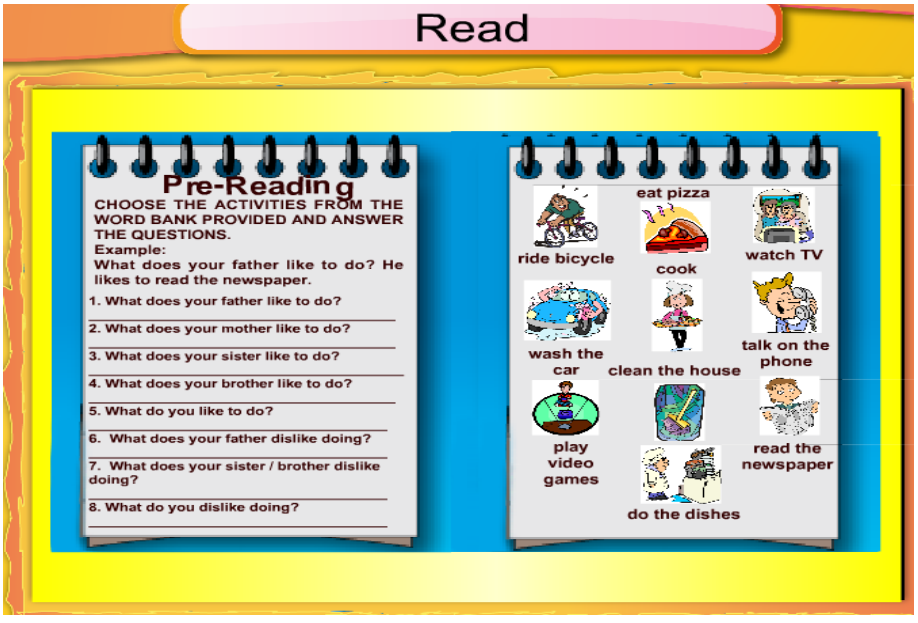


Figure 15. Pre-listen activity, Grade 5

Figure 16. Image that indicates to start reading

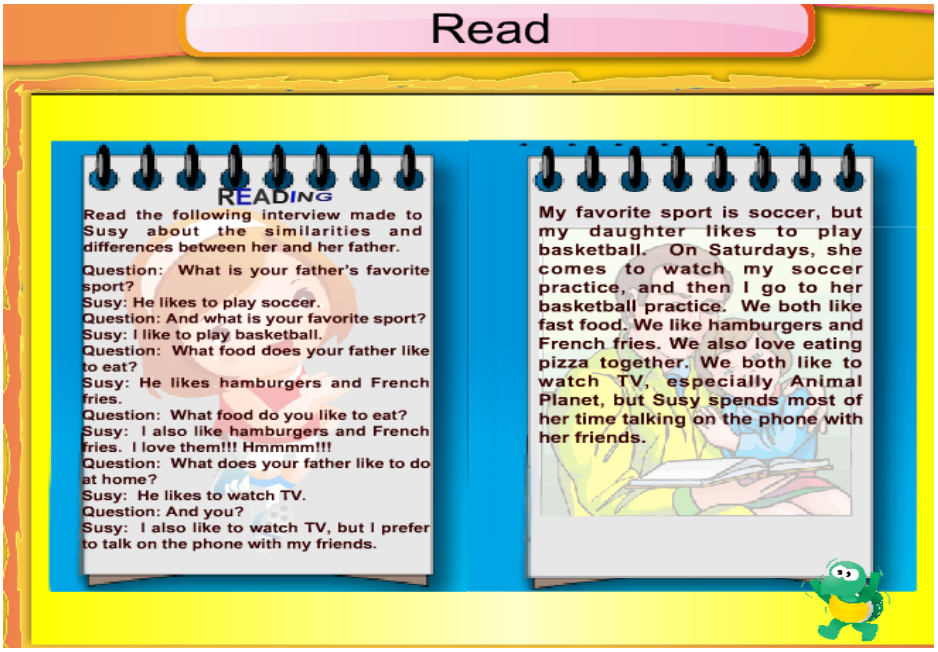


Figure 17. While-reading, Grade 5

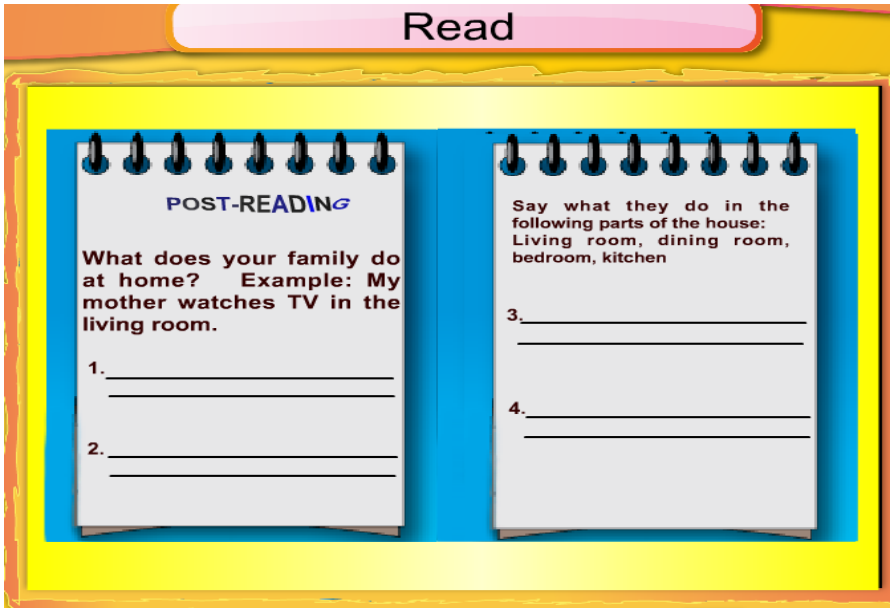


Figure 18. Post-listen activity, Grade 5. Reading is integrated with the writing skill.

Writing as well as listening and reading is part of CyberL@bKids for children who are in fourth, fifth and sixth grades. The types of written elements that students have to develop depend on their age, interests, level, bakcground knowledge, vocabulary, and topics of the unit or lesson (Harmer, 1998). The types of writings expected from children are poems, postcards, letters, job applications, narrative paragraphs, filling in forms, advertisements, short conversations, surveys, short reports, birthday invitations, descriptions of likes, dislikes, members of the family, among others.

As in reading and listening, CyberL@bKids follows a series of principles to ensure that the written process is enjoyable and fruitful. Students experience a pre, while, and post writing stage. Nunan (2003) has elucidated that students need to have a purpose for writing especially their personal interests. Their writings should also connect to the real-world as if they were transmitting a personal message. Nunan (2003) has added that learners learning a new language should have plenty of opportunities to write and receive helpful and meaningful feedback and assessment.

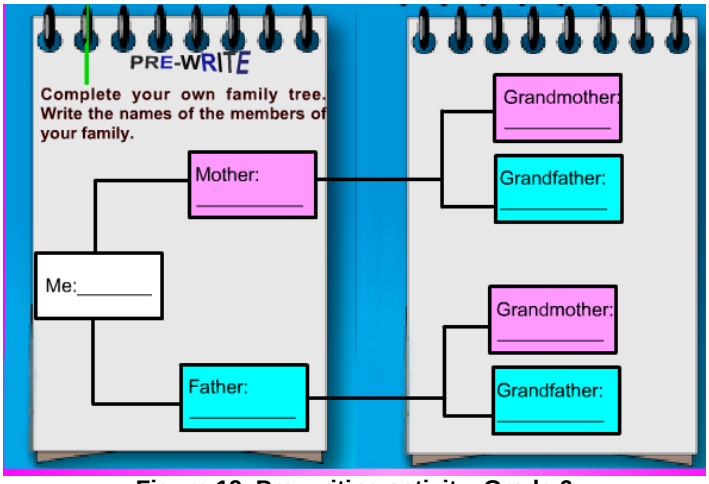


Figure 19. Pre-writing activity. Grade 6

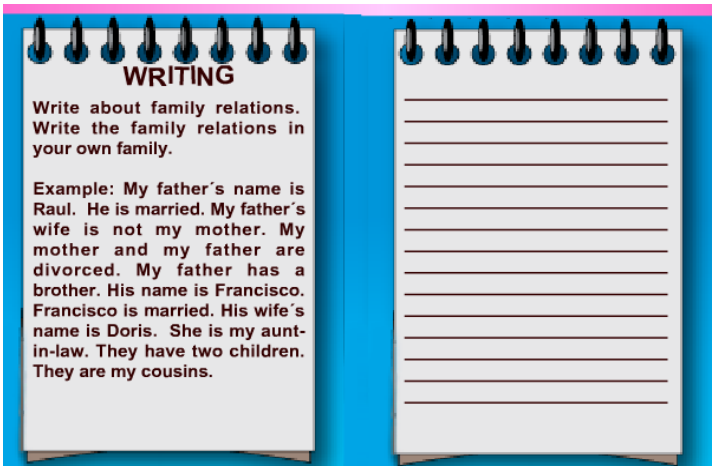


Figure 20. While-writing activity, Grade 6

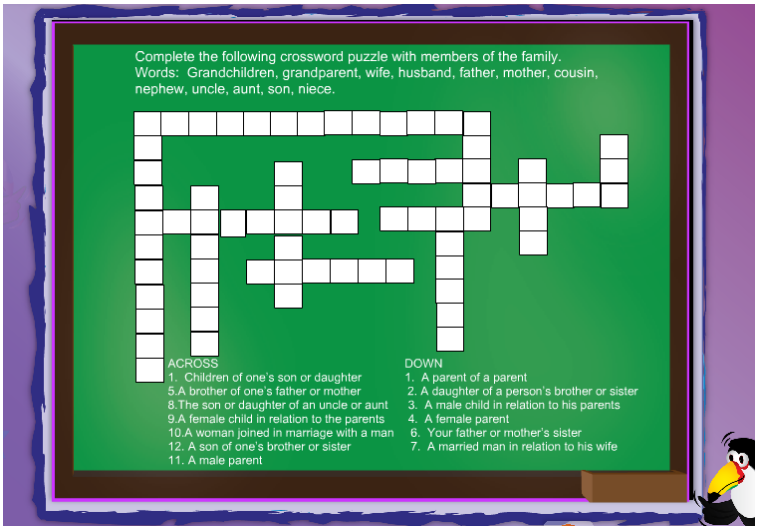


Figure 21. Post-writing activity. Grade 6

The application of an integrated skills approach has been the objective of CyberL@bKids, both for content-based instruction and for task-based instruction. In content-based instruction, learners are able to practice all language skills in a greatly integrated and communicative way by working with content related to their basic social and interpersonal life.

According to Scarcella & Oxford (1992), there are three models of content-based instruction: theme-based, adjunct and sheltered. CyberL@bKids uses the theme-based model since it integrates themes of study such as, health, body, environmental education, customs and traditions, holidays and celebrations, family relations, among others. Since these themes are related to the context they live at and experience day by day, language skills communication can be exploited and students become interested and motivated to use the English language meaningfully. Another important premise of content-based instruction deals with student input. In the vocabulary section of CyberL@bKids, content-specific vocabulary is illustrated for the understanding of unfamiliar words that will serve as input for the content learners will be involved at during the different units. Chamot & O´Malley (1994) have explained that "content should be taught as experiences rather than merely facts. Instead of being drilled on content vocabulary and facts, students should be provided with opportunities to understand new information and practice new skills within meaningful contexts and then to apply the information and skills to their own experiences" (p.33). This is the uniqueness of CyberL@bKids: providing experiential learning opportunities related to themes of the learner´s daily context through hands-on activities that integrate the four skills.

On the other hand, task-based instruction fosters the integration of skills through tasks, basically through pair and group work. Many of the practices in CyberL@b challenge children to interact with one another. When children are engaged in pre and post tasks in listening, reading and writing activities, they are expected to ask questions, investigate certain details, share information that is needed by a classmate, inquire in likes and dislikes, do collaborative activities and take part in joint tasks. They are also using the speaking skill for functional purposes unconsciously. In addition, the types of tasks characterize task-based models of teaching and learning. Task types for listening, for example demand the use of learning strategies like listening for gist or listening for specific information or demands for activating the linguistics skills (pronunciation or grammar); task types for reading, may challenge students to interact with the text or with other peers, or may require learners to transfer information from text to a visual (Nunan, 1999).

In short, both content-based and task-based instruction have served for the integration of listening, reading, speaking, and writing, as well as the associated skills of syntax, vocabulary. Both methodologies have promoted a learner-centered digital platform as a virtual environment for primary school children. Indeed, CyberL@bKids seeks to acknowledge and encourage children´s learning abilities and strategies to further them in learning English as a second or foreign language.

Conclusion

A state-of-the-art option for teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) at the elementary level can be described as CyberL@bKids. This digital platform has many useful tools and resources which are offered to children from first to sixth grades: games, songs, videos and audios, hands-on activities, projects, listening exercises, reading activities, writing opportunities, speaking exchanges, language structures: all-in-all centered around themes that are part of the life of Costa Rican children.

For first, second and third graders, CyberL@bKids opens a world of excitement with the English language through listening: listening to learn and learning to listen. Moreover, fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, as more mature children, have fun learning English through the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities.

In both scenarios, CyberL@bKids accomplishes "uniqueness", because this digital platform is based on the Ministry of Education curriculum and serves as a useful resource that complements and strengthens the teaching of English as a second or foreign language at primary schools. In short, in Cyberla@bKids, the computer plays the role of a tool (Crook, 1994; Levy, 1997; Kern & Warschauer, 2000) because it provides the media that students use to access information and to interact with other speakers in English. It serves as a resource and catalyst for socially constructed knowledge and understanding (Papert, 1993) and a support to encourage collaborative activity, making it possible to integrate authentic and creative communication in the English program. It also plays the role of a tutor (Levy, 1997; Quesada, 2005) because it is used to deliver input in multimodal channels in learning tasks that allow students to practice their language skills.

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