

The Value of a Good Start in the EFL Classroom

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Resumen: EL aprendizaje exitoso va de la mano con la motivación y disposición de los estudiantes. Con el fin de maximizarlo, los profesores deben de sacar el máximo partido de la experiencia de clase a través de actividades motivadoras. Los primeros minutos de la clase pueden hacer una gran diferencia en la actitud de los estudiantes hacia los diferentes retos lingüísticos. Albert Einstein una vez dijo “La enseñanza debe ser tal que lo que se ofrece se percibe como un regalo valioso y no como un deber difícil”. Sus palabras retan a los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera en la medida en que las actividades de clase deben de ser presentadas de manera tal que se perciban como una valiosa oportunidad. Las actividades de inicio son indudablemente una alternativa para afianzar el aprendizaje y fomentar la motivación. Este estudio investiga las percepciones de los profesores y el uso de estas actividades en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera en la Universidad Nacional, Sede Regional Brunca, campus Pérez Zeledón. También analiza las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre los efectos de iniciar la clase con una actividad lingüística creativa y atractiva. A raíz de la información obtenida de cuestionarios y un grupo focal se propone una serie de actividades flexibles que pueden ser modificadas para ser implementadas en cualquier clase de inglés proveyendo así a los profesores con una herramienta para promover un ambiente áulico motivador.

Palabras claves: motivación, actividad lingüística, actividades de inicio, inglés como lengua extranjera

Abstract: Successful learning goes hand in hand with students' willingness and motivation. In order to maximize students' learning, teachers need to get the most out of the classroom experience through motivational activities. The very first minutes of a class can make a difference in students' attitude toward linguistic challenges. Albert Einstein once said “Teaching should be such that what is offered is perceived as a valuable gift and not as a hard duty.” His words challenge EFL language teachers inasmuch classroom activities should actually be

presented in a way that students perceive it as a valuable opportunity to learn to avoid the idea of learning as a hard endeavor. Warm-ups and class starters are undoubtedly alternatives to support pupils' learning and foster motivation. This study investigates teachers' perceptions and use of class starters at Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension, Pérez Zeledón campus. It also analyzes students' insights regarding the effects of starting the class with a creative and catchy linguistic activity. Based on the results gathered through questionnaires and a focus group, a practical set of flexible class starters that can be modified is proposed as a tool to promote a motivational atmosphere in the classroom.

Keywords: motivation, warm-up, linguistic activity, EFL

I Introduction

The teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) has evolved through the years. The last decades have witnessed significant changes in classroom dynamics in which students' motivation has a key role. From curriculum development to methodology, changes have reconfigured and shaped language instruction to identify and satisfy learners' affective, social and linguistic needs. It was in the early 70s that the revolutionary Communicative Approach shed into light widening instructors' and curriculum developers' views. This approach sprung up the proposition that language is communication; hence, new methodologies should direct instruction toward effective communicative outcomes rather than just grammar-based models. Those changes made clear that learners were no longer blank slates who needed to be filled with knowledge, but builders of their own linguistic performance. This reconceptualization had a profound effect on classroom dynamics. Language education moved from traditional grammar-oriented practices in which learners answered rote paper-and-pencil exercises towards using communicative language activities as the core units of teaching. Additionally, language games are identified as motivating activities that generate curiosity, interest and a positive attitude toward learning.

1.2 Research Questions

1. Which class starters are EFL teachers using at Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension?
2. Which are the benefits of starting the class with a motivational activity?
3. What class starters can be suggested to enhance a positive environment and interactive language learning?
4. What materials can be recommended to implement class starters?

1.3 General Objective:

To establish the contribution of class starters to the linguistic development of EFL students of the English Teaching Major and the Associate's Program in English at Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension in Pérez Zeledón

1.4 Specific Objectives:

1. To identify the type of class starters implemented in the language English programs at Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension.
2. To determine possible benefits of starting the class with a motivational activity.
3. To suggest a set of class starters to enhance a positive class environment and interactive language learning.
4. To recommend EFL instructors material for the development of different class starters.

II Literature Review

Teaching a foreign language has many implications. Through the years, linguists, researchers and teachers have given important contributions to the field of teaching methodologies. This section provides theoretical derivations that shape current practices in an attempt to reach communication in the EFL classroom.

2.1 The Communicative Approach

An approach refers to the theories and principles about the nature of language and language learning behind classroom practices. Approaches state the way people learn a language and delineate the path to follow for instruction. In such a case the Communicative Approach (CA) which emphasizes that in language learning communicative competence is the desired goal. CA promotes students' communication in the target language by negotiating meaning in a process that involves linguistic forms, meaning and functions. To understand this approach in depth, it is important to review general principles. Brown (2007) outlined some general ones as follows:

Language learning is learning to communicate. Any device that helps the learners is accepted-varying according to their age, interest, etc. The target linguistic system is learned through the process of struggling to communicate. Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language. Language is often created by the individual through trial and error. (p. 49)

Based on these premises, it is concluded that classroom practice should provide opportunities to rehearse real-life situations so that students can develop communicative strategies that are required outside the school setting. The provision of real-life classroom experiences and communicative activities guarantees learner centeredness in which students are recognized as active participants who take a central role in their learning process. Additionally, when practicing these types of activities, pupils can see the direct benefit of learning.

While traditional approaches focus on accuracy, the CA focuses on communication. Consequently, students and teachers grasp the idea that being understood takes precedence over correct grammar. A fine-tune process of grammatical structures comes in a later learning stage though. It comes into play the belief that an emphasis on engaging learners in more useful and authentic language rather than repetitive phrases or grammar patterns may bring greater linguistic development. Given language learners real-life

classroom experiences, teachers need to use authentic activities and materials more than they would with traditional settings. Authenticity then takes center stage in this context.

2.2 Reaching Authenticity in the Classroom

One key principle of communicative methodologies is the use of authentic materials in the classroom. A classification of authentic materials is usually limited to newspaper and magazine articles. However, the concept also entails songs, web pages, radio and TV broadcasts, films, leaflets, flyers and posters that is to say anything created in the target language and used unedited in the classroom. Larsen-Freeman (2000) summed the assertive contribution of authenticity by determining it helps “to overcome the typical problem that students cannot transfer what they learn in the classroom to the outside world and to expose students to natural language in a variety of situations” (p.132). But authenticity goes beyond the mere use of particular material, as Mishan (2005) summarized “Use of authentic materials does not imply that tasks will be authentic [...] it is what trainees or students DO that counts (cited in Arnold, 1991, 238)”. It is assumed then, that authentic teaching/learning is reached inasmuch materials and classroom activities portray situations in the outside world.

There is no doubt the classroom will always be an artificial setting; however, in EFL contexts, it is almost always the only source of interaction and input. Under this circumstance, reaching authenticity poses a challenge for teachers. If they are to foster natural language, they will need to find ways to predict real-life situations students may encounter and provide tasks accompanied by material that guide them to be able to transfer classroom practice to these situations. Once learners realize they are equipped with language tools to satisfy social demands, their motivation will increase and in that event their internalization of language is boosted.

2.3 Motivation

Motivation takes a central role in the language classroom. Not all students in a group have the same rate and type of motivation. Students have different reasons to be in a language class. For instance, some may be there because their parents or the educational system say so, like in the case of children and teenagers in school or university students taking required courses for a degree. However, there are other situations in which learners are committed to learn a foreign language to satisfy certain demands. Ainslie (2010) explores the concept of instrumental motivation by establishing it as “a practical reason for learning” (p. 3). A high standard of living for ones’ family and job opportunities are some of the demands faced by learners. In addition to these contributions, Borton (1995) gave a more detailed conception of motivation by defining instrumental motivation as a determiner of students’ success.

Learning investment is delineated as a possible generator of students’ interest in getting access to resources that privilege language speakers have (p. 17). She expanded this idea by adding:

The conception of instrumental motivation generally presupposes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner who desires access to material resources that are

the privilege of target language speakers. In this view, motivation is a property of the language learner-a fixed personality trait. The notion of investment, on the other hand, attempts to capture the relationship of the language learner to the changing social world. (p.17)

Motivation is a complex area for teachers since teaching choices weigh heavily on their shoulders. Perhaps the most useful perspective is to identify what is behind each student to focus on providing enhancing experiences. EFL teachers under the CA approach should pursue to engage students' interest and motivation to participate in communicative activities effectively. One way to incorporate these practices and at the same time encourage learning is through games.

2.4 The Role of Games in the Classroom

Using games in the classroom is far to be a controversial issue. Currently, language instructors are aware of the contributions of providing authentic situations where students can use the target language of the lesson in less formal performance. At a linguistic level, games promote spontaneous interaction to solve problems and face challenges. They allow opportunities to assess learners' performance in context which will put in evidence their true knowledge as Larsen-Freeman (2000) ascertained "Games are important because they have certain features in common with real communicative events (p.126)". When participating in a game, students need to think fast and accurate to succeed. Consequently, they resort to structures and rules in their language system to come up with immediate answers. This situation helps the teacher to monitor weaknesses and strengths that can be addressed in future classes. At an affective level, when the class starts with anxiety-reducing games, teachers find the students more motivated to learn. Reducing negative feelings in the EFL classroom assures successful learning experiences. Krashen's contribution to the subject reveals that emotions such as anxiety and boredom interfere with the second language acquisition process. Those feelings function as a filter between the speaker and the listener which reduces the amount of input the listener internalizes. This is known as the Affective Filter Hypothesis which also states that this obstruction can be reduced by enlivening interest, providing low anxiety environments and boosting self-esteem (Krashen, 2003, 140).

The process of choosing the right game should not be understated; indeed, it implies a thoughtful consideration of students' age, linguistic level, and group size. Ersöz (2000) outlines a blueprint to use games in the EFL classroom. He stated that:

- games should be regarded as supplementary activities. The whole syllabus should not be based on games only,
- when choosing a game the teacher should be careful to find an appropriate one for the class in terms of language and type of participation.
- Once the game has begun, the teacher should not interrupt to correct mistakes in language use.
- The teacher should not compel an individual to participate. Forcing students to participate usually does not have successful results,

- A game which looks wonderful on the paper may not work in the actual classroom setting. It is tiring or boring, it should be stopped.
- Give clear instructions (p.1).

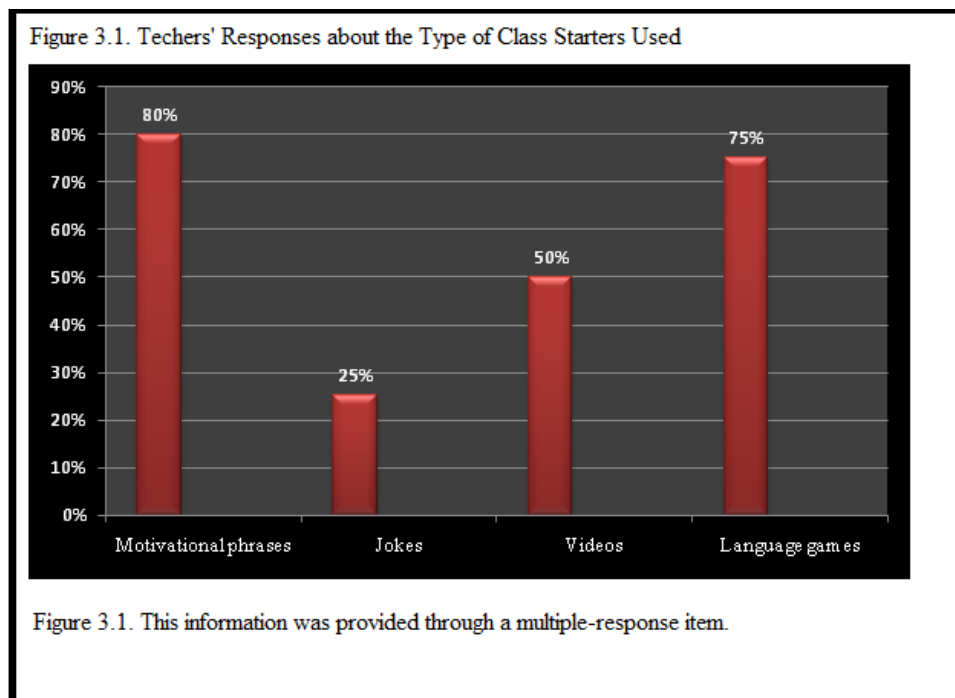
Games in the EFL classroom make their greatest contribution to teaching and learning by suggesting that teachers can expand their repertoire of class tools beyond the typical activities predominantly used to test achievement. In doing so, a broad range of motivating experiences can awaken pupils' enthusiasm which at the short and long term will satisfy both teachers' and students' linguistic expectations.

3 Implementation of Class Starters and Warm-ups

In this study, six professors from the English teaching major and the Associate's Program in English completed a questionnaire to gather data about current practice about the subject, their responses revealed key information. Additionally, the data from the students were garnered through one questionnaire answered by 20 pupils in the English Teaching Major and the Associate's Program in English and the participation of ten students in a focus group (annex 2).

3.1 Teachers' Perceptions and Use of Motivational Starters

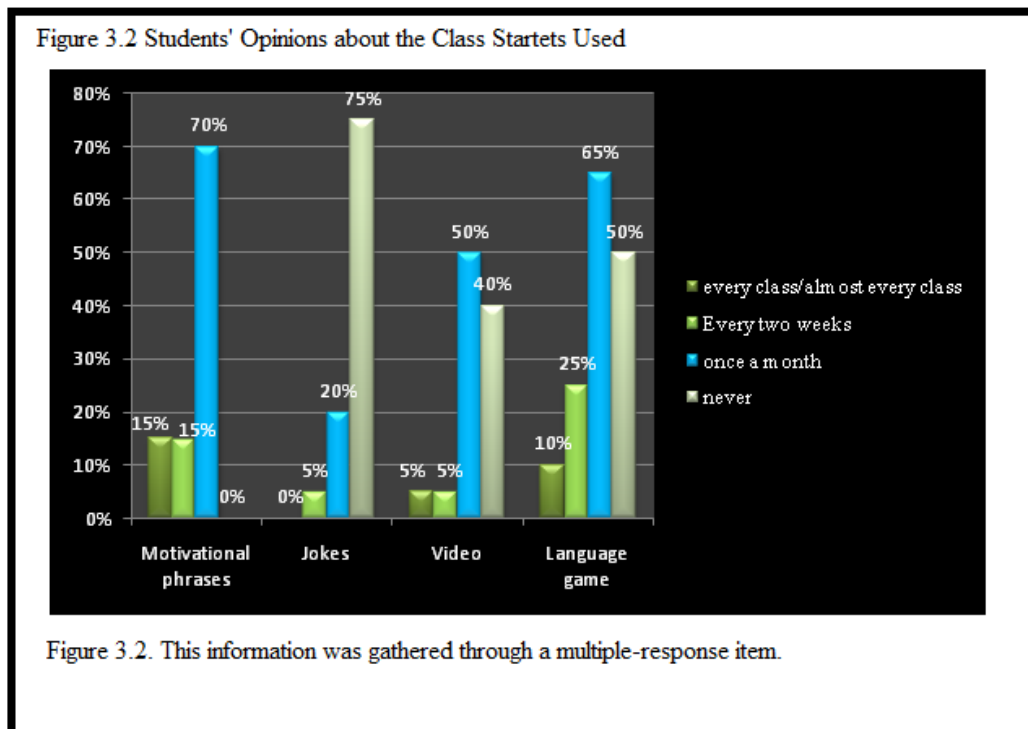
A questionnaire was the instrument used to gather teachers' insights about the role of class starters in the EFL classroom. Their responses about the type of warm-ups they frequently use are summarized in the next graph.



The data revealed that teachers show preference for motivational phrases and language games as class starters. Indeed, 80% and 75% of the informants answered that they use them at least once a week. Teachers also responded that they never call the roll to start a class, but always review last session's topics. These informants identified particular benefits of using motivational starters. They mentioned that they enhance language points, arouse students' interest, bring their attention to a point or the English class, wakes students up, keep them motivated, make them release stress and feel comfortable since the very beginning. Selecting a class starter should be an intrinsic step when planning a class. Consequently, language instructors should not undervalue the consequences of careless choice. By selecting those activities carefully, teachers are affirming a comfortable classroom atmosphere since the very beginning while assuring effective classroom practice that will be reflected on students' linguistic achievement and positive attitude. The teachers in this study stated specific aspects to consider when choosing effective class starters. These aspects are currency of the language point, length, level of interest and motivation it may awake, level of difficulty, the number of learners in a class, their age, space in the room and skills to be emphasized.

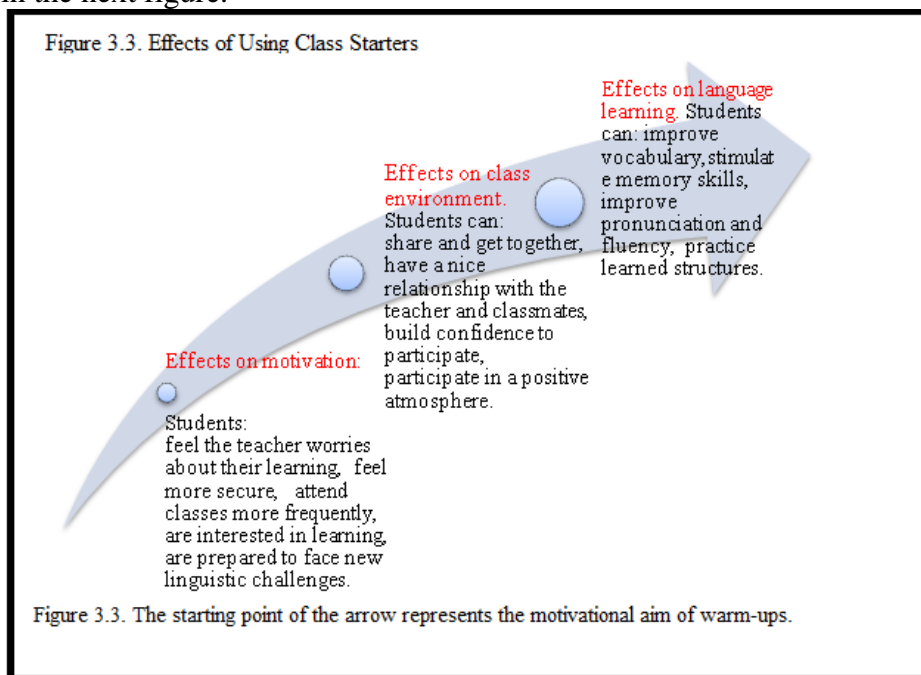
3.2 Students' Insights Regarding Class Starters

Contrary to what teachers responded, learners reported a not frequent use of class starters. Indeed, the *every class or almost every class* category was recorded only once. Their responses are displayed in the next figure.



These data reveal that motivational phrases are the class starters most used followed by language games. It is important to clarify that students' responses agree with the

information provided by the teachers. In this regard, learners mentioned that there are specific language classes that prompt their learning. They listed classes in which: they have to participate individually, the teacher starts with an interesting short activity, and present challenges. On the contrary, classes in which the teacher controls every step do not help them. These same informants were also requested to list the most common warm-ups used in the courses they were taking. They stated that in the Writing Workshop they usually draw and read famous quotes, in Oral Communication courses they frequently draw, watch videos and read phrases, in pedagogical courses they play games and create their own quotes. They reported not to be introduced with warm-ups in the other courses. In order to gather deeper insights, ten students participated in a focus group. They mentioned the effects that warm-ups or class starters have on language learning, class environment and motivation. Their insights were summarized and outlined in the next figure.



When teachers start a class with a warm-up or class starter, their intention is usually to build a cozy atmosphere during the first minutes of the class that will prepare students to face linguistic challenges. The arrow in the previous figure shows the process in which the starting point is to provide a motivational environment that will ascend to help learners reach a linguistic ultimate goal. Students identified benefits of the use of class starters. The most remarkable ones are that when teachers implement those activities they show they care which in the long run makes learners reflect on their own interest. They also mentioned that these short games help them feel more secure and self-confident. At the linguistic level, they assured that vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and memory skills are stimulated.

Informants also identified negative aspects of the use of class starters. They mentioned that if they are not well-organized, they take a lot of time; teachers need to

create new material and buy prizes, engaging all students to participate is difficult, competitive participants may lose track and end up fighting, and handling big groups makes teachers avoid warm-ups. In this same data gathering instrument, learners outlined a list of recommendations for teachers who plan class starters. They mentioned that those activities should be creative, and short but meaningful. They should also involve kinesthetic performance and authentic material. Finally, they suggested that teachers should be practical and incorporate reusable material and be enthusiastic.

3.3 Analysis of Courses Outcomes

Five different course outlines were analyzed in order to identify their flexibility in regard to the implementation of class starters. The courses were Writing Workshop, Juvenile Literature, Oral Communication and Listening Comprehension 1, Composition, and Didactics for English Learning. Two out of these syllabi belong to the Associate's Program in English, the other five to the English Teaching Major. The main finding of this analysis is that all courses give room for critical thinking and language improvement that can be promoted through short class warm-ups. Indeed, some of these flexible course goals are:

- To generate and organize ideas (Composition).
- To continue developing oral communication and writing skills (Juvenile Literature).
- To express and defend opinions (Oral Communication and Listening Comprehension 1).
- To express creativity through the production of texts according to interests (Writing Workshop).
- To promote an autonomous professional attitude (Didactics for English Learning).

4 Conclusions

This study revealed that class starters and warm-ups are for sure a necessary tool in the EFL classroom. Teachers who want to use them should plan these activities around the lesson plan. In addition, careful planning of these activities require considering students' age, proficiency and class size. There is a time limit in their use, class warm-ups should not be the sole activity of a lesson; instead, they should be used during the first minutes to build an anxiety-reducing learning process. For class starters and warm-ups to be successful, specific features should be taken into account: they should promote authenticity to ensure meaningful language learning, they should be developed in a stress-free environment where students feel free to participate to produce spontaneous language, teachers should monitor learners' performance to make decisions about lesson plan and evaluation and they should encourage individual and social skills. At the individual level, class starters should promote critical thinking skills and self-confidence while at the social level they should promote negotiation of meaning and teamwork. Finally, this study puts in evidence that class starters can be easily incorporated into any course in the programs analyzed.

5 The Proposal

Based on the results gathered, a set of practical and flexible class starters is proposed. Each activity can be modified to be implemented in any EFL class as a tool to promote a motivational atmosphere in the classroom and prompt linguistic achievement. The boxes on the left specify the skill(s) to be emphasized in each activity (S= speaking, L=listening, V=vocabulary, R= reading, W= writing, CT= critical thinking). Three different categories are included in this document which are: class starters with songs, class starters with encouraging phrases and class starters with language games.

CLASS STARTERS WITH SONGS:



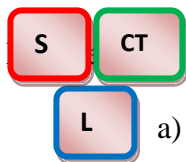
Procedures:

- a) The teacher chooses a song (remember to consider topic and students' interest).
- b) The teacher chooses words and phrases from the song and look for pictures that illustrate each of them. S/he sticks the pictures on the board.
- c) The teacher divides the class in two or three groups, depending on class size, and asks them to stand in line facing the board.
- d) The teacher gives a marker of a different color to each group.
- e) The teacher plays the song while students listen carefully.
- f) The teacher asks the students to run to the board to circle the picture they listen to. Once a student participates, s/he moves to the back of the line to let others participate. The group that circles more words is the winner.
- g) The winners distribute words and phrases from the board to each of the groups and ask them to create a short oral story or new song.



Procedures:

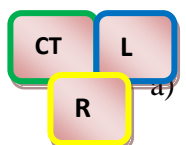
- a) The teacher chooses a song (remember to consider topic and students' interest).
- b) The teacher chooses words and phrases from the song and lists them on the board.
- c) The teacher distributes an empty bingo card with six grids to each student (if the group is large, students can work in pairs or groups).
- d) The students complete the card with they choose from the ones listed on the board.
- e) The teacher plays the song while students listen carefully. They circle the words they listen to.
- f) When they complete the grids, they shout "BINGO".
- g) The teacher checks the winning card. The game can be played four corners, sideways, up and down and diagonally.



Procedures:

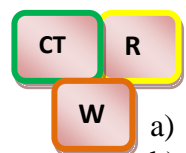
- a) The teacher chooses a song with an interesting/thoughtful topic (appendix 1).
- b) The teacher distributes a piece of paper and color pencils to each student.
- c) The teacher asks students to listen to the song carefully and list their feelings while listening to the song on the piece of paper.
- d) The teacher plays the song again and asks students to draw a picture in which they relate the lyrics and the feelings they listed on the back of the page.
- e) Volunteer students share their list of words and drawing.
- f) Students and teacher participate in a macro-group discussion about the topics that emerge.

CLASS STARTERS WITH ENCOURAGING PHRASES:



Number 1: Procedures:

- a) The teacher divides the class into three groups. The “beginning” group, the “end” group and the “author” group.
- b) The teacher distributes pieces of paper with the beginning part of famous quotes to the “beginning” group, the last part of the quote to the “end” group and a small card with the names of the authors to the “author” group.
- c) Each student in the “beginning” group reads his/her phrase aloud and whoever has the answer in the “end” group reads it aloud. Finally, the student with the name of the author reads the name.
- d) If the phrases and name match, the students get together. If they do not, they continue until the right matches are found.
- e) Once all students are correctly grouped, they discuss the teaching or moral behind the quote. They share their thoughts with the class.



Number 2: Procedures:

- a) The teacher distributes a card to each student.
- b) The students write an encouraging phrase they know or create one of their own.
- c) The students put all cards in a bag.
- d) The teacher takes one card from the bag and gives one to each student. S/he verifies they do not get the phrase they wrote. They read the quotes aloud and share the meaning.



Number 3: Procedures:

- a) The teacher divides the class in groups of three or four students, and explains students this is a timed activity. The winner will be the group that finishes first.
- b) The teacher distributes an envelope with a quote which is cut into pieces. All groups have the same quote.
- c) When the teacher shouts “Go!” the students arrange the quote.
- d) The winning group reads the quote aloud.
- e) The teacher and students discuss the meaning behind the quote.

CLASS STARTERS WITH LANGUAGE GAMES:



Number 1: Procedures:

- a) The teacher divides the class in small groups.
- b) S/he distributes the worksheet annexed (appendix 1) to each group.
- c) The teacher asks the students to come up with as many words beginning with each letter of the alphabet as they can in five minutes. The teacher can narrow the activity by limiting the list to a specific topic.
- d) The teacher asks the winning group to share the words they gathered.
- e) The winning group lists some of the words on the board, and they ask the other groups to create oral sentences with the words listed.



Number 2: Procedures:

- a) The teacher divides the class in two teams.
- b) Each team must explain the difference between two words/phrases from a set of cards (appendix 1).
- c) The teacher gives each team a card; they have one minute to explain the difference aloud.
- d) If the difference is correct, they score a point. If it is not correct, the other team has a chance to score.
- e) The winning team is the one who scores more points.



Number 2: Procedures:

- a) The teacher puts a set of photos from old magazines on a table. This table is placed in front of the class.
- b) The teacher asks students to stand up and choose a picture that “talks” to them. It means a picture they can relate to a past event, future plans, daily life or feeling.

- c) Each student shows the picture chosen and explains the reason behind their decision.

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Author's biography

Lena Barrantes Elizondo holds a master's degree in Second Languages and Culture from Universidad Nacional. During her twelve years of teaching experience she has taught in different areas. She has worked for the Ministry of Public Education as a primary school teacher and a teachers' trainer for in-service teachers. She is currently a professor at Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension in the English teaching major and the Associate's Program in English, and coordinator of different projects in this institution.

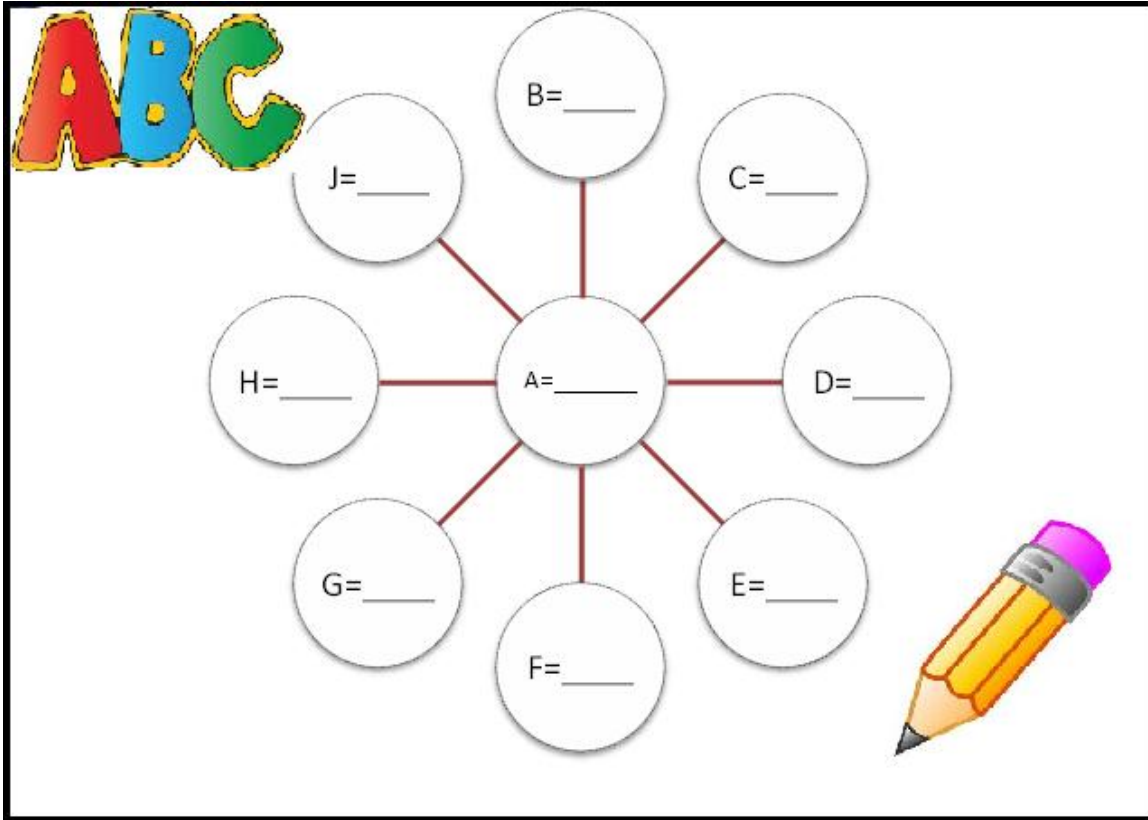
Appendices

Appendix 1: Material for class starters

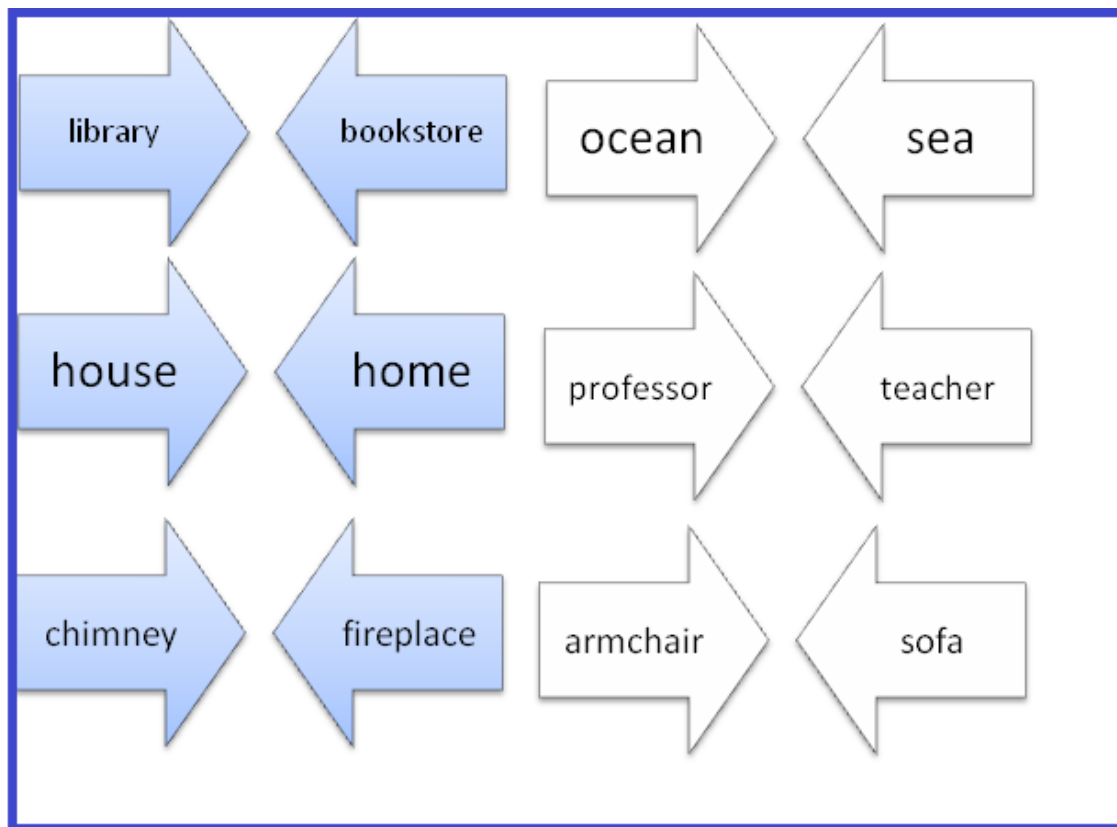
SONG ACTIVITY 3

Song	Singer	Topic
The Climb	Miley Cyrus	Perseverance
I Believe I Can Fly	Seal	Determination
Living in the Moment	Jason Mraz	Peace of Mind
I Can See Clearly Now	Johnny Nash	Optimism
All You Need Is Love	The Beatles	Love-Solidarity

LANGUAGE ACTIVITY 1



LANGUAGE GAME 2

**Appendix 2: Focus Group methodology:**

This instrument recorded students' insights about the research topic in-depth. To understand its implementation a description of the participants, place, time, procedures and material is given.

- 1. Participants:** Ten students from the English Teaching Major were the participants in this focus group. Eight of them are in their third year and two in their fourth year. Their ages range from 21 to 27 years old.
- 2. Place:** The focus group was conducted in room A2 at Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension. The chairs were arranged as a semi-circle. In the same way, this room was fully equipped with the necessary conditions to develop the activity as expected. These conditions were: quietness, a chair for each participant, a desk, and a board.
- 3. Time:** It was carried out at 9:00 a.m.
- 4. Procedures**
 - a. Welcome activity: 5 minutes.**

1. Introduction of the researcher.
2. Each student was given a tag to write their name.

b. Warm-up: 10 minutes

1. Twenty cards were stuck on a small board. Each card has a word.
2. Each student stood up and chose a card.
3. They shared with the group on how those words relate to their experience as EFL learners.

Success	Language games	Scores	Songs	Obstacles
Frustration	No time	Teamwork	Internet	Opportunities
Fun	Homework	Professors	Board games	Encouraging phrases
Goals	Tests	Classmates	Routines	Limitations

c. Presentation: 10 minutes

1. The moderator of the focus group gave a short presentation about the use of warm-ups or class starters in the EFL classroom.
2. Students were asked to give their opinion on the topic.

d. Individual work:

1. Four cardboards with different colors each were organized on a table in front of the room. Each of them had a phrase.

Green	Yellow	Orange	Pink
A positive aspect	A negative aspect	A recommended aspect	A challenging aspect

2. Each student was given a marker. They were asked to write their ideas under each category.
3. A macro-discussion was carried out by using the information from the cardboards.
4. Four new cardboards with different colors each were organized on a table in front of the room. Each of them had a phrase for students to generate their own arguments.

Light-blue	Red	Purple
The effects of warm-ups on language learning.	The effects of warm-ups on motivation.	The effects of warm-ups on class environment.

5. A macro-discussion was carried out by using the information from the cardboards.

e. **Material:** name tags, cardboards, markers, masking tape.

3. **Characteristics of this focus group:** Its main purpose was to record the students' insights regarding the effects of warm-ups or class starters on the EFL class. This instrument was implemented in the final stage of data collection since it aimed at capturing deep perspectives from students.

The SWOT analysis method was used so that the researcher could identify the strengths and weaknesses of the research topic as well as the opportunities and threats of the students. Activity one in the section individual work captured the strengths and weaknesses of using warm-ups in the class by asking students to identify *positive, negative, challenging and recommended aspects* about this technique. In the same way, activity four in this same section garnered data about the opportunities and threats of learners who participated in warm-ups. In this activity, informants listed on the cardboards the benefits of using these short activities at the beginning of the class. They referred to specific threats and opportunities on language learning, class environment and motivation.