

Significant Learning Experiences for English Foreign Language Students*

Experiencias significativas para estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera

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This action research examines experiences that students in a grade 10 EFL class had with redesigning a grammar-unit into a topic-based unit. Strategies were formulating significant learning goals and objectives, and implementing and reflecting on activities with three dimensions of Dee Fink's (2003) taxonomy of significant learning: the human dimension, integration, and application. Students reported positive perceptions about learning with and about others, learning about themselves, integrating language and topics to their lives, and recycling and applying topics to other formats. They became more active and reflective language learners. Difficulties were linking significant unit goals and objectives to all participants' needs and interests, students' initial unwillingness to learn about others, and students' limited proficiency for integrating and applying English.

Key words: English as a foreign language teaching, public secondary school, significant learning, Dee Fink's taxonomy, topic-based unit.

Esta investigación acción examina las experiencias que estudiantes de un grado 10.º de inglés como lengua extranjera tuvieron durante el rediseño de una unidad gramatical a una unidad temática. Las estrategias fueron la formulación de metas y objetivos de aprendizaje significativo, y la implementación y la reflexión sobre actividades con tres dimensiones de la taxonomía de aprendizaje significativo de Dee Fink (2003): la dimensión humana, la integración y la aplicación. Los estudiantes reportaron percepciones positivas al aprender con otros, acerca de otros y acerca de ellos mismos. También integraron el lenguaje y los temas a sus vidas, reciclaron y aplicaron los temas en otros formatos. Los estudiantes se convirtieron en aprendices más activos y reflexivos. Las dificultades fueron: la vinculación de las metas y los objetivos significativos de la unidad con las necesidades y los intereses de los participantes; la falta de disponibilidad inicial de los estudiantes para aprender acerca de otros, y su bajo dominio para integrar y aplicar el inglés.

Palabras clave: enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, colegio público de secundaria, aprendizaje significativo, taxonomía de Dee Fink, unidad basada en temas.

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Introduction

While significant learning is often associated with students in higher levels of education, this concept is equally important for English language learners in secondary schools. In Colombia, students learn English as a foreign language and its usefulness is questioned by many teachers and students in public high schools. This issue can be related to instructional approaches that are grammar-based, with teaching and learning processes focused on students' acquisition of grammar knowledge and the ability to manipulate grammar structures. Often lacking are significant learning goals and activities for students to use English meaningfully. For instance, learning English falls short of classroom experiences that go beyond knowledge to include purposeful active learning, relevant content, student interaction, integration of content and ideas, and application of learning to new situations. Consequently, it is not uncommon that students have difficulties connecting with and remembering content, participating in English, and completing class work.

With this predicament, understanding how teachers can help students experience significant learning in an EFL class is addressed in this action research report. Specifically, the reformulation of a grammar-based unit to a topic-based unit is a point of departure for this inquiry. This process has students choosing a topic and subtopics to make learning English more interesting and relevant for them. Also, it promotes active learning leading to change by reformulating goals and activities towards Dee Fink's (2003) human, integration, and application dimensions of significant learning. Students learn about themselves and others, recycle and connect information and ideas, and employ information and ideas in a useful and creative way. Similarly, students reflect on learning experiences and achievements with unit goals and change as

learners of English. In short, these actions are explored in a grade 10 EFL class and discussed in an attempt to understand how students can learn best.

Literature on Significant Learning

Dee Fink (2003) regards learning as when students change. This change leads to significant learning, according to the author, when there is some permanence of the learning experience. For this type of learning to take place, teachers need to look beyond what students learn to how they learn. This requires an instructional shift from focusing on the teaching of content or knowledge towards other types of learning experiences. Students can be encouraged to relate what they learn in the classroom to their lives, learn more about themselves and their classmates through interaction, and apply or use what they learn to new situations.

Teachers can help students achieve these learning experiences by revising course content, reformulating goals and objectives, implementing activities to achieve them, and evaluating learning. Course content and language need to be personally relevant and meaningful for significant learning (Williams & Burden, 1997). Students can have the opportunity to link subject matter to interesting and accessible topics and other situations for this purpose (Ashburn, 2006).

Organizing course content around interesting topics is characteristic of the topic-based approach (TBA) that can respond to the demands and characteristics of significant learning. According to Crispen (n.d.), a topic-based approach can promote student engagement by linking content, activities, and materials to the students' lives. Equally important, students can explore a variety of accessible topics and recycle content with clearly detailed goals and outcomes. Bourke (2006) recommends that the topic-based syllabus be based on a student needs assessment. Teachers can select topics, content with

language items, learning goals and objectives, and activities that reflect what students are interested in learning about, and how they wish to learn.

Revising content to include real-life topics can help students develop a more holistic and integrated view of themselves and others, as well as learn about people's opinions and beliefs (Wiśniewska-Brogowska, 2003). In this way, students learn to express meaning in real life contexts (Ur, 1996). With meaningful topics and activities, students can interact, exchange, and negotiate messages while working together and learning about each other (Hudelson, 1991, as cited in Bourke, 2006). Hudelson believes that this social nature of learning helps students feel comfortable with learning new content and skills. Learning English with interesting and relevant topics can be more significant for students.

Reformulating goals and objectives that are focused, relevant, and lead to a long-lasting learning experience is essential for significant learning according to Brown (1994), Williams and Burden (1997), and Dee Fink (2003). Dee Fink (2002) advises teachers to reformulate their learning goals and objectives beyond a focus on knowledge. The author proposes a number of dimensions, three of which were used to reformulate the goals and objectives of the topic-based unit in this study: the human, integration, and application dimensions. Human dimension goals are focused on giving students the chance to learn about themselves and others in class. Integration goals enable students to establish connections among the topics, concepts, and ideas to their real lives. Application goals describe how students will think about and use both what they have learned and their skills in a useful and creative way.

Setting learning goals and objectives for students is related to "establishing a direction for learning" by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001, p. 93). Marzano et al. state that setting general goals

helps student focus on what they have to learn in units and lessons. Focusing and maintaining students' attention on these goals is recommended by Wong and Wong (1998), who advise teachers to review them orally and in writing with students at the beginning of the class and keep them visible. In addition, teachers need to write clear objectives with sentences having the student as the subject, and the topic, concept or skill as the object, plus an action verb to express what students will be able to know or do (Center for Teaching and Learning, 2008). Reformulating and sharing goals and objectives can help teachers and students identify the types of significant learning experiences they desire, and reflect on the learning process and achievements.

Implementing activities to reach significant learning goals requires a change in role for students. According to Dee Fink (2002), students are active learners and engaged with achieving the learning goals. Dee Fink refers to significant activities as those in which learners are actively involved in getting information from different sources, doing hands-on activities while exploring the content and language, applying learning, and reflecting on the learning process. Similarly, Jonassen, Peck, and Wilson (1999, as cited in Bhattacharya, 2002) associate meaningful learning with active students and their intentional engagement with and reflection on activities to reach learning goals. These authors highlight collaboration, student interaction, and dialogue in group experiences as a means for understanding different views about the world. These activities are authentic as students' ideas and opinions arise from real-life contexts and can be transferred to new learning situations. So, for significant learning experiences, the key is integrating learning to the students' context and letting them apply what they learn to other situations (Williams & Burden, 1997).

Reflecting on and evaluating learning is also associated with this type of learning. Teachers can encourage students to think about their learning process and growth. Williams and Burden (1997) suggest that teachers point to students out a personal or broader cultural significance of the learning activity. These authors coincide with Dee Fink (2003) in that teachers can help students develop an awareness of the purposes of the learning experiences beyond the classroom, and of themselves sharing, cooperating, and changing. Indeed, teachers and students can engage in dialogue about whether their learning experiences have led to significant learning.

Method of the Study

This nine-month action research study has characteristics and stages of action research proposed by Burns (1999), Johnson (2005), and Mertler (2006). The authors concur that action research is a contextualized, small-scale, planned and systematic effort of inquiry into improving classroom practice. Critical reflection on one's teaching and learning processes is required, and the inclusion of other participant perspectives. Mertler's (2006) four broad stages of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting included Johnson's (2005) processes of identifying a problem, reviewing the literature, planning and implementing actions, planning for and gathering data, analyzing data, and reporting the data.

Context and Participants

This study was carried out in the high school section of a large public elementary-secondary school in the town of Bello, adjacent to Medellín, in 2008. This institution has collaborated with our university in the preparation of future foreign language teachers in the teaching practicum for a number of years. I was given a grade 10 placement with stu-

dents who had English classes three times a week. The English curriculum at the school cites a humanistic and cultural approach to learning English; one that is enjoyable, motivating, interactive, and significant for students. Students' needs and interests and their background experiences are to be taken into account in the learning process.

The participants of this study were my Cooperating Teacher (CT) as a participant observer, twenty (out of 27) students in our grade 10 class, my practicum and research advisor as a nonparticipant observer, and myself as the teacher-researcher. My CT is Colombian and an experienced EFL teacher who has supervised other pre-service teachers. The students were 10 boys and 10 girls whose ages ranged from 14 to 17. Students had a low level of English and some lacked motivation for the class. These students were chosen according to Creswell's (2003) qualitative sampling technique that included typical and extreme cases. Ten students demonstrated average engagement with the English class and performance on activities, and the other ten were divided equally between students with excellent or low class engagement and performance. I have taught EFL in public institutions for five years, but not at this institution. Although I have had preparation in action research theory and experience with research activities prior to the practicum, this was the first time that I carried out action research in my practice under the guidance of a university advisor.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data were collected from four different sources during the planning and implementation of the topic-based unit. These sources included students' perceptions about the topics, goals, activities, and their achievements on rating checklists and feedback cards. My CT's and advisor's perceptions of the significance of topics, goals and activities during classes were gathered with structured observation

rating checklists. My perceptions were written in a teacher research journal (Crookes, 2003) during the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the topic-based unit.

The data were analyzed following Burns' (1999) steps of inductive analysis. After I organized the data according to source, I read it with my research inquiry in mind. I took notes and coded what I considered relevant. While coding the data, I realized that the codes could be grouped easily into Dee Fink's (2002) three stages of significant learning for courses which are planning, implementing, and evaluating a course. These three broad themes helped me to group and narrow my codes, and understand and interpret the data more easily. I triangulated the data by identifying recurrences among codes from the data sources. Subsequently, I validated my findings with participants at the school.

Findings and Interpretations

Findings related to the planning and implementation of the unit for significant learning are written in a narrative style and could be a practical contribution to this theory for the reader. Five important themes I identified were changes in participants' roles, planning challenges and drawbacks, the nature of the learning goals, opportunities for students to achieve the goals and the significance of the topics and activities.

Planning the Significant Learning Unit

Planning the unit with Dee Fink's (2002) steps for designing courses around significant learning was challenging. Changes in participant roles and challenges and drawbacks were present when balancing students' interests and decisions, my CT's interests and the grammar syllabus, plus my desire to provide students with significant learning experiences.

During this stage I adopted the role of a planner and organizer of goals and activities while my students assumed an active role in selecting topics, subtopics and activities. This led me to perceive my unit as student-centered with possibilities for meaningful activities for students. Based on my students' needs assessment, I gave them the opportunity to choose from three topics of their interest, and they chose music for the unit. They proposed two subtopics which were the history of music genres, and symbols and lifestyles for music genres. Then, students selected their favorite music genre and grouped themselves. Students became active participants identifying the content to learn English with. These interesting and relevant topics, I believe, became the basis for what Dee Fink (2003) coins significant student learning.

According to Dee Fink's (2002) suggestion for course design, I contemplated and analyzed different situational factors to design my unit. As the unit planner, I faced different challenges and drawbacks designing the topic-based unit. I struggled with deciding which grammar items from the structural syllabus should be integrated to the new unit. I found that it was very challenging to make the unit less grammar-driven knowing what students have usually been assessed on in grade 10.

It has been very difficult for me to stay apart [*sic*] from the grammar based approach and syllabus my school has, because that is what my students are going to be assessed and graded on by the end of the year¹. That is why my first unit was like a grammar unit framed inside a topic. (Teacher research journal)

I did not feel very comfortable with grammar being the main focus for the unit, since I thought that language and significant learning meant much more than this. After receiving feedback from my

¹ In this article, language from the teacher journal and observation rating checklists is presented as it was written.

advisor on my first draft of the unit, I became more aware of the necessity to clarify my understanding of significant learning goals and activities and re-read Dee Fink's (2002) guidelines. I realized that I would have to reformulate the learning goals according to what I wanted students to learn for each dimension, and what the school wanted.

First, I decided to focus on the main goals students should achieve by the end of the unit. I thought that students should gain knowledge about language items proposed by the school, make connections among these items and the topics, relate them to their lives, and use language to communicate and share ideas in a creative way. With these, I started to contemplate how students would achieve the goals. Somehow, I had to make decisions about the grammar items that students would need so that the unit was significant for them and feasible for us. These decisions were in part guided by the communicative language functions required to develop the topics. Almost all the grammar items the school required students to learn were integrated to the units. Those that were not, were introduced later to students with contextualized grammar activities.

After formulating the main goals, I planned activities considering students' needs and interests (see Appendix 1). To propose and define the goals and activities related to the human dimension for the unit, I reflected on what my students would learn about themselves and their classmates, and how. I thought that students could get to know and understand their classmates' opinions about music genre preferences, genre lifestyles and symbols, and their cultural backgrounds. Interactive activities could facilitate this information sharing. I believed that students could learn about their own points of view through questioning and reflecting. These activities and goals were aimed at providing students with a more holistic and integrated view of themselves and others (Saluveer, 2004).

When planning integration goals and activities, I reflected on how students could relate the topic to their lives and background experiences, and connect information and ideas. This resulted in goals and activities in which students would be asked to make connections between the subtopics and their personal preferences and opinions, and background experiences. I also planned lessons with active learning that included Dee Fink's (2002) actions of doing, observing, reflecting and engaging in dialogue about the topic. The planned activities reinforced this important concept for the significance of activities and materials.

For application goals and activities, I decided to give students hands-on activities in which they could apply their knowledge about the topic and the language, plus their creative skills in a final poster to be presented, shared, and assessed.

With this experience I realized that the grammar items would also emerge from the language needed to perform the activities, as well as from my CT's suggestions and the syllabus. With these general goals and ideas for activities in mind, I wrote topic-based objectives that were more meaningful and significant and in which grammar was only a part.

I have chosen those grammar structures I can integrate to our topic, and I have written in terms of what my students will be able to do with those structures and that knowledge. Then, I built more topic driven objectives which I think are more meaningful and significant and in which different grammar issues are implicit. (Teacher research journal)

This helped me realize that topics were in fact very useful for building significant learning units. As Hudelson (1991, pp. 2-5, as cited in Bourke, 2006) suggests, TBA allows students to be engaged in working with meaningful activities where language is part of a complex process and skill development. I also realized that topics were very flexible for curriculum organization. They could

be approached from different perspectives or subtopics, and integrate grammar structures that my CT and the school considered mandatory in a more purposeful, meaningful, enjoyable and contextualized way.

Reformulating the units, goals and objectives to more significant experiences was not an easy process. It required a lot of dialogue with my CT and my advisor to reach an agreement since all of us had to reconsider our teaching paradigms. It was very difficult for me to reconceptualize the role of grammar in learning, and likewise for my CT to give more control of the learning process over to the students and me. We had to be very reflective and open-minded to accept that each one of us had something valuable to propose for our new unit: my new ideas, confidence and high expectations of the project; my CT's teaching experience in a public high school; and my advisor's knowledge about new methods and strategies.

After a lot of reflection and several attempts, I designed a topic-based unit that I thought responded to all participants' interests, and that included goals, objectives, and activities with features of significant learning. My advisor, who reflected on my unit goals and activities, commented:

I think that you planned your general lesson goals to promote significant learning for students. Your objectives were written to promote the human dimension of significant learning, as well as integration and application. Your activities were structured in a way from simple to more complex. The four skills were integrated in this lesson, as well as the sub-skill of grammar and culture. (Advisor observation rating checklist)

Finally, students became active evaluators reflecting on their learning process and their achievements with the goals, objectives and activities. This led to future planning and decision-making for the lessons. Students adopted an active voice in class decisions regarding group work, the sequence of

activities, and materials (Teacher research journal). Students gave their perceptions and opinions about the goals and activities before and during the development of each subtopic. They reflected on the feasibility of the learning goals and gave suggestions about extending the time we had to accomplish the unit goals. Also, students evaluated their achievement of the goals and objectives, and the significance of activities and materials during each subtopic.

Implementing the Significant Learning Unit

During the implementation of the unit, students were provided with opportunities to work towards the learning goals and objectives, and to reflect on their performance for each subtopic.

All participants perceived the human dimension positively and that it was the most developed dimension for the two subtopics. I believed that students learning with others in small collaborative groups was effective, as it let students assume a more active role in class, share knowledge and experiences about both language and topics, support each other when language difficulties appeared, learn from each other's products, and finally, improve their performance (Teacher research journal).

Many students expressed that learning with others in groups was useful and significant and helped them to improve their performance. Students expressed that they learned more about the topics for the following reasons:

When I work with others I learn about their likes and how to distinguish the music genres in English.²

[...] and the classmates because some know more than others.³

² Original Spanish: "Al relacionarme con mis compañeros aprendo de sus gustos y a distinguir en inglés los géneros musicales".

³ Original Spanish: "... y los compañeros porque hay algunos que saben más que otros".

[...] the classmates because they explain what I did not understand.⁴
(Student rating checklist)

These findings are similar to those of Middlecamp (n.d.) who reported that the main advantages of students working in groups were each member's unique contributions, the chance to learn from classmates who had considerable knowledge about a topic, and learning being easier.

My advisor also perceived group learning positively stating: "I saw that you promoted small group work in the class which gave students the chance to share their ideas and use English to communicate them" (Advisor observation rating checklist).

She noticed that students learned from each other by negotiating meaning, knowledge, and understanding in groups then sharing their final products. In this sense, there was a collaborative nature to the learning process (Jonassen et al., 1999, as cited in Bhattacharya, 2002).

All participants agreed that students had the opportunity to learn about themselves and others via the two subtopics, and become more tolerant of different opinions. Discussions of the subtopics in whole class or group activities let them share their opinions about the different music genres, criticize and question them, understand others' points of view, and expand and change theirs toward other music cultures. At the beginning of the unit, some students were reluctant to learn about their classmates' musical preferences and opinions and were unmotivated to participate in class activities. However, as the subtopics were developed, they showed more interest in learning about and accepting other genres and the reasons that their classmates liked them (Teacher research journal).

⁴ Original Spanish: "... los compañeros porque me explican lo que no entiendo".

This change occurred after giving students the opportunity to show their preferences and share some of their favorite music. When they noticed their classmates accepting and listening respectfully to their ideas, they started to realize that they should demonstrate the same respect and openness towards their classmates' ideas about other genres. Others' points of view were respected because students wanted their own opinions to be heard and respected as well. While students' roles included discussing, sharing and participating actively during the class activities, my role as a teacher involved establishing rules of interaction and talking about respecting differences. Also, I had to give language tools and guide cultural discussions so that students could recognize the importance of acknowledging others' cultural backgrounds before judging and rejecting them. As I reflected in my journal:

Then, I added that was why we cannot judge a genre without knowing its backgrounds, its topics and its history. Everybody agreed with that conclusion. With this activity I think that today [student name] perceived that their [sic] classmates respect their [sic] genre even if they do not share his passion for it. I think that was why he had a completely different attitude during the sharing activity, he was attentive, interested and respectful. (Teacher research journal)

My advisor also observed this change. She perceived that by sharing and discussing preferences, and background knowledge and experiences about the subtopics, students began to develop an understanding of common characteristics for some music genres, and a tolerance for others. As my advisor reflected,

[...] they realized that some representations were not mutually exclusive to a particular music genre. Perhaps, this activity might develop student tolerance towards different music genres and their representations. I believe that the final application activity encourages students to "put themselves in another person's shoes", for example, by choosing a music genre that is not their favorite

and then considering what they would wear and what activities they would do being that person. (Advisor rating checklist)

My CT also perceived a change in students with respect to their interest in the class, which included a more active participation without fear of being judged by others and a willingness to express a different point of view. She wrote:

They express their feelings freely.⁵ [...] They express their preferences and what they dislike about other music genres.⁶ [...] They learn a lot about their classmates' likes and trends while listening to their comments because they are very attentive and interested.⁷ (CT observation rating checklist)

However, at the beginning of the unit on music, group work was a problematic issue. Students were having conflicts in the groups they had arranged. They were not listening to their classmates' opinions and wanted to change their group or interaction pattern because of personal problems among themselves or just whim. I realized then that students were taking an active role in learning without being serious and responsible enough, and began to reflect on this situation:

This episode has made me think... and realize many things about the process my students and I are having with the project. What I see is that students are taking an extremely active role during their learning process because they have been given the right to take decisions about the contents, topic and activities of the unit and now they feel with the right of changing things just because they do not like something. This makes me wonder: To what extent is this positive? To what extent being too democratic facilitates the learning and teacher process? Is really good being democratic with this type of students (adolescents) who

are always changing their way of thinking and feelings? (Teacher research journal)

I understood that a teacher with authority and clear procedures was needed from the beginning of this process so that students could work better in groups and listen to their classmates' ideas and opinions. It was necessary for my CT and I to convey to students that even though they had made decisions about the course content and activities, they needed to follow the rules that were established in class. As we advanced through the units, students became more open-minded, required my interventions less frequently to solve their difficulties, and began to listen to each other.

I also had to guide students to solve their conflicts by talking among themselves and reaching agreements, and by creating an environment where all opinions were respected. Regarding this issue, I observed changes in participants' roles that, according to El Karfa (2007), usually happen with instruction that is learner-centered. I became a facilitator whose work, according to Owen and Saddler (1999, p. 14, as cited in El Karfa, 2007, p. 1), is "...to create a safe space within which people can work"; safe meaning a space where students can share their ideas and opinions without feeling any kind of pressure.

The majority of the students also became aware of this change and of their increased tolerance of different points of view during class activities and discussions. They recognized that they had become more open and accepting of their classmates' opinions about music genres they were previously reluctant to learn about. Students expressed this new attitude:

I learned many things about different genres in which I was not interested at all. I discovered new things about the genres

5 Original Spanish: "Ellos expresan sus sentimientos espontáneamente".

6 Original Spanish: "Expresan sus preferencias y lo que les disgusta acerca de otros géneros musicales".

7 Original Spanish: "Ellos aprenden mucho de los gustos y tendencias de sus compañeros al escuchar sus comentarios porque todos están atentos y muy interesados".

and I would love to continue learning more about them.⁸
I learned about other genres cultures and why they listen to that music.⁹ (Student feedback card)

El Karfa (2007) states that whole class discussions and group work can help students to develop tolerance and mutual respect.

Students also reported positive perceptions related to their achievement of the human dimension learning goals for both subtopics in Table 1. Eighteen students completed the rating checklist during the first subtopic –history of music genres–, and seventeen during the second subtopic –music symbols and lifestyles. Students reviewed the learning goals before assessing their performance.

One of the most important findings during my research project was that most students actually experienced and perceived a change with the human dimension and reported having achieved the goals for this dimension for both subtopics. As most of the information and discussions about the topic came from their cultural background, students began to recognize and understand that each of them had background experiences that made them prefer one music genre. They also realized through group work, class activities and discussions that even if they were different in preferring other genres, there were similarities among the genres related to history, lifestyle, symbols, and clothes. This led us to conclude, in accordance with Dee Fink's (2003) theory of significant learning, that students indeed had a significant learning experience since they experienced a transformation in one of the di-

mensions. Moreover, students had a collaborative experience that put them in contact with different views of the world, which leads to meaningful and significant learning according to Jonassen et al. (1999, as cited in Bhattacharya, 2002).

Students' work samples also demonstrated that they were able to see themselves as part of a different music genre and lifestyle. Students were quite motivated with this work after knowing more details about the different genres and their histories, life-styles, and backgrounds.

I further noticed a change in students' attitudes towards learning English during this unit. Before this intervention with this group, students had negative attitudes and thought that English was difficult to learn and they did not have the abilities to learn it successfully. However, over time, I began to see that my students were more confident, motivated to learn, and able to use English meaningfully. As I reflected in my journal:

Another important thing I saw was that students finally believe they can use English in a meaningful way and they finally saw themselves achieving something they thought it was impossible. I think we have made a change in the perceptions students have about English and about them learning English. (Teacher research journal)

I wanted my students to have an active role, reflecting on their learning process and achievement of the learning goals. In this way, I tried to transform goal setting into an act of communication so that the learning process could be more successful. I gave the students the opportunity to experience the reflective and intentional nature that learning should have, which is associated with meaningful and significant learning, according to Jonassen et al. (1999, as cited in Bhattacharya, 2002), and Dee Fink (2003).

Throughout this process, I communicated to students that I wanted them to keep in mind the

8 Original Spanish: "Aprendí muchas cosas sobre diferentes géneros por los cuales no he demostrado ningún interés de aprender. Descubrí nuevas cosas de géneros y me encantaría seguir aprendiendo más de ellos".

9 Original Spanish: "Aprendí acerca de otros tipos de culturas y por qué ellos escuchan esa música".

Table 1. Students' perceptions of achievement with human dimension goals

Learning goals	Subtopic	Excellent		Good		Fair	
		Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 1	Goal 2
Human	1	11.61%	9.50%	6.33%	8.44%	1.5 %	1.5%
	2	10.58 %	10.58%	6.35%	7.41 %	1.5 %	NA [*]

* No goal 2.

learning goals of the topics and subtopics. For this purpose, I used wall posters with the goals, a written agenda on the board, and whole class discussions. I also gave students the goals on slips of paper so that we could refer to them regularly and reflect on the learning process. My role turned more into that of a guide who proposed the agenda, and who motivated and gave students a chance to reflect actively on their learning process during class. My advisor and CT recognized this role and the importance I gave to both communicating the agenda and goals and having students reflect on their achievements. Regarding this issue, my advisor expressed:

In this class, you asked students to take out their sheets with the second unit subtopic goals, and think about which objectives they have reached or not. Most students were engaged. Students re-read the subtopic goals orally in class and then gave their opinion... I perceived that students were familiar with the goals and quite capable of reflecting on whether they had achieved them or not. (Advisor rating checklist)

This activity enabled students to have clear learning purposes and adopt a more active and reflective role towards their learning process. Moreover, while reflecting, I realized students improved their self-confidence and adopted a different perception about learning English. In fact, students

started to personalize goals and refer to them as theirs: "I have achieved all my goals"¹⁰ (Student rating checklist); and, "Until now, nothing has hindered me in achieving my goals"¹¹ (Student rating checklist). This personalization of goals showed that learning was enhanced. Researchers at the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (n.d.) refer to students taking ownership of their learning goals as a process which helps focus students' learning. Reading through those reflections, I understood that students were recognizing that they were learning and achieving the goals we had previously established and agreed upon. The majority of the students acknowledged they were achieving all their learning goals and that the new topic-based unit and activities had helped them do so.

The nature and organization of the music topic also helped students experience the integration dimension. They recognized they were not only learning about grammar, but about a topic that was relevant, interesting and useful for them. All participants agreed that the topic was very interesting for students and the activities and materials led to more meaningful and significant experiences.

¹⁰ Original Spanish: "He alcanzado todas mis metas".

¹¹ Original Spanish: "Hasta ahora nada me ha impedido cumplir mis metas".

Thus, students were personally engaged during the development of the topic and were able to establish permanent connections between the content and their real context and experiences. In this sense, learning became more authentic (Jonassen et al., 1999, as cited in Bhattacharya, 2002) as it was connected to students' real life experiences and background (Dee Fink, 2003), which characterizes significant learning.

During my classes, my CT and advisor agreed that the topic was interesting and motivating for students since they chose it for the unit and it could be applied to their life experiences and knowledge. (CT, Advisor rating checklist) Furthermore, my advisor noticed that students were making connections between the topic and their lives. She expressed in a rating checklist: "In your lesson, you gave students the opportunity to link the topic – music genre of hip-hop– to their lives. You asked students questions and made comments about hip-hop that enabled students to connect it to their lives". In this sense I realized another change in the participants' roles. Students started to make connections by themselves, guided and motivated by my questions and comments.

Regarding whether working with a topic-based unit was significant for students, they all answered affirmatively. Most of their comments indicated that they were motivated and enjoyed the unit:

Yes, because we learned about what we like the most: music genres.¹²

Yes, because I have learned very easily and it is a topic I like a lot.¹³

Yes, because I have realized I have learned a lot with this new learning methodology.¹⁴ (Student rating checklist)

¹² Original Spanish: "Sí, porque aprendimos de lo que más nos gusta, géneros musicales".

¹³ Original Spanish: "Sí, porque he aprendido muy fácil y es un tema que me gusta mucho".

¹⁴ Original Spanish: "Sí, porque he visto que he aprendido más con este método de aprendizaje".

I think that this corroborates Thanasoulas' (2002) proposition that if we want our students to be more successful and motivated learners, we should find their relevant topics and integrate them into the curriculum.

The topic and subtopics enabled me to present, link and recycle content and grammar in a meaningful way, including integrating language from the students' cultural background experiences. After students practiced the language required for the different activities several times in class, they realized they could give important information about the topic during our discussions and activities while using the grammar structures they learned and their background knowledge of the music genres (Teacher research journal). My CT also realized that students were trying to recycle structures to give opinions about the class discussions (CT rating checklist). My advisor agreed and wrote on the rating checklists that I gave students opportunities to "...connect previous ideas, both topic content and grammar, by using standard questions about a music genre during the warm-up activity"; and "to integrate grammar with the topic in a meaningful and inductive way". Students had a more active role with this dimension, being responsible for building and integrating knowledge with guidance and support. I realized the topics were useful to produce cohesive and meaningful learning, and allowed students to reuse knowledge and topics in a variety of different contexts, which is promoted by the Faculty for Applied Science Resource Center (2000).

Many students perceived that they had achieved the integration goals, although a few reported not having done so well for both subtopics, in Table 2.

Samples of students' products showed that many of them were successful with integrating language and content to express their ideas and knowledge about the topic. Overall, students were

Table 2. Students' perceptions of achievement with integration dimension goals

Learning goals	Subtopic	Excellent		Good		Fair	
		Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 1	Goal 2
Integration	1	2.11 %	5.27%	14.77%	10.55%	2.11%	3.16%
	2	12.70%	5.29%	4.23%	11.65%	1.6%	1.6%

Table 3. Students' perceptions of achievement with application dimension goals

Learning goals	Subtopic	Excellent		Good		Fair	
		Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 1	Goal 2
Application	1	8.44%	7.41%	7.41%	9.50%	3.17%	2.36%
	2	2.12%	12.70%	12.70%	4.23%	3.18%	1.6%

able to build more complex sentences and to recycle grammar and vocabulary from previous lessons. However, a number of students with low language ability had more difficulties with this dimension. Their products contained isolated words or a few short sentences. Yet, I recalled that a number of these students hardly wrote in English at the start of the semester. I realized that they would have benefited from additional material and activities with alternative grouping arrangements to reach their classmates' language level.

Regarding the application dimension, I reflected that I did not propose enough activities and materials that would let students explore this dimension during the development of the subtopics due to a lack of time during my practicum (Teacher research journal). It seemed that students had a chance to explore this dimension with the final product of each subtopic, which is a possibility according to Dee Fink (2003). My advisor and CT strongly agreed on their rating checklists that

students applied content of the topic and language in the hands-on activities for the two subtopics. My advisor wrote, "I believe that all students were able to apply their knowledge about their music genre in a final product –a hand-made poster–answering wh-questions"; "Your last activity in this lesson is an example of a hands-on activity as well as an application activity".

Also, students believed that the most significant learning activities for the application dimension during the two subtopics were developed with surveys, posters, and cartoons (Student feedback cards; Student rating checklists). Students expressed wanting to share what they had applied during the class with their families and friends (Student feedback cards; Student rating checklists). One could say that students' intentions illustrate Brown's (1994) notion of permanence in students' learning. These students wanted to share the knowledge they acquired in class in real life contexts outside the classroom.

Students believed they had achieved the significant learning goals related to application in Table 3.

While reviewing my students' final products, I realized that many of them applied what they had learned about the target language and the topic with a creative, hands-on activity. The students with better language ability did very well with the written part as well as the oral presentation of the products. They were able to build meaningful and logical pieces of information and share this information with their classmates. Even those students' products with low language ability revealed that despite difficulties students had building sentences, English was used to communicate information and ideas.

Conclusion

English foreign language students in public high schools in Colombia can experience significant learning experiences leading to change by participating in the design and implementation of a topic-based unit.

The topic-based unit becomes a useful strategy to allow teachers and students to take on new roles in the teaching-learning process. For example, teachers can become active planners and communicators of significant learning goals, designers and organizers of activities and materials to achieve these goals, providers of content and language, and facilitators and motivators of learning. Equally important, students can be active learners with roles such as decision-makers of learning content, products and group members, information sharers and active listeners, as well as reflective learners and evaluators of their learning process and achievements.

Moreover, new roles for students can contribute to significant learning when goals and activities relate to Dee Fink's (2003) human, integration and application dimensions. Students can express and share their opinions about relevant and meaningful topics, and learn about others while becoming

more tolerant and respectful of different points of views. Additionally, students can establish meaningful links between content and language to their lives, and use what they learn in creative expression. Students can become more interested in learning English, and reflect on their success with learning achievements.

Significant learning for students can be promoted by teachers and students together negotiating what and how they want to learn with a topic-based unit. Constant dialogue about learning goals and activities during the implementation of the unit is important, as well as reflection on learning. In this way, EFL public high school instruction can include significant learning experiences in their courses. The rewards of shifting towards a student-centered approach to learning is worthwhile, and outweighs any challenges.

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Appendix 1: Unit 2. Music Genres

Topic: Our favorite music genres: Origins and characteristics.

Unit Goals: Students will:

- learn about different music genres, their origins and representations (Integration);
- share their likes and interests of music genres (Human);
- identify similarities + differences among their preferences for music genres (Human);
- describe the history of their favorite music genre and representations (Integration);
- ask and answer questions in English about the unit subtopics (Integration);
- create a music poster exhibition with information about their music genres (Application).

Weeks	Objectives		
	Integration	Human	Application
Subtopic 1. Origins and history of our favorite music genres			
1	Identify, describe important information about favorite music genre in writing (When? Where? Who?).	Share likes + preferences for music genres, small groups.	
2	Compare favorite music genre history to others, in writing and orally.	Share, notice + understand different music preferences.	Illustrate + present a poster with important facts of favorite music genre (e.g. dates, artists, songs).
3	Compare origins + history of different music genres, in writing (timeline), share orally.		Draw + present timelines to class.
Subtopic 2. Music symbols and lifestyles			
4	Recognize musical instruments of music genres + characteristics. Identify + describe symbols, clothes, accessories that define music genres in writing, present orally.	Share + notice the background, cultural richness of music genres.	Show + present visual with representations of music genres.
5	Hypothesize about the lifestyle they would have if they liked another music genre. Connect to symbols, clothes.	Place yourself in a different music genre lifestyle.	
6	Invent + describe a fictitious character who represents their point of view of a different music genre.	Explain your point of view of a different music genre to classmates.	Draw, label + describe a fictitious character who represents and illustrates their point of view of another music genre.