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Issue 1

ELT Voices

By Teachers For Teachers

A collection of articles by UVG students

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DEL VALLE
DE GUATEMALA

Simple Strategies for Student-Centered Learning

Decision-making Based on Data Analysis

Overcoming Boredom in Virtual Classrooms

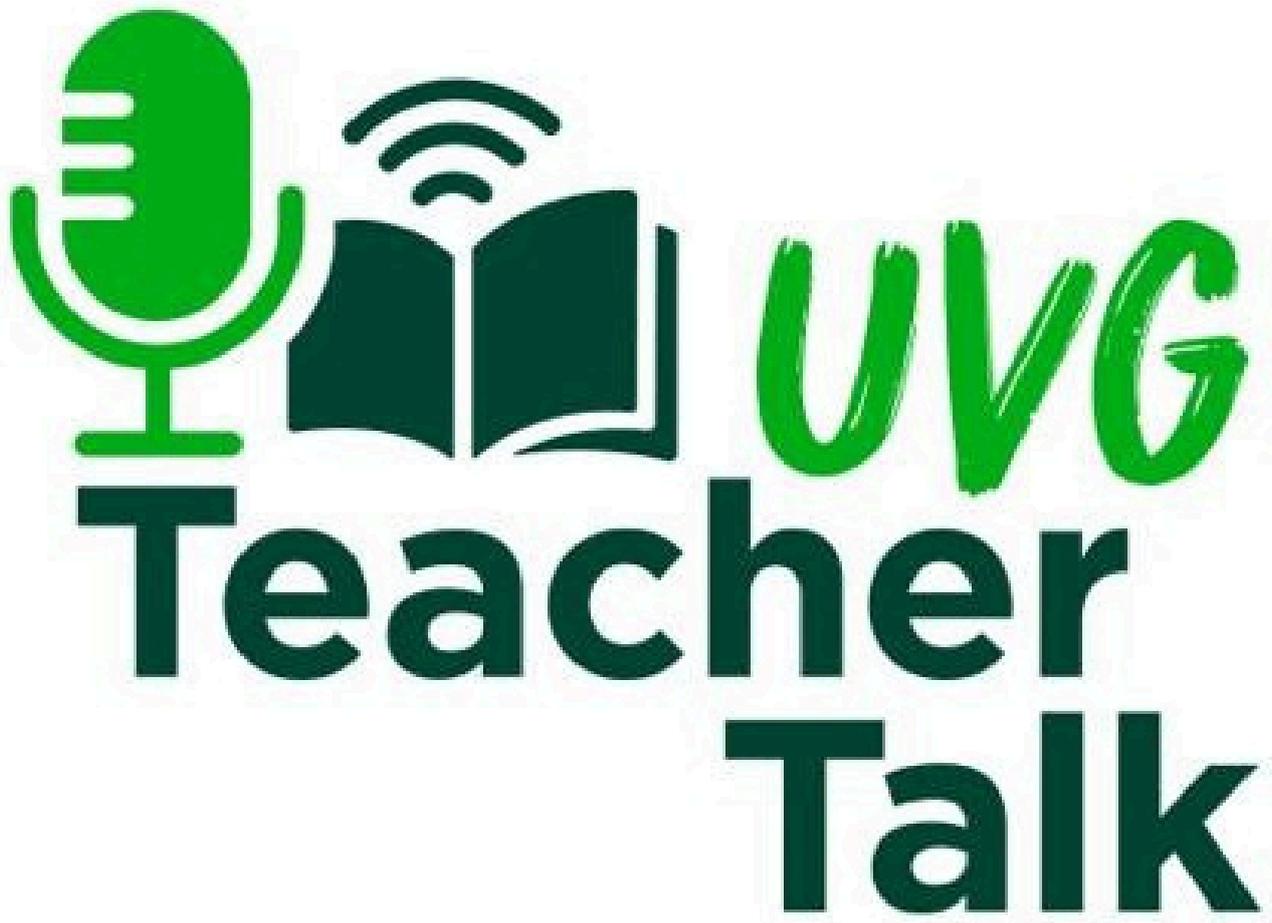
Grammar with Personality

Using ChatGPT for Parent-Teacher Communication

Designing Lesson Materials without the Burden

Turning Challenges into Creative Learning

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Preparing a team of astronauts implies a lot of planning, structure, effort, and discipline from both the administration and teaching staff, as well as from the astronauts themselves. Preparing ELT professionals is somehow similar, as there are dreams, adrenaline, and a clear objective to upscale humanity through a specific discipline.

LETTER *From the* EDITOR

Empowering individuals for a better future in the academic, professional, and personal areas is what ELT professionals do. At UVG, we believe that Guatemala deserves the best English language professionals, not only to teach but also to design ELT programs, manage teams, make decisions based on data, and transform the way people learn, speak, and lead.

This year, an outstanding group of Year 5 students shared their reflections, best practices, and anecdotes with readers interested in the ELT world to lend a hand for the many day-to-day challenges that being a teacher of English as a foreign language represents. It gives me great pleasure and enormous pride to introduce this magazine with the hope that the soul, effort, and voices of my students will bring light and innovation to other professionals who may be struggling with similar situations. As they take off into the universe of ELT, I am sure their impressive critical thinking and effective communication skills will continue to grow and empower others through English. The leadership and support of our ELT Fellow, Tim Thompson, was key to completing this endeavor. On behalf of the ELT department at UVG, I hope you enjoy this reading journey and learn from it.

Karin Rossbach

LETTER

from the

DEAN

Welcome to ELT Voices, the yearly magazine that portrays insights, creativity, and the academic growth of last-year students from the English Language Teaching Program at Universidad del Valle de Guatemala, reviewed by ELT university professionals from other countries. Each article featured in this edition reflects the authors' passion for education, their commitment to continuous improvement, and their desire to contribute meaningfully to the ELT community.

The content you will find here is designed to inspire reflection and spark meaningful dialogue. Every article can be used for group discussions, personal reflection, and reconsidering daily teaching practices, but also for professional development sessions, peer observation debriefings, teacher training workshops, and curriculum review meetings. The topics explored invite readers to question, innovate, and connect theory with real classroom experiences in the Guatemalan and global ELT contexts.

Make the best use of it in your ELT teams and departments across your country and Guatemala, and at different levels of educational systems.



We invite you to approach each article with curiosity and openness. Let these voices challenge your perspectives, enrich your teaching practice, and remind you of the transformative power of education. May this collection serve as both a source of inspiration and a call to action—to continue learning, growing, and shaping the future of English language teaching with purpose and passion.

Carolina Roca

Testimonials



Matthew Allen - Purdue University

ELT Voices is more than a student project—it's a meaningful contribution to a global community of English language educators. The magazine beautifully showcases the authors' thoughtful inquiry and vibrant voices, offering useful insights on a range of ELT topics, from grammar to cutting edge technologies.



Whitney Sarvar - University of Mississippi

The experiences, difficulties, solutions, and successes of educators in the field make ELT Voices the perfect platform for in-training, new, and veteran teachers. This publication is a great resource that contributes to our community of practice, and it offers encouragement, inspiration, and a reminder that we all face similar challenges in our classrooms. By sharing real experiences and practical ideas, ELT Voices helps us stay connected to each other and to the heart of teaching.

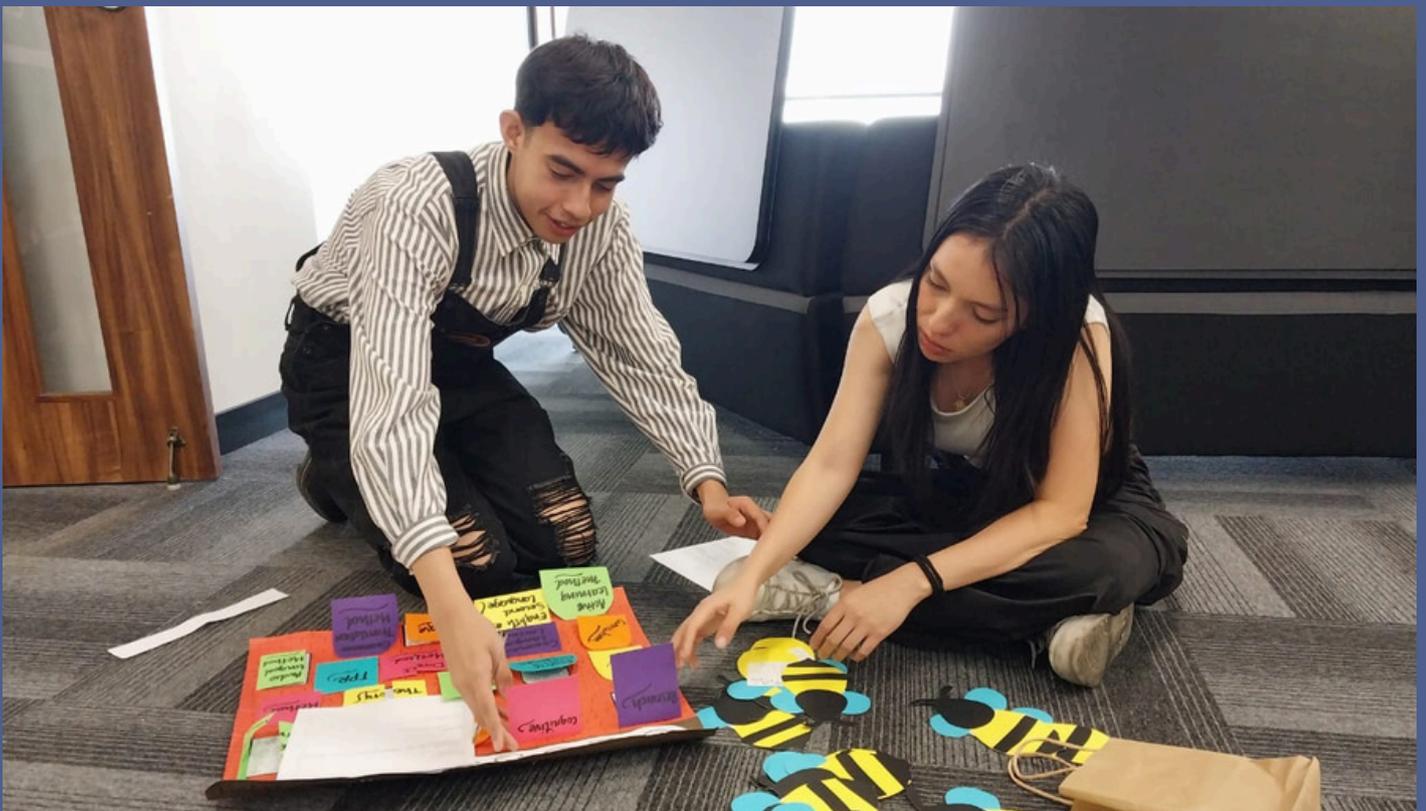


Max Diaz - The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Having a platform that functions as a community of practice is critical to empowering educators, practitioners, and, of course, students. ELT Voices goes a long way toward making the field of ELT one that truly helps learners and allows fellow educators to continue improving their own understanding of critical concepts in language education.

Two Simple Strategies for Student-Centered Learning

Students often become disengaged because the focus remains solely on the teacher



By Paula Auyón

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About the Author

Paula Auyón is an elementary educator from Guatemala City who enjoys working closely with young learners and helping create meaningful classroom experiences. She's currently specializing in English Language Teaching and is especially interested in how thoughtful classroom management can build stronger connections and keep students engaged.



Overcoming Boredom in Virtual EFL Classrooms

Online teaching and learning have amplified some issues related to learner engagement, attention, and motivation, especially among adult learners.

By Daniel Talé

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) presents unique challenges, particularly in virtual environments which have been shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Online teaching and learning have amplified some issues related to learner engagement, attention, and motivation, especially among adult learners. According to Lee (2025), social media addiction affects 21% to 40% of adults between 18 and 64 years old, therefore impacting their attention time in virtual classrooms. This also aligns with the cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2023), suggesting that excessive and redundant information reduces working memory capacity and negatively affects learning. This represents a major problem for teachers keeping up with the attention span of students since it is so easy for them to just switch tabs and start checking their favorite social media sites.

Thus, you might ask: What can I do to keep my students engaged? Or what can I do to improve the way I conduct my lessons? The following are some of the common errors I have identified in my classroom and the solutions to overcome them.

Common teacher mistakes (and their treatment)

#1. Excessive Teacher Talk Time (TTT)

I used to need to do a lot of class preparation, often feeling like it was too much: reviewing materials, adding extra content, and delivering long explanations. I mistakenly used to believe that extensive input would ensure understanding. However, when I asked my students, “Did you understand?”, students would nod their heads politely, yet their later performance revealed the opposite. They were not really engaged; they were just being polite.

This pattern made me reflect on my teacher talk time (TTT). Distractions are just a click away, especially when it comes to virtual classrooms, which can turn extended explanations into students’ disengagement. Research from Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Popovikj (2019) indicates that, for ESL/EFL classrooms, the 70/30 figure (where students participate 70% of the classroom time and teachers 30%), works well in most classroom settings. I now design lessons with small group discussion slots, peer tasks, and reflective questions that prompt learners to utilize and produce target language collaboratively.



I started to ask about their hobbies, previous jobs (if any), and goals during icebreakers, and used that valuable resource to build lessons that would resonate with their contexts.

#2. Activities Without Relevance or a Clear Purpose

Based on my teaching experience, classroom energy often drops when learners cannot find a clear purpose or connection to their lives. This happens more frequently when teaching adult learners, who tend to be more goal-oriented and strongly value practical applications. When tasks feel disconnected from real-world contexts, adult learners disengage from the task; often turning to scrolling on social media. After all, if the task does not feel like it connects to their everyday lives, why would someone bother to work on something they consider useless? This pattern connects directly with the learning theory called Andragogy (Knowles et al., 2014, as cited in Ferreira, 2025), which states that adults are more motivated when content is relevant and applicable.

To solve this problem, I began designing activities that represent chunks of my students' lives. I started to ask about their hobbies, previous jobs (if any), and goals during icebreakers, and used that valuable resource to build lessons that would resonate with their contexts. Some of the most recent tasks involved taking phone calls from customers, talking about their abilities, discussing solutions to workplace challenges, or analyzing current pop culture trends. I also make sure to share the lesson objectives at the beginning of each lesson, so that my students understand the purpose behind each activity.

After these changes, I not only noticed more attention from my students, but I discovered that they would also share more deeply what they had done when they had faced the same situation. Once students see both the relevance and the goal clearly, they are more likely to engage meaningfully.

#3. Too Little or Too Much Time in Breakout Rooms

Managing breakout room timing can be surprisingly tricky. I have noticed that, in virtual classrooms, giving students too little time to complete a task leads to frustration and leads to lower interest in participating meaningfully. On the other hand, giving too much time can result in early task completion, which is followed by students not taking advantage of the additional time and performing off-task activities. Both situations are more likely to contribute to having disengaged students during the rest of the class.

In my classroom setting, which is made up of 18 to 24 adult students, I began observing how long my fastest and slowest students took to complete tasks. My findings pointed out that the average time was 8-12 minutes for most collaborative tasks. I also give students a clear goal before sending them to breakout rooms and use reminders to keep them on task. These practices have helped me keep students focused, reduce frustration, and ensure tasks in breakout rooms remain purposeful and productive.

#4. Oversized Virtual Breakout Rooms

In virtual classrooms, assigning large groups of students into breakout rooms often leads to uneven participation. In my early days of teaching, I would assign groups of five or six students. Surprisingly, this practice led at least one student to totally disengage from activities; turning cameras off, staying silent, or letting two people do all the interaction were the most common reactions to this dynamic.

To solve the problem and enhance active participation, I now limit breakout groups to two to four members depending on the task. This size allows for more even speaking time and offers the opportunity to share and get different perspectives at the same time as student exchange practice new target vocabulary. Combined with the correct breakout room time, each student should have at least two minutes to meaningfully contribute to the conversation in this new dynamic. This practice has helped me keep students more engaged, productive, and evenly participating.

Conclusion

Virtual disengagement in adult classrooms goes far beyond technical issues; it involves adult learning-related challenges that demand planning, reflection, and adaptation from the teacher. Through my own teaching journey, I have identified patterns that lead to boredom and disengagement in online adult EFL settings: excessive teacher talk, irrelevant activities, poorly timed activities, and oversized groups in breakout sessions. Each of these must be reframed from practical and adult-learning strategies that can restore classroom engagement and participation in the virtual learning environment.

By designing meaningful tasks, managing time accurately, structuring group work, and including activities related to our students' goals, we can create an online environment where adult learners feel challenged, motivated, and purposefully engaged. In virtual classrooms, careful attention to these details and real-life applications matter more than keeping students "busy" with empty and meaningless activities.

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3

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Designing Lesson Materials without the Burden

By Irene Solares

Designing your own teaching materials can be sometimes frustrating or even annoying since ELT teachers are always planning, correcting, monitoring, and curating topics. This often happens outside their teaching time, which requires sitting for long hours and dedicating a significant amount of creativity. I know that by just reading this, you are feeling overwhelmed, too. It is hard to find time to create a lesson plan, review it, and then put everything into neat slides; however, slide design is a very important element if you want your learners to engage in every lesson and find it meaningful. In this article, you will find very useful tips if you are diving into the design side of teaching, no matter whether you are a novice or an experienced educator.

1. Keep Your Layout Clean and Focused

I recommend not putting everything together on one page just because it all looks important. If you do this, you will end up with an overloaded page that will be hard to follow in class, and even you, the teacher, will get lost. When creating your own teaching materials, think of the types of resources you like to see or read. Think of the last lesson material you saw, and you thought, “I love the design because it is simple yet creative.” This is what will make your materials more understandable for your learners. The layout depends on how clearly and logically you put your content into a canvas, and balancing the elements will give it a clean look. Start by creating a layout in a draft, meaning that you have to do some brainstorming first, where you will include the title, subtitles, body text (don’t focus on how long it will be yet), colours, school grade, English level, or type of audience. The most important element is your audience, since this will guide the type of design you are looking for in icons and images.

2. White spaces

The white canvas is always intimidating, isn’t it? But here’s the trick: If you are now satisfied with the previous draft, you can start filling in the blank space as well as deciding how much info you want to include, and if you will send the material to your students or if it will only be used in class. This will help you think of the material as an aid or as a study guide. As with any other skill, designing requires practice, so if this is the first time you’re doing it, don’t overwhelm yourself with doing the design, text, and images all together; this will only delay the process.

No matter how playful the topic might be, your text should always remain formal; the standard fonts are Arial, Calibri, Helvetica, or Open Sans.

Instead, focus on adding your titles, the text box that should match it, and a description of the image or icon that will accompany it. This is still a draft, but it will give you an idea of how well the content will be perceived by your students in terms of balance, focus, and readability. For example, if the space between the text and the image is close, then you are using it to illustrate the text, but if the space is bigger, the learner might not associate it with the text.

3. Typography

This is another element that can give you a hard time. However, it is the second most important since it will guide your learners' attention, and if used correctly, the text will be recorded in your students' memory. A practical and easy rule is following the h1-h6 standard, or what I like to call "the double titles rule," which establishes an orderly structure for the titles and subtitles. For example, if your main title is font size 14, the subtitle after that one should be 12, the next one 10, and so on. It is done this way so the reader identifies the text hierarchy and importance. When it comes to body text, the recommended font size is 11, but you can play around with it depending on the space available on your canvas. After all these technical guidelines, you might be wondering what the best font is to use.

No matter how playful the topic might be, your text should always remain formal; the standard fonts are Arial, Calibri, Helvetica, or Open Sans. You can use a more creative font for titles, but avoid using them in body so they don't distract your students or make the text more difficult for them read.

4. Colour

We are now in the most expressive element of your design. Think of when you're preparing for that day and selecting an appropriate "outfit". Your design will set the mood and the meaning of the topic. When choosing the colour, never forget about your audience. If you are teaching children, they most likely will pay attention to something colourful, but be careful, you might create something distracting instead of eye-catching. Primary and secondary colours can be a good match, and you can even assign a meaning to each colour. For example, using blue for verbs and orange for nouns.

If you work with teenagers, the same chromatic range can work, but the colour load will be less compared to the amount of text. For this audience, you can start using primary, secondary, and tertiary tones or shades. Lastly, another important consideration is cultural meaning. Colours do not mean the same everywhere – white symbolises purity in some countries but mourning in others. Take a few minutes to research colour palettes if you're teaching international learners, and if not, still do some research and be a good observer so your students' favourite colours are also represented and they become part of the lesson.

5. Navigation

As in every other part of your lessons, the design should follow a logical order so it's comfortable for your learners to follow during or after class. If you are a tech-savvy teacher, responsive design, such as features that fade in or interact with sound volume, can do the trick. For example, when introducing a new grammar point, you might reveal the title first, then the explanation, followed by an illustrative image or example sentence.

GenAI can be a huge help, but always make sure not to rely completely on it. If you prefer to give printouts, it's always a good idea to create some space for notes and keep a structured layout; this way, students won't just discard your work.

6. Consistency

Over time, your students will notice that you have a design pattern, so make sure to use this to your advantage. Keep the same style for your presentations or documents, and avoid changing the design each time you create something, since this will give you extra work and will not create an instant bond with your students.

7. Images and diagrams

Choosing the right photo or icon is always hard since you might need to match the style of your materials. Here is where you need to choose which elements will be part of your teaching style. As I mentioned before, you need to consider who your audience is before doing this.

a. Images/Photos: There is a wide variety of websites that can be useful if you are looking for real photography, but the ones I would recommend are Shutterstock, Freepik, and Canva. Shutterstock needs a membership, but if you want to invest in a top-level source, this might be the one. Freepik can give you more free resources and even generate AI images according to your specific context. Canva has free and paid resources, but the images are revised, and the variety of icons can save your life if you're in a rush.

b. Diagrams / Charts: Canva also has plenty of options for creating charts, but sometimes you simply don't have time to find the perfect one. GenAI tools can become invaluable here. For instance, Napkin AI allows you to paste your text and automatically generates a chart. You can choose the version that best fits your lesson. If you were explaining the frequency of different verbs in English, Napkin could quickly create a bar chart showing the most common verbs, saving you time while making your explanation visually clear.

Takeaway

Designing effective ELT teaching materials is as much an art as it is a skill. By considering your learners' needs, maintaining clarity, and balancing structure with creativity, you can create resources that are both engaging and memorable. Attention to layout, typography, colour, and consistency not only enhance comprehension but also foster a positive learning environment in every classroom you set foot in. The thoughtful use of images, diagrams, and navigation ensures that your materials guide students seamlessly through the lesson. Remember, a well-designed resource reflects that you care.

About the Author

Irene Solares is an experienced language educator and content creator with a background in teaching English and French to adult learners. With a passion for making language learning engaging and practical, she has helped learners develop strong communication skills in multicultural environments. Currently, she works as a Content Creator in the Learning and Development department at TELUS International, where she designs and develops learning materials that support professional growth and continuous improvement. Combining expertise in language education and instructional design, Irene creates impactful content that empowers global teams to learn and collaborate effectively.



Decision-making Based on Data Analysis

Data analysis used for decision making applies to many problems within the classroom and many moments throughout the school year.

By Luisa F. Morales

Introduction

It's the end of the school year. The bell rings intensely but not as loud as the students' severe shouting. They pack their things in their backpacks to run away from the battlefield. The sound of them dashing home marks the end of the battle, but not the end of the war. Have you ever felt like the end of the school year makes you go into survival mode? Students get chattier and overly energetic. Teachers get easily frustrated trying to teach a class where students are simply not open to learning. I have certainly felt like that, and this same frustration led me to test a plan to find a solution to the problem that I have struggled with every single year since I started teaching.

The problem that started it all

I would go to the teachers' lounge and encounter many teachers—including myself—complaining about how students just wanted to chat with their friends, making it almost impossible to present a learning experience that would be attractive enough to interest them. I realized this would happen every year—usually at the end of each term. This would leave me feeling helpless and lead to poor classroom management.

However, I kept thinking about how I could turn this nightmare into something good. How could I keep those last days of the term from becoming insufferable both for them and for me? What could I do differently? Then I finally hit the nail on the head.

What I did

Here's where analytics and data-based decision-making (DBDM) come in. As Hebbeker et al. exposed in 2022 through their study published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, the idea of DBDM is to guide teachers toward using assessment data to adapt their instruction to students' needs and improve students' learning progress. So, I used that principle and started gathering data to monitor the moments throughout the day in which students would have more interaction in class. In other words, I observed them and tallied how many times they disrupted the lesson by either interrupting me or making a comment to a classmate. I also divided the school day into three blocks: early (before the first break), middle (between the first and second break), and late (after the second break). I observed and tallied class disruption for a week, and what I found helped me make decisions based on the collected data to transform disruptions into interactions.



Learning occurs naturally. In the mornings, students are focused on their personal tasks, and in the evenings, they are so busy interacting with their peers that they tend not to realize that learning is happening.

What I found

It turns out that students were less likely to disrupt the class during the mornings. As the day went by, they would get chattier and more energetic, so the block in which they would disrupt the class the most was the late one. Equipped with this new knowledge, I started changing my lesson plans and left the receptive activities for both the early and middle blocks (reading analysis, listening practices, individual work) and assigned the productive activities (student interaction through discussions, vocabulary planned interactions, retelling, speaking practices and collaborative assignments) for the late block. And let me tell you, my students and I started having the best time in class. They were not fighting their human nature and impulses, and I was no longer swimming against the current, all thanks to my instructional decision-making changing the way I was doing things to fit my students' needs (McKean, 2025).

Results and what to do

1) Students have a better time. They get to chat and be energetic without a stubborn teacher constantly trying to shush them. So, make sure you include more student-centered and interactive activities where they can have time in class to do what they want to do the most: chat. Low-key, trick them into not noticing that learning is happening.

2) Teachers have a better time as well. Let them do the magic and be the ones who take the leading role in their learning process. Of course, do not expect the class to be quiet, but expect them to use their energy instead of draining yours. As more student-student interactions take place, there is less need for teacher-student interactions. Instead, you focus on monitoring and mentoring.

3) Engagement increases. The disruptiveness will turn into class interaction and engagement because it will be about the task they are completing. Of course, there is the risk that students will still chat about something unrelated to the class activity, but take a breath and guide them back on track. Even if they speak about something else, they are still using the language, so take it as a win.

4) Learning occurs naturally. In the mornings, students are focused on their personal tasks, and later in the day, they are so busy interacting with their peers that they tend not to realize that learning is happening. Do not force students into using the language, but rather give them the time, opportunities, and tools to do so.

5) Early blocks can be effectively used for receptive activities. You can include reading activities, analysis, or writing tasks during the early blocks, which will help them run smoothly. The point of it is matching class activities to student energy and interactions to increase the effectiveness of your lessons. It is a win-win.

6) It works for everyone. You might be surprised if I told you that this analysis of data was conducted in a first grade classroom, but it works wonders for other grades as well. No matter what grade you teach, you can always find a problem, collect data, and make decisions based on your findings (Brown et al., 2020). It may not always work, but it is worth trying. Even if it fails, it is still data you can utilize to make future decisions.

Conclusions

1. Weaknesses can always be transformed into opportunities if they are seen with the right eyes. Although not all decisions might work with all your groups of students, data collection can play a significant role in decision making because all groups are different. So, the more data you collect, the better. Sometimes you will even need to start all over again, but this is part of the DBDM process (Hebbecker et al., 2022). Be fearless.
2. It is not about surviving with what you can “possibly” do but rather bring the most effective practices possible into the classroom. Choosing the most effective practices might be the tricky part, but that is just another reason to implement data-based decision-making and try to understand it better.
3. Data analysis used for decision making applies to many problems within the classroom and many moments throughout the school year. No matter what grade or subject you teach, how many students you have, or what time of the school year it is, good things will happen if you are willing to put some effort into identifying the problem, collecting the data, making decisions, and trying different things until the issue is solved.
4. Student energy can be used as an advantage if it is channeled into proper and effective learning activities.
5. Indeed, classrooms can become a war zone—especially at the end of the term, but it is up to the teacher if we will stay in the trenches complaining and suffering about things that do not work or take the initiative of changing things for the better through decision making based on data analysis.

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About the Author

Lu is a 24-year-old Guatemalan teacher who has dedicated the past five years to educating, guiding, and mentoring children. She is a certified Montessori guide and is currently undertaking a degree in English Language Teaching at the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala. She has worked in preschool and lower elementary schools as a Language Arts teacher. Lu strongly believes in the positive impact of poetry, music, and humor when it comes to learning. She has been recognized as a well-structured, proactive, and caring teacher who helps students develop confidence and a growth mindset through second language learning.



Grammar with Personality

By Sara Ramirez

Let's be honest—grammar has had a rough time overcoming its negative reputation. For years, it's been branded as boring, repetitive, and mechanical... the broccoli of English lessons. Necessary, often a bit boring, but certainly not delicious for everyone. I can't blame my students for feeling that way. I used to teach grammar "by the book," with perfectly aligned slides, bullet points, and all the linguistic precision you could dream of. It was neat. It was organized. It was... quiet. Too quiet.

One day, I looked at my students and thought, "They're not learning—they're surviving." And that hit me hard, because grammar isn't supposed to feel like a punishment. It's supposed to be a way to understand how language breathes and moves. So, I decided to rebrand grammar.

From Rules to Stories

I started to ask myself: what if grammar didn't have to sound like a robot manual? What if it could sound like... us? That's how I stumbled onto the idea of grammar storytelling—turning grammar rules into tiny stories students can actually relate to.

It all started with a simple observation: Subject-Verb Agreement. The word "agreement" already sounds like a relationship term, doesn't it? And that's when Cupid's arrow struck!

The next morning, my students were greeted by a title slide that looked like this:



The Perfect Match:
When Subjects & Verbs
Fall in Love

Because in English, subjects and verbs are a grammar couple — and they need to agree to stay happy.

Everybody laughed. Some even said “Awww!” (Yes, over grammar!) Suddenly, the lesson felt alive. Now, “agreement” wasn’t a rule to memorize; it was a relationship drama to understand. That day, grammar stopped being grammar. It became a story.

The Birth of a Grammar Brand

Once that door opened, there was no going back. Every grammar topic became an opportunity to tell a new story. I started branding grammar—giving every structure a personality and a metaphor:

- Nouns: “The VIPs of English” – If words were a party, nouns would be the ones everyone was talking about.
- Pronouns: “The Masters of Disguise” - If English were a spy movie, pronouns would be the sneaky agents replacing names and stealing the show.
- Articles: “The Gatekeepers of English.” - If English were a VIP event, articles decide who gets in, and how special they are.

Soon, my slides looked less like grammar charts and more like mini movie posters. Each title had its own aesthetic, color scheme, and tone, something students could visually and emotionally connect to. And surprisingly, they began remembering the lessons.

When I’d ask a review question, someone would say, “Oh, that’s from the love story rule!” or “Sara, this is the one that we use for life updates, right?” They weren’t quoting definitions: they were quoting stories.

Why Storytelling Works (and Why Krashen Would Approve)

Now, you might be thinking, “Okay Sara, this sounds fun, but is there any theory behind all that glitter?” Absolutely!

Let’s call in our friend Stephen Krashen, the linguist behind the Affective Filter Hypothesis. He said that students learn best when they’re not stressed or anxious. And what lowers anxiety faster than laughter? When students connect emotionally (such as when they find grammar funny, cute, or even weirdly relatable) their affective filter drops. They’re not just memorizing; they’re absorbing.

Then there’s Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, which basically says we acquire language when we understand messages that matter to us. Storytelling turns “grammar input” into “meaningful input.” When students feel the metaphor, they remember the rule. And please, let’s not forget the Natural Order Hypothesis: the idea that language acquisition follows a natural sequence.

So, when grammar feels human and contextual, not mechanical, students allow that natural process to happen without fear or resistance.

So no, it’s not just cute slides and funny one-liners. It’s science with a sparkle.

What Happens in Class

The transformation has been wild, in the best way. My classroom used to be quiet and polite. Now it’s full of laughter, inside jokes, and “grammar gossip.” Students tease each other about grammar “relationships,” debate which verb tense travels the farthest, and even invent their own metaphors. I once had a student say, “Sara, I think pronouns are jealous of nouns, they always take the spotlight!” And honestly? He was right. We started using more nouns that day.

When grammar becomes a story, it becomes memory. And when students feel something, they own it.

Grammar with Heart

At the end of the day, this whole experiment reminded me why I teach. Grammar doesn’t have to be the villain in our classroom story. It can be the sidekick, the comic relief, the hero, or even the romantic lead! When we teach grammar with humor, emotion, and humanity, we’re not just teaching rules. We’re teaching students how to feel confident with language.

The purpose of this article isn't to tell you how to teach, but to remind you that you can and should dare to have fun with it.

So yes, grammar has a bad reputation, but maybe it's time for a glow-up. Because when grammar lessons make your students laugh, relate, and remember, that's when the real learning happens.

A Final Note: Your Classroom, Your Magic

This is my story, my approach, my way of turning grammar into something that feels alive. But you—you know your students best! You know what makes them laugh, what makes their eyes light up, and what topics spark their curiosity and confidence. The purpose of this article isn't to tell you how to teach, but to remind you that you can and should dare to have fun with it. Step out of your comfort zone. Experiment. Reimagine.

What worked for my learners is a reflection of my personality—playful, a little dramatic, and full of heart. But your classroom has its own rhythm, its own energy, and its own kind of magic. So find your grammar sparkle. Be your own superhero, your students' favorite storyteller, their safe space where mistakes are part of the plot and learning is the happy ending. Because at the end of the day, grammar isn't just about agreement—it's about connection.

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About the Author

Sara Ramírez is an English teacher with an Associate's degree in English Language Teaching and is about to complete her Bachelor's degree in Education. Passionate about creativity and emotional connections in the classroom, she believes grammar lessons should make students laugh, reflect, and feel. She has presented at two academic conferences, sharing her insights on teaching English with heart, humor, and humanity. Sara's mission is to transform the way learners experience learning English—one story, metaphor, and smile at a time. When she's not teaching, she's probably designing her next "grammar glow-up" presentation with extra sparkle and sass.





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Turning Challenges into Creative Learning

By Naty Soto

Introduction

Textbooks remain one of the most influential tools in language teaching because they shape the way students experience learning in the classroom. A good textbook can make lessons more engaging and support both teachers and students by offering clear explanations, creative activities, and opportunities to build different language skills. However, when a textbook is poorly designed or disconnected from students' needs, it can quickly become a limitation rather than a support (Richards, 2015).

In my teaching experience, I worked with a textbook that only contained ten units. I was required to use it across four different courses: Conversation, Reading, Grammar, and Spelling. I had to stretch the content to cover four bimesters, yet I often finished units in less than a week because the material was repetitive and overly simple. Each unit included only one grammar topic without explanations, examples, or even a clear title such as Past Perfect Tense. Often, the grammar was implied through a short listening activity or a few isolated exercises. As a result, my students quickly lost motivation and told me that the book felt boring and confusing.

Before using this book, my students had worked with another academic book for the same four courses. That one was not perfect either. It lacked an online platform and the content felt outdated, but it did provide some written explanations and reading variety. Eventually, the school switched publishers, and the new book was supposed to be more modern. The only real improvement was the online platform. The content itself was still repetitive and lacked depth. This made me question how these decisions were made and who was truly involved in them.

I began to wonder why the principal should be the only person deciding which textbooks teachers use. While school leaders play a crucial role in organizing resources, teachers are the ones who use those materials every day and see firsthand how students respond to them. Effective school leadership depends on collaboration and shared decision making between administrators and teachers (Fullan, 2014). When teachers are excluded from these conversations, schools risk choosing materials that look attractive on the surface but fail to address real classroom needs.

Teaching is full of challenges, but it is also full of opportunities to make a difference.

Finding Solutions in Creativity

This experience taught me to value teacher input and professional collaboration more deeply. Teachers understand their students' strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles better than anyone else. We are the ones who see the spark when a lesson clicks or the frustration when it does not. Empowering teachers to contribute to curricular decisions strengthens both professional growth and school improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). When schools trust teachers' expertise, decisions become more meaningful and aligned with what truly supports learning.

After realizing how limited the textbook was, I decided to take a different approach. I began designing my own materials to make lessons more dynamic and relevant. I created digital presentations that included colorful visuals, short videos, and examples connected to my students' interests. For instance, when teaching past tenses, I asked them to write short stories about their favorite vacations or funny experiences at school. I also incorporated games, group activities, and storytelling exercises to make grammar more interactive. These adjustments helped my students understand concepts more easily and stay motivated throughout the lessons (Harmer, 2007).

The Detectives Activity

One of my favorite projects was our Detectives Activity. Students had to solve a mystery using clues written with different grammar structures. Each clue practiced a different tense, and they worked in teams to figure out who had committed the "crime." The activity combined critical thinking, grammar practice, and creativity. My students loved it because they were learning without realizing it. It also showed me that when learning is meaningful and connected to their interests, engagement increases naturally.

The International Fair

Another memorable experience was our International Fair, which I organized as a culminating project for the Reading and Conversation courses. My students worked in trios to represent different countries. Each group prepared a small stand with cultural information, typical food samples, and decorations inspired by their country. To make it more engaging, we created "passports" for all of the visiting students from pre-K to high school so they could collect stickers from each country they visited. Even though the passports were paper crafts, students took the activity seriously and were excited to fill them up.

Watching my sixth graders explain facts about Japan, France, or Brazil in English to older and younger students was a powerful reminder of what learning can look like when it is done with passion and purpose. It was not just about memorizing vocabulary; it was about using the language to communicate and connect. Meaningful learning happens through social interaction, and that is exactly what took place during this event (Vygotsky, 1978).

Lessons Learned: Collaboration and Teacher Voice

Despite the challenges with the textbook, these experiences became highlights of the year. They reminded me that even when materials are lacking, teachers have the power to create rich learning experiences through creativity, empathy, and adaptability. Instead of waiting for the perfect book, I learned to use my students' curiosity as the foundation for every lesson.

This journey also highlighted the importance of balance in school leadership. Principals have the responsibility to guide and support the institution, but teachers should be active contributors in shaping the learning process.

When both roles work together, schools can make smarter choices that truly benefit students. Shared leadership fosters trust, innovation, and stronger student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

In the end, this experience reminded me that meaningful education does not come from a textbook or a platform. It comes from people. It comes from teachers who care enough to adapt, students who stay curious, and schools that value collaboration over hierarchy. If schools truly want to prepare students for a changing world, they must start by listening to the voices inside their classrooms.

Conclusion

Making Learning Matter

Teaching is full of challenges, but it is also full of opportunities to make a difference. Even when resources are limited, our creativity and empathy are our greatest tools. We can turn a weak textbook into a rich learning experience if we listen to our students and design lessons that speak to their hearts and minds. Principals provide guidance, but teachers light the path. Collaboration transforms classrooms into spaces where learning truly comes alive.

Call-to-Action:

Teachers, do not wait for perfect materials. Trust your creativity, involve your students, and work with your colleagues. Collaboration makes learning meaningful.

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About the Author

Naty Soto has been teaching English in Guatemala for several years. Her professional interests include creative lesson design, student-centered learning, and fostering caring classroom environments. She is passionate about helping students learn through curiosity, kindness, and meaningful experiences.



Using ChatGPT for Parent-Teacher Communication

By Pablo Andrés Mosquera

Even before starting my professional life as a teacher, classmates who already had teaching experience terrified me with horror stories about overly zealous parents. Looking back on it, my classmates were obviously hazing me, but it did implant a fear in me that I couldn't shake, even after I taught my first actual lesson and had my first meeting with a parent. Thus, I started communicating with my students' parents weekly about every possible occurrence in their children's school life, under the logic that if I somehow managed to anticipate a problem, I would not have a parent screaming at me or writing at inappropriate hours. The weekly communication lasted about a month before the overwhelming amount of writing and extra work ground me to a halt, but parents were indeed grateful, and I was avoiding problems. Therefore, I needed a solution to the workload problem if I wanted to continue benefiting from the extensive communication. I had been using AI to create classroom material for a long time by then, and the transition from creating materials to creating emails was obvious. The time required to write the emails and the replies became trivial, around two to three minutes to produce the reply, to proofread it, and to adjust it to emulate my own style—if required.

Effective use of prompts

AI is a fickle and poker-faced tool that is prone to altering its outputs from prompt to prompt in subtle and hard-to-detect ways, even though we often believe its responses are always trustworthy. Thus, there is one mantra that the modern teacher must internalize deeply: it is not a matter of whether the AI you are using will make a mistake, but when and how. If mistakes are to be avoided, a watchful eye is essential when working with AI. Thus, every piece of writing produced by it should be proofread carefully. AI seems magical, but it is a tool, and tools fail.

Prompts need to be straightforward. What you want from the AI must be clear. Tone, context, and the intention of your email must be frank and clearly demarcated. Therefore, an ideal prompt for creating an email to a parent regarding a downward trend in their child's performance and adding that you believe it is caused by strained social relationships with their friends, for example, would be:

Prompts need to be straightforward. What you want from the AI must be clear.

Give me a format for an email to a student's parents communicating:

1. A recent drop in performance during the last two weeks.
2. I believe the students' recent poor performance is caused by a damaged friendship.
3. I urge the parents to provide as much emotional support as possible.
4. The email must be formal.
5. It must not exceed 200 words.

The response was the following:

*Dear Mr. and Mrs. [Last Name],
I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to inform you of a recent decline in [Student's Name]'s academic performance over the past two weeks. This change has been noticeable in both class participation and the quality of submitted work.*

Based on classroom observations, I believe this shift may be related to a personal matter involving a damaged friendship that seems to be affecting [his/her/their] emotional well-being and concentration. While I will continue offering guidance and support at school, I kindly encourage you to provide additional emotional support at home to help [Student's Name] regain stability and motivation.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss this matter further or explore ways we can work together to support [Student's Name].

Remember, it is not a matter of if errors will occur but when. Notice that I never asked the AI to describe exactly how the student's performance worsened, or that I was offering guidance and support during school time to their child. As I mentioned earlier, proofreading is essential. In this case, the additions were minor, but I have encountered worse ones. However, after fixing those minor mistakes, the email format is good enough for what I intend. The entire process took less than two minutes.

If you have a more specific idea of what you want to write, you should write a prompt that describes exactly what you need, idea by idea, such as:

Write a formal but warm email to the parents of my student named xxx. Keep it under 200 words.

1. Congratulate them for their child's excellent academic performance in the Reading & Writing class.
2. Mention that she was very close to achieving a perfect score of 100.
3. Emphasize her effort, consistency, and commitment throughout the term.
4. Highlight that this success reflects both her dedication and the support from home.
5. Close with an encouraging note to continue fostering these positive qualities.

This was the response from the AI (Roughly translated from Spanish):

Dear Esteemed Parents,

It is a pleasure to write to you to congratulate you on the outstanding result achieved in my class. xxx was very close to obtaining a perfect score of 100 points in Reading & Writing (R&W), falling short by only a few points. This performance clearly reflects her effort, commitment, and consistency throughout the term.

Beyond the final grade, what is most valuable is the learning process she has demonstrated: responsibility, dedication, and enthusiasm to improve day by day. These accomplishments are possible thanks to xxx's perseverance and the support you provide at home.

I encourage you to continue cultivating these qualities that will allow her to keep reaching great academic and personal goals. Congratulations on this well-deserved achievement!

Sincerely,

I recommend that you write as detailed instructions as possible because the more specific, concrete, and detailed you are, the less likely the AI is to make mistakes, add ideas you didn't request, or omit ideas. The previous paragraph didn't require any correction, precisely because of that. The time to create was, again, under two minutes.

Eventually, with consistent correspondence with parents, a very cordial relationship may be established without ever meeting or communicating directly with them (the following texts are roughly translated from Spanish):

Dear Teacher,

I truly appreciate the time you took to write us this email, but I am even more grateful for the excellent work you did with XXX. He is very happy, and in his own words, "he was a friendly teacher who taught us a lot and showed that he liked us. He also played and joked with us."

Honestly, the change was harder for us than for XXX, and we are grateful that he met people like you who helped him overcome this new challenge.

Thank you very much for your dedication. I hope you also enjoy a well-deserved rest, and we look forward to seeing you next year. Have a wonderful day!

But beyond maintaining a high volume of communication to improve or keep cordial relationships with parents, the most significant outcome of using AI to communicate with parents consistently is the beneficial ideas for your students that can be uncovered.

Unintended but positive effects for my students

Students don't usually get to enjoy the praise of their parents for their minor day-to-day achievements, but when teachers communicate them to their parents, they can finally feel rewarded for the routine efforts that major achievements demand. It is a recognition of the hardships students endure every day, not just their results. Such a discovery, indeed, was a lucky find: that communicating my student's achievements regularly, even when small, is a very efficient way of generating good rapport between teacher and students and improving academic performance, as it creates a feedback loop of positive reinforcement and its results were well worth the time. The following student showed behavioral and academic improvements, while my rapport with her improved:

Dear Professor Andrés,

Please receive our respectful greetings. Thank you very much for your valuable comments and congratulations.

We are proud of xxx for all her effort—it's not easy, but it's not impossible either. We will keep working to achieve perfection next term.

Your comments motivate and inspire young people; thank you for making a difference. Our daughter feels very happy about your reflections. 😊

xxx tells us that you are an excellent teacher.

Please, whatever you may need from home, don't hesitate to contact us—we are here to support you and the school in general.

A thousand thanks!!

Xxx's mother

Using AI to communicate with parents, then, isn't just a single problem solution, as a high volume of communication creates a good environment for discovering strategic ways in which to improve a student's academic performance and emotional well-being.

What began as an attempt to manage my anxious fear of conflict evolved into an efficient and meaningful way to sustain communication that directly supported my students' well-being. While AI must always be approached with critical skepticism, my experience shows that thoughtful experimentation can reveal benefits that reach far beyond administrative convenience—fostering connection, recognition, and trust between teachers, students, and parents.

About the Author

Andrés Mosquera is an English teacher who holds an associate's degree in English Language Teaching from UVG University. He believes that no matter the context, teachers should always strive to teach students the tools required to learn independently, as education is only meaningful when students learn how to improve by themselves.





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