

ZAMBIA, ARGENTINA, SIERRA LEONE & USA

## Classrooms Around the World: An Educational Adventure

**Laura Rodríguez, Thandiwe Zitha, Mark Kungbana and Adam Borchers** share an initiative to bring classes together

In today's world, the value of teaching additional languages and learning about different cultures is widely recognized. The benefits of multilingualism and multiculturalism practices in education include the enhancement of cultural awareness, creativity, social adjustment and a better appreciation of local languages (Okal, 2014). Yet, although we live in increasingly diverse societies, fostering soft skills in language classes may not always be easy, particularly in monolingual environments.

In spite of conscious efforts to promote diversity, mainstream textbooks will often present a partial view of the world; a large number of groups are left out of the picture. And even in a scenario where adequate materials are readily available for our adopted methodologies, many educators will want to explore alternative ways of approaching language and culture with their groups. Our contemporary age is believed to be the age of communication, especially thanks to the possibilities of technology, which bring us all together (Dobrot, 2021). Thus, more than ever, it is in teachers' hands to build intercultural bridges where none exist.

"Classrooms around the World" is a

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Facebook group created in Argentina in 2022 to generate virtual exchanges among teachers and students from a multicultural and multilingual perspective. In this project, students from a secondary school in Argentina communicated with teachers and students in Zambia, Sierra Leone, and the USA. The initiative started by each teacher assessing local realities - in terms of schedules, resources, students' interests, among other factors - to see what could be achieved with each group. The result was fruitful, though varied. Here we share our motivations, part of the students' work and personal views on our "educational adventure".

### Zambia

#### Thandiwe Zitha from Zambia

Thandiwe is a teacher at *Mkushi Secondary School*, a co-education public boarding school situated in a small farming town called Mkushi in Central Zambia, Africa. It has a population of 1,200 students and English is both a subject and a medium of instruction. In this section Thandiwe explains the school's participation in the project.

*The school has no deliberate exchange/partnership programs with schools from*

*outside Zambia; therefore, when this classroom exchange was advertised, I thought it would be an opportunity for my students to learn more about other countries and possibly get collaborative skills for their own use.*

*The class involved was 12F, and they were doing their final year in secondary school. It was a class of thirty students, particularly special to me because they loved challenges and were normally very creative and innovative even during normal English lessons. Argentina was a great country to collaborate with as Zambia is a nation that loves football and most of my students know Argentine football stars like Diego Maradona and Leo Messi and so this helped motivate them to learn more.*

*My class did a project on the kinds of food that Zambians normally eat, including 'nshima' (a thick porridge-like meal made from maize flour) eaten as lunch or supper, accompanied by relish which can be chicken, meat, vegetables, small sardines called 'kapenta', and caterpillars (locally called 'finkubala') among other delicacies.*

*We also had an opportunity to learn about the various types of foods found in Argentina and we discovered we had some in common (pasta and Fanta, for example) although they are not our traditional foods. We learnt about foods like 'mate', 'asado' and 'empanadas'.*

*We loved the spirit exhibited by the Argentine class and we learnt that they are very accommodative people and rather liberal compared to us. For instance, some had ear and nose rings and could openly talk about their boyfriends/girlfriends while for us, it is forbidden to wear rings or to date while in school (although of course people still date).*



Zambia: Getting ready for the cooking lesson

## Argentina

### Laura Rodríguez from Argentina

The students that participated in the project are teenagers from Fourth and Fifth Year at *Escuela Secundaria Number 12*, a state school in the province of Buenos Aires. English (EFL) is a curricular subject taught once a week over a two-hour period. Laura explains:

*A special lesson was devoted to watching the video from Zambia in which students introduced themselves and talked about their population, the colours of their flag, and their food. The Argentinian groups did a listening activity aimed at enhancing comprehension, and then*

*answered the following questions: "Apart from what the students say, what else do you see in this video? What can you infer about what school is like for these teens?" They observed the Zambian classroom, the students' uniforms, and the way they interacted with each other. Many mentioned how kind and respectful the Zambian students seemed to be. During and after this lesson the students became more reflective and insightful. They also showed a renewed flexibility to engage in hands-on tasks.*

*At a later stage, both groups were asked to explain how to prepare traditional foods. The Zambian students took the ingredients to school and mounted a wonderful live cooking station both*

*outside and inside their classroom. There was laughter and dancing too! In Argentina, students learned key vocabulary, ways of giving explanations in English, and then shot their videos at home, in pairs or small groups. Most accepted the challenge; the shy ones had the chance to do their assignment in writing.*

## Sierra Leone

### Mark Komba Kungbana from Sierra Leone

Mark teaches English and different content subjects at *Jefferson Baptist Primary School* and *Junior High School*, located in the Western Area Rural District of Sierra Leone, West Africa. The school was established in 2003 to help refugee children have access to basic education during the postwar era.<sup>1</sup>

Mark recorded a video to greet the Argentine students and tell them about his country and his school. His message was shared with two groups in Second Year and motivated students to learn more about a country they knew very little about. They responded by recording voice messages and videos for the children in Sierra Leone, in which they talked about and showed "bits of culture": football T-shirts, sweets and drinks, maps and everyday objects. Mark reports:

*We are working very hard to change the mindset of our new generation toward*



Argentina: Bringing the real world into the classroom made a difference



Sierra Leone: Classroom exchanges promote cultural awareness

peace and development. Our goals are to improve and increase language learning skills among students and help them develop global consciousness. We encourage them to:

- Develop thinking and enquiring minds with a spirit of curiosity.
- Become highly motivated and lifelong learners.
- Be flexible, adaptable and open to the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of modern life and the world.
- Seek to extend themselves aesthetically, culturally, intellectually, morally, physically and spiritually.
- Foster cultural competence by striving to meet and exceed the unique needs of a multicultural population.

After getting greetings and messages from Argentina, Mark's students introduced themselves, talked about their staple foods and what they knew about Argentina: football and the World Cup!

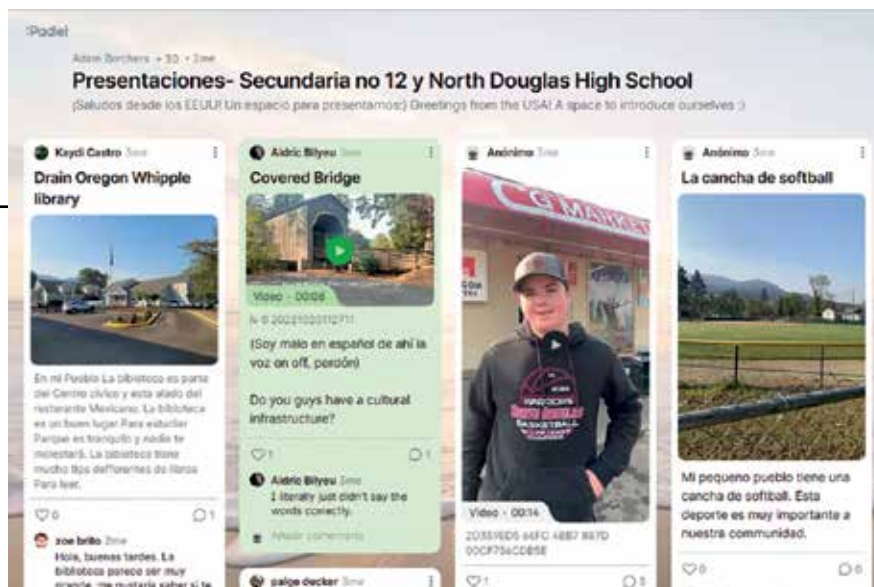
## USA

### Adam Borchers from USA

Adam teaches Spanish, Art and Leadership at North Douglas High School in Drain, Oregon, USA, and has this to say about his school taking part in the project:

*Drain is a small, dispersed community of about 1,000 people in rural Oregon. The high school has approximately 100 students. The class that participated in this project is my Spanish II students. The students show mostly "novice high" or "intermediate low" proficiency as described by ACTFL standards.*

*When I think of my own language-learning experiences, my passion for*



USA: The Padlet generated sundry exchanges in both countries

*language-learning, and relevance for students, I think authenticity. In our area, there are not many opportunities to speak Spanish in an authentic context. I wanted students to have a real reason to learn Spanish - to connect with Spanish speakers. I also wanted students to experience an international connection, which may inspire them to pursue Spanish or international connections in the future. I was specifically interested in working with a teacher from Argentina, as I studied in Rosario, Argentina, during my university education. My experience there had a positive impact on me, and I often share aspects of my time there with my students.*

*My class engaged in written and verbal communication via Padlet. The teacher in Argentina and I would communicate ahead of time to plan a discussion topic (for example: what is your favorite flavor of ice cream?) and provide our examples in our L1s. Then, I would give the students a mini lesson on the targeted language structure and relevant vocabulary. Finally, I would allow the students to engage in the way they saw fit (writing, video). On one occasion, I assigned my students a language task to give a tour of the community. This aligned with the current unit they were learning in Spanish II (cities). I also guided my students in their understanding of the Argentine students' posts. I would scaffold the process by first having students listen to a video or*

*read a response without my help, see what they could understand, then guide them with relevant vocabulary or explanation. Then, I would ask the students to craft a response individually or we would come up with a class response.*

*Through this process, I learned that students are overall more engaged to learn a second language when given the opportunity to authentically communicate. I noticed students who are normally more disengaged in Spanish class literally perking up with interest. This is such a refreshing thing to see.*

Information is all "out there". Nobody would deny the value of doing Google searches or using books to learn about other cultures. Yet, how many facts from an Internet site or a printed text will learners remember after some time has passed? Barbara Hawkins (1988) points out that scaffolding is more likely to be effective when the situation is both interactively and cognitively demanding for students and when there is a real reason for interaction - that is, where there is a genuine level of information exchange between the teacher and the learners or between the learners themselves. In terms of gaining knowledge and intercultural understanding, it is when building up human relationships with others that we become deeply involved with their world. ■

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Sierra Leone Civil War began in 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), with support from the special forces of Liberian dictator Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) intervened in Sierra Leone in an attempt to overthrow the government. The resulting civil war lasted 11 years, enveloped the country, and left over 50,000 dead.

## References

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