Wrapping up classes

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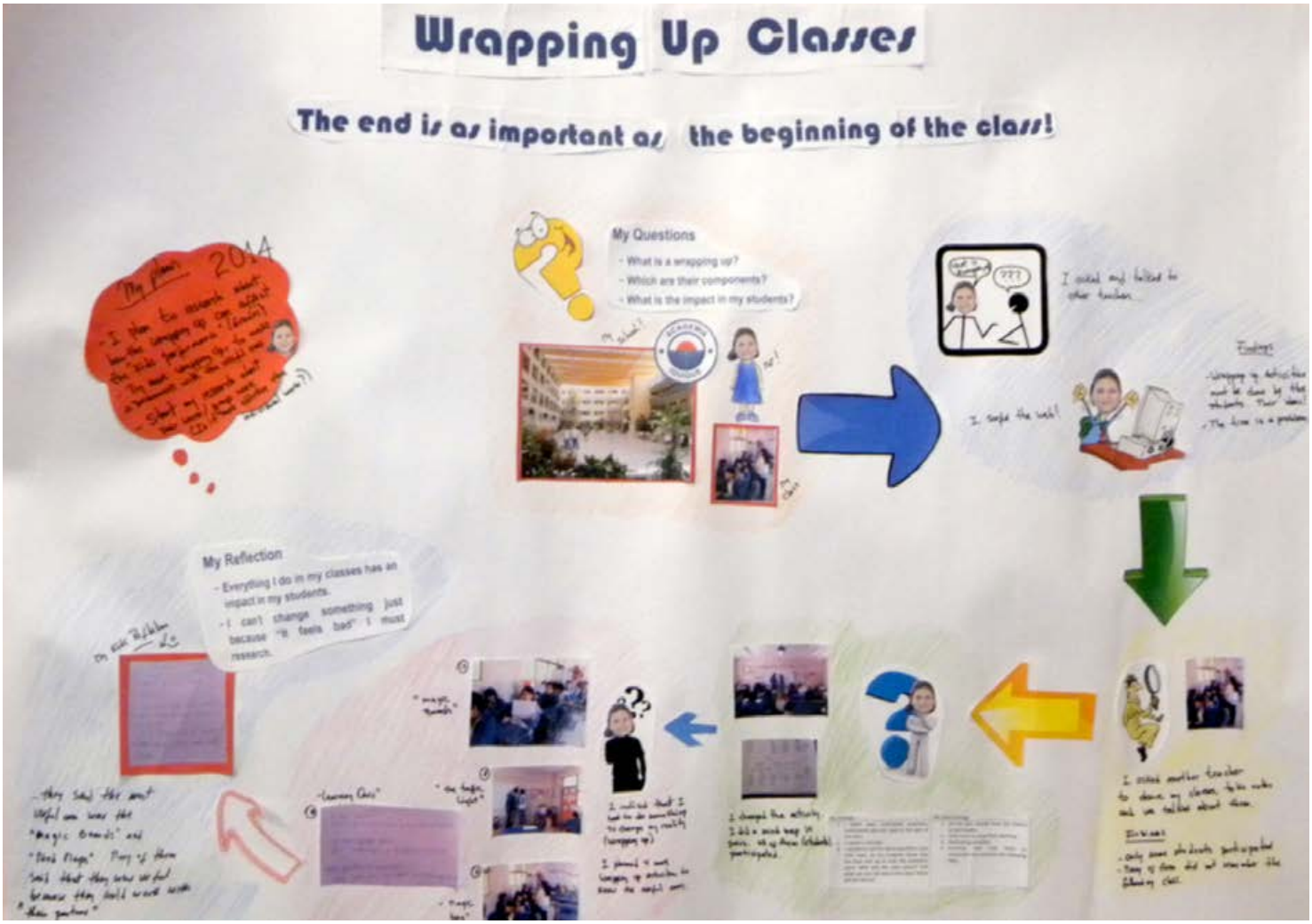


Andrea Robles López teaches English to 11th grade students (15-year-olds) in a large secondary school in Iquique, with more than 1,700 students and average class sizes of 36. Expectations are high and students who do not perform well or achieve good results are actually asked to leave. For this reason Andrea does not face the problems more typically encountered in a secondary school context – poor grades, lack of motivation, or unwillingness to participate. She does, however, reflect on her teaching, try out new ideas and think about what she can do better, and there was one question in particular which was puzzling her.

The puzzle

It started with a feeling, just a feeling, at the end of the lesson – the wrapping up, or closure, was weak. While she put a lot of effort into planning the warm up and main activities, she felt the end of the lesson, where students reflect on what they have actually learnt, was neither engaging nor effective.

First steps

To find out if she was right, if the wrapping up really was weak, she decided to do some research. There were three questions she wanted answers to:

1. What is wrapping up?
2. What are the characteristics of wrapping up?
3. How do my students react in this part of the lesson?

The first step was to think about these questions, try to answer them on her own and make a few notes. Then, she asked a few colleagues what they thought, and if they had any problems during this stage of the lesson. Finally, she went online to get more information and came across an article written by another teacher, on www.busyteacher.org. The conclusion she came to was that wrapping up should be done by the students themselves and the teacher's role is not to lead, but to facilitate and guide. This was reassuring because it confirmed what she herself had suspected from the start. She also realised that it is important to allow sufficient time, that the activity needs to be centred on the learning objectives, and it needs to be student-centred.

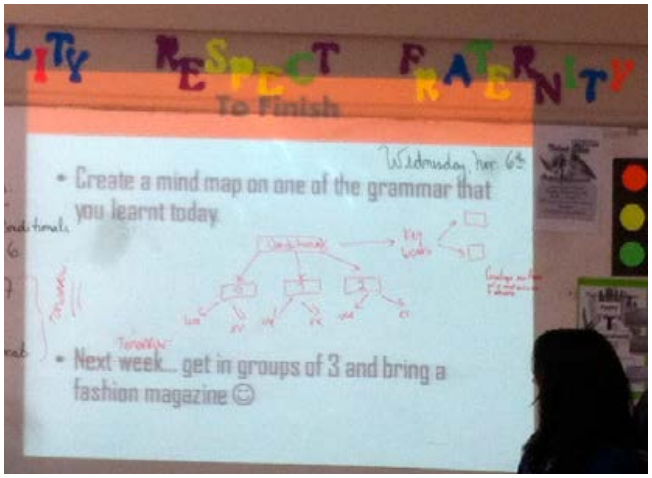
Her next step was to observe the classroom reality, so she invited a colleague to come and take notes on what happened in the final stages of the lessons. What he noticed was that she tended to ask general questions such as 'What did we learn today?', 'What did we do?' or 'What can you remember?', and while a few students made an effort to answer, the majority were paying no attention and busy packing up their things getting ready to leave the room. The very next lesson, she asked them to write about what they had done in the previous lesson, in Spanish so they could fully express themselves, and this is what she found:

- 23 did not remember
- 3 did not answer
- 8 answered correctly.

That was it – something clicked! Everything added up and what she had felt was right – the closing stage was simply not working. She now had evidence that there really was a problem and something had to be done to change the situation.

She sat down and compared what was happening with what should be happening:

My closings	My ideal closings
1. I asked general questions and did not nominate who should answer. 2. The wrapping up took five minutes. 3. I tended to use the same questions at the end of every lesson, and this signalled that the class was about to end. 4. My questions were: What was the lesson about? What can you tell me about this lesson? What did you learn?	1. All the students need the opportunity to participate – I need to nominate. 2. Students should show what they have learnt. 3. Activities should be engaging and of more than five minutes. 4. Activities need to help them to remember the content at the start of the following lesson.



Time for action

The first thing she did was to think of activities that worked for her when she was a student, and decided to try mind mapping.

The students worked in pairs for ten minutes to create a mind map. Then one pair shared their ideas on the board while other pairs contributed suggestions. At the start of the next class when she asked her students to recount what they had learnt during the previous class, most of them could recall!

So, some weeks later she repeated the activity and invited her colleague to come and observe again. What he noticed was a huge change – motivated students and all of them engaged and collaborating! And, in the following lesson, when she asked what they had learnt, she found most of them could remember.

She could now link new content to previous learning to make everything more meaningful! Encouraged, she sat down and asked herself, 'What next? What can I do now?'

She tried four more activities:

1. Using mini-whiteboards

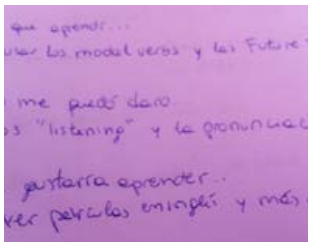
Mini whiteboards can be easily made out of paper and plastic. Students can write answers on these with a marker, erase the answers and write on them again. Andrea asked questions and the students worked in pairs, laughed and shouted their answers – they loved it! And, in the next lesson, most of them remembered what they had done.

2. Traffic lights

Andrea made a set of traffic lights out of cardboard. She then asked the students to write what they had learnt in the previous lesson in the green light; what they had learnt in this lesson in the yellow light; and what they wanted to learn in the next lesson in the red light. Andrea really liked it because it was unusual and it covered all the lesson stages (warm up in the green and closing with the yellow) but to her surprise, the students did not respond well – only a few participated and in the following lesson many of them couldn't remember the content.

3. The magic bag

Andrea took a simple paper bag and called it 'the magic bag'. She asked the students to take some magic powder out of the bag, make a ball with their knowledge and then throw the ball and say what they had learnt. It was fun and the students clearly enjoyed the activity but the following lesson only 20 remembered what they had learned, so she was not convinced it was a useful activity.



4. Learning quiz

This was done in Spanish. Andrea asked her students to write what they learned, what was not clear, and suggestions for the following lesson. She enjoyed reading their comments, and some of their suggestions were very useful. She also found that in the following lesson they could easily remember previous content.

Student feedback

Andrea continued to use these activities for a couple of months and at the end of that time she asked her students for feedback in Spanish. She told them to choose two activities and explain which were the most useful in terms of:

- having a clear overview of what the lesson was about
- having the chance to reflect on what they did
- helping them to remember when asked during the following class.

This is what they thought:

- 20 said the mind mapping was the most useful activity because it helped them to organise their learning and get an overview of the lesson.
- 15 said using the mini whiteboard was helpful because it enabled them to review the content in a fun way; and they had to work with a classmate, which was useful.
- 10 of them chose the learning quiz because they could reflect on their learning and it was nice to make suggestions to the teacher for the following class; it was also nice to see that the teacher took these on board!
- The other two activities – the magic bag and traffic lights – were only chosen by one or two students.

What was especially notable was that the students appreciated the opportunity to work with a partner and share ideas with their classmates.

Reflections

The research opened Andrea's eyes to what she needed to do more effectively but she admits that it was no easy task to undertake because it took time, and courage to get started. However, once she'd started, it was difficult to stop because there were always questions to find answers to. What she found crucial was the support of her mentor – there were many things she took for granted but her mentor helped her to stop, reflect, and refocus in order to learn more about the exploratory process rather than simply trying to find a solution to a problem.

What she learnt is that it is very important to centre on her students – their learning preferences, their needs, their interests, their background and not rely on what she, as a teacher, felt comfortable with or had been doing for years:

'If you are an experienced teacher and you think that you have nothing to learn from your colleagues and from your students, you are wrong.'

She also understood that, as a teacher, it is very important to be reflective – to have the capacity to think critically about her teaching practice. She started her research journey with a feeling that something was not right, had the chance to stop and think why she felt that, proved that there was a problem and took action to change her reality. Some things worked, others didn't, but at the end of the day she realised her students' learning depends on her own.

What next?

Andrea has now started thinking about her new goals. Her journey isn't over – she wants to create more wrapping up activities and possibly make a list of the most successful ones to give to other teachers who have run out of ideas. She would also like to find out if using the activities that her students find most useful will result in better learning and better grades. And finally, she wants to follow up on her discovery that her students preferred some activities because they had the chance to work with their classmates to share their knowledge, ideas, feelings and needs. This discovery has given her an open window through which to explore how her students learn best. Something she is quite sure about is that this is the beginning of more research projects to come...

'My research journey started with a feeling, just a feeling that something wasn't right. Going from that feeling to asking why, and finding out what works is the key.'