

**C**an we teach English through place-based projects? Claudia Andrade Serrano says, “Yes!” Claudia teaches English to students of all ages—with a special focus on children and teens—at her binational center (BNC), the Centro Boliviano Americano in Tarija, Bolivia. Tarija, an Andean city, is near the Sama Mountain Range and is characterized by a dry mountain ecosystem. However, recent forest fires in the region have resulted in loss of vegetation.



**Claudia Andrade Serrano, who teaches at the Centro Boliviano Americano in Tarija, Bolivia, poses with a young churqui tree.**

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## Claudia's project incorporated elements of place-based education and project-based language learning (PBL).

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Claudia's interest in integrating civic engagement into project-based English language learning resulted in "Dropping Seeds from Our Hearts," a reforestation unit for young English learners. In the week-long project, students wrote poems, prepared an instructional video, and made seed bombs to release into the forest. Claudia's project incorporated elements of place-based education and project-based language learning (PBL). Place-based education focuses students on learning about their community, often with a concentration on nature (Vander Ark et al. 2020). PBL helps students to reflect on their progress in language learning (Beckett and Slater 2005), an important learning process at any age and stage.

Below, Claudia explains how she implemented her project in face-to-face classes when on-site classes resumed after COVID-related health restrictions were lifted, and she describes how it continues to grow.

### WORKING WITHIN THE BNC COURSE SCHEDULE

After consulting with a forestry engineer about when to plant seeds and securing permission from the academic director of the BNC to implement the project, Claudia

strategized to launch the project in December 2023. The project fit well into the BNC's carefully structured course sequence. At the BNC, teachers use textbooks as the primary instructional resource, and students are expected to complete two units in each 17-day course cycle. Because the children's textbook had nine units, Claudia had time in the fifth cycle—when there was only one textbook unit planned—to engage the students in the project. Claudia's class consisted of 11 students, aged eight to 11. They met in the afternoon, Monday through Friday, for an hour and a half. At the end of the week, the students received a certificate and a booklet of their work, celebrating their efforts.

Let's hear of Claudia's experience in her own words.

### PLANNING THE UNIT

**Engaging students in an authentic topic.** During the first session, our class hosted a video conference with Susan [Huss-Lederman, the author of this article], who piqued student interest by introducing the topic of natural disasters to the children in an age-appropriate way. The children then participated in a "Just One Question" activity (Bolen 2025) on caring for their family and



**Making the seed bombs**



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## In talking about hiking, we brainstormed vocabulary for clothing (e.g., *shoes*, not *sandals*; *pants*, not *shorts*), drinks, and snacks.

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**Placing the seed bombs**

community, including nature. The questions in the activity included the following:

1. Do you love nature?
2. Do you think animals are intelligent?
3. Do you play outside every day?
4. Do you help nature?
5. Do you love animals and plants?
6. Do you recycle plastic and paper?
7. Do you feel happy in nature?
8. Do you help other people?

Students answered the questions with *yes*, *no*, or *sometimes*. They tallied the responses, which I recorded on the classroom whiteboard. This activity led into a short discussion to raise the students' awareness of local issues. They ended the class repeating a pledge for nature.

### **Learning content with voice and choice.**

During the second session, the students learned about native churqui trees. I showed the students “before” and “after” pictures of the forest and posted vocabulary on the whiteboard for students to use. After practicing the target vocabulary, they wrote nature poems, which they illustrated with drawings. To support students' expressive language, I used scaffolds like pictures and sentence starters (such as “I love . . .”) for students to complete. If students needed help with expressing an idea or feeling in English, I helped them with a quick translation. In preparing these poems, students not only voiced awareness, but they also connected their feelings to nature. Poetry is a good way of expressing these feelings. Students were eager to write the script for the video we would record on day three. They used sequencing words, such as *first* and *then*, along with command forms of verbs, as in “Add the water.”

### **Using new language in collaboration.**

In the third session, we made the seed bombs and recorded the video “Seed Bombs Elaboration” (Andrade Serrano 2024). The students practiced saying their parts so that they knew when to speak in sequence as we made the seed bombs. In editing the video, I captioned it in English and in Spanish. This video was crucial for delivering a message to the community by teaching others how to create seed bombs.

**Practicing critical thinking.** The fourth session focused on designing a hiking field trip to drop the seed bombs and to read the poems. In talking about hiking, we brainstormed vocabulary for clothing (e.g., *shoes*, not *sandals*; *pants*, not *shorts*), drinks, and snacks. Using graphic organizers, students planned the hiking activity. They drew pictures in the appropriate sections of the graphic

organizer and then labeled them. In this way, students could think critically in preparing for the hike and describe their preparation for the experience using English vocabulary.

**Sharing final products and reflecting on the experience.** During the last session, we visited a nearby area affected by erosion to drop the seed bombs. We walked for some time, and the children carefully placed their seed bombs in spots where the new trees would grow. After planting the seeds, we enjoyed a picnic and played games. The students then read their poems aloud. They reflected on their answers to the initial project questionnaire, and they took pride in their own contribution to caring for nature and in how they could express their ideas about this in English. They were happy they had been active participants in this activity. To close the class session and the unit, the students restated the pledge they had made at the beginning of the week. I then awarded a certificate to each student, along with a booklet including a collection of their work, which made them feel even prouder of themselves.

### CLAUDIA'S REFLECTION

When children engage in a local project, the learning is meaningful. The students who

participated in “Dropping Seeds from Our Hearts” learned and practiced English in a natural, enjoyable way by taking part in a project like this. Their learning became more personally relevant as they used language as a means to achieve another goal. Engaging in a successful project encouraged them to use English for a new, meaningful purpose.

(Note: The remainder of the article consists of questions that were asked to Claudia, followed by Claudia’s responses.)

### What did you enjoy the most about completing this project?

I enjoyed hiking with the students and dropping the churqui seeds the most. You could notice the level of commitment of the students as they carefully placed the seeds where the land most needed them. I am glad students could be part of this experience of personal growth. Then, reading the students’ poems in nature truly affected our hearts.

### What do you think the children enjoyed the most?

There were many parts the children enjoyed, but the one they liked the most was making the seed bombs. I remember as a child, when I played for endless hours, how much I enjoyed getting dirty.



Students' tree poems

I think we humans have a special connection to the earth, and playing with dirt is definitely one of the biggest pleasures. In watching our video, I noticed the students' big smiles and the enthusiasm they had when mixing the clay and dirt to form the little bombs. They had a blast! Of course, they also enjoyed the field trip. They had a unique experience that I am sure many will keep as a dear memory.

**What is special about focusing young students on a project during English language learning?**

I am confident that all students can achieve great results when carrying out a project like this one. Young students practice language in a purposeful way by taking part in such a project. Their learning becomes more meaningful as they communicate in English to reach another goal. The unit topic arose from their personal interest. When language is taught through meaningful projects, students are more willing to try new things.

**Describe what you noticed about teaching children before, during, and after the pandemic. What changes did you notice? How did you decide to support students in interacting face-to-face again?**

Before the pandemic, children in my classes were used to in-person instruction, and interaction among the students was familiar and friendly. During the pandemic, students became more introverted and would not participate as much online. It seemed that sitting for long periods, isolated at home, made them feel less interested in language learning. When these young students returned to in-person classes, they were hesitant to interact with each other, or they would ask to work with a particular classmate, whereas before they had enjoyed working with anyone. At first, this was difficult for me to handle since at that age students become visibly upset when made to work with those not of their choosing. Nevertheless, with time and encouragement, the students started collaborating and interacting with each other.

I also noticed that the students struggled expressing their emotions, even in their

mother tongue, when writing the poems for the project. I am not sure if this is a consequence of the pandemic or not, but indeed it caught my attention since in the past, children were typically very expressive in English class.

**Eleven students participated in this project. Do you think that it would be possible to conduct the project with a larger number of students or in a different learning context?**

Yes. All of the activities that we did in the classroom—from the questionnaire on the first day to practicing English with sentence starters for writing poems, creating graphic organizers, and preparing the video script—were language-learning activities that we commonly use in language instruction, no matter the class size. I talked to a forestry engineer and did online research to learn how to make seed bombs, and I am sure that other teachers could do this, too. If it isn't possible



**Students' plans for the planting trip**

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## “It is possible to keep the same project goal in mind but to vary the language-learning activities for the proficiency level and age of the students.”

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to make a video, there are other ways for students to share how to make seed bombs—for example, by illustrating a booklet or giving a presentation to other classes. If it is not possible to take a field trip away from a school site, teachers can see what might be possible closer to the school. There is always a way!

### **Do you think that older students could do this type of project?**

Yes, I do! In fact, I have adapted this project for intermediate students, aged 15 to adults, so I changed some of the activities to be more age-appropriate. For example, when I use the unit with this new group of students, they will listen to the motivational song “Better,” by Tamara Jade, and will complete a cloze activity with the lyrics as a project unit opener to motivate students to make a positive change. Students will use ChatGPT to write poems with some of their new vocabulary. These more mature students will make seed bombs and record their own voiceover for the steps of the video, whereas I captioned the video with the younger students. The older students will also plan a hike, but they will make choices for the place to drop the seed bombs and present their proposals to the class for a vote. You can see that it is possible to keep the same project goal in mind but to vary the language-learning activities for the proficiency level and age of the students.

### **What advice would you give to colleagues who wish to implement similar projects?**

First of all, I would suggest that English teachers go for it! I am sure many teachers feel the urgency to implement place-based topics in their classes, especially if they are self-driven to contribute to the good of their community and surroundings. I suggest gathering necessary information and working collaboratively with staff members. Ask for support from the program administration and

colleagues to develop a multiplying effect of the activities. Also, adapt the best activities to meet the requirements of your own educational and community setting. I am sure you’ll have a successful experience.

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This article was written by **Susan Huss-Lederman**. Susan has taught ESL and has offered professional development to teachers in many settings, from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater to the Galápagos Islands. After conducting a Specialist virtual project for RELO (Regional English Language Office) Andes, Susan received the 2023 Alumni Impact Award from the Office of English Language Programs.

**Claudia Andrade Serrano** holds a bachelor’s degree in languages and has taught English for over 16 years. At the Centro Boliviano Americano in Tarija, Claudia teaches, trains educators, and is the regional coordinator for the U.S. Embassy Alumni network Inspira Tarija. Claudia has presented her work nationally and internationally.

Photos courtesy of Claudia Andrade Serrano