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Promoting Peacebuilding, Creativity, and Critical Thinking in the EFL Classroom Through Collaborative Storytelling

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In the contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, fostering essential 21st-century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, and social-emotional learning (SEL) is of paramount importance. An innovative and effective approach to achieving these goals is through collaborative storytelling, particularly in the form of wordless graphic narration. This pedagogical tool not only nurtures creativity and critical thinking but also promotes peacebuilding, intercultural understanding, and social awareness, allowing students to engage deeply with both global and local social issues (Cahill & Dadvand, 2020; Darling-Hammond & Ifill, 2019; Gay, 2018; Lee et al., 2020, 206-214; Martínez-Alba & Pentón Herrera, 2023, 35-50). Through this holistic approach, educators can cultivate a learning environment that empowers students as active learners while equipping them with the skills necessary for success in a rapidly changing world.

In the context of students at Rivne State University of Humanities, who are specializing in EFL and psychology and have been introduced to stress-reducing techniques in response to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the curriculum focuses on mastering vocabulary related to war experiences, volunteering, mental health, and coping strategies. Given the complexity of the war, which involves retraumatization and secondary trauma among both students and educators, the module was carefully designed to account for these challenges and potential emotional triggers. To address these difficulties, a collaborative initiative was introduced with the aim of providing support and fostering resilience.

A key element of this initiative involved exploring innovative educational approaches to create a safe, engaging, and meaningful learning experience for students. One such approach was wordless graphic narration “How Are You?”, which provided students with an alternative medium for self-expression, reflection, and communication. This method not only facilitated emotional processing but also encouraged critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and mastery of EFL vocabulary. Wordless graphic storytelling became a bridge—allowing students to express complex emotions and experiences in a non-verbal way while mastering the necessary language skills. It fostered both a therapeutic outlet for processing trauma and an academic tool for building the language proficiency required for effective communication in their professional fields, especially those related to education, psychology, and mental health.

By offering an avenue for creative expression and emotional release, this initiative promoted personal healing while enabling students to continue their academic and professional development. It provided them with the skills to better navigate their roles in supporting others facing similar challenges. Furthermore, through the collaborative nature of the project, students strengthened their interpersonal skills, which are essential for fostering resilience both individually and in the community. This dual focus on emotional well-being and academic advancement created an environment that nurtured both personal growth and professional competence,

ultimately helping students build bridges between their experiences and their academic goals.

Among key focus areas, we distinguish the following:

Emotional Resilience and Well-being.

A primary focus is to provide students with tools and techniques for managing stress, trauma, and emotional challenges, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. By integrating stress-reduction strategies and mindfulness practices into the learning process, students are equipped with the emotional resilience necessary to navigate personal and academic challenges.

Language Acquisition and EFL Vocabulary Mastery.

An essential component of the initiative is to enhance students' mastery of specialized vocabulary related to war experiences, mental health, volunteering, and coping strategies. Through wordless graphic narration and collaborative storytelling, students are encouraged to use language in context, which not only boosts their language proficiency but also strengthens their ability to engage with complex topics in their field of study, such as psychology and education.

Collaboration and Interpersonal Skills.

The project emphasizes the importance of collaboration and teamwork in creating a supportive learning environment. Working together on graphic narration projects encourages communication, empathy, and problem-solving, which are critical skills for both personal development and professional practice, particularly in fields like psychology and social work.

Critical Thinking and Reflection.

Encouraging students to critically engage with the material, analyze social issues, and reflect on their emotional responses is central to the initiative. Through creative projects like wordless graphic narration, students develop the ability to think

critically about complex global issues, challenge their perspectives, and generate thoughtful solutions.

Cultural Sensitivity and Intercultural Understanding.

Given the diversity of students' backgrounds, with many facing the realities of living in a war zone or dealing with trauma, fostering cultural sensitivity is essential. The collaborative storytelling process promotes intercultural dialogue and empathy, helping students understand and appreciate different cultural perspectives, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty.

Peacebuilding and Social Awareness.

Integrating social issues such as the war in Ukraine into the curriculum helps students develop a deeper sense of global responsibility and peacebuilding. The storytelling approach provides a platform for students to voice their experiences and reflect on how they can contribute to peace and social justice in their communities and beyond.

Through these key focus areas, the initiative aims to create a comprehensive, supportive, and dynamic learning environment that fosters both academic and personal growth, helping students to thrive in their academic journey and develop the skills necessary to face the challenges of the future.

For teachers seeking to integrate SEL and collaborative storytelling into their own EFL classrooms, these strategies can be employed. First, teachers should focus on creating a supportive classroom environment that encourages open communication and respect for diverse perspectives. The supportive classroom environment can be achieved through activities that promote active listening, empathy-building exercises, and opportunities for students to reflect on their emotional responses to various narratives.

Secondly, the use of multimedia and technology can enhance the storytelling experience. Digital tools such as online platforms for collaborative writing, digital

comic-making software, and multimedia resources can all support the creation of dynamic, engaging, and accessible graphic narratives. Teachers should also provide clear guidelines for the project, including the use of visual language, symbol systems, and collaborative workflows, to ensure that students are equipped to create meaningful and cohesive stories.

Finally, teachers should emphasize reflective practices, encouraging students to assess their learning and emotional development throughout the project. Reflection prompts related to both the creative process and the social issues explored can help students develop a comprehensive understanding of their growth as well as the collective impact of their work.

Conclusion. Incorporating collaborative storytelling into EFL classrooms offers a powerful means of promoting peacebuilding, creativity, and critical thinking. By engaging with wordless graphic narratives, students develop essential language skills and enhance social-emotional learning, cross-cultural awareness, and empathy. The combination of storytelling, art, and cross-cultural collaboration fosters an environment in which students are empowered to address social issues, reflect on their personal and collective experiences, and contribute to a more compassionate and understanding world. By integrating these approaches into EFL education, teachers can help students cultivate the 21st-century skills necessary for success in both their personal and professional lives.

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ACADEMIC CONTEXT OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN PRIMARY SPANISH SCHOOL

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In modern English teaching theory and methodology, there is a tendency to consider both the cognitive and emotional spheres of children. The English language class is the most appropriate way to integrate emotions into the learning process. The presence of an emotional component contributes to more effective language learning, which is sometimes accompanied by stress, tense situations, and anxiety. Students' attempts to communicate in a language other than their native language may not always be successful, despite all efforts and aspirations. Therefore, all those involved in the teaching process of English as a foreign language constantly seek ways to make the learning process more effective and efficient. If, when learning a language, we consider not only the student's abilities and intelligence level, but also the emotional sphere, the psychological environment in which the educational process takes place, we use various pedagogical technologies for social and emotional learning, and we create a favorable microclimate in lessons that will contribute to the formation of a positive motivation to learn a foreign language, then learning will be more successful not only for talented children. The importance of developing socioemotional skills in the English language learning is a relevant topic of interest for researchers in the field of education. The issue of the effectiveness of the learning process, the selection of methods, techniques, and teaching aids that help transform the learning process from something that must be done into something desirable and positive, integrating English language learning and developing skills that help students adapt to current realities, is constantly in the spotlight of everyone involved