# Educational English Project "Let's discover the values of our town" - Project-based Learning

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## 1. Introduction

The process of globalization, as we know it, is an undeniable truth happening at this very moment in today's world. Such process brings myriads of challenges to societies in the world. One of those challenges is the urgent need to successfully communicate in one global language, the English Language. Becoming a proficient speaker of English has become an essential skill to develop for people in countries whose first language is other than English. Experiences and observations as learners and teachers of English as a foreign language offer some evidence that a language is better acquired when it feels "more like real life" through the participation in English language projects; this seems to be an effective learning strategy found in the so-called Project-based Learning (PBL). Educators and experts support that Project-based Learning represents a great importance in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms nowadays. Clearly, this practice can be applied to a wide variety of subjects other than English teaching, however, the important question here is how this teaching methodology could be implemented by EFL teachers in a developed and a developing country and to what degree it could be effective to teach English. This study is an attempt to examine, and analyze the effectiveness of an English learning project in Japan and El Salvador which will derive in a future comparison research paper once the project is completed in El Salvador. The data in this paper was collected using surveys, questionnaires, and observation of 41 high school students at Iwate

Prefectural Senior High School in Kuzumaki, Japan.

## 2. Research question

The following research question was formulated: How can Project-based learning be implemented and how effective can it be?

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Project-Based Learning (PBL) this initiative intends to apply some of the principles of the learning theory called Project-Based Learning (PBL), which is a student-centered pedagogy (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palincsar, 1991). In this theory, it is stated that objectives should start with a "driving question" and end with a concrete artifact or any tangible target; in this sense, this project is presented to address the need to find an answer to a great question, "How can we contribute to promote the town in other cities?" PBL suggests that in the end, a product or thing that shows off the answer to the great question should be produced, the author calls this a meaningful project. But, what is Project-Based Learning? This is a relatively recent comprehensive instructional methodology that has gained a lot of popularity in EFL/ESL classrooms across the globe. In this methodology, students gain new knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, complex and engaging question, problem, or challenge. PBL is intended to develop deeper learning competencies in students. It proposes some design elements for implementing any learning project. The elements taken from this teaching methodology and applied in this project included:

Understanding a problematic situation, challenging problem or question, authenticity, student voice & choice, reflection, critique & Revision, Creating artifacts.

According to the Project-Based learning theory, there are two essential components of the projects:

A driving question or problem that serves to organize and drive activities and the culminating product or consequential task that meaningfully addresses the former driving question or problem.

The foundation of the Project-based learning lies on students working as a team on a specific driving question to respond, then directed to create an artifact to present the knowledge gained. This artifact may include writings, art, drawings, videos, photography, technology-based presentation, etc.

### 3.1 "Learning by doing" and the social nature of the project.

In *My Pedagogic Creed (Dewey, 1897)* we can find some great insights about the nature of this study. Undoubtedly, this project responds to a social issue being faced not only by the town but also the whole country, which is dealing with a demographic dwindling. Every year, there are less young people in town, this happens because they migrate to nearby or other bigger cities to work or study. Great efforts are being made by the local government to treat this situation. For example, one of the programs launched seeks to publicize the town in other prefectures so that students can come and study their high school in Kuzumaki. This is clearly a social implication that this project was closely related to, and of course, the final product of this project, the calendar of the town, will contribute to these

efforts to publicize Kuzumaki in other cities and prefectures of Japan. Students, through the elaboration of a calendar to showcase the town, are undoubtedly taking an active role in local efforts and becoming more conscious of the issues of their town; they take part in the solution by providing a concrete artifact which intends to contribute to the local initiatives to publicize Kuzumaki.

"Language is almost always treated in the books of pedagogy simply as the expression of thought. It is true that language is a logical instrument, but it is fundamentally and primarily a social instrument. Language is the device for communication; it is the tool through which one individual comes to share the ideas and feelings of others…"

"I believe that much of the time and attention now given to the preparation and presentation of lessons might be more wisely and profitably expended in training the child's power of imagery and in seeing to it that he was continually forming definite, vivid, and growing images of the various subjects with which he comes in contact in his experience…"

Throughout the realization of this project, English language was used, not only as an expression of thought (students describing pictures of the town in English) but it was also the primary instrument for communication. Due to different constrains related to the level of students, and time limitations, many adjustments had to be made in the process in order to promote more effective classroom interactions (the occasional use of L1 for example) Ultimately, students had the opportunity to make use of the English language to share their feeling and ideas about Kuzumaki by writing photograph descriptions.

## 3.2 The lexical approach implications.

The so-called lexical approach is a pedagogical conception of syllabus design and is described in Lewis (1997). The main philosophy of this approach rests on the idea that an important part of learning a language consists of being able to understand and produce lexical phrases as chunks. In this approach, vocabulary is prized over grammar itself, even though grammar is also perceived somehow, at some point during the learning process. A big deal of importance is put on the "word" as the unit of analysis and content for syllabus design (Boers, 2006). The central focus of a lexical approach is that "language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar." This means that lexis is central in making meaning, and grammar plays a subservient role in managing meaning. Based on this, the logical implication for teachers becomes that we should spend more time helping learners develop their stock of phrases and words, and less time on grammatical structures. Some of the principles of this approach that go along with the experience in Kuzumaki project, are

Grammar exploration instead of grammar explanation, first and second language comparisons and translation, repetition and recycling of activities and vocabulary, guessing the meaning of vocabulary items from context, working with dictionaries and other reference tools, and the use of word units and text frames

## 4.   Method

## 4.1 Participants

In "Let's discover the values of our town", 41 high school students were

exposed to a considerable amount of applied vocabulary and basic grammar explorations in a relatively short period of time; this with the purpose of improving their performance in writing tasks.

## 4.2 Instruments

Some instruments used during this project included the use of vocabulary lists, surveys, questionnaires, diagnostic reading & writing tests, authentic material use, and photo cameras or phone cameras.

## 4.3 Description

In every session, students were given a list of target words; Students revised such vocabulary lists as homework and the next class started with an activity to check meaning or memory-based games on the same target vocabulary; after that, a new list was assigned. In total, students were given 3 vocabulary lists consisting in 50 words in total. Three diagnostic tests were also performed in order to find out how much vocabulary students had already "in stock", as well as their level in writing and reading tasks. These data were collected at the beginning of the project "Let's find the values of our town" from a group of 41 first-year students. The entire project had a duration of 5 lessons, 1 hour 50 minutes each, starting in June and finishing in October. Three word lists consisting of 50 target words were given for students to write the meaning (in Japanese) to as many words as they could. Besides such vocabulary check, reading and writing assessments were also conducted in order to have a more realistic idea of the real level of students in such skills of the English language at the starting point of the project.

Table 1.　Project Timetable

| Date | Content | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Tuesday, June 28th | Organization | Reading and Writing Diagnostic tests |
| Tuesday, July 19th | Grammar explor. 1 Learning to organize information chronologically. | Calendar design Drafting/Editing practice. (Photograph taking in Summer break) |
| Friday, Sept. 2nd | Grammar explor. 2 Paragraphs structure Learning to describe places using adjectives | Photographs descriptions editing/Drafting |
| Friday, Sept. 16th | Grammar explor. 3 Describing places, writing practice Describing places. Vocab. Check | Photographs descriptions editing Finish revising |
| Tuesday, October 25th | Surveys & questionnaires Project assessment | Assessment/Final draft submission |

## 5.　Results

In terms of the research question, "How can Project-based learning be implemented and how effective can it be?" engaging students in a cooperatively elaboration of a meaningful artifact (a calendar) by having them make use of English in the process as a mean for communication

seems to be a great way to implement a Project-based learning initiative at a high school level. It also demonstrated to be a very effective practice, as the improvements showed that the quality in students' writing proficiency, in terms of vocabulary and grammar structure, was evidently enriched.
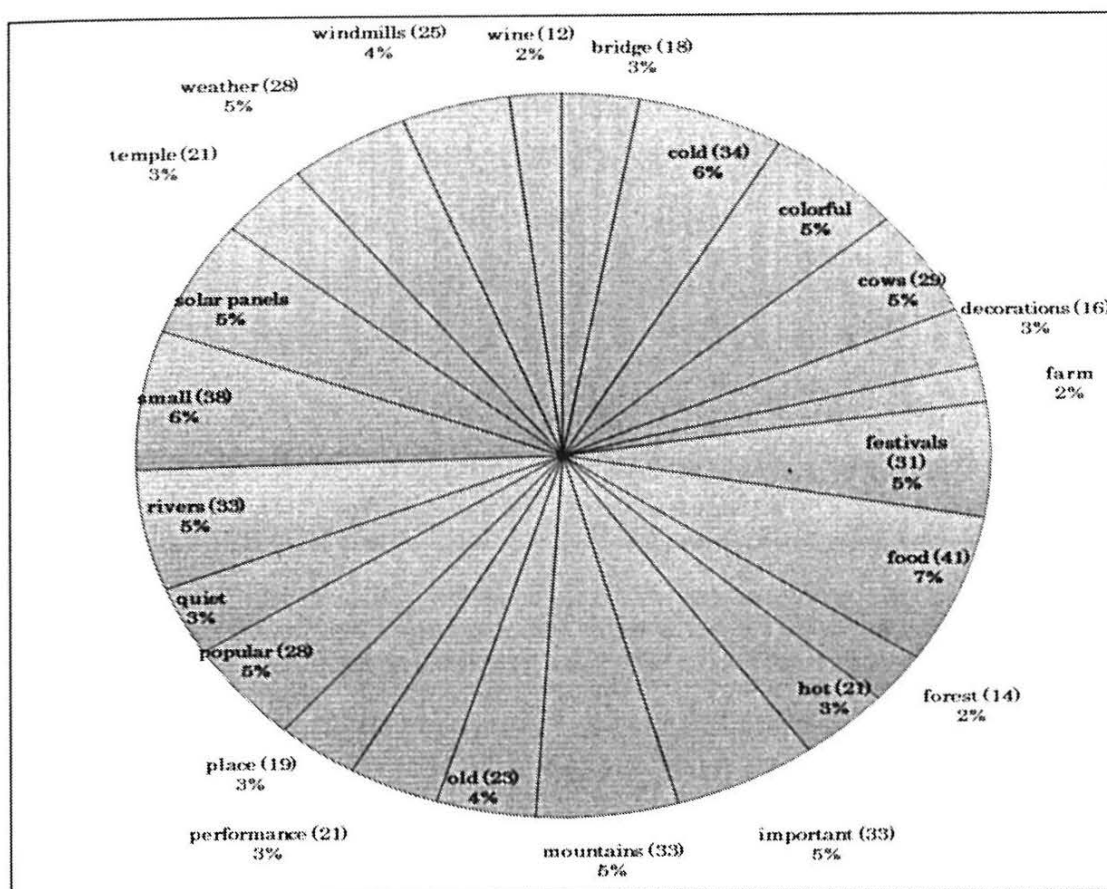


**Graph 1.** *The percentage of words that students were familiar with*

Graph 1 describes the familiarity that 41 high school students had with the vocabulary proposed. The maximum percentage is 7%, these are the words that students knew more. From a total of 50 words, students were familiar with 24 (42%); however, this also includes some words that only two, three, or four students knew. The number of students is represented in parentheses.

During the last session, students took the same vocabulary test in order to discover if the number of students who knew each word had grown upon the culmination of the project. These are the results for the 24 words that students already knew at the beginning compared to the results at the end.
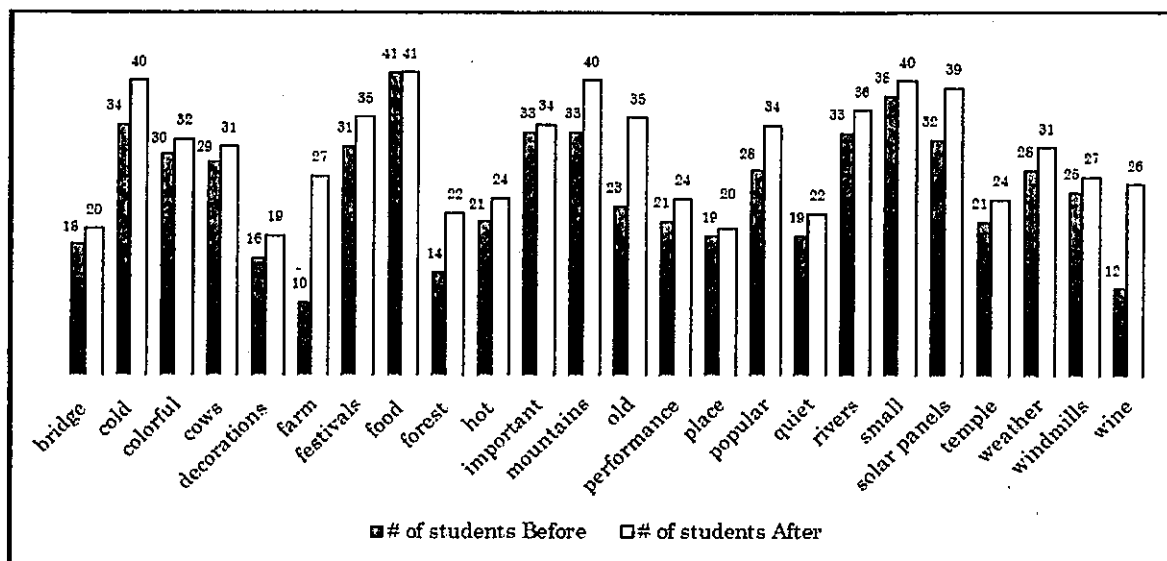


Graph 2. *The comparison of the vocabulary that students knew before the project*
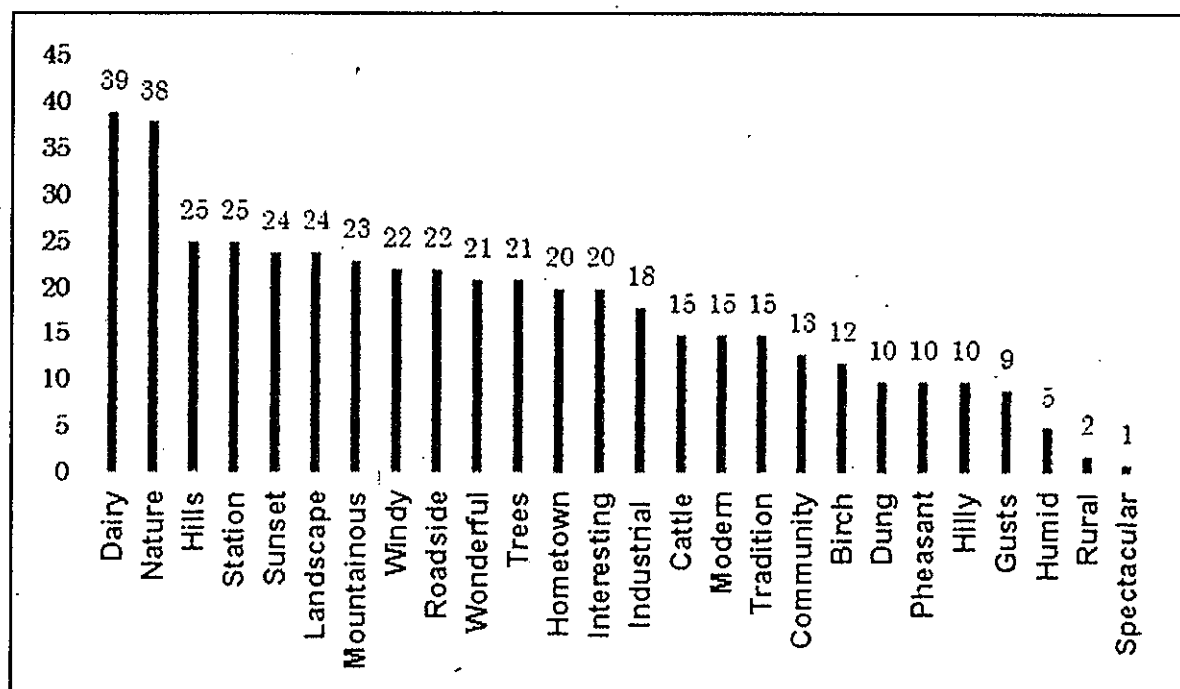


Graph 3. *Other words that students learned*

As it was expected, the familiarity of students with the 24 previously known words increased approximately 5 students per word. On the other hand, besides these 24 words that students were already familiar with, there were 26 more words that students did not know. The following graph indicates the number of students that successfully recalled the meaning and correct spelling of such words during the final vocabulary check.

It is important to mention that students were totally unfamiliar with these 26 words at the beginning of the project; however, they were able to recall their meaning, spelling and successfully used them in the calendar descriptions as well.

**Reading diagnostic test**, a reading test was also given to the students. The purpose of the test was to have a clear idea about the level of students at reading tasks; for this, it was necessary to get to know the percentage of effectiveness of students' answers in the test. The central focus of this diagnostic instrument was checking reading comprehension.
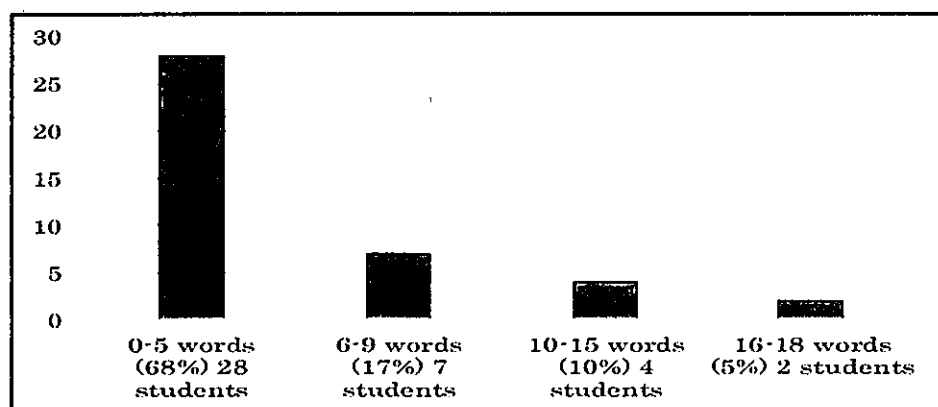
Table 2. The numbers and percentages of correct answers written by students at the beginning of the project

| students | correct answers | Percentage of effectiveness |
|---|---|---|
| 6 students | 0 correct ans. | 0% |
| 5 students | 2 correct ans. | 40% |
| 7 students | 3 correct ans. | 60% |
| 18 students | 4 correct ans. | 80% |
| 5 students | 5 correct ans. | 100% |
| 41 Students | | |

A short paragraph about Kuzumaki was presented for them to read and write the corresponding information answering five open questions at the end. The results obtained are presented in terms of the number of correct answers written by students.

The test contained a total of 5 comprehension questions. These results show that 18 students were able to correctly answer at least 4 out of 5 comprehension questions; 6 students obtained no correct answers at all or they did not answer anything. The lowest result was 0 answers (6 students), and the highest was 5 correct answers (5 students), the average of correct responses per student was 3 answers.

**Writing diagnostic test,** the purpose of this test was to discover the level of students at writing tasks by observing their use of basic grammar structures, the amount of specific vocabulary as well the number of words and sentences that they were able to write to describe in English. The strategy used was to measure students' performance through writing picture descriptions in a free-writing style.



Graph 4. *The numbers and percentages of correctly written words at the beginning*

More than the half of the class (28 students) wrote between 0 to 5 correct words. This 28 students represent the 68% of the class; this means that the majority fell into this category. On the other hand, only 2 students wrote between 16 and 18 accurate words. The average of correct words written per student in the diagnostic test was 5 words; the lowest was 0 words and the highest 18 words; 3 students did not write any answer. As for the number of sentences written by students; they were also counted and the distribution turned out to be as follows:
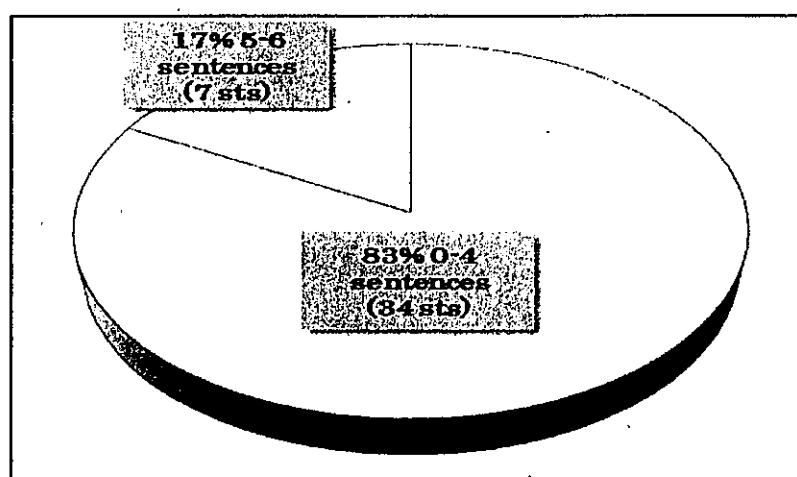


Graph 5. The numbers and percentages of correctly written sentences

The graphic shows that 34 students that is the 83% of the class wrote between 1-4 correct sentences; the remaining 17% (7 students) wrote from 5 to 7 correct sentences in English. The correct-sentences average became 2 sentences per student. As a "correct sentence" it was determined to be any set of words with meaning in itself, containing a subject and predicate, conveying a statement, exclamation, or command. Regarding the proficiency level of the students, based on the results of the writing and reading diagnostic tests, and the teacher-students oral interactions during the project, it could be estimated to be a breakthrough A1 level, with a limited and very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to

particular concrete written situations; students also seemed to have problems using some basic grammar structures such as the simple present, and the present continuous.

## 6. Discussion

As it is suggested in the project-based learning theory, the project should end with a concrete artifact or any tangible target; in this case, the calendar that students elaborated. Students were assigned two photographs and they were asked to write a description in English to each. In total, 69 descriptions were written by students and when we calculate the final number of words used per student in the calendar descriptions, it shows an average of 37 words per description for one photograph and a modal value of 32 words per photograph description; this makes a clear contrast with the results obtained in the diagnostic test (see Graph 3). If we compare this average of 32 words per student in the calendar to the 0-5 words that 28 students presented in the diagnostic test, we will realize that this increased at least 25-27 words per student. As for the number of sentences they wrote, the average was 4-5 sentences per student, and a modal value of 3 sentences. Students were able to successfully write 281 sentences in English and used a total of 80% of the target vocabulary by using it in context in the photograph descriptions of the calendar elaborated. Students observed an evident improvement in their written performance. They made a better use of basic grammar structures and target vocabulary in their paragraphs describing photographs in English. Proof of that is the appropriateness in the calendar descriptions that they wrote. They made use of a big deal of the target words that were recycled throughout the

project; they also improved in the use of basic grammar tenses. While in the diagnostic test most of them wrote between 0-4 sentences (in the simple present only) with an average of 1 sentence per student; at the end, they wrote between 4-5 correct sentences while making use of 80% of the target vocabulary, and tenses other than the simple present (the present continuous, future simple, first conditional, an commands). This is clearly in contrast with the results obtained during the diagnostic stage of the project.

## 7.   Implications

**"Let's discover the values of our town" in another social context - Areas of adjustment and future improvements**

The project "Let's find the values of our town" makes use of the English language to achieve the concretion of its general goals. Those goals are promoting awareness about the beauty and importance of finding the core values of their town, as well as getting students more engaged and motivated in the correct use of the English language for writing and reading tasks through the elaboration of a meaningful product which can be helpful for them and their community. In this case, such product was a calendar in English; such calendar featured the values of the town by using representative photographs and descriptions in English and at the same time, having students explore their town while making use of English to write by themselves. Undoubtedly, from an English teaching perspective and based on the experience in Kuzumaki, this is a relevant and meaningful project, which can definitely work in the context of a developing country just like it did in Japan. This project has been completed two times already, each time in a different town from the prefecture of Iwate, in Japan. Techniques and

methodologies that appropriately responded to the Japanese standards and needs for working with high school students were used. It will be quite interesting to see how this project works when applied in a different social framework where the basic structure of ideas for education varies to that in the Japanese teaching style. Let us say a Latin American developing country like El Salvador in Central America.

The call for values is currently echoing throughout every land in the World and El Salvador is not the exception, where educators, parents, and students are increasingly concerned about and affected by violence, growing social problems, the lack of social cohesion, and the lack of respect for each other. Therefore, implementing the project "Let's find the values of our town" in a social context in such conditions will absolutely represent a meaningful and relevant initiative; it may undoubtedly contribute to improve the attitudes of students towards society and the English language itself. As for the methodology and techniques utilized in Japan, some adjustments must be done during its implementation in El Salvador. This responds to two noticeable differences between the Salvadoran and Japanese education systems: Students' lifestyle, and curriculum approach for English teaching in high school level.

The social background of Salvadoran and Japanese High School students from public schools differs in many aspects, it is clear that the concept of a high school student is very different in Japan and El Salvador. Students in both countries experience different social circumstances and this could definitely condition students' performance in educational projects such as "Let's discover the values of our town" project.

Besides students' social background, another evident difference could be the curriculum approach for English teaching at a high school level in both nations. 'English language education in Japan remains a controversial issue. While Japanese education system has been generally recognized as one of the most successful ones in the world, its English language curriculum in public institutions has been object of criticisms" (Hosoki, 2010)

In the particular case of high schools in Japan, English is mostly seen as the mean to enter the university, rather than the way to communication. Hence, English is frequently taught by making use of traditional practices often times focused on translation, and rote learning of linguistic elements with a special emphasis on reading and writing. While the teaching practices in El Salvador are somewhat similar to the ones in Japan, the emphasis seems to be different; it falls more on the listening & speaking skills. In El Salvador, it is not necessary to pass an English test to enter the university, unless one is pretending to major in an English-related field. Sometimes high school graduates do not immediately enter the university; they start working, pursue technical careers, or go to Computers' and English language academies. The teaching emphasis in El Salvador responds to the increasing need to become proficient in English in order to meet the requirements of growing call-centers market. As for the teaching methods, and approaches influencing the Japanese and Salvadoran English teaching in high school, very traditional ways of teaching such as practices of the grammar-translation approach (1880), audiolingual method techniques (1940), and influences of the reading approach (1930) are often observed in both systems. However, the communicative approach has lately started to gain some popularity among teacher too, and it has become more frequent to find Japanese and Salvadoran teachers striving to adopt communicative methods in their teaching styles in

order to promote an integral development of their students' communication abilities. (Hosoki, 2010) In the particular case of El Salvador, the use of what seems to be an eclectic method is applied. While both systems seem to have a lot in common in terms of teaching methodologies, the Japanese education system definitely overtakes El Salvador's with the inclusion of English native speakers in the classroom (ALT's). Japan has an Exchange and Teaching Program known as "the JET program", which started in the late 80's. This important initiative contributes to reach Japan's national goals for a foreign language acquisition. Undoubtedly, having a native English speaker interacting with junior high and high school students makes a great impact and motivates students to learn English. This is an initiative, which has not reached El Salvador yet; however, it could represent a great benefit to the context of El Salvador as well.

## 8.   Conclusion

The project "Let's find the values of our town" is supposed to be implemented in El Salvador with students from public high school institutions, following the same objectives, and considering some necessary adjustments in methodology. This project is an attempt to contribute to the efforts of the Ministry of Education of El Salvador to promote an inclusive education with the English language acquisition being a key factor in the development of the society. This educational project promotes human and national values in students, not only English abilities are perfected, but also cognitive thinking and social skills. Students being exposed to and asked to explore the positive values of their own environment will help them grow towards their potential, protect them from violence, and engage them in the community with confidence, respect, and purpose. English language learning must include

positive values as well; that is the heart of this project, and the resulting expression of this, is the calendar in English made by students themselves; this is just the tangible proof of the goals of the project. By the culmination of this project, I hope to have contributed to the English learning process of 41 Japanese high school students, and also, I hope to have helped to promote the beauty of Kuzumaki in other cities and prefectures, or perhaps countries where the "Kuzumaki Calendar 2017" will ultimately reach.

**Special thanks & acknowledgements**

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