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ADHD and English Teaching: Dealing with Teenagers

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## I. Abstract:

ADHD is one of the most common learning disorders that teachers have to deal with on a daily basis. Despite this, initial professional education does not make it easier for newly qualified teachers, since we are not taught about how to deal with ADHD students, thus we end up perpetuating practices that do not encourage ADHD students' improvement.

This research proposal aims at suggesting specific strategies and actions to try in a Chilean educational setting, taking mostly a study case done with a fourteen-year-old student in Costa Rica. It is imperative to mention that most, if not all, of the research found related to ADHD has been done with children who have been diagnosed and medicated by a professional. This experience from Costa Rica does not mention these two characteristics for which I speculate there is neither of them present in the "treatment" and strategies applied in the study case.

Furthermore, research shows us examples and cases of small groups of ADHD students within a regular group. This paper is based on a completely different case, in which the entire group –of nine students- suffers from untreated ADHD in their adolescence.

## I. 1. Resumen

El Trastorno por Déficit de Atención con Hiperactividad (TDAH), o Déficit Atencional, está entre los trastornos de aprendizaje más comunes con los cuales los profesores han de lidiar en el aula. A pesar de esto, la formación inicial docente no lo hace más fácil para nosotros, los profesores recientemente egresados, pues no se nos prepara para enseñar a estudiantes que sufren de déficit atencional; así, terminamos perpetuando prácticas docentes que no potencian el aprendizaje de éstos estudiantes.

Esta propuesta de investigación apunta precisamente a sugerir estrategias y acciones específicas a ser probadas en el contexto educacional Chileno, tomando mayormente como punto de referencia un estudio de caso realizado en Costa Rica con un niño de catorce años de edad. Es igualmente importante mencionar que la mayoría de la bibliografía encontrada es acerca de investigaciones realizadas con niños pequeños que han sido diagnosticados y medicados por un profesional. Esta experiencia de Costa Rica no menciona ninguna de éstas dos características, por lo que especulo que no están presentes en el “tratamiento” y estrategias aplicadas en el estudio de caso.

La investigación también nos muestra ejemplos de pequeños grupos de estudiantes con déficit atencional insertos en un grupo normal de estudiantes. Esta propuesta está inspirada en un caso completamente distinto en el que el grupo entero –de nueve estudiantes adolescentes– muestra evidentes síntomas concordantes con el déficit atencional, pero que nunca han sido diagnosticados y tratados.

## II. Introduction

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is by far one of the most common learning difficulties teachers have to face in the classroom. In our Chilean context, it has become a major problem considering that no teacher has been professionally prepared to teach students with special needs – as it is the case of ADHD students – and this is a huge flaw to add to our initial training programs. It has become one more responsibility for teachers to prepare, study and inform themselves about this topic, rather than having the help of a professional in charge of these students in the school. Many educators just do not have the time to do this; therefore, many students with this problem end up unattended. This is basically why more research in this area is needed, but focused on more specific circumstances and context.

ADHD students are equally –or even more- talented than regular students, and that talent many times is wasted because no prepared or adequate professional was there to foster students' skills and personal talents.

There is much research done in this area regarding children and not so much regarding adolescent students. It would be interesting to develop activities and assignments related to topics of teenagers' interest. Moreover, we do not know if we need to develop new strategies and methodology or if we can combine and modify the existing ones for these students, however, it is necessary to put teachers, parents and students along with the researchers up to the task of creating knowledge that benefits ADHD high school students, who do not have the medicine, the financial support or even their parents' support.

### III. Context

The context for this research proposal is a private, progressive school located in La Florida. The grade is 11<sup>th</sup> which for the English lesson is divided into two groups: the strongest and the weakest, according to the students' proficiency level. This division is made through tests, performance, the teachers' observations and personal opinions; therefore the class is not divided into two exact halves. This proposal will be focused on the weakest group, which has only nine students.

The group is good in terms of understanding English, they are perfectly capable of understanding the entirety of the lessons in English and they do not have major problems or intellectual limitations. The main problem here is that all the students present symptoms concordant with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and this makes it difficult to keep the rhythm and pace of the lesson. They get distracted very easily and frequently and it is hard for them to avoid drifting off the lesson into any other topic, which makes it even more difficult for the teacher to bring them back on track with the lesson. Also, each student has a different kind of attention focus; one or two get easily distracted by things they can touch with their hands; other students are very talkative; another student gets very distracted with others' conversations and/or noise; other students are more visual and tend to focus their attention on things that they can watch or observe.

It is also important to mention that none of these students have been diagnosed by a professional and never have had any kind of medical treatment regarding this topic. I tried a few things that are recommended for these cases in the booklet "Teaching Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Instructional Strategies and Practices" by the U.S. Department of Education, but they did not seem to work out. This might be due to the fact that the booklet is

thought out for children and not for teenagers in this specific situation. It is well understood that teenagers have different interests and the contents they learn require different skills than those of a child.

#### IV. Problem statement

##### Research questions

- i. What specific practices or strategies can I use/change in the classroom so that this particular group of students keeps engaged and focused on the lesson?
- ii. How can I establish the main characteristics of a lesson in the classroom since the very first class in the environment of a group of students with ADHD?
- iii. What methodology (ies) should I use to fit my ADHD students' interests?

#### V. Objectives

##### V. 1. General Objective

- To develop and apply a set of specific strategies and methodology for my ADHD high school students, so that I can make the English lesson both effective and interesting for them, considering they are adolescents.

##### V. 2. Specific Objectives

- To apply different strategies and activities in a classroom where the entire group of students have ADHD, considering their individual learning difficulties and needs.
- To find the specific environmental characteristics that need to be considered to encourage ADHD students' learning of the English language.



## VI. Rationale

This area of research is both important and useful for many reasons. To begin with, dealing with ADHD is not necessarily something regular teachers learn throughout their initial professional education, it is actually an area that has been somehow left aside in our Chilean context –in both public and private areas of the system-. The fact that there are inclusion programs being implemented in regular schools does not consider taking the professional training of teachers into consideration, i.e. teachers who are not trained for it, end up teaching students who suffer from all kinds of learning difficulties, ADHD and Asperger's included.

Moreover, ADHD is far more common than any other learning difficulty, ergo, research in this area and even more specifically teenagers' ADHD, would be useful for the teaching profession. I think that I -and teachers in general- and students could benefit from this type of research mainly because teachers would have more practical ways to cope with this condition and students would become more aware of their own capacity and abilities knowing exactly how to deal with certain situations that occur in the classroom. This is more likely to have important repercussions in students' adulthood.

Also, it is imperative to have more research done in this area because of its significant impact on demographics; every time, there are more students diagnosed with ADHD and the numbers will certainly keep rising.

## VII. Theoretical Framework

### VII. 1. Symptoms of ADHD and its impact in the classroom

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a recurrent issue in regular classrooms all over the country and teachers are learning to recognize it day by day, a little more. What is interesting about this condition is that there are so many young people who have gone into adulthood having it without knowing, and these same people have had to learn to cope with this disorder. There are studies which support the idea of ADHD having an important genetic factor (WebMD.com), therefore people have somehow passed it on to their children and so on, thus becoming a far more common topic for teachers to deal with.

First off, it is necessary to clear out the main aspects or symptoms of ADHD; “it is a neurobiological, genetically-based condition characterized by differences in brain functioning that affect behavior, thoughts and emotions” (Tannock). From this definition, we can establish that the main difficulty inside the classroom that comes from ADHD is that students basically have a poor working memory and impulsivity. This difficulty concentrating on one thing for too long, fixating on, and/or remembering specific details for a long period of time translates into inattention during the lessons; therefore, students have poor academic attainment.

There are also scientific studies that show the possible cause(s) for ADHD. This disorder can be caused by delayed brain growth in the frontal cortex, which controls attention and/ or it can also be triggered by abnormalities in the brain’s neurotransmitters. As mentioned previously, it is also possible to consider the families’ genetic heritage –heritability is about 76% (Tannock)-. From this, it is not crazy or daring to say that children whose parents have ADHD will also have its symptoms.

There is another dimension to this condition that also alters the flow of the lessons and teacher-student interaction. Children with ADHD will inevitably have to deal with social and emotional difficulties mainly because they will find it hard to manage their own behavior and emotions, and they tend to misperceive social cues and over-react.

Moreover, there are many misconceptions or myths circling around ADHD. First, there is the unreal notion that ADHD is “a problem of modern society”; there is data of writing pointing out ADHD symptoms as far as 1798. There is also the notion, sadly shared by some educators, that ADHD is a matter of regulation –parents or teacher not disciplining children enough-, rather than a medical condition (Tannock, 2011)

## VII. 2. General strategies suggested for ADHD children.

There is plenty of specific and practical advice for teachers to cope with children with ADHD. These students have specific needs and the teacher has to start by identifying them –how, when and why the students is inattentive, impulsive and hyperactive-. It is also recommended to take particular measures and apply specific strategies from three different components: Academic instruction, behavioral interventions and classroom accommodations. The United States Department of Education issued a report (2004) that contains specific strategies to put into practice in each of these three components.

### VII.2.1. Academic Instruction

In terms of academic instruction, it is recommended to introduce the class following certain steps, such as providing an advanced organizer, reviewing previous lessons, setting learning and behavioral expectations, stating needed materials, explaining additional resources and simplifying instructions, choices and scheduling. Then, conducting the lesson takes up a teaching commitment to be predictable and supportive, check students’ performance, use

audiovisual materials, ask probing questions, perform ongoing evaluation, help students correct their own mistakes and focus, use follow-up directions (both oral and written), lower noise level, divide work into smaller units, highlight key points, eliminate or reduce frequency of timed tests, use cooperative learning strategies, and finally use assistive technology. Lastly, while concluding the lesson it is also important for students not to be interrupted abruptly, this means that they must get advanced warning that the lesson is about to end, checking the completed assignments and briefly previewing the next lesson.

### VII. 2.2. Behavioral Intervention

Regarding behavioral intervention, it is recommended to define appropriate behavior while giving praise, and praising is an extremely important part for the intervention to be effective. It has to be immediate, varied, consistent and sincere. Inappropriate behavior, on the other hand, must be selectively ignored. Also, nuisance items have to be removed and calming objects to be manipulated must be provided.

### VII.2.3. Classroom arrangement and parents' attention

Consequently, there are some actions that can be done in the classroom arrangement to strengthen student's attention in class, for instance seating the ADHD student near the teacher or next to a student role model. Providing low-distraction work areas, use a timer to indicate the beginning and end of an activity, turning the lights on and off as required to get the children's attention and playing instrumental, calmed music while they work is also recommended. It is also necessary to make sure that the furniture of the classroom is appropriate, i.e. it is the right size, so that the students will not fidget.

There is plenty of research done in this area; however, the final component of coping with teaching children with ADHD is that parents must be completely involved in their children's

education and, in many cases; children are diagnosed and given medications by a professional. This final aspect is what crashes a little with our Chilean reality. Most of the students who attend public institutions do not always count with the parents' attention or the medicine.

### VII.3. Teaching English to ADHD adolescents

So far, we can find many data of study regarding ADHD in different subjects, such as Mathematics –problem solving- (Platt) and English (the equivalent to our Lenguaje y Comunicación) in terms of reading and writing (Tannock). However, the specific focus of this research project proposal is related to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) not to a couple of students with ADHD, but a group of nine students who are separated from the rest of the group just for the English class. It is also imperative to consider that much of the data related to ADHD has been obtained through studies performed with children because it is most commonly the age in which it is diagnosed, but this specific group of students is composed by adolescents, between the ages of 16 and 18.

Even more specifically, how do we teach English to students who are almost out of the educational high school system and have never been formally diagnosed and treated? One of the practices that have become popular in schools, particularly in private ones, is that the groups are divided into more proficient and less proficient students and they work separately for the English lesson. Each group works with a different teacher, with the purpose of facilitating learning for those who find it more difficult. From my personal observations, I have been able to distinguish only one difference between the lessons carried out in both groups: the more proficient group of students is expected to do more in less time; and the less proficient group is given more time to do less, that is to say that both groups are basically working with the same contents and

somewhat at the same rhythm with the only difference that there is more or less expected from them depending on their fluency.

This example may lead us to question the need to separate the groups of students according to their proficiency level: do we really need to separate them because they do not benefit from other students who find it easier to learn English? What about the mixed ability classes concept?

There is a lot of research done in the field of ADHD and EFL learning; however most of the research done is regarding children, not teenagers, and few ADHD individuals within a regular class, not an entire group –in this case, a group of nine- of ADHD students.

#### VII. 4. Case study

I caught a glimpse of an interesting idea to put into practice with teenagers who have ADHD, based on a case study performed with one fourteen-year-old student in Costa Rica (Bula Villalobos, 2011). First of all, I thought that even though the educational reality of Chile might be distant from that of Costa Rica, there is the predominant Latin-American factor in common, which means that there is not a general preference for learning the English Language. In the case of Costa Rica, according to the compulsory educational programs in the first and second cycles of education (the three cycles are the same as in Chile), the students get to choose between French and English and in the third cycle students have three hours of English per week (OEI, 1997), which is only one more hour than in public schools in Chile and almost the same as in private schools.

This case study was done by a researcher, with the cooperation of the teacher of English and the student's parents, and it was performed along the course of four sessions with just one

particular student who suffered from ADHD and was part of a regular class. First, the researcher presents a list of ADHD indicators that might turn out being extremely useful for teachers. It is important to mention that teachers are not particularly instructed in this matter throughout their initial professional training, it takes dedication and interest for us to learn and inform ourselves.

The table of indicators is the following (Bula Villalobos, P. 27):

Table 1: Indicators of ADHD.

Behavior	Yes	No
Interrupts or intrudes the teacher and other students.		
Blurts out answers and opinions.		
Has difficulty waiting for his/her turn.		
Constantly stands up for no apparent reason.		
Is very talkative.		
Might dash around or climb.		
Fidgets excessively with hands or feet.		
Is easily distracted by extraneous stimuli.		
Is very forgetful.		
Cannot sit still for short periods of time.		
Does not pay attention to details.		
Shows difficulty sustaining attention.		
Does not finish on time the assigned tasks.		
Loses personal belongings.		
Rarely finishes tasks and assignments.		
Impulsively calls out answers.		
Has a short term memory.		
Has a messy desk.		



There were some accommodations made by the teacher of English for this student, such as: giving the student twenty extra minutes when doing the exams, sitting the student in the first row, check the student's work constantly and assigning a tutor (buddy system) to the student to remind him of class work and assignments (Bula Villalobos, P. 27)

What is interesting about this case study is that each one of the four sessions with the student had a particular objective regarding teaching the student how to implement a specific set of strategies for the English lesson, starting from the simpler and more immediate strategies, as shown in the following table:

Table 2: Strategies adopted per session of the case study.

<b>SESSION</b>	<b>STRATEGIES</b>
First	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To decide on a specific color and picture –of the student's choice- for the English notebook and book.</li> <li>• Using a highlighter to highlight whatever seems relevant to the student.</li> <li>• Using a pocket calendar to keep important information in mind and to accomplish duties and tasks when required.</li> </ul>
Second	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using an audio device to record the English lessons.</li> <li>• The student was allowed to use a fidget object: a mini ball made of clothe, with the condition that he would not throw or bounce it.</li> </ul>

Third	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The student was assigned a physical job within the class; in this case, he was going to be in charge of erasing the board and distributing and collecting copies, assignments and projects.</li> <li>• Establish a pre-arranged signal –the teacher touched her left ear- for the student to know when he was losing concentration or moving excessively.</li> </ul>
Fourth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A specific folder was chosen to keep all the materials, copies and assignments for the English subject which included a section for parents-teacher communication.</li> </ul>

Although these are all strategies students have to be taught to maintain, I speculate it would not be excessively difficult for them if parents and teachers are involved. As a conclusion, the author – Olmedo Bula Villalobos- mentions how “the attitude and knowledge exhibited by both, the student and the English teacher were determinant to the success of the implementation plan” (P. 31) thus allowing students to become more autonomous and independent learners at an age in which they need to develop those skills. The author also concluded the study with the creation of a list of strategies and techniques for teachers working with ADHD students, which is the following (Bula Villalobos, P. 32):

Table 3. List of Strategies and Techniques for Teachers working with ADHD Students

When possible, raise phonological awareness by teaching phonemes in students' L1.	Make sure you teach the sound system of the target language explicitly.
Sit students in a place with little distraction.	Make frequent visual contact.
Give short and clear instructions several times.	Have students repeat instructions.
Post checklists for the different tasks.	Have rewards for in-school work and homework.
Write the objectives and instructions on the board.	Make students use a highlighter.
Encourage the use of pocket calendars.	Use physical proximity and touch.
Signal that someone is to answer a question about what is being said.	Ask a simple question to a child whose attention is beginning to wander (not even related to the topic).
State behaviour that you want and expect.	Use students' names in the material being covered.
Share with students your expectations of what paying attention looks like.	Teach learning strategies (predicting and reciprocation).

Try desperately not to criticize students.	Write negative and positive behaviour.
Use the buddy system.	Handle medication with sensitivity.
Develop a sense of humor.	Emphasize quality of work – not quantity.
Remove distracting items from the classroom.	Increase the distance between desks.
Vary voice, tone, and inflection.	Move around the classroom.
Use body gestures.	Periodically record or videotape your lessons.
Alternate physical and mental activities.	Believe in positive rather than negative.
Encourage planning by frequently using lists, charts, and calendars.	Use the wall clock. Tell students how long they are to work on assignments.
Communicate the value of accuracy over speed.	Use attention getters before explaining.
Increase frequency and content of positive reinforcement.	Use and promote contracts with students and parents.
Give students a physical responsibility in the class.	Prearrange signals with students.
Expect students to wiggle.	Use a folder for copies and homework.

When reading, allow students to use a pen across the page.	Consider having students complete every third question or item, instead of answering each one.
Expect the unexpected.	Use mnemonics to help retention and memory.
Do a countdown for the last minutes of activities.	Avoid more than 20 minutes of seatwork.
Incorporate more TPR activities.	Increase the novelty of lesson by considering MIs.
Knowledge and attitude are equally important.	Provide a positive and non-threatening environment.
Establish a daily routine.	Promote hands-on activities whenever possible.

This particular case study caught my attention in the sense of bringing up important and basic notions, strategies and techniques that can effectively be used with teenagers, as this case study shows.

However, it would definitely be interesting to implement these techniques and strategies in a group composed mainly by ADHD students with the particular characteristics of age and background mentioned in this project proposal –adolescents without prior diagnose and treatment-.

## VII.5. Methodology in the classroom

It is equally important to consider the methodology a teacher can use when dealing with this particular situation. Through the reading of different articles and M.A. theses, I could find some examples of activities that can be done with an entire class where there are few ADHD students through the combination of different already existent EFL methodologies like Total Physical Response (TPR), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), The Silent Way (TSW) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). “Since the EFL methodology already has a rich variety of feasible tools, no separate method need to be developed per se” (Turketi, 2010), but then again a problem comes to mind when thinking of all these different activities being done with eleventh graders: How could they be adapted to fit sixteen-year-old’s interests?

It is imperative to point out also that these different activities have to cover all dimensions of language learning, not just vocabulary and grammar, but also the four language skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. This is the complicated part of the research because most of the research I have encountered has been done with small children and at the first stages their teachers’ main concern is the exposure and acquisition of basic everyday vocabulary and simple grammar structures. Also, there is research done regarding reading and writing (Tannock) but not integrating all four skills. Therefore, it would also be interesting to select and apply specific methodology or see if it is indeed necessary to create a new methodology for this purpose: teaching the four main skills to ADHD teenagers in a foreign language.

## VIII. Methodology

In this section I put forward the proposed methodology to implement this action research project. The main reason why this is an action research project is that, hypothetically speaking, I could go through with the project in my own classroom. Action research is mainly taking a reflective approach to one's own practice. Therefore, the most important requirement for this project is that the teacher/researcher is willing to adapt as many times as necessary the list of strategies that will be used in order to reflect upon them and their results continuously.

### VIII. 1. Instruments:

- *Narrative*: the description of situations and tactics put into practice in the classroom would be a good way to obtain the teacher's appreciation of the actions adopted from literature and other sources.
- *Interview of Other Teachers*: a good way to get a general idea of how teachers deal/or have dealt with ADHD so far, and what they have seen or think it works will provide an interesting insight of how to deal with ADHD not only from theory but also from practice.
- *Interview of Students*: This will allow me to get a clear picture of what my students think of their own learning process.
- *Students' Results*: This will show me exactly what practice(s) seem to work out and which do not according to the progress of students' performance.

## VIII. 2. Data Collection:

- *Copies of students' work*: In the varied formats: recordings, written assignments, tests and oral assignments or presentations.
- *Videos of recorded lessons*: Observing the lessons contributes to analyze and reflect upon what practices have been done properly and which ones could be changed.
- *Interviews with teachers, students and parents*: This would be useful to get an insight of how the different actors are affected by the changes performed and what their opinions are.
- *Surveys*: Surveys are useful to get the more objective opinion of the teachers and students and also it can be useful to mark the difference between the actors' responses at the beginning and at the end of the intervention

## VIII. 3. Data Analysis

Surveys and tests or assignments results can be quantitatively measured at the beginning and at the end of the intervention. Previous year grades may also be considered for the analysis, if pertinent.

From videos and recordings I can draw conclusions from the way students respond to the measures that I take to make sure that the class flow is maintained, which is observable.

The interviews with teachers are at the beginning to see what other colleagues do, select suggestions and ideas to see if they work, thus generating theory from practice.

Students and parents interviews and surveys would be helpful to see how they appreciate the process, from the beginning to the end, and see how they cope with difficulties that might present themselves along the intervention.



## IX. Action Plan Proposal

In general, the whole research project with interventions included should take a school year to be considered significant and valid. I personally speculate that in that period of time, students and teachers can adopt new strategies and educate them, meaning, that is enough time for students and teacher to acquire significant routines that will positively affect students' performance in class. Plus, it is also an adequate period of time because not only one strategy or methodology could be tried, but several.

During the first semester the interviews, surveys and diagnose would be carried out first and later a trial would be put into practice with the different strategies and methodology that we obtain from research and other more experienced teachers' suggestions.

The second semester would be devoted to consolidate strategies that showed good results throughout the first semester and validate them with teachers, parents and students.

## X. Resources Needed:

- Parents and Students' acceptance and participation in the project.
- School's approval of the project.
- Legal permission from the parents and school to record lessons and interviews.
- School's permission and resources to adapt the classroom (i.e.: seating arrangement, decorations, materials)
- Video camera, audio recording device.

## XI. Conclusion

As a conclusion I can say that there is a lot of information available for teachers to cope with the specific needs of ADHD students. However, it is necessary to adapt the existing information for all kinds of students –not just elementary students- and generate new knowledge that can be applied to these specific circumstances. It would also be useful to learn from those more experienced teachers who have educated themselves in this area of research and have found different ways to teach English to students who live with this learning difficulty. This is why this research proposal includes a dimension based on teacher expertise, because we, educators, know that experience brings a lot of important knowledge that is not always found in theory, ergo, we have the responsibility of creating this new theory to complement the findings that research has given us so far.

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