

UDL in 15 Minutes
With Liliana Vidal
Episode 124 - The Transcript

LOUI:

Hello, and welcome to UDL in 15 Minutes where educators discuss their experiences with UDL. I'm Loui Lord Nelson, UDL author and leader. Today, I'm talking with Liliana Vidal, an English teacher for secondary students and adults. Liliana is going to talk about including students with disabilities in an English as a second language classroom. Welcome Liliana.

LILIANA:

Hi, Loui. Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to share my journey and the work I have been doing to promote inclusion and accessible education. I have worked for many years with adults until I started teaching kids and teens at a private primary and secondary school. Working there, I noticed that while students were eager to learn, those students with disabilities were often left behind. We realized that some traditional methods we didn't use, were not using, we were using it in account for there are diverse needs. This was causing frustration to the students. So as a teacher, it was hard to see that students were struggling, not because of a lack of ability, but because the system was not working properly, and we couldn't support them. So, in my case, I knew that we had to change something. So I started looking for new things, studying for example, neuroscience, multiple intelligences, other things to see how I could help students or how could accommodate the students better. I went different ideas, as I told you before, until I came UDL. And there was something like something magic, let's say. I created a proposal at that moment that outlined the need for creating an area inside the English department in the school that I work. I tried to show the benefits that it could bring to the students and the school and how we could implement it. And we started. Really fortunate to the school administration saw the value in this initiative. They gave us the green light to move forward. I worked there for some time. And then I decided to create a play for myself where we teach English as a second language using Universal Design for Learning.

LOUI:

Okay, wonderful. So I have two questions next. You did a wonderful job. You just dove right in, but I'd love for people to know where you are in the world. And then also tell us a little bit about your background in education.

LILIANA:

I am from Argentina. I live in a place that is called Funes near Rosario, the third city in Argentina.

I am an English teacher. I have been teaching English for more than 20 years. I consider myself a very curious person, so I started reading and investigating about different topics, and in a moment I decided to continue my academic journey with Bachelor's degree in English language and literatures. Then, I decided I want more. I pursue Master degree in teaching English as a second language in Spain. There I also started studying or put into practice UDL because my thesis was related to UDL, but my journey didn't stop there. I became increasingly interested in the science of how the, how we learn. So I studied neuropsychology, neuroeducation. These fields opened my eyes to the incredible diversity of the human brain and the different ways that students process information. Understanding these concepts has been very important for me. And in the way that we shape the teaching. I also completed a traditional training and educational coaching. That helps me to support the students, mainly the students with disabilities. And then I deliver workshops, webinars. Such as topics, on topics like neurodiversity, inclusion, Universal Design for Learning. I also had a, I founded a place that was called Edukit, where I offer educational material that supports inclusive teaching practice. Mainly games, but now, I'm not doing it because I continue with my talks and my English classes.

LOUI:

That's wonderful. I have to give people an aside here. So Lilia and I had such a great fortune to work with Lilia at a conference where she helped with translation as we would move throughout a conference, and she did this beautiful job of people would ask questions in Spanish, and of course, this was for Latin America, so you have lots of different Spanish speakers there. Lots of different ways to speak Spanish, but she was asking them questions and then they would give their answer back and then she would translate for me and then I would ask the question in English, and we got to a point where at one point in time, people asked her the question in Spanish. And then she turned to me and spoke to me in Spanish. And then I said, wait, I don't understand. And then I would speak in English. And then she would speak to other people in English. And it was just a funny moment, but it really spoke to Lilia's incredible skills of not only translation, but the translation of Universal Design for Learning, which that is a whole conversation in and of itself. But I feel like I have a deep connection with Lilia. So I just wanted to share that with people. Okay. So you do many things in Argentina that help so many learners, but we're going to focus on how you use UDL to include students with disabilities so they also can learn English. So can you first talk about why

it's important that students with disabilities are included and how it is still unique to include them?

LILIANA:

Well, including students with disability in the English classroom, I think it's not a question of fairness, but I think it's essential, but there is a need to foster a more inclusive society. Every student, regardless of their ability, has the right to have the access to education and the opportunities. But I saw that, for example, in the English classroom sometimes, students were not included in the way that they should.

So, I started working on that. Because in Argentina, many educational systems and classrooms are designed for a one-size-fits-all approach. Which doesn't account for diverse needs of all students with disabilities. The students need to face many barriers when they are learning a language. It's necessary to start working with different methods. Yes, in order to align their learning styles and the environment. And this is why Universal Design for Learning is crucial because it provides multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representations, multiple means of expression, so every student, let's say, can learn in the way that suits them best, and I think in teaching English, we need to use different ways of multiple means, like a visual aid, interactive activities, technology. Apart from the fact that I believe that learning a language, a second language, helps teachers or gives other teachers the possibility of having a wide range of material to work, but maybe it's not the case of other subjects, but it's important to include or to incorporate UDL to work with the students who need more things or a bit of accommodation, like a student with dyslexia, students with autism, students with hyperactivity, for example. So it's very important to work on that, and to create environments that are appropriate for all the students and that everybody can benefit from the learning experience.

LOUI:

Yeah. Yeah. So, okay, let's dig into that UDL part. What are some examples of how you've used the framework to design those lessons?

LILIANA:

In my English classroom, I, as I told you, I apply Universal Design for Learning, but I think one of the key elements that I use are visual aids. I think it's a kind of help. I realize that, for example, with the students with disabilities, except that they have a visual impairment, they all need visual aids, for example. So I use flashcards, I use PowerPoints, presentations, glossaries, interactive games, for example, to introduce

vocabulary. That is very important. I also, for example, use a lot of hands-on experiences. So, because they have idea that the multisensory activities help the students to acquire better the language. So, in terms of multiple means of representation, let's say I prioritize presenting information in different ways. So that's how maybe if you have, for example, in the class, a student with dyslexia, you present as I told you, maybe visual aids, maybe a calendar, you can show videos or interactive or to use tactile activities, multisensory approaches. I use a lot of technology because I think it plays a crucial role in enhancing these multiple means of representations. For example, I try to use Word and the Immersive Readers to help students maybe to read the text. I pay a lot of attention to the font, to the size, to the background color. If there is a space, for example, if you have a text and the base suits, the reading preferences of the students that may help maybe students with dyslexia with visual impairment. For example, I use an app that is from Microsoft that is called OneNote that also helps my students to organize their ideas. That also maybe they can personalize more the learning experience. For example, they can add audio, visual aids. Also, they can click and they can have, for example, pictures. So, I use technology a lot. As regards to multiple means of expressions, I think are key in my teaching philosophy, because students with disabilities sometimes they feel like lost, no? Because they cannot demonstrate how much they know about the language. If we think about a traditional written exam, we have a lot of exams that are quite rigid, let's say, and they cannot express how much they know about the language. So I offer them, I try to be more flexible in the way that they show, you know, how much they have learned about the language. May be trying to express through art, through music, in a collaborative group work. So I try to put in practice this. And equally important, I also address the affective network. Because students with disabilities sometimes they feel frustrated, for example, because they cannot get maybe the level that they want. And they also find it quite difficult to sustain the effort and to develop self-regulation skills. So, I try also to work on that side and not to, not just to think about the language, but to see how I can support them, try to help them not to feel overwhelmed by the difficulties that they encounter. So, I work to create supportive classroom environments where students are encouraged. To persist despite these challenges. This involves creating strategies for managing frustrations, such as, for example, breaking tasks into smaller manageable steps. And often regular positive reinforcement to keep them motivated. To get them to sustain effort, I try to set clear, achieve goals, and to celebrate their progress. And no matter how small they are, I encourage them self-reflections, so where they can see their own progress and to recognize the strategies that work best for them, because this not only helps them to build resilience but also empowers them to take ownership of the learning. That is one of the things that UDL proposes.

I think also it's important to believe in your students. I think to maintain high expectations are fundamental to my approach. I think when you believe in them and you

show confidence in their abilities, that helps them to believe in themselves and also to motivate them to rise there to the challenge.

Last but not least, self-regulation is another critical area that I focus on because sometimes students get frustrated easily, you know when they cannot get it and they want to stop maybe or studying the language or not doing the exercise, so you had to help them to self-regulate. So, my aim is to give students with tools that they help them to navigate challenges independently, both in and outside the classroom.

So, I think it's important to support your student, not just academically, but emotionally and socially as well. So this is more or less my idea, to think about multiple means representation, to think about how they show the language, not being so rigid, and to help them to self-regulate.

LOUI:

Wonderful. So, anybody who's been listening to this, you can use this as a master course. You can go back through this podcast. You can listen to what Liliana has just shared in the last, oh, about seven minutes. And really walk yourself through the UDL principles and the guidelines. And it's just, it was a wonderful talk through how to empower all learners and, Lilliana, you were speaking specifically about students with disabilities, but as we know, these are just great examples of how we can design a learning environment in a really straightforward way. And what I loved about the explanation that you provided is that I don't know that these are necessarily new ideas for a lot of educators, but it's the fact of we weave them together. We put them all together within that learning environment, and then, like you said, it's having those high expectations and saying, oh, no, I know my students can reach this goal. I know they can. And then when we see that maybe they aren't, then we give them a little bit more support in one of those areas or in several of those areas. But we have the expectation and know they can achieve this. I just need to help find the right pathway for them and to help them learn how to choose the pathway that's going to be the best for them. So this was a brilliant conversation. Thank you so much for going through this and helping everyone understand how you use UDL to help learners, specifically with disabilities, learn English as a second language. Thank you so much.

LILIANA:

Thank you for everything. Thank you for the invitation. And I hope everybody can enjoy this podcast.

LOUI:

Thank you. I know they will. So for those listening to this podcast, you can find supplemental materials like an image montage with closed captioning, that montage with audio descriptions, a transcript, and an associated blog at my website, which is www.theudlapproach.com/podcasts And finally, if you have a story to share about UDL implementation for UDL in 15 Minutes, you can contact me through www.theudlapproach.com And thanks to everyone for your work in revolutionizing education through UDL and making it our goal to build learner agency.