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Disabled and non-disabled artists come together for change

Open Dialogo was a bilateral cultural exchange programme that fostered knowledge and experience sharing between disabled and non-disabled artists and influencers working in England and Italy. Aristide Rontini is an Italian freelance dancer, choreographer and community dance practitioner. He completed an artist residency during the programme, and here shares his experience.

‘I am very delighted about being awarded the Open Dialogo residency. It will offer me the possibility to strengthen my position as a leader with a disability, and to start conversations around dance and disability with English dance organisations like the Northern School of Contemporary Dance.

Open Dialogo is a valuable project, in my opinion, because it recognises the artistic relevance of artists with disabilities and the need to open spaces and give concrete support to such artists so they can cultivate their personal, artistic voice. It boosts our presence in positions of leadership, which is key to expanding understanding of accessibility and inclusiveness across the performing arts system.

I appreciate Open Dialogo because it invites Italian and English institutions to collaborate to achieve common goals. This kind of sharing and collaboration encourages listening, dialogue and exchange, which is essential to create a more welcoming environment for all artists.’

Bilingual Baby Club: learning naturally through play

In 2022, Jorge Fuentes reflected on what Christmas present could stimulate his 22-month-old son Alonso's learning and development. He decided to try the [Bilingual Baby Club](#), a British Council School programme that supports parents to create a bilingual environment at home for their children. Here, Jorge shares some of the inspiring outcomes of his and Alonso's experiences.

'From the first day, I noticed that my son Alonso was quite comfortable with all the activities despite it being his first contact with English, which is not his mother tongue language. In fact, every day that we have attended the Bilingual Baby Club, Alonso has come and gone content and happy.

In these months, Alonso has evolved a lot. He has become familiar with a second language, learned new skills through games and is eager for new challenges. He likes listening to and watching stories in English. The way the classes are organised and the philosophy with which the programme is structured have helped him to have more capacity to think and reflect.

And from my side, I have been able to share many experiences with him by using games, songs and interactions supported by different materials. It is a real pleasure to witness how such young children are learning and evolving.

I have learned how important routines are for my son since they help him to know what is coming and to manage his emotions, to be able to adapt to different situations and be more organised. It makes him learn that there are rules and limits to respect.

Knowing how to set limits and rules for our children, and explaining why in a respectful and calm manner, helps the common good and their self-esteem and autonomy. The Bilingual Baby Club has taught me to put all this into practice. I have also learned that adults sometimes see disorder or bad behaviour in children when they are simply playing or have a need that should be expressed.

The educational system used in the Bilingual Baby Club stimulates all children's senses thanks to the great experience and warmth of the teachers and the techniques used.'





Chevening Scholar empowers Azerbaijani youth through our Learning Hubs

Gulnar Jafarli is a [Learning Hub](#) teacher and a Chevening Scholar from Azerbaijan. She returned from the UK to her community in Beylagan to support young people to develop their skills, build confidence and access educational and career opportunities.

'I started working as an English teacher as soon as I completed my bachelor's degree in Foreign Language Teaching in Azerbaijan. I have been teaching English for ten years and have been following the British Council's work in the field of English language teaching to broaden my horizons.

In 2019, an incredible opportunity beckoned as the British Council launched a Learning Hub project in my hometown, allowing me to fulfil a long-held ambition of working with them. I was selected to run the English classes at the hub, where I assisted many young learners in honing their language skills in preparation for improved employment options.

Participating in the British Council [teacher training] courses is helping me develop my professional qualities, teaching skills and practice, and supplies me with a plethora of modern resources to boost my learners' communicative competence and digital literacy skills.

Newly acquired insights from the British Council programmes laid a strong ground for my Chevening application. I was awarded a scholarship in 2020 and started a new phase of my professional career by attending the University of Bristol to pursue a master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. I even conducted my research on the role of the British Council Learning Hubs in improving Azerbaijani teachers' teaching strategies and completed my studies with distinction.

My co-operation with the British Council is also opening great doors for me as I was selected as a Global Teacher Awardee in 2020 and, shortly after, was awarded [a place on] a six-week Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement programme that will be held in the US from January to March 2024.

I hope that I will continue collaborating with the British Council and benefit from its effective educational initiatives to enhance the educational system and increase the number of English speakers not only in Beylagan but throughout Azerbaijan.'

An English teacher's inspiring journey of professional growth

Gulim Batyrgaliyeva is an English teacher from a rural state school in Shortandy, northern Kazakhstan. Her career took an exciting turn when she joined our [Online Teacher Community \(OTC\)](#), a digital platform connecting thousands of English teachers. Gulim is now supporting her peers to expand their networks and take charge of their own professional development.

'The pandemic pushed most teachers to expand their potential and rethink their teaching techniques. As an English teacher of 18 years, I've also been in search of better online tools to keep teaching despite many challenges. I came across the British Council's OTC summer school in 2021. From that time on, I started my professional journey with the British Council.

After completing the summer school, I was offered the chance to facilitate the OTC programme, which was provided for teachers from 12 countries to support their professional growth, knowledge and expertise, and expand professional communities to work together. Today, we are running the fifth cohort and continuing to assist Kazakhstani teachers with their ten-week course, holding live sessions, moderating teacher forums and assisting personally on different issues related to the course.

I also dived into the global community of English language teachers united by the OTC community. I had the chance to work with global moderators, was chosen to participate at the IATEFL Conference in Belfast, UK in May 2022 and had the privilege to present at the KazTEA Conference, Kazakhstan in June 2023 on 'Taking Responsibility for Your Own Professional Development'. All these opportunities also led me to be part of the British Council's working group aimed at re-evaluating the system of professional development in Kazakhstan and developing a proposal for a revised professional development framework for teachers of English. These would not be possible without the help of the British Council!

It was a great opportunity to enhance my professional development and a great way to expand my professional boundaries and community. All the OTC courses, training and webinars bring some new tips and techniques to my own teaching or facilitating expertise. I'm lucky to have discussions and collaboration with my peers in the community and share common ideas that we had from the course. I have met with many experts and professionals that I was fascinated by in their work in education, English language teaching and continuing professional development.'





Empowering girls to be their own heroes

Seventeen-year-old Laura Leoho, from Latvia, took part in the third edition of [Future Heroes](#), a leadership and entrepreneurship competition for girls aged 14–17. Through skills workshops, mentoring and collaboration, girls are encouraged to develop their own businesses or social action projects. It's run by the National Centre for Education with support from the British Council in Latvia through our People to People cultural engagement programme. Laura's team won the Gold Award – a study trip to London supported by the British Council in Latvia.

'Future Heroes is great; you can learn about leadership, problem solving, marketing, financial and media literacy, entrepreneurship and product management, gain insight into many different professions, and use that knowledge in practice, all while still in school.

Our project focused on girls' reproductive health and access to hygiene products in schools. We identified the latter as a relevant issue, and our team collaborated with a company to provide free hygiene products in a school we worked with. We also organised online and in-person lectures, produced social media content, and attracted co-operation partners for social media competitions.

My team put considerable effort into approaching businesses for support and had a meeting with representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science to discuss the availability of free hygiene products in schools.

One of my goals was to improve my English skills. I also improved my co-operation and leaderships skills while working with my team and serving as the team leader. There were many opportunities to work on my presentation skills, too.

I recommend girls challenge themselves and join the programme. Meeting like-minded peers, building lifelong connections and friendships, engaging with opinion leaders, exploring new places, and, in my case, embarking on a life-changing study trip are just a few of the programme's benefits.'

From English student to English teacher

Rubén Moya was one of the first students to take part in the British Council's Bilingual Education Programme (BEP) in Spain. He joined the project when he began school in 1996–97, and continued through to his last year of compulsory secondary education. Today, Rubén is a primary school teacher specialising in English and a children's football coach. 'At home nobody spoke English, so they couldn't teach me. What I know is thanks to the education I have received and the BEP.'

'I'm a teacher at a public school in Vallecas, my lifelong neighbourhood. I never thought of becoming a teacher when I was a child, but when I finished my exam to access university, I started my degree and during my first internship I fell in love with the profession. From that moment on, it was clear to me that I wanted to do this,' says Rubén.

The Bilingual Education Programme supports learners at public schools to succeed in a multilingual and multicultural world. Students gain fluency in English and Spanish and develop an awareness of the diversity of both countries' cultures. 'Thanks to English I have travelled to New York, Ireland, Germany and have had experiences that I would not have had if I had not been part of the British Council programme,' adds Rubén.

Rubén always encourages people to study English, to take part in projects such as those offered by the British Council, and to take the plunge and do things that frighten them. He often comes across the phrase 'I understand English but I'm embarrassed to speak it'. He would like to break down that barrier by inspiring young children to see that speaking English 'is cool'.

Rubén thinks his life would be very different without English, a language that has opened the door to a profession in Spain and so much more. 'English surrounds my life. When I get together with friends and we need to speak English, they always come to me. And best of all, it's not a problem for me – on the contrary,' he says.

Rubén is very positive about his experience with the British Council. 'Both my family and I have great memories of the British Council. Once we went to the headquarters, where they gave me a cheque to redeem in New York, thanks to a Global Classrooms project in which I participated. We will always be very grateful for everything they did for me.'





Building confidence and identity as an English teacher

Natalia Valentina Mitric has been teaching English for 15 years. Since 2008, she has worked at the Technological High School in Vatra Dornei, a unique mountainous region of Romania rich in natural resources, mineral waters and amazing landscapes, but isolated from major education centres.

Natalia participated in our [English for the Community project](#), which provides professional development opportunities for English teachers from rural areas. She formed a Teacher Activity Group with other teachers in Vatra Dornei, bringing them together to learn from one another, share and discuss experiences and ideas, and apply what they learned to their own teaching and careers. By gaining experience and strengthening their teaching practice, they were able to make a positive difference to their students' lives and grow their skills.

Taking part in the project helped Natalia to build her identity as a teacher. She had spent four years at home raising her two sons and felt lost after coming back to work. 'I needed a fresh start and efficient guidance. When I found out about this chance to learn freely with amazing support from the British Council experts, I was very enthusiastic. For me it was an extraordinary opportunity which made me what I am today as a teacher: confident, communicative, with improved skills of teamwork, adaptability, multitasking and class management.

'After I discovered and formed my personality as a teacher, I decided to leave my comfort zone and see if I could manage a higher position inside the group – I became a Local Facilitator, and this opportunity brought a lot of personal and professional satisfactions.'

Eventually, Natalia and her colleagues decided to start an NGO to expand their work, supported by the British Council and Romanian -American Foundation (RAF). 'At this point there are six people involved in the English for the Community and Educational Achievements work. The main goal is to try different English-related activities, workshops, summer camps and other activities until we find the most suitable for our area and it can become a permanent one,' Natalia explains.

'If you have ever thought of becoming a teacher – remember, it's not easy but it's a wonderful and honourable profession which brings lots of satisfaction and joy if it's carried out with passion! So, dare, dear friend and become a true model for as many children as possible because they really need us!'



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