

Graciela Chera is hesitant to talk about herself and her classroom. She claims that she is not doing anything special, yet she is clearly making a powerful impact on her students and the English-teaching community in Paraguay. A typical day for Ms. Chera starts by teaching English to preschool students at a private school and ends by teaching students of all ages at the Centro Cultural Paraguayo Americano (CCPA), a binational center that offers English classes to children and adults in the capital city of Asunción.



Graciela Chera takes a break between classes in the sunlit patio at the Centro Cultural Paraguayo Americano.

Photo by Yesenia Ortúe



Ms. Chera plays a learning game with English Access Microscholarship students.

Photo by Lourdes González

Time flies in Ms. Chera's classes because she manages to strike a rare balance of academic rigor and an atmosphere of fun team spirit. Her use of thematic instruction and group work teaches her students not only English vocabulary and grammar, but also cooperation and respect. While Ms. Chera is an exceptionally good teacher, her humble attitude and her long workweeks at multiple schools are the norm in Paraguay. Humility and hard work are highly valued in Paraguayan culture.

When she was 12, Ms. Chera took her first English class—at the CCPA. Her friends were taking classes there, and while her family lived humbly, they found the money to pay for that first course. Ms. Chera was the top student in every class she took, which earned her a scholarship from CCPA for subsequent studies—18 classes in total. At the time, after-school classes at the CCPA were one of the only options for students attending public school to learn English. These days, some public schools offer English, and many private schools—such as Santa Teresa de Jesus, where Ms. Chera teaches preschool—offer several hours per week of English instruction.

During her studies at CCPA, Ms. Chera began to see teaching English not only as a way to realize her dream of travelling to the United States, but also as a career that would support her family. She majored in English at the Instituto Superior de Educación; she also has a degree in English Education from the

Instituto Superior de Lenguas that she earned after returning to Paraguay from Denver, Colorado, where she spent a year with the Au Pair program. This is a U.S. Department of State Exchange Visitor Program that sends participants to provide childcare to host families in the United States. Ms. Chera's eyes light up when she talks about the three children she helped to raise, and she was thrilled that her host family attended her wedding in Asunción in 2014.

On any given weekday, Ms. Chera starts her day teaching preschool at Santa Teresa de Jesus. After a full day of teaching the little ones, she goes to CCPA to teach after-school English classes to children or to teenagers in the English Access Microscholarship Program. Access classes meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays, while the classes for children meet on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On Saturdays at CCPA, Ms. Chera teaches intensive English classes to adults. Teaching adults who work in different fields such as law and medicine challenges Ms. Chera to be aware of specialized English vocabulary that she might not otherwise know. She serves as a curriculum writer at both schools, and she loves to co-teach and collaborate on lesson planning with colleagues. Since becoming a mother three years ago, she also founded an organization called *Bebé Showers Solidarios* to support other new mothers by providing newborn essentials and parenting classes on the weekends.



Ms. Chera teaching adult students at the CCPA

If you peeked inside Ms. Chera’s Access class, you would be likely to see 25 highly motivated high school students working in groups of five, cooperating to achieve a shared goal. Ms. Chera varies her student groupings by using pairs or trios, but she likes groups of five best because she can give each group member a specific role. The roles she uses are as follows:

Facilitator – makes sure that everybody has a chance to participate

Recorder – writes everybody’s answers and comments

Reporter – tells the class a summary of what the group discussed

Language Manager – makes sure that everyone is speaking only English and that shy and extroverted students have equal opportunity to contribute

Motivator/Timekeeper – keeps the group motivated, on task, and on time

Ms. Chera changes the students’ roles within their groups to add variety during the three-hour class session. In a recent class, the instructional theme was climate change. In groups of five, students discussed the causes of the many problems the planet is facing. Four corners were presented, and groups had to decide which is the biggest problem: water pollution, air pollution, global warming, or deforestation. After exchanging thoughts with

people who had the same opinion, students went back to their original groups, shared their thoughts, and came up with simple solutions to make a difference at home, at school, and in their communities. Finally, the groups reported their ideas to the class.

Meanwhile, if you peeked into Ms. Chera’s preschool classroom, you would see 25 toddlers working in stations to learn English vocabulary as part of a thematic unit. For example, the students recently finished a unit on protecting bees. Ms. Chera collaborated with other teachers to set up four stations:

1. Planting seeds of plants that bees need
2. Listening to a book about bees during story time in the library
3. Creating bee posters to be exhibited in an “eco” gallery with the message, “Hug more trees, clean our seas, save the bees.”
4. Learning the words and dancing to a song called “Here is the Beehive”

With students having this much fun in class, it’s no surprise that Ms. Chera is inspiring the next generation of English teachers. She mentions that the teacher who facilitates the dance station is one of her former Access students, and it becomes clear that Ms. Chera’s impact reaches beyond her classroom. Eight of her Access students have gone on to work toward undergraduate degrees in U.S.

universities, and some have become English teachers. Additionally, 11 of her students have completed the Youth Ambassadors Program, which aims to prepare high school students to become leaders in their communities.

In 2014, Ms. Chera participated in the three-week English Access Microscholarship Program for Teachers at Spring International Language Center at the University of Arkansas. The following year, she was chosen to attend a summer TEFL program at Pace University in New York City as one of six CCPA teachers who had achieved the highest scores after being observed by her coordinators. To continue her professional development in Paraguay, Ms. Chera attends CCPA workshops and conferences, which often focus on communicative methods. CCPA has been supporting teachers in the implementation of communicative group work for decades. It has thousands of students at branches throughout Paraguay and a reputation for building fluency through a consistent instructional model in which teachers serve as facilitators of engaging language tasks done in groups. Stephen Krashen has been the keynote speaker at CCPA's professional-development conferences several times in recent years. The center's innovative methodology has resulted in high levels of English proficiency for students, many of whom return as teachers.

Ms. Chera also likes to participate in American English webinars to learn about new strategies, especially when the topic relates to technology in the classroom. Whenever possible, she shares her teaching practices with colleagues by facilitating workshops and presenting at conferences. Her recent workshops include *Cooperative and Communicative Activities for Beginners* and *Technology in the 21st-Century Classroom*. Ms. Chera embodies the ideal of the lifelong learner, though she admits it can be hard to find the time and energy to do everything perfectly.

"The biggest challenge each day is to give the best of yourself in every class and also take

care of yourself," she says. "I demand a lot from my students and from myself, and that is tiring. I have to find a balance because I also have a three-year-old daughter who is waiting for me and who needs me."

Through it all, Ms. Chera is motivated by a desire to help support her family and give them a better life. She continues to be energized by the transformative power of English and the doors it can open, and she instills this sense of possibility in her students. "We are giving them tools in order to succeed in life," she says. "They can get better jobs in the future, they can have opportunities outside the country, and the most important thing is that they can come back, and they can change the reality of Paraguay. Because that is what motivates me every day to wake up and go to work. Because I trust Paraguay. Everybody asks me, 'Why didn't you stay in the States?' and I say, 'Because there is a lot to do in Paraguay!'"

"I want to give my daughter a better society. I want to give her a better country, and I think that only by working together we can change the reality of Paraguay."

By teaching students of all ages, Ms. Chera is having a positive impact on the English-teaching community in multiple ways every day. She is giving the littlest learners a joyful initial experience with English. She is modeling to older students how English can lead people to new countries and new professional opportunities. And she enjoys the challenge of learning with her adult students when they need to learn English for specific reasons, such as medical or legal purposes. From toddlers to teenagers to teaching colleagues, it is a pleasure to be in Ms. Chera's classroom.

This article was written by **Abigail Williamson**, who served as an English Language Fellow in Paraguay in 2012–2013. Abigail is currently an instructional coach, and she supports teachers in U.S. K–12 classrooms to make language learning more communicative.