

What it Takes to Be a First-Year Student: An Ethnographic Study at Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension

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Resumen

Esta investigación se enmarca dentro del enfoque cualitativo y el diseño etnográfico. Se reporta la descripción de una etnografía realizada en Universidad Nacional, Sede Regional Brunca con un grupo de estudiantes de primer ingreso en la carrera Diplomado en Inglés. Diferentes instrumentos para recolectar datos fueron utilizados para poder identificar y obtener información relevante sobre las experiencias de los informantes. Los métodos de recolección de datos interactivos fueron: una entrevista a tres profesores y dos entrevistas estructuradas con estudiantes. Tres cuestionarios fueron aplicados; uno de ellos al director académico, otro a estudiantes matriculados y otro a estudiantes egresados. Los instrumentos no interactivos usados fueron: diez observaciones participativas y ocho no-participativas. Algunos artefactos (documentos) fueron recolectados, entre ellos la malla curricular, registro de notas, registro de asistencia, material didáctico, anuncios de periódicos y documentación sobre el uso del laboratorio. Algunas fotografías sirvieron también como instrumento de análisis. Los resultados revelaron que los estudiantes matriculados demostraron estar altamente motivados para aprender inglés a pesar de las muchas demandas y retos que enfrentan. El ser parte de un programa efectivo también fortalece la actitud positiva. También se identificó la clase multi-nivel. El haber estudiantes con diferentes niveles lingüístico hizo que el trabajo de clase fuera un reto; algunos era más rápidos que otros. Además, las técnicas para corregir a los estudiantes utilizadas por los profesores promovieron un ambiente cálido para los aprendientes. Finalmente, esta etnografía pone en evidencia un fenómeno en particular: estudiantes altamente orientados a invertir en el aprendizaje de un idioma, motivados por un programa efectivo.

Palabras clave: etnografía, motivación, clase multi-nivel, inversión en aprendizaje, corrección, niveles lingüísticos

Abstract

This research follows a qualitative approach and an ethnographic design. This document reports a description of an ethnography carried out at Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension with a group of first-year students from the Associate's Program in English. Different data instruments were used throughout this research in order to identify and accumulate relevant information about their experiences. The interactive methods were a key-informant interview carried out to three professors, two unstructured interviews in which participants shared meaningful insights. Three written questionnaires were administered to the head of the English Department, current and former students. Some non-interactive methods were also used, ten participant observation reports and eight nonparticipant observation reports. Artifacts were also collected. Some of them were the curricular guide,

grades' records, attendance list, teaching aides, newspaper ads and the access and use of the language laboratory. Visual recording through photographs is another data collection instrument used in this ethnography. Findings revealed that the students shown to be motivated to learn the language in spite of the many demanding tasks and challenges faced. An effective curriculum also reinforces participants' positive attitude toward their learning process. A heterogeneous multilevel class was identified. Different proficiency levels made of class work a challenge for some participants while others were able to easily follow the flow of language instruction. Also, teachers' technique for error correction promoted a nonthreatening class environment. Finally, this ethnography evinces one main phenomenon: *highly goal-oriented students toward language learning investment motivated by an effective program offered.*

Keywords: ethnography, motivation, multilevel class, learning investment, cultural capital, error correction, proficiency levels

1. Introduction

Even though English is not the most spoken language in the world, its influence on business, education, economy and entertainment is paramount. It is not about how many people speak it; rather it is about what it is used for. Its importance in Costa Rica has emerged slowly over the years, but currently it is clearly manifested in different regions. English has become a necessity in the economic area since job opportunities are demanding this language as a key requirement. Consequently, education has shown concern and hence different possibilities to study it effectively are now available. That is the case of Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension that is offering a two-year Associate's Program in English. This program provides the community with an accessible opportunity to learn this language successfully. Learners take daily classes on writing, reading, oral skills, culture and pronunciation, which enables them to become effective communicators. Due to its influence on the students, and the community, this ethnography intended to reveal what it takes to be part of the program. The phenomenon identified in this ethnography encompasses the following categories: the benefits of an effective curriculum, motivation, language learning investment, and characteristics of teaching adults.

2. Literature Review

Some theoretical derivations that throw light into the complexity of being an EFL learner is explored in this section. The different contributions explore the role of an effective curriculum, motivation, learning investment and teaching adults.

2.1. An Effective Curriculum

Providing effective course curricula in a major constitutes the building blocks of a successful institution. When designing and implementing a language program many factors come into play. Richards (2001) revealed many of the implications. He listed institutional, teacher,

teaching and learner factors (p.198). He refers to the importance of organizing courses and contents effectively as well as the considerations developers should have. He said:

A school's organizational culture is revealed in the way the following questions answered: What are the school's goals and mission? What is the school's management style? How are courses and curriculum planned? How receptive is the school to change and innovation? (pp.198-199)

The first question is addressed to clarify the institution's educational purpose and vision. According to the institution's website, some of Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension's goals are to be a pioneer campus by educating excellent professionals and to generate strategic projects to reinforce the region's development by considering the needs of the community. By using these goals as reference, it can be interpreted that the institution under research seeks to have an effective curriculum. Richards (2001) also mentioned the importance of establishing a harmonious curriculum design. He stated,

A sound curriculum is reflected in the following features of a school's programs: the range of courses offered corresponds to the needs of learners. The curriculum is coherent: The courses represent a rationale approach to achieving the school's mission. Courses have been developed based on sound educational principles with due attention to recognized curriculum development processes. Course descriptions, including aims, goals, syllabuses, and course organization, have been developed (p.204).

Many are the people impacted when a curriculum is effectively designed and implemented. Language learners are clearly benefited since the final outcome, effective learning, will bring them personal and professional satisfaction. Language instructors can benefit also by receiving job opportunities and participating in profession development. Institutions committed to providing high- quality education invest in prestige.

2.2. Motivation

Learning a second or foreign language is a demanding task. Not every person can succeed in communicating in a different language due to aptitude and attitude factors. Language learners need to be goal-oriented and motivated to achieve the final outcome that is communicating. Motivation is defined by Brown (2000) as "the extent to which you make choices about (a) goals to pursue and (b) the effort you will devote to that pursuit" (p.72). Students' attitude toward the learning of English plays a determining role. It is not only to set a goal, but to pursue this goal. Motivation can be classified in different ways depending on the agents involved. For instance, it can be divided into extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, as well as instrumental and integrative.

Intrinsic motivation implies a desire that comes from the inside of the learner, it has internal factors that make language learning be purposeful. This idea is reinforced by Brown (2000) when he affirmed, "Intrinsically motivated behaviors are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-

determination” (p. 76). On the contrary, in extrinsic motivation, teachers play a significant role since learners get this kind of motivation from external factors like the teacher, institution, parents or workplace. In this case, students expect a reward from these external agents like money, encouraging phrases, good grades and prizes. Intrinsically motivated language learners tend to be more successful because they do not depend on others to achieve competence.

Instrumental motivation can also be defined as a “desire to learn a language in order to attain certain career, educational, or financial goals” (Brown, 2000, p.75). This type of motivation leads to a utilitarian use of the language learned to achieve a higher social status, to pursue a degree or to get a job. Integrative motivation contrasts since it is directed toward learners who feel identified with the people who speak the language as well as with the target culture. Brown (2000) described it as a “desire to learn a language stemming from a positive affect toward a community of its speakers” (p.75). Whatever the perspective motivation is analyzed, it certainly has a keynote role when learning a foreign language since it drives students’ path toward success.

2.3. English Learning Investment

Language learners’ desires and expectations cannot be overgeneralized since groups differ from context to context. Discrete socially constructed needs in individuals, institutions, and communities contribute to an array of goals and demands when learning to speak a foreign language. Society’s needs may direct learners toward a specific direction. This issue leads researchers, curriculum developers and trainers to consider what is behind students’ motivation. Borton (1995) enlightened this topic by identifying two interlocked concepts: cultural capital and investment. Bourdieu and Passeron explained cultural capital as “the knowledge and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms” (cited by Norton, p.17). Borton (1995) added to this concept that “if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital” (p.17). Investment is, in other words, the purchase of learning that will be used in the future to generate academic income. It is also important to take a glimpse into the difference made between investment and instrumental motivation as described below:

The conception of instrumental motivation generally presupposes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner who desires access to material resources that are the privilege of target language speakers. In this view, motivation is a property of the language learner—a fixed personality trait. The notion of investment, on the other hand, attempts to capture the relationship of the language learner to the changing social world (Norton, 1995, p.17). Understanding this difference may guide language instructors to better classroom practices and target them to short and long-term goals. Addressing students’ expectations must go

hand in hand with understanding that age is a key factor that should drive instruction. There are significant differences when teaching kids, teenagers and adults.

2.4. Teaching Adults

Differences are found in personalities, likes, concerns, goals and abilities among children, teenagers and adult learners. Identifying variables when teaching adults gives language instructors a clearer view of what to expect from students and how to direct classroom performance. Brown (2000) listed suggestions and caveats:

Adults are more able to handle abstract rules and concepts. Adults have longer attention spans for material that may not be intrinsically interesting to them. Adults often bring a modicum of general self-confidence (global self-esteem) into a classroom; the fragility of egos may therefore not be quite as critical as those of children. Adults, with their more developed abstract thinking ability, are better able to understand a context-reduced segment of language. (pp. 90-91)

Adult language learners are goal oriented, they learn the language because they have established purposes. Many are directed toward improving their life status considering educational and financial issues. Hence, the difficulties they face are also particular. Celce-Murcia (2001) envisioned this perspective by stating,

For many adult students, economic upward mobility will be achieved, if not by them, by future generations. If they learn enough English to survive, their children and grandchildren will most likely to be able to take advantage of the upward mobility education can bring. (p. 396)

On her part, Turula (2002) examined the sense of direction adults learner need to have in the classroom; she said, “Adult learners need to know-and it is the task of the teacher to tell them- how particular activities and exercises help them achieve their overall learning aims and, therefore, why they need to do them” (p.32). Adult learners can handle abstract concepts and rules better than young ones due to their cognitive abilities. They are critical thinkers who demand concrete explanations on a topic or language structure. However, language aptitude is a factor people are not born with. Hence, teachers cannot take for granted that adult students can learn better. Scrivener (2005) stated “It is hard to know how best to work with individuals if you know nothing at all about them (p. 66)”. Teaching adults

is challenging and involves a combination of mutual understanding, teaching awareness and teachers' involvement.

3. Research Methodology and Data Analysis

This study follows a non-manipulative, naturalistic ethnography design and a descriptive scope. The main purpose of this study is to generate complete descriptions of events, interactions and activities that lead into the development of categories that allow interpretation of the beliefs of the participants so that a complete description of the educational settings and context is put in evidence. This ethnography involved the use of different data collection instruments. LeCompte and Preissle (2003) categorized data collection instruments into two main methods, interactive and non-interactive by mentioning Peltó and Peltó's contribution on the topic. They stated,

The former (interactive) are methods for collecting data involving interaction between researcher and participant; as a result, they may produce reactions from participants affecting the data collected. Unobtrusive and other less reactive techniques (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest), which necessitate little or no interaction between investigator and participant, comprise the second category (noninteractive). (p.159)

Data, in this ethnography, were collected using both methods. An interactive instrument used was a key-informant interview carried out to three professors of the program whose information was valuable. Also, two unstructured interviews in which participants shared some insights are part of these instruments. Three written questionnaires were administered to the head of the English Department, current and former students.

Some non-interactive methods were implemented during the development of this research. For example, ten participant observation reports and eight nonparticipant observation reports took place for around three months. Finally, visual recording through photographs was another data collection instrument that helped illustrate some of the in-classroom and outside the classroom behavior. Artifact collection constitutes the gathering of physical elements surrounding the population. Artifacts are a salient element in any ethnography since they provide data that describe the group under study. The list of artifacts in educational research is extensive, as LeCompte and Preissle (2003) suggested, some resources are:

text-books, teacher-made games and teaching aides, curricular guides, memos, enrollment records, minutes of meetings, student personnel records, student and teacher handbooks, student classroom products, lesson plans and other teacher files, correspondence, government documents, and such researcher-stimulated materials as teacher diaries, logs...(p.216)

They also categorized them in two different types; artifacts obtained from archives or data banks and artifacts obtained by following physical trace. For this research the former category will be labeled as type 1 while the latter will be type 2. Type 1 artifacts gathered for this research were: registration statistics (provided by the registration office), the curricular guide, grades records, attendance record, teaching aides (encouragement phrases), and newspaper ads. The type 2 artifact included describes the access and use of the language laboratory.

3.1. The Setting

Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension is located in San Isidro de El General, the main district of Pérez Zeledón county. It is in the southern region of Costa Rica. This is one of the three branches of UNA, and it was founded in 1976. It also has a smaller campus (Sede Coto) in Ciudad Neilly. The majors offered are English Teaching, Computer Engineering, Business Administration, International Commerce and Science Teaching. A small forest that provides a quiet environment surrounds UNASRB. There are departments and groups on campus that provide essential everyday services that enhance the learning environment. It has 15 classrooms and large corridors. All rooms in hall A are equipped with a projector. There is an auditorium, a gym, a soccer field, two computer labs, a language lab and a library. The library has two group-study rooms equipped with a TV set, projector, comfortable seats, a large table and a small whiteboard. There are strict regulations for their use. There is also an individual study room with a ten-person capacity. It has a twenty-person capacity computer lab. Students have access to wireless Internet service all around the campus. Regarding dining services, there is one cafeteria and a lunchroom for those who bring their own food.

3.2. The Participants

First-year students of the Associate's Program in English are the participants of this ethnography. They were observed during their Integrated English 1 course. Two professors teach this course, one for reading, speaking and listening from 5:00 p.m. to 6:40 p.m.; and the other one teaches grammar and writing from 7:00 p.m. to 8:40 p.m. Class schedule was Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 5:00 p.m. to 8:40 p.m. Listening and speaking classes were held in the language laboratory while grammar and writing were held in room A01. Students were suggested to take all the courses of their program (Pronunciation, Oral Communication 1 and Spanish Writing); however, not all of them took the courses. There are 32 people in this group. There is no reference of any student with a special accommodation; however, there are some who wear glasses and sit in the front rows.

All of them are Costa Rican. Their ages range from 17 to 42. It is a young population since the majority of are under 21. There are 21 women and 11 men. Fourteen of them live near the campus while the rest come from remote rural areas so they stay in a relative's house or rent an apartment near campus. Most of them are full-time students although some work as secretaries and others as babysitters. Few of them have some English background since they studied in institutes and language schools before enrolling in the major. Students tend to sit around the same people, which is an evidence of certain group preferences. Most of the students decided to register in UNASRB because it is a public institution, and it implies

prestige and excellence; few considered it because of its low cost and location. Furthermore, two of them are registered in Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNDE), one is enrolled in Business Administration and the other one in Tourism. There is one girl who has postponed her major in Chemical Engineering at Universidad de Costa Rica because she is currently taking care of her newborn. The professors in charge of this course are two young female assistant professors at UNASRB. Both have also a tenure position in a public elementary school. They both have a master's degree in Second Languages and Culture from Universidad Nacional.

3.3. Description of Access and Entry Process

The ethnographer implemented some strategies to shorten the distance between her and the research participants. Some strategies selected were: to talk to students in Spanish outside the classroom, to sit next to them during classes, to participate in classroom activities, to arrive minutes before the class starts and to greet and call them by their names when she ran into them in the institution.

The ethnographer approached some of them and asked them personal questions to gain their confidence. They shared their academic concerns mainly. Nonetheless, it was an excellent opportunity to get to know participants more. Another strategy was to sit next to some students during classes. It was effective since all of them felt confident enough and asked questions. Participating in some class activities was also a strategy selected. The ethnographer also arrived minutes before the class started. Finally, greeting and calling by their names was really effective. Students immediately smiled and greeted back to her. There was still certain distance between one specific group of participants who were really difficult to access. They sat in the back of the room.

3.4. Data Analysis

The first step to follow was to read all the information gathered from the observations, interviews and artifacts to establish a broad outline of the phenomenon. All elements were put together to bring consciousness and judicious findings. Once, this step was taken LeCompte and Preissle's conceptual techniques "theorizing, sequential selection strategies, and general analytic procedures" (2003, p.238) were considered. First, it was necessary to establish the tasks of theorizing. "...perceiving, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, ordering, establishing linkages and relationships, and speculating" (p.240) were the pace to follow. While perceiving, the researcher chose and defined some of the units of study. They are also called the emerging patters; those patters were next compared and contrasted. A step forward was taken to establish linkages among those patterns. However, no statistical manipulation was done. Some inferences about the participants behaviors were also made during the last step, speculating.

Sequential selection strategies took place when the participants, the events recorded in the photographs and observation reports were examined. This technique was followed to facilitate the finding of more emergent constructs. One of the first emergent patterns found

was motivation, shown by the participants' early arrival to classes and a high attendance record. This led to the idea of designing an instrument in which students could share the reason why they behaved that way, and hence guide the ethnographer toward the discovery of the phenomenon.

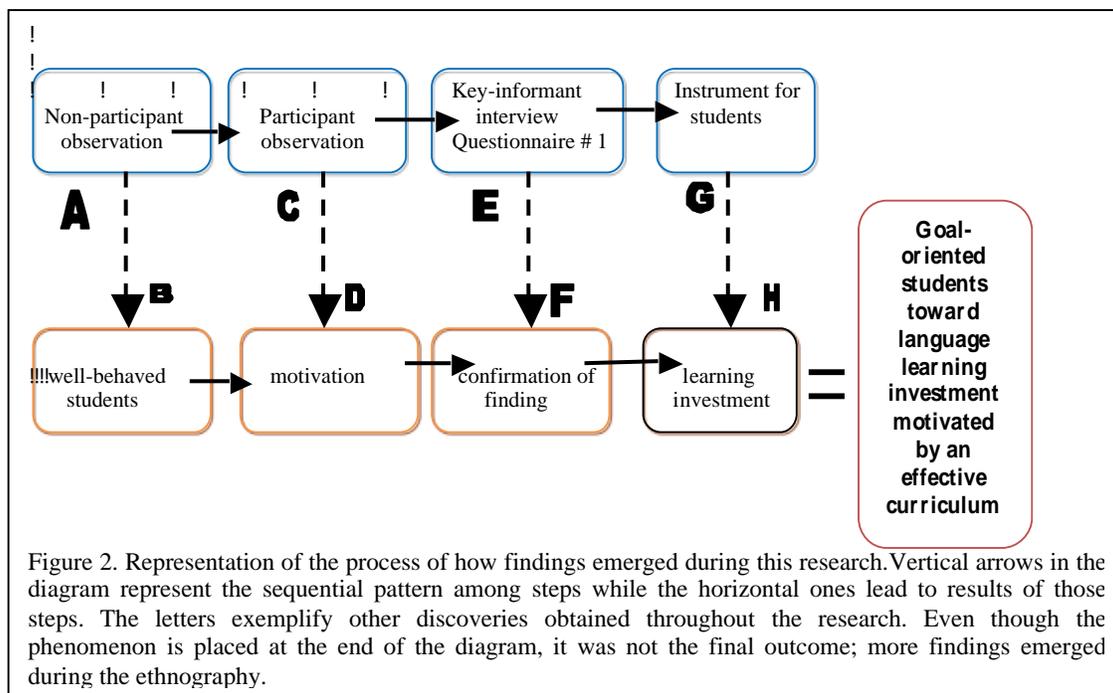
Once the participants' insights were obtained, the last conceptual technique was considered, *general analytical procedure*. Here, analytic induction took place. It "involves scanning the data for categories of phenomena and for relationships among such categories (LeCompte and Preissle, 2003, p. 254). More categories were scanned, and more findings were noticed; for instance, motivation was narrowed to instrumental. In order to validate the initial and final impressions triangulation was used. Triangulation helped the ethnographer to assure the accuracy of data and findings gathered. The findings were shared with the professors and students who agreed on them.

4. Findings

Findings in this ethnography emerged through the data gathering and analysis processes. Observation reports revealed valuable information that guided the researcher so that other instruments were used. Six participant and ten non-participant observations took two months and they covered two different classes from the same course (Integrated English 1). The ethnographer planned to observe only the speaking, listening and reading classes; however, as units of study were emerging, she decided to expand the scope of research and start observing the other class. Professors were always willing to facilitate the group. During the first non-participant observations, the ethnographer identified well behavior in class. They always paid attention to the instructions and explanations. During the participant observations, the researcher could notice that participants continued to be motivated due to their active in-class performance. All students brought the book to classes and they used it when requested. All of them had a brand new book and followed classroom work as assigned by the instructors. Motivation was then the first category identified. This finding directed the ethnographer to start researching the cause of this motivation. Hence, she used some other instruments with the informants. Later, professors agreed on the findings obtained in a key-informant interview, and students confirmed this information as well. The researcher decided to apply one more instrument that could lead to an explicit reason of their motivation to establish the phenomenon. This instrument consisted of presenting learners incomplete sentences for then to provide spontaneous answers. Their responses lead to the phenomenon, *goal-oriented students toward language learning investment motivated by an effective program offered by UNASRB*.

Learners proved to have a long-term goal for their future; this goal is to speak English to have better job opportunities once they are immersed in the job market. Participants were conscious about their country's economical needs, so they were currently purchasing and investing in learning that they will use to generate academic income. The following diagram is a representation of the process of how findings emerged in this ethnography.

This phenomenon can be justified by two main reasons also found during this research. First, as it was previously mentioned Costa Rica's economy is demanding an English speaking population, and it can be exemplified by some classified ads in everyday newspapers. Young adults can clearly see the impact English has on the job market. This need to learn to speak a foreign language forces them to look for institutions that can successfully train them. Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension is one of those places in the southern region that are offering an effective program. This conclusion was drawn from comments and responses in questionnaire one as well as by analyzing the curricular guide, which shows to be really demanding. Students shared that they trust the university because of comments they have heard and because of their own learning experiences. Learners also trust professors; they even consider them good professionals with a lot of experience. Offering a demanding schedule and courses motivated them to believe in the system. The complete courses take only two years, but the schedule is challenging since participants have to attend classes everyday. A registration statistics provided by this campus revealed that during 2009, 273 people were interested in studying English; nevertheless, there was space only for 32. This same information shows that people prefer this program over the English Teaching Major which has been one of the institutions' strengths.



Discoveries were illustrated in figure 2 with upper case letters, and they include particular behaviors from the participants and also some administrative elements that had a direct influence over the institution, students, professors and the teaching/learning process. Some constant behavioral patterns were identified. One of them was that learners almost always worked in pairs. Seating arrangement was set up in a way they did not work alone or in groups. In room A01, desks were arranged in pairs and in the language laboratory booths were paired up. Students showed preferences regarding the way they set up their desks.

Another constant behavior was that they were always in time. They usually arrive five or ten minutes before classes started, and some of them even stayed in the room during the break.

One important finding was the participants' high attendance record since it evidenced their motivation and responsibility for their learning. As it was demonstrated through the record provided by one of the professors, students did not miss classes regularly. The other professor confirmed this finding, and she added that when some of them have missed a class they present the corresponding formal justification.

Professors also provided information for analysis. For instance, it was found that they have certain teaching techniques that aid learning. Both teachers walk around the class while classwork. This technique minimizes the interaction gap between students and teacher. Also, they can assist and monitor learners' performance, so they get individual attention and feedback. Another technique found was the use of quotations with visual aids to start the class. These quotations were followed by a brainstorm and apprentices had the chance to use the target language to express their ideas and opinions. In addition, professors provided a lot of input, it was noticed that classes were spoken in English only at all times. There is no use of the mother tongue; in fact, instructors reinforced the "only English" rule. During some observations, a professor insisted not to talk to her in Spanish. Gentle correction was also found during the observations. Students were not threatened with rude correction, instead professors showed them that incorrectness occurred, but without making a big fuss. Even respect among participants took place since they did not laugh at each other. Language instructors seem to be sure of the methods needed to achieve a well-managed class. The researcher also found that learners enrolled in this English program have a demanding weekly routine since they have a full schedule from Monday to Friday. They start at 5:00 p.m. and finish at 8:40 p.m. and on Tuesdays they start at 3:00 p.m. Participants make sacrifices to get to university everyday. Testimonies were recorded in the interviews. Some of the informants work and study at the same time which turns this experience into a real challenge.

Another interesting finding is related to the access and use of the language laboratory. This institution has two language laboratories; however, only one is fully equipped. Even though there are many other groups using this laboratory, students took full advantage of it. In fact, the speaking, listening and reading class from the Integrated English 1 course was given in this room throughout its schedule (Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from 5:00 p.m. to 6:40 p.m.). The Oral Communication and Listening Comprehension 1 course was taught in this same room once a week as well as their pronunciation course on Tuesdays. It means that they used the language laboratory five days a week. One more discovery revealed that this group is a multilevel class and this issue was discovered by analyzing participation in class and some of their grades. Participation was gathered in the observations and the grades' record was provided by one of the professors. It was observed that some students were able to answer exercises or questions by providing a complete sentence in English while other participants were not even able to answer, so they used their mother tongue. Grades also revealed this gap since there were learners who constantly scored low grades (they range from 19 to 69) in contrast with others who achieved higher scores regularly (those grades range from 80 to 100). Finally, this gap is also exemplified in classroom participation in view of the

fact that not all students answered oral questions asked by the professors. Usually, the same apprentices were the ones who dare to give their opinions or answers of an exercise.:

Photoethnography

This section reinforces some of the main findings. Photographs one, two and five were taken by the ethnographer in the real classroom setting while pictures three and four were taken by the collaborative professor. The first picture exemplifies two particular and recurrent behaviors in this group. One is that students always took the same seats with the same peers.

The other behavior is that students were always working quietly and attentively. As it is clearly seen they were solving the exercises assigned. They all had their own material and followed the teacher's instructions and class exercises.

Students were waiting outside the room for the class to start (see photograph 2). Two different groups who were waiting outside and near room A001 are observed. They usually were from 10 to 15 minutes before the class started. This behavior showed their concern about punctuality. Learners always got in the language laboratory at 4: 55 p.m. This behavior shows commitment and responsibility.



Photograph 1, photograph by researcher, language laboratory.

Another pattern of behavior recorded in these photos (see photo 4) was that students in the back were more distracted than the ones in the front. Also, it illustrates the small room in which this laboratory is installed. There was not enough space for thirty students and a teacher. It was hard to move from one both to another. However, professors were walking around constantly.



Photograph 2, photograph by researcher, campus.

Finally, room A01 was spacious enough to move. However, no group work was recorded or any other kind of seating arrangement. Instead, students were paired up and kept the same arrangement. In the particular case of photo five, they were writing a letter to a friend as part of a class activity. They all were on-task until they finished. This on-task behavior was observed repeatedly. No misbehavior or off-task pattern was registered during the study. The room was neatly organized and has a good lighting system. The board was large enough.

5. Conclusions

The following information lists some of the main conclusions and recommendations derived from the data analyzed. These conclusions provide a set of counter-measures addressed to the improvement the few weaknesses identified. They cover in-class actions and administrative decisions. The recommendations set out principles for action and allow language instructors and students a measure of flexibility in implementing these principles according to their particular circumstances.



Photograph 4, photograph taken by collaborative teacher, language lab



Photograph 5, photograph by researcher, room A001

5.1. A Mixed-Level Class

Being a multilevel class, this group faces challenges. Students who have a higher level left behind others with a low proficiency level. This was shown through class participation and grades. Indeed, proficient ones must follow a measured pace when teachers try to slow down activities. Due to this stumbling block, the researcher recommends to carry out a needs analysis at the beginning of the semester. There is a variety of diagnostic procedures that

include administrating a placement test, asking students to fill in a questionnaire, interviewing them (individually or in groups) and observing them while working in class. Language instructors can take action and implement any of these; however, the institution can also establish a placement test as a requirement. Once, the diagnosis is done and professors have a glimpse of their apprentices' language competence, there is a range of possibilities to minimize this proficiency gap.

A recommendation for teachers is to pair up learners with a lower level with communicative stronger ones. Both groups benefit from this procedure. Advanced students strengthen their linguistic competence because they have the chance to explain instructions and share knowledge. Also, less competent ones can benefit because they get the language explained to them in different ways and from different perspectives. To assign tutors for extra class assignments can also benefit them. Advanced learners can be tutors to help beginners with homework and presentations. Another suggestion is to call on apprentices when directing questions and checking exercises. High-level learners usually take center stage when participation is optional, and low students feel threaten to share their ideas and answers. Language instructors can also divide the class by using subtle grouping techniques. Learners should not realize this classroom arrangement because they can get discouraged. However, teachers can focus easily on those who need extra support and guidance. Professors should talk openly about this proficiency gap, and make them understand that there will be situations in which pace will be slower or faster than expected. Building awareness minimizes negative consequences and promotes a more relaxing classroom environment.

Even though institutional policies do not allow Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension to proceed with a placement test and discard those who do not show a high proficiency level, this institution can wide the scope of the program and offer two groups to the community. Hence, grouping learners by the results of a placement test can minimize this gap, and more attention can be given depending on individual needs. Finally, this institution should offer extra-curricular and language-oriented activities like conversation and reading clubs and writing centers for those who need extra support in their learning process. Another recommendation for professors is to organize meetings with students from second and first year in the same program so that the latter can talk about their concerns and worries. This can also work as a stimulus for them to continue studying to achieve the higher level accomplished by more experienced students.

5.2. Technology

The successfulness of language learning relies not only on academic aspects such as an effective curriculum and good professionals, but also on the quality of resources provided for everyday instruction. It was found in this ethnography that the English department has two language laboratories. One of them (laboratory one) is equipped with air conditioning, appropriate lighting, two hang-on speakers in each corner in the back. Also, it has 30 booths grouped in pairs connected to a control console that is used as a teacher's desk. This control console is also connected to a VCR, head projector, and TV. Students and professors have

access to two CD players as well. The other laboratory is equipped with brand new desks, a TV set and air conditioning only.

Regarding this issue two recommendations are given. First, to place laboratory one in a bigger room since, as it is noticed in some of the pictures included in the photoethnography, this place is too small to host thirty-one people. The second recommendation is to equip this room with more technological aids. Computers should be provided to transform it into a multimedia language laboratory with Internet access and a networked system. This can promote a student-centered approach directed toward self-paced learning as well as the use of authentic and communicative teaching resources. Also, to offer satellite television can improve learning since students and instructors can schedule to have material recorded onto video or audiotapes to use them in the class or to study at home.

5.3. An Effective Curriculum

This recommendation is directed to the Universidad Nacional, Brunca Region campus' authorities. Findings show that this program is a good opportunity for members of the community who really want to learn English as a foreign language. Regular and former students' comments are an evidence of the positive effects it has had. Also, the registration statistics shows that there are many people interested in enrolling these courses. Hence, it is recommended to continue with this for some years more, and to offer not only one but also two or three more groups.

5.4. English Learning Investment

The last recommendations are for students enrolled in this program. First, beginners should attend student-teacher conference hours. The speaking, listening and reading class professor gives this individual feedback in the language laboratory which enlarges apprentices' language learning. Non-participant observations revealed that only five out of thirty learners attended regularly. Second, they should organize study groups to reinforce everyday knowledge, and take advantage of study rooms provided by the library. They can also ask seniors to join them to get more challenging input. Apprentices also should have higher rate of classroom participation, they must identify class activities that promote their contribution; and hence answer questions from the teacher and classmates even though their responses are not completely right, ask questions and make comments and give their own opinions when requested.

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