

# THE VALUE OF CURRICULAR INTROSPECTION

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## ABSTRACT

The incredulity of an important number of BEIC<sup>1</sup> student-teachers of the E.L.C.L.<sup>2</sup> at the UNA<sup>3</sup> on the efficiency of second language communicative principles—as effective tools to teach English to Costa Rican children—was the first element of alarm which motivated us to formulate the current research. However, the above condition was only a symptom of deeper curricular weaknesses that emerged gradually as the investigation took place, these inconsistencies having a harmful effect on the professional learning of the teacher-students. Soon, external curricular factors were discarded since data analysis pointed out to several components and participants of the BEIC curriculum as the sources of educational weaknesses; accordingly, an introspection of the major's curriculum was set.

A multimodal qualitative (mainly) and quantitative approach was used to orient “The Value of Curricular Introspection” research, which was conducted in two phases. In the first one, it was found that the sample group studied (BEIC students in their last year) did not implement communicative principles in primary school classes appropriately since they had important pedagogical and English competence deficiencies. Some of the reasons for this condition lied on factors such as the major's fragmented curriculum, BEIC instructors' weaknesses on the particular field of knowledge of this major, the use of Spanish in 50% of the courses, and the deficient coordination among the two schools that had designed and are jointly managing the major. In the second phase, it was discovered that some BEIC professors were dissatisfied working in this major, and that most (if not all) student-teachers in their third and fourth year were aware of and therefore frustrated by not having reached the linguistic competence they were supposed to at the time of graduation.

Up to the present, the research findings and recommendations have been shared with professors, students and authorities of both schools in charge of the major. As a result, the BEIC redesign committee is nurturing its endeavours to improve the major's curriculum with the data of this investigation. Moreover, in 2008 six four-hour workshops will be implemented to train the E.L.C.L. professors on theoretical and practical methodologies to teach English to children, in order to enable these professionals to perform more efficiently in the BEIC. Likewise, our suggestions on designing extra-curricular courses for the BEIC fourth-level students to improve their competence in English derived in the school authorities' proposal to open the major “Bachillerato en Inglés.”

In consonance with the above, this ongoing research will certainly have a positive and important impact on three instances. The redesign of the BEIC curriculum will render more efficient English teachers who can provide Costa Rican children a stronger bilingual foundation, this being a working skill highly valued all over the world. In the linguistic arena, the present investigation serves as an example that an apparently isolated teaching/learning concern may be just the tip of a myriad of deep educational problems. Finally, the research emphasizes the relevance of permanent curricular introspection and individuals' humbleness as intrinsic conditions for successful development of educational programs.

Due to globalization phenomenon demands, learning English is already an unavoidable requirement for Costa Rican citizens' educational, economical and intercultural communication success. The MEP<sup>4</sup> has acknowledged the above by stating that, “...English has become the first means of communication between people all over the world” (Venegas et al: 2005, p.14-15). To provide Costa Rican citizens a bilingual condition to face the new world order, the MEP has integrated the teaching of English gradually to the curriculum of most public primary schools.

1 ———— Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés para I y II Ciclos, con Salida Lateral de Diplomado.

2 Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del lenguaje.

3 Universidad Nacional.

4 Ministry of Education

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This educational policy raised the need to prepare professionals in the particular field of teaching English to children, a challenge assumed in 2001 by the E.L.C.L.<sup>5</sup> of the UNA<sup>6</sup> through the opening of the BEIC<sup>7</sup>, a program that is jointly managed by two schools: the E.L.C.L. and CIDE<sup>8</sup>. This is one of the very few formal programs around the country that attempts to graduate professionals trained to teach English to children through the implementation of an integral communicative methodology; presently, communicative principles have proven to be the most effective pathways to allow students to learn and use second/foreign languages for real world purposes.

Notwithstanding the above, it was noted that a growing number of BEIC student-teachers often claimed that it is very difficult (some assure that impossible) to teach English to Costa Rican primary school students through some communicative principles. This symptom was the first call of alarm which motivated a team of researchers from the E.L.C.L. to formulate the current investigation. Initially, it was hypothesized that external factors were the origin of the teacherlearners' lack of trust in communicative principles, but the research demonstrated that internal variables—intrinsically bound to several components and participants of the BEIC curriculum— were responsible not only for the BEIC student-teachers' mistrust in communicative principles but also for some of their English proficiency and pedagogical skill weaknesses. Accordingly, an introspection of this major's curriculum was set.

A multimodal qualitative (mainly) and quantitative approach was used to orient “The Value of Curricular Introspection” research. The investigation was carried out in two phases by students of the MSLC<sup>9</sup>, in the first case, and teacher-trainers of PROCAPRI<sup>10</sup> (an outreach program from the E.L.C.L.), in the second. The level of pertinence of interaction, partial immersion, and experiential learning were the ones chosen to be under scrutiny, for they were the communicative principles causing more controversy.

5 Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del lenguaje.

6 Universidad Nacional.

7 Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés para I y II Ciclos con Salida Lateral de Diplomado, a four-year program that prepares teacher-learners how to teach English to children.

8 Centro de Investigación y Docencia en Educación; a school specialized in the teaching of pedagogy.

9 Masters in Second Languages and Cultures, ascribed to the E.L.C.L. at UNA.

10 Training for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language in Elementary School.

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## First Phase Of The Research

Initially, the area of inquiry was a divergence in thought among the BEIC student-teachers and the curriculum designers and professors of the program; while the student-teachers claimed that interaction, partial immersion, and experiential learning are low pertinent to Costa Rican children's learning of English, the BEIC instructors and curriculum designers stressed the opposite.

From the teacher-learners' point of view, these principles' practicability in public-primary schools of the country is low because there are educational and cultural conditions that constrain their implementation. They argue that in most public primary schools the groups are too large (30 to 45 children per class) which makes difficult to set up group work for pupils' to interact in English; another limitation is that equipment to teach the FL is scanty or not available at all in public schools, so replicating the outside world for pupils to "learn by doing" is somehow utopic; in addition, time constraints (only five forty-minute lessons per week) and the overwhelming English curriculum set by the MEP to be accomplished in this restricted time pose a limitation on teachers for the implementation of partial immersion as a means to provide sufficient exposure to the TL (target language); finally, the teacher-learners add, cultural patterns of our country—such as individualism—instil in children a reticence to work in groups.

On the contrary, from the BEIC curriculum designers' and professors' perspective, communicative principles are highly pertinent to teach English in Costa Rican primary schools, since scholars such as Brumfit (1981), Allwright (1994), and others, have proposed them considering the complexity and heterogeneity of human beings; consequently, these principles provide multiple avenues for individuals to address knowledge meaningfully, shaping and making input learnable (Miranda and Villalobos: 2004, 18-19). Likewise, communicative principles have been tested by the E.L.C.L. and proven to be pertinent to the learning needs of the children of our country. In Costa Rica the E.L.C.L. has been a pioneer in the implementation of communicative approaches and design of didactic materials. In like manner, the language school has provided

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training based on communicative principles to teacher-learners from the BEI<sup>11</sup> and to primary school in-service English teachers participating in PROCAPRI; as a result, most of these trainees have been able to manage communicative principles effectively by developing diverse teaching strategies to comply with the educational and cultural conditions of the country. Unfortunately, the situation is somehow different for the BEIC teacher-learners.

In this first phase of the research, the investigation was carried out in two private schools in Heredia. At the time, the main subjects of study were four senior BEIC teacher-learners (who were already teaching English at the place) and their students (four sample-groups of children, some in first and others in second grade). The researchers carried out overt nonparticipant observation of the BEIC student-teachers while they were implementing eight communicative lessons (two lessons each of them), and covert participant and nonparticipant observation of the same student-teachers in the university class. In addition, the investigators used, as a data collection source, a parallel research that these teacher-learners were carrying out. At the time that “The Value of Curriculum Introspection” research was set, these student-teachers were taking a course (LLE-408t) that for special reasons had to be modified, so they helped to redesign the course devising a research project that could help them find support for their beliefs about the use of various communicative principles in primary schools of our country. Notwithstanding the above, they were not aware that a research with a similar focus to the one they had formulated was in progress.

Inasmuch as it was required to determine if the investigation problem was a particular or a general one, the sample population was later enhanced; accordingly, the perspectives of all four level BEIC students were inspected through a survey, and the views of eight professors from the major were examined through an open unstructured interview. Thus, because of the need to examine diverse scenarios and populations from different angles, the research was oriented by a multimodal approach.

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11 Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés, a program to train student to teach English to adolescents and adults.

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## Findings

The analysis of the data collected, in this first phase of the research, confirmed that communicative principles have internal validity; i.e., they are effective per se and are also high pertinent to teach English to Costa Rican children; this was concluded because whenever the BEIC student-teachers used these communicative principles appropriately, they accomplished the purpose of stimulating primary school learners' comprehension and production in the FL (foreign language). In this regard, scholars acknowledge that to facilitate students' TL proficiency success through communicative principles, instructors need to identify and analyze the aspects that—given conditions of the educational setting and students' and teachers' as well—facilitate or constrain the teaching and learning processes. To deal smartly with the weaknesses of these processes, Kathleen Graves advises that teachers should undergo the “problematizing” process; i.e., “...teachers need to identify the [teaching/learning] challenge(s), analyze all options, determine which individuals could help, and make a plan (strategies) to carry it out” (in Richards: 1999, 33-35).

In the case of “The Value of Curricular Introspection” study, it was observed that the size of a group, lack of equipment to teach English, time constraints and pupils' cultural background did pose a challenge on the novice instructors to implement communicative principles, yet, ever since appropriate teaching strategies were used to deal with these external variables, the implemented communicative principles activated children's cognition and stimulated their language skill development. Consequently, external variables were discarded as the origin of the disparate phenomenon generated among the teacher-learners and the BEIC professors and curriculum designers in regard to the efficiency of communicative principles.

On the contrary, the investigators discovered that internal variables were at the core of the research problem. The initial sample group studied had important nonverbal communication and pedagogical skill deficiencies. The analysis of data garnered set a correlation between the above educational constraints and some particular conditions of the BEIC program such as its fragmented curriculum; scanty integration or complete absence of relevant course contents

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that contextualize learning, some BEIC professors' lack of theoretical knowledge on teaching English to children and/or their scanty previous experience teaching English in primary schools; and finally, a deficient coordination of the BEIC endeavours on the part of both schools sharing the management of the curriculum.

Because of these curricular inconsistencies, some of the BEIC teacher-learners did not manage nonverbal communication skills in the teaching area appropriately, this condition leading them to render to "the frustration phenomenon<sup>12</sup>" very easily. McEntee (1998), Samovar et al (1998), Seelye (1993), Kramsh (1993) and other scholars have acknowledged the relevance of non-verbal communication skills to the teaching and learning of a L2 (second language), for these skills endow speech acts with the individuals' intentional, cultural, social, and linguistic contexts required to transmit their ideas, and these to be decoded easier and more accurately.

In spite of the relevance of nonverbal communication skills to teach the TL, the issue is not emphasized in the curriculum of the major. It was observed that because of this condition, the student-teachers experience the frustration phenomenon, which is an emotional state including desperation, annoyance and intolerance for not having access to the appropriate mechanisms to rely on to facilitate children's comprehension of the FL, then, in order to be relieved from this hardship, the teacher-learners tended to switch to the pupils' mother tongue since the very first or second time that the children complained about not being able to understand English input. Unfortunately, drawing back to English became very difficult thereafter, since neither do teachers nor pupils wanted to abandon the emotional and cognitive comfort that using ones' native language provides. In contrast, novice teachers with more developed nonverbal skills resisted for a longer period of time the temptation to render to the frustration phenomenon.

The other constraint observed was that although the teacher-students managed well the teaching of pre and post language skill development stages (pre listening, post listening), they did not carry out effectively the while language skill development stage, i.e., the "practice" stage for reading, listening, speaking, and writing. At the beginning of the class, the teacher-

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<sup>12</sup> This concept was coined by the researchers of this investigation, literature review did not yield any specific information about this issue.

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learners were able to engage the children in the activities set to have them interact with the FL, but “practice” was somewhat neglected, so very often the pupils were not ready to express using English in the production language stage.

## Recomendations

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations were provided to the two schools sharing the curriculum of the BEIC. First, the fragmentation of courses in the curriculum of the program can be solved by fusing several courses that approach similar contents and processes that are intrinsically bound to each other: These courses are Creative Expression in the Teaching of a Foreign Language, Didactic Lesson Planning in Primary School, Didactical Resources and Materials for Primary School, Didactics of the Oral and Written Communication, and Evaluation of Types of Learning of a Foreign Language.

Second, the credibility of the BEIC teacher-learners on the pertinence of communicative principles to teach English to children can be reinforced by incorporating some of the following pedagogical practices: a) the courses on pedagogy should provide information in regard to the role of the E.L.C.L. in the teaching of English to children. For instance, students should know that this language school has been a pioneer in the implementation of communicative methodologies in primary schools of the country; b) equally important is to incorporate the study of the BEIC curriculum and the MEP’s FL program for primary schools, since this will endow students with understanding on the educational congruency among these two entities for using communicative principles to teach English to children; c) student-teachers should first be assigned to observe an in-service instructor implementing communicative principles in a real class, and only after having this experience should they be exposed to observe the implementation of a class lead by non-traditional FL teaching methodologies; d) finally, teacher-learners will rely more in communicative approaches once all their professors receive training to enhance their knowledge on this field, and due to its leadership in this area, PROCAPRI trainers have offered to accomplish this training task.

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Third, there should be a consensus among the members of the BEIC redesign committee to raise non-verbal communication to the category of the “sixth language skill” in FL learning. Accordingly, the issue should be dealt with systematically in all courses for student-teachers to master nonverbal communication skills and to raise awareness of the need to use this tool in the teaching of English to children.

And fourth, pedagogical courses must be redesigned as to emphasize the teaching of the while (practice) stage for student-teachers to learn how to aid children in their development of comprehension and production language skills. This includes, having the teacher-learners study the theoretical grounding of the issue and creating, carrying out and testing an array of meaningful activities to support the “practice” learning stage.

## Second Phase Of The Research

In this second phase of the investigation, the researchers dealt with another phenomenon that had began to emerge at the end of the first stage; many BEIC learners were angry at the program and its instructors; in turn, some of the professors were dissatisfied with the lack of orientation and support that they had in the program—this feeling being very well disguised.

The first group of graduates from this major had discovered that their language proficiency in the TL was lower than that of the teacher-students from the BEI. This caused them great frustration since they felt betrayed in their professional expectations and blamed the E.L.C.L. for it. Similarly, some BEIC professors felt that they had been left on their own dealing with the inconsistencies of the curriculum, which were causing a covert tension between them and the student-teachers.

In search of answers, two groups from the major (one from the third and another from the fourth level) and some of its professors were selected as subjects of “The Value of Curricular Introspection” research. The investigation continued to be mainly a qualitative one since the data required to shed light on the research problem was of this type; thus, different types of documentation addressing the student-teachers’ perspectives and assessment of the BEIC and



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MEP's English curriculum were gathered: for instance, reaction papers, written documents in which the teacher-learners presented a re-design of the BEIC curriculum, student-teachers' written recommendations dealing with specific problems of the curriculum, a semi-open questionnaire applied to the students of the fourth level, and others. In addition, focus group discussions were generated systematically as part of the lesson in both groups, which created opportunities that enabled the student-teachers to state openly and with no restrictions the reasons for their discontent with the program.

The data collected allowed the researchers to confirm the findings of the first stage of the investigation and it also yielded important insights that unveiled the causes of the problems addressed in this second part.

## Findings

The reason for the teacher-learners' underdeveloped English proficiency level laid on the fact that the BEIC major had been designed mostly to attract in-service English teachers that had already achieved an average or high command of the FL, so courses for the development of English were set to depart from an intermediate language level, and it was agreed that 50% of the courses of the program belonging to the CIDE were to be taught in Spanish. Despite this objective, the major ended up drawing the attention towards it of individuals who were not working in primary schools and who—in general terms—had a basic command of the TL. The conditions of the major remained the same as for the purported population initially thought of and the consequences of this curricular shortcoming has diminished greatly the opportunities of the student-teachers to get the exposure to English that they require in order to reach the advanced language proficiency level stated in the program for graduates of the major.

Another aspect that has not allowed these teacher-learners to develop a higher language competence is that many of them, since their third year in the major or even at lower levels, start working full time, this becoming a strong compromise that leads them to place work before learning (even if unconsciously).

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At the same time, the professors of the E.L.C.L. working in the BEIC have had to deal themselves with the different collateral effects of the problems described above, since the language school has not assigned a coordinator for this area with the authority to manage the givens of the courses and to negotiate with the coordinator of the CIDE. Thus, sometimes consciously and others unconsciously, the professors have worn out from dealing with problems that they cannot solve alone since the real solutions must depart from an appropriate articulation of matters between the E.L.C.L. and the CIDE.

## Recomendations

To give the student-teachers more opportunities to achieve an advanced level of English competence, as stated in the BEIC curriculum for graduate students (Miranda, Jiménez y Villalobos: 2004, 41), all CIDE courses should be taught in English; this includes providing print and audio-visual materials in the FL. Moreover, the E.L.C.L. should return to its culture of emphasizing TL immersion; in the past, professors used to encourage the use of only-English for academic as well as for daily interactions among teacher-learners themselves and studentteachers with professors as well.

Finally, in the E.L.C.L. hitherto there is no coordinator assigned to manage the BEIC although the CIDE has always had theirs; due to the academic and administrative imbalance that this situation provokes, the language school authorities should create that work position. This measure would allow both schools to create the best conditions to attend the needs of all the participants in the BEIC program: professors, students, primary school learners, and others.

## Conclusion

Up to the present, the research findings and recommendations have been shared with professors, students, and authorities of both schools in charge of the major. As a result, the BEIC redesign committee is nurturing its endeavours to improve the major's curriculum with the data

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of this investigation. Moreover, in 2008 the researchers of this inquiry project will reinforce the E.L.C.L. professors' theoretical and practical grounding on communicative methodologies for teaching English to children through the implementation of six four-hour workshops; the training provided by PROCAPRI will enable these professionals to perform even more efficiently in the BEIC. Likewise, CIDE authorities learned from this research about the need to teach pedagogical courses in English, and they have already compromised to hire professors with high English competence. Finally, the investigators' suggestions on designing extra-curricular courses to help the graduate students to improve their English competence derived in the school authorities' proposal to design the "Bachillerato en Inglés" departing from the third level; this program will be opened in 2008.

In consonance with the above, this ongoing research has already had, and it is hoped will continue to have, a relevant impact on three instances: the first, in the redesign of the BEIC curriculum, since the research-recommendations are contributing to improve the program with the fusion and design of courses to reformulate the BEIC curriculum into a more integrated one, this in turn, will enable student-teachers to become more efficient English-instructors in primary schools, thereby enhancing the opportunities of many Costa Rican children to achieve a stronger bilingual foundation; the second impact is in the linguistic arena since the present investigation serves as an example that an apparently isolated teaching/learning phenomenon may be just the tip of a myriad of deep educational problems; and the final impact will be on professionals of the linguistic field because the research emphasizes the relevance of permanent curricular introspection and individuals' humbleness as intrinsic conditions for successful introspection and improvement of educational programs.

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