English Language Teaching in Costa Rica: Facing Challenges

Edited by Juan Pablo Zúñiga Vargas

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How to cite?

Foreword

Undoubtedly, it is every teacher's life quest to find the best way to teach; there are no universal formulas to accomplish that. A committed teacher is a life-long learner, which shows why being an educator is not an easy career. A teacher is indeed like a candle that lights the students' path as it consumes itself. Such abnegation comes at a high price.

Particularly, English teachers in a Country such as Costa Rica are faced with various challenges, ranging from deeply ingrained negative attitudes towards teachers and the education system itself, their own well-being which tends to be neglected a little too often, unequal access to resources and teaching materials, heterogeneous student populations, emotional factors in the classroom, among many others. An English teacher in a developing country (and probably elsewhere) has to be prepared to deal with the unexpected, learn, relearn, and unlearn, and whenever something new is learned, it is every (English) teacher's duty to share it using different means; getting published is but one way to do so.

This ebook comprises a collection of essays written by students from the Master's Program in Education with an Emphasis on English Learning from Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica as part of their graduation project. In each of the manuscripts contained here, a Costa Rican English teacher reflects on some of his or her educational experiences and encountered challenges and proposes strategies to tackle them so that any English teachers out there facing similar situations may benefit from these ideas.

Juan Pablo Zúñiga Vargas

Acknowledgement

About the Editor

Juan Pablo Zúñiga Vargas is an English language teacher educator at Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in English, a Licentiate Degree in University Teaching, and a Master's Degree in English Teaching as a Foreign Language, all of which were obtained at the University of Costa Rica. He is also the main editor of the academic journal *Ensayos Pedagógicos*. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8717-3793

Contents

Considering Danish Social Pedagogy and its Possible Contributions to Costa Rican Public Education

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Abstract

This essay explores aspects that surround Danish culture and its social-pedagogical practices. It is shown that Denmark occupies top places in educational matters in Scandinavia and the world; on the contrary, Costa Rica displays critical numbers regarding its education system. A variety of critical concepts are reviewed: first, soft power, which is the strategy for Denmark to become less military and more technological, artistic and creative; second, hygge or coziness which is described as a national feeling; Danish social pedagogy and its implications for the community; and lastly, the educational concept of bildung, which is intended to integrate the individual as part of a community. The possible contributions of these concepts for the improvement of Costa Rican public education are explored in this paper as well.

Keywords: community, Costa Rican education, culture, Danish education, inclusion, social pedagogy

Introduction

As part of a living experience in 2018 in the island of Funen, Denmark, something that caught my attention, above many cultural aspects, is the education system of this country and how it, because of its deeply rooted traditions, is extremely effective and competitive. To focus on the English teaching and learning processes of this country as a whole, it has to be stressed that Denmark, in 2016, was shown as the second country with the best English as a second language proficiency in the world in the World Economic Forum (Breene, 2019).

It was identified, during my stay in the country, that the vast majority of people had the communicative competence to interact with foreigners in English with no problems. Also, parents spoke in English to their children in the

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supermarket. These actions denote a high recognition of the importance of the English skills for daily use with family, work or travel. Regarding the academic side of learning a language, Fernández and Andersen (2019) stated that, in Danish education, "it seems that primary school takes up the practice of everyday dialogue, upper secondary school is in charge of information exchanges about social matters and university undertakes the communication of academic stuff" (p. 62). As it is presented, since primary school, Danish children are positioned into places of language use.

Denmark is located in the northern part of Europe, what is called Scandinavia. Even though two out of the three countries that surround Denmark (Norway, Germany and Sweden) used to be part of the Kingdom of Denmark, nowadays, all of the countries mentioned speak different languages; however, all of them share a second language in common, English. It is widely known that European countries utilize English as a common communication tool for trading, business and pleasure.

After a brief contextual introduction of Denmark and its English proficiency, it is pertinent to say that this essay will focus on Danish social pedagogy and how considering this idea may contribute to Costa Rican education. It has to be added that the intention of this paper is not to compare or to idealize the fantasy that Costa Rica, as a third world country, can reach the educational and cultural development of one of the most developed countries in the world; yet this essay intends to consider what can be learned from Danish social pedagogy and implemented in Costa Rican day-to-day pedagogical practices.

Danish *Hygge* and Soft Power

Danish culture has an enormous array of traditions that not only are different from Costa Rican culture, but those traditions may clash with our world view as a Latin American culture. Apart from this, there are some factors from this Scandinavian culture that can be understood and possibly adapted for the enhancement of Costa Rican education. To expand on the idea of these traditions and world view, I would like to present two important aspects from Danish culture that can be viewed as contributors for what can be explored and rethought in our culture.

Firstly, the concept of *hygge* (pronounced "hue-guh"); it is explained by Howell and Sundberg (2015) as "typically something akin to the 'national feeling' of Denmark" (p. 98). The authors continue by stressing that *hygge* is a Danish construct that, agreed by Danes and outsiders, has no translation into English; though, an equivalent of this term could be "coziness" (Howell &

Sundberg, 2015, p. 98). Danish people may not start a conversation right away when they encounter someone else at the supermarket or the park, yet at the moment one asks a question or says hello, they do not hesitate to help in the kindest way possible. In social and family gatherings, the feeling described as hygge is present; independently whether a Dane or outsider is part of the group, there is a feeling of inclusion and comfort around. regardless of people's communication skills in Danish, they adapt to English easily.

To elaborate on the concept and explanation of *hygge*, Howell and Sundberg (2015) stressed that "affective constructs such as coziness, relaxed fun, security, and the various other emotional components of *hygge* are certainly found in many cultures... However, the concept is not so specifically articulated as it is in Danish culture" (p. 108). *Hygge* is, indeed, present in most of the Scandinavian countries; I would say that it is part of the Scandinavian culture as a whole although, talking from experience itself, I can only refer to Denmark. Go to a birthday party, have dinner with a Danish family, meet someone at the park, ask for help to find an item at the store, and Danes will always make sure you have a pleasant time.

Secondly, the concept of *soft power* refers to a shift from the hard or military power such as Russia or the USA to a softer and more intellectual power (Howell & Sundberg, 2015). Companies and the government are betting for a more technological approach to strengthen their economy and improve life quality, which is already in very high standards. Engineers are being brought from other countries, and top job offers are created for creative and digital media. Howell and Sundberg (2015) added that "the wielding of various cultural products like design, music, and artwork; socio-economic policies like public social support, urban planning, and the notion of 'knowledge economies'; and tourism programs [are intended] to achieve geopolitical goals" (p. 98). It has to be emphasized that Denmark invests in its education as it does in the aspects mentioned in the previous quote. OECD (2017) denoted that Denmark is in the top in regards to its performance relation and socio-economic profile on science in PISA tests. Furthermore, the website "Study in Denmark" (para. 1) published a news article which highlights that "Denmark has the fifth best higher education system in the world... And the second best in Scandinavia. U21 Rankings has released their 2019 report ranking 50 countries on resources, environment, connectivity and output."

Danish soft power and *hygge* have been a valuable aspect for the development and culture of the country; they have been, as shown previously, key items for the country's education. One of the negative sides of attaching to this model is that, as Howell and Sundberg (2015) stated,

[as] Denmark has been utilizing the soft power tools of hygge, it runs the risk of appearing hypocritical to the very people, businesses, and exchanges it is trying to attract if it cannot extend the offer of coziness to residents already living inside its borders. (p. 114)

Defining Danish Social Pedagogy

Based on Rothuizen and Harbo (2017), social pedagogy, as a concept, surfaced initially around the year 1850 in Germany, being used first by Karl Mager and Adolph Diesterweg. Nivala argued that social pedagogy has historically been connected to kindergartens and to residential care of kids and youngsters; moreover, the author explained that social pedagogues worked in institutions with children, teenagers and young adults with social, physical and psychological complications (Nivala, 2019).

Going back to Karl Mager and Adolph Diesterweg's idea about social pedagogy, on one hand, Mager compared it to democracy because its framework is designed to promote the participation of and for citizens as "free persons in social, cultural and political life" (Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017, p. 7). It is safe to mention that the activities/actions performed form a social-pedagogical perspective affect the individual and the group or community they belong to; therefore, the promotion of participation has to be reflected from both perspectives, that of the individual and that of a group. Rothuizen and Harbo (2017) continue with a similar idea by stating that "social pedagogy is concerned not only with the individual and their social connections, but also with developing a connected, productive society, relevant for the modern age" (p. 7). The authors elaborate further on this idea, commenting that "reform pedagogy stresses individual flourishing and strives to reform social aspects" (Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017, p. 7). On the other hand, the authors argued that Diesterweg "used social pedagogy as a framework for the pedagogical tasks that could contribute solutions to the social and pedagogical problems that appeared in the modern, emerging industrial society" (Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017, p. 7). It can be noticeable that both pioneers of the concept had a similar perspective of its attributions and limitations inside the education field; however, Diesterweg leaned towards the industrial revolution side of the time; the author was projecting towards the solutions that had to be offered to a transforming society.

Cleary (2019) proposed a definition for social pedagogy that, as the previous ones, views the individual as a person that needs support other than just medical and psychological:

it refers to professional work with people who have 'problems' that undermine their ability to exist, interact and live with self-dignity, i.e. homeless people, substance abusers, children in care, children in need of care, senior citizens in need of care, people with disabilities etc. (p. 3)

Jensen (2015) expressed that social pedagogy is referred to as an academic discipline because it is a social science that bases its procedures in social life and living conditions. The author continued by saying that it is a reality science given that it is founded upon empirical research (Jensen, 2015). it is an extension of pedagogy, which deals with understanding people, their roles in the community and how their abilities can be used to develop people and their surroundings. It can be confidently said that social pedagogy is a formal social science as are pedagogy, social work and education. Rothuizen and Harbo related to this point by expressing that "social pedagogy is concerned theoretically with new forms of marginalisation, and practically with efforts that aim towards integration, inclusion and citizenship" (2017, p.10). As stated previously, as a formal subject, this field deals with the two sides of the matter, the theoretical part in order to identify the issues and the practical side to find solutions and apply them. Another pertinent aspect that can be added to this line of thought is that in social pedagogy, "they [people] are not seen as objects for treatment, but as active participants" (Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017, p. 8). It is particularly interesting to dissect the phrase "objects for treatment" because the vast majority of work is done with people that need support in order to improve themselves and integrate into their community. The role of the pedagogue within social pedagogy is, without question, determining when it comes to supporting the person transform and recreate their communal sense; Rothuizen and Harbo (2017) stretched this idea by arguing that "the pedagogue sees the other person, not as a bearer of symptoms, but as a participant who has the right to an everyday life with autonomy and community" (p. 15).

Rothuizen and Harbo (2017) embraced the idea that "Danish social pedagogues in their work pay attention to developing internal and external qualities, processes, experiences and understandings about participation" (p. 10). Participation is a relevant aspect to note when it comes to social pedagogy; the core idea is to foment inclusion and functionality of the individual into the society they live in. Additionally, Nivala (2019) insisted that "social pedagogical work is the idea of supporting the personal and social growth processes of everybody in their everyday life" (p. 6). Nivala (2019) stressed that in social pedagogy, every member of the community is included, the ones who are leaders, who take the initiative, creative, participative and strong-minded, without

excluding those who live adverse situations or suffer from social problems. Finally, Jensen (2015) claimed that, in a process of transformation, an extremely beneficial point to social pedagogy is that it has a touch that keeps an idea of integration and inclusion for those citizens that expected segregation as the outcome.

Social pedagogy connects three different factors: practice, theory and discourse. The first refers to the reality of the society in which people act and the structure and institution of such society. The second relates to the fact that reflection is involved in social pedagogy. The third one is associated with the idea that it is built upon speaking and writing about it (Jensen, 2015). These three pillars construct the subject of social pedagogy as a formal object of study that concerns the empirical understanding of it, as well as the practical form through different communication and documentation forms.

The social pedagogical approach connects to factors such as inclusion and independence which are highly important for personal and communal development. The academic and political side of the equation are as well influenced by the trends of pedagogy and social pedagogy as they affect the rights and well-being of the individual and the community (Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017). The authors followed the idea by pointing that the social pedagogical approach is intended for children and adults to create themselves when facing what is around them, this means that the individual has to act upon what they know or what is new and the pedagogue has to allow room for engagement and interaction (Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017).

Figure 1 shows that the individual and the community cannot exist without each other; nevertheless, they can entangle. As an individual, the person has to be also part of a community; if this person falls into selfishness, the dynamic fails as it does when the person gives too much to the community because "it can be difficult to remember who you are" (Rothuizen & Harbo 2017, p. 17). Rothuizen and Harbo (2017) added that the model has to be read from the inside to the outside, then, the other way around. In simple words, there needs to be a balance between the two layers in the figure for the individual to be mindful with themselves and get the sense of belonging and participation. The social pedagogue has two paths to follow: accompany the individual to be integrated in the community or work with the community through activities that can include the individual into the community. Therefore, "social pedagogy is about both bonding and bridging" (Rothuizen & Harbo 2017, p. 17).

Figure 1.

The task of pedagogue: turning the negative cycle by means of contact and bridge-building
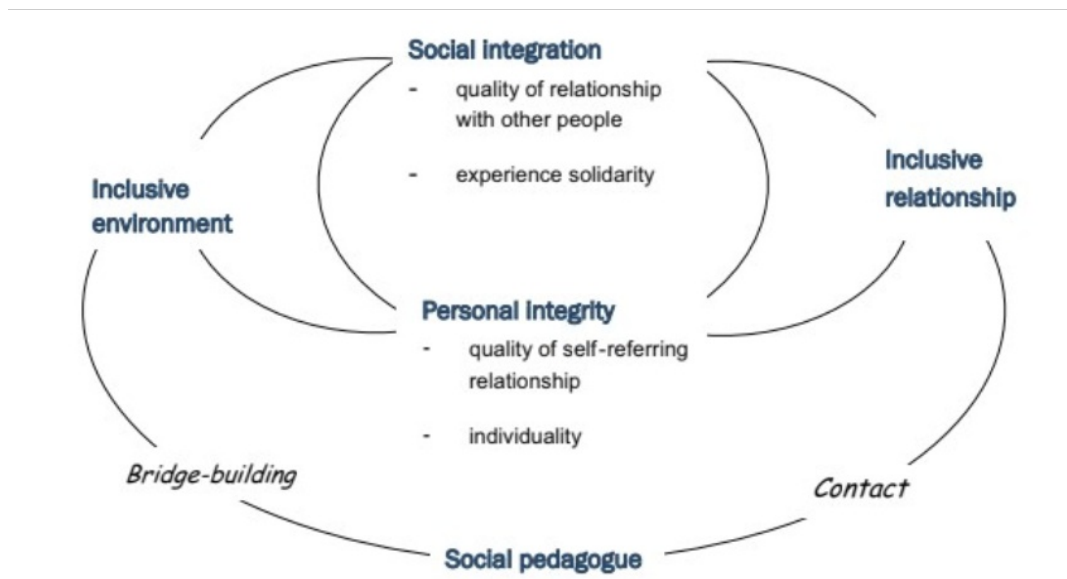
Note: Taken from Rothuizen and Harbo (2017, p. 17)

Key Features of Social Pedagogy

While doing the pertinent research in academic papers for the definition of social pedagogy, some explanations related more to a feature itself rather than a concept or definition; still, the line between these two notions, feature and definition, is not so well-defined at least for the purpose of this paper. The following section describes key features of social pedagogy.

Fox and Thiessen explained that it mixes a person-centered involvement or a group procedure inside a larger community and compositional organization (2019). As seen before in Figure 1 and the definitions of social pedagogy, it is a matter of balance between who the individual is as a person and what they do in and for the community as a group. It is always about including every individual to form a functioning society.

Creativity is seen as an important characteristic that needs to be present in every subject, discipline and career. Social pedagogy is not the exception. Cleary (2020) stated that this field incorporates creativity as one of its most

important instruments for the promotion of relationship and community-based practices. Continuing the idea of creativity as a tool, Fox and Thiessen (2019) expressed that "the social pedagogy approach embraces notions of informal, less-structured activities, and creativity in terms of music- or art-based interventions" (p. 3). Being informal and less structured is especially important for the growth of creativity in an individual or a community; in those moments of informality, it is when the pressure vanishes and comfort takes place to stimulate different forms of expression. In the same line of thought, Fox and Thiessen (2019) compared social pedagogy's approach to social work; as an example, the authors stated that practices such as forming and keeping long term relationships have been historically observed in other professional specialties (Fox & Thiessen, 2019).

Cleary (2019) stressed that there is a concept present in Nordic countries, especially in Denmark, called bildung. This educational concept is the foundation of what social pedagogy is in this country. In addition, the author expanded on the notion of bildung as "an integrative concept in that it designates a bringing together of various aspects of the individual into a whole; the whole being not so much a complete personality or identity but an integrated character" (Cleary, 2019, p. 6). In other words, there is a process or concept especially in social pedagogy that helps the individual be more complete in themselves and integrated in a community.

From the Danish social pedagogue (socialpædagogerne) standpoint, Cleary (2020, p. 4) listed a code of ethics that present five values: "personal emancipation (of the service user), social justice, compassion, cultural freedom (of the service user) and professional integrity". This code of ethics may help the pedagogue be a better professional in its field; furthermore, it is valid to say that the five values stated by Cleary (2020) are not the only ones that professionals could implement in their daily practice. Although the values stated are proposed by and for Danish pedagogues, they are not strictly bound to be utilized merely in Denmark; on the contrary, every professional in the field of education should consider them as core values to practice.

Social Pedagogical Implications for Costa Rica

Costa Rica's reality in terms of education may vary depending on economic status, location, culture, family traditions and other related factors that can affect a community, family or individual. One side of the spectrum can be reviewed as the ones who have the resources to send their children to a prestigious school, full of growing opportunities and contacts to seek professional development in a proper educational environment. The other side of the

spectrum regards the ones that do not have the resources to send their children to a school with an excellent education program; these are the ones that send their children to the nearest public institution hoping that someday those kids will be professionals and will get out of various difficult living conditions. Here is where inequality in Costa Rica takes place, and social pedagogy could be applied.

Badilla et al. (2018), for instance, developed a project in four vulnerable communities of Costa Rica: San Rita, San Gerardo, El Cachito y Punta Cortés, in which they found that there was a lack of a contextualized educational curriculum that allowed students and the community to develop soft skills and new organizational abilities. Additionally, they encountered that the cultural activities and the promotion of community identity were almost non-existent. Moreover, the authors/researchers noticed that any organizational, educational and artistic expressions that did not align with the extreme conservative principles were evil and had to be subjected to scrutiny. In contrast to these findings, social pedagogy promotes artistic expression, creativity of any kind, integration, and organizational structures. If there is a community where none of these practices are allowed, there will be no progress as individuals or society. Examples such as this show that social pedagogy's work has to do more with cultural issues than educational ones.

Badilla et al. (2018) suggested that there are an array of dynamics inside the communities that stop the active participants from feeding their organizational capabilities. The authors explained that some of those dynamics correspond to decontextualized educational curricula that are far away from the logical and productive ideas of the communities. While working with and for a community and as a functioning individual, there needs to be a sense of direction; here is where the organizational aspects of the community come to life; yet if there is no organization or the intention there of, community development will never be present.

From a broader view of Costa Rica's educational situation, Barberousse-Alfonso et al. (2018) claimed that the problem with the low level of schooling in the country is not solely due to the low attendance by itself, it is caused by other factors such as school dropouts, schooling failures or educational exclusion. It is evident that the factors that drag the students out of school are linked to social aspects such as educational exclusion. This can be produced by the teachers, parents, or any other member of the community. There is a need for social pedagogues to bring the community together or integrate the members that might be productive and functional back to the community.

OECD (2017) reported that the number of program conclusions and learning results performance is not positive; in addition to that, the level of school dropouts in schools and higher education is alarming. This organization continues by stating that education has a key role to reduce inequality and poverty, which are increasingly high in Costa Rica.

How can all these issues be worked on in order to achieve better educational and social performance in Costa Rica? There needs to be organization at a community level that permits the individual to feel part of the group. From Danish culture, the concept of hygge or coziness can be considered; besides, the educational concept of bildung should be taken into account. The integration and well-being that Danish social pedagogy lays its bases on must be thought of as a helper to have every single individual motivated and comfortable to be as functioning as possible. Finally, community means the neighborhood, the family, the classroom, the school or university. Wherever there is a group of people, there is a possible functioning community and its members.

Conclusions

To conclude this essay, I would like to cite Cleary (2019) who stated that "the challenge for a contemporary social pedagogy is to develop environments that inspire and nurture personal and cultural narratives" (p. 10). As was presented in the section of Social Pedagogical implications for Costa Rica, it was noted that the educational and pedagogical problems of the communities are bound to a lack or prohibition of cultural and personal expressions that allow the individual and the community to be well organized and integrate everyone. There are factors that increase the number of school dropouts, such as educational exclusion which, as reviewed previously, do not comply with the principles that the field suggests.

Costa Rica's education, pointed out by the evidence, may not be the best; in despite of that, if we view the cultural aspects from a nation such as Denmark and start working as a community for the improvement of education and culture and the well-being of every single person, there might be surprising results that would inspire others to follow the same path. I am not implying that Costa Rica can pursue to become a Central American Denmark; what I am envisioning is a better education that starts from having a better culture as a community.

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Reconsidering English Language Learning in Costa Rica: Exploring Teachers' Well-Being and its Importance, Challenges, and Recommendations in the Wake of a New Era in Education

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Abstract

The lack of empathy and support that educators constantly face has serious consequences. However, this does not seem to be enough to make a significant change in the way this is perceived. The following paper aims to study the current situation regarding teacher well-being among Costa Rican English language teachers. It focuses on stressors, testimonies, and a series of strategies that can be used as a way to cope with this profession's struggles and offer better conditions for English language instructors.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, well-being, stress, Costa Rica

Introduction

Anybody who has had the privilege of teaching a group of people will probably agree that helping others and witnessing achieve their goals is arguably the most satisfying part of the job. No matter how weary we may feel at the end of the day, the reward of being useful and having accomplished something good fuels the desire to keep on going. However, oftentimes we find ourselves in a position where frustration, discontent, and exhaustion find their way to tip the balance in favor of a feeling of powerlessness and despair. The role of the educator goes far beyond the responsibilities inside the classroom. Planning, grading, attending meetings, and other extracurricular duties put a lot of pressure on teachers, who very frequently sacrifice part of their own time to meet the demands of their work. I do not think I am the only one who has considered other professional paths in order to avoid this. While I love instruction, those other time-consuming chores take a toll on both physical and mental health. MacIntyre et al. (2019) affirmed that teaching is among the most stressful jobs. What should concern us all is identifying the factors that affect us as

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professionals and addressing them appropriately. MacIntyre et al. (2019) also mentioned that teaching a language is more complicated than imparting other subjects, which in turn increases the array of issues.

English teachers in Costa Rica are bound to a series of requirements that set them apart from other colleagues who are in charge of other fields of study. For example, a college degree is not enough. A language certification is needed if they want to apply for a job, and depending on the organization, this might need to be renewed every other year. As Recio (2019) pointed out, educators who intend to work for the Ministry of Public Education (MEP in Spanish) must have a C1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which is one of the international standards to measure language proficiency. This particular situation may create several emotional afflictions, such as stress and anxiety. Not being able to find a position or the risk of losing their employment are reason enough for someone to become restless. While this decision was made to improve the overall quality, it might prevent great professionals with strong pedagogical foundations from doing what they were trained to do. It is important to remember that knowing a language is one of the variables; how it is taught is just as important.

In addition to what has been mentioned, there is one very specific incident that aggravated the problems regarding teacher well-being and made the situation escalate to a level that has not been imagined. The COVID-19 pandemic put us in front of a computer so we could continue with our duties, and along came a series of negative effects as well. MacIntyre et al. (2020) placed workload, remote learning, and family health as part of the main stressors that injured well-being. Focusing on the instructors' perspective, this change has definitely been grueling, and we need to be better prepared to face the complications that lie ahead of us. This new reality has given education new tools to transform itself. We may be in the middle of a paradigm shift, and that should be seen as an opportunity to improve the conditions in which teachers do their work. I believe that health must be a priority, and raising awareness of its importance is exactly the objective of this paper. Throughout this essay, I will look into the difficulties that afflict educators and their impact in order to foster a series of meaningful and effective practices that can find their way into the system, as well as actionable advice to promote wellness.

Stress and its Triggers

There is a quote I came across not too long after I started working on this text, and I would like to include it even when the context that it was used in does not have anything to do with education per se because I think it is just too

powerful. Noah (2022, 2:10) said, "there is something liberating about fighting an obvious enemy, as opposed to one you have to prove exists." I strongly believe that something worse than denying a problem is knowing you have one and do next to nothing to change that. This, in my opinion, is what has been corroding the very foundations of this profession, and throughout this paper, I will try to address everything related to the one we as educators have. However, I would like to start by giving this document its own voice. The last thing I want is a dull, generic piece of writing that keeps shoving numbers and data down the reader's throat from the very beginning. These elements are key to supporting the point I want to make, but I also want this essay to be as compelling and enjoyable as possible. This decision is probably influenced by my own preference for straightforward texts that keep the reader engaged. An essay is, after all, a means for authors to convey their own thoughts. I want to tell a story, and the reason I am motivated to do this is that it is exceptionally easy for us human beings to find a connection and identify with one. Then, what better way to begin than to start with an anecdote of my own?

Near the end of my fourth year as a teacher, I truly wanted to quit. Seriously. I am not sharing this solely because it serves the purpose of this paper; I genuinely felt like that. I went through an existential crisis that did not dissipate in a matter of weeks. The idea kept prowling my mind for months, and there were a few situations that triggered this. To summarize, I was immensely tired, stressed, disappointed, unmotivated, unhappy, and I questioned pretty much everything that was going on in my life up to that point. On the other hand, there were three strong reasons for me not to give up. First, I love what I do, at least the core task of this job. Second, I felt that my work was meaningful, and the effort was worth it considering I was helping others. The third reason is that my coworkers were not only colleagues; they were friends. That combination guided me to find the strength I needed to be here, four years later, continue teaching. Still, I am getting too far ahead. We first need to establish a starting point and determine the source from which the rest of the issues I will refer to originate. After that, I can then start formulating solutions. Luckily, the answer to the aforementioned predicament is quite simple. I am talking about stress.

Stress could be regarded as the root of all evil since this is where several physical and emotional concerns emanate from. Nevertheless, there are a number of factors that contribute to its buildup. MacIntyre et al. (2019) found that a heavy workload, strenuous hours of work, and financial struggles are the most common causes. In a profession that requires a lot of academic and social interaction, it should not be surprising that these aspects fuel those stressors. Bethune and Kell (2021) described that teaching sometimes can be mistaken for

a lifestyle on the grounds that the work seems to be endless, and it is very difficult to simply forget about it once the shift is over. The most dangerous aspect is that overwork can create the illusion of efficiency, and what it actually does is quite the opposite. By thinking that more means better, this false impression can lead to exhaustion pretty quickly. Similarly, this job involves a lot of giving. It is not bad to show interest and lend a hand whenever possible, yet at the expense of one's well-being is surely a one-way ticket to burnout. In fact, MacIntyre et al. (2019) stated that language teaching, particularly, is highly emotional. The bigger these demands are, the higher the amount of work needs to be put in by educators.

This career has its own set of special characteristics that are perhaps deal breakers for most people. For example, colleagues and individuals who have had the chance to be in front of a group of students know what it feels like to spend part of their free time to either plan a lesson or grade homework. Granted, nowadays there are a lot of occupations that require their associates to work a little extra sometimes, and even when they do, that time is paid of course. That is not the case for most teachers, and what should not be more than just a couple of hours a week eventually becomes part of their daily routine. According to Rasheed-Karim (2020), when it comes to work-life balance, the issue that stands out from the rest by almost fifteen percent in a survey taken by thirty-seven professors in the United Kingdom is maintaining a balance between family time and their duties. In addition to that, Jerrim and Sims (2021) mentioned that one-fourth of teachers in England spend over fifty-nine hours working weekly. The question is, why is that number so high? In a study that collected information from five English-speaking countries, including England and the United States, grading and planning came up as the two main reasons. In my opinion, this should be seen as a wake-up call in order to take the relationship between those two factors and the damage they could cause to well-being more seriously.

Another element that can definitely make the stress level more volatile is the class sizes. I will not refer to the fact that it is very common for instructors to have more than one workplace, which leads to having several different classes and is sometimes a consequence of not being able to meet their financial needs. Nevertheless, the quantity of students in the classroom is strictly interrelated with workload and is indeed detrimental to well-being. For instance, Atkins (2003) pointed out that there is an evident psychological effect between reasonable and disproportionate responsibilities regarding assessment. Besides, an additional component that is part of the equation has to do with how much teachers have to dedicate to interacting with parents and dealing with extra-

curricular situations. Huang et al. (2022) stated that teachers in New York would rather have small-size classes since they are clearly more enjoyable. Likewise, large classes represented a source of stress for teachers in the United Kingdom and Israel. Finally, in a study designed to assess the impact on education policies in Costa Rica, Vega (2022) indicated that a small class represented a positive effect on student performance. A finding like that one could suggest that a reduced number of pupils contributes to a more suitable environment, which may positively influence the psyche of professionals in education. From a very personal point of view, teaching big groups is not really the core issue. I actually believe that it is controllable up to a certain point. Notwithstanding, dealing with the onerous tasks of marking and other external situations do have an impact on well-being.

One last stressor that I particularly identify with is caused by management and unsupportive superiors. There are a couple of thoughts that I would like to get off my chest because this problem is so serious that it easily puts many colleagues off and demoralizes them, myself included. However, there are some data that can support my claims. For example, after conducting a study with the aid of twenty-one Australian teachers, Fogelgarn and Burns (2020) indicated that these educators did not think they were trusted by those in charge. Similarly, Mercer (2020) investigated the welfare of language instructors in private institutions in Malta. According to her, teachers' well-being and employee satisfaction are not as well appreciated as the organizations' profits (Mercer, 2020). I have been through both scenarios, and I can only say that this is somewhat therapeutic. Employers and heads of departments must always listen to their staff, and they must not minimize circumstances that threaten their emotional stability. Ignoring their concerns might blow up in their faces because discouragement and indifference may result in negative consequences to the quality of instruction, as explained by Mercer (2020). This is not about whining; it is about gradually reversing irregular behaviors and practices that have been normalized.

Just as Huang et al. (2022) described, the mixture of all those ingredients I have mentioned has a risky outcome. Unhappy, pressured, disillusioned professionals working more than they should without a fair compensation may lead to deliberate under-performance, lack of interest and purpose, burnout, poor health, and, ultimately, desertion. Looking for other jobs is perhaps the only way they have to change that and find satisfaction in what they do. For the most part, this career is probably not the easiest or fastest path to getting rich, so why would I sacrifice my own sanity as well? Many people ask themselves this question, and even when more experienced colleagues could handle the

pressure of this labor, novice teachers are the ones who are more likely to call it a day. Despite being obvious, Bardach et al. (2022) reported that emotional intelligence is relevant to educators' welfare. If they do not have the necessary tools to cope with the daily difficulties, they are definitely more prone to breaking down. Moreover, Sulis et al. (2021) suggested that pre-service teachers are susceptible to a series of complications that force them to abandon ship. I consider this to be of the utmost importance given that the potential implications might be disastrous. For instance, if this continues to happen, there will be an impact on the quality of education. The number of individuals interested in forging their way in this field can decrease progressively, and many of those who decide to give it a try might not stay for too long. Clearly, we are in dire need of an action plan.

So far, I have examined causes that lead to an adverse effect on physical and mental health among professionals in various countries, but what about Costa Rica? According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (n. d.), Costa Rica is amongst the nations with the worst work-life balance. Out of forty-one countries, it ranks in the thirty-eighth position behind Colombia, Turkey, and Mexico. That elaborate collection of data takes the entirety of the workforce in the country into account, and although it gives an idea of our current situation, it is only the tip of the iceberg, thus, the need to look for something more specific. I will devote the following paragraphs to sharing what I could find out about English teachers in Costa Rica. I will explore their stress levels, causes, and how they feel about their own well-being.

The Costa Rican Context

In an effort to better understand and assess a bit of the reality of English language professors, I had the opportunity to interview several of them over the course of a month. Originally, ten candidates were supposed to be part of this initiative, though only seven of them could participate. The conversations lasted from forty-five minutes to one hour, and these were carried out via Zoom and telephone call. Only one of the participants sent the information in written form since it was not possible to schedule a meeting. As for the other three teachers that could not make it, two of them were sent the questions, but the answers were not returned. The last one was contacted on more than one occasion; however, the attempts were unsuccessful. I acknowledge that this experiment is simply a drop in the ocean, yet the testimonies represent precious contributions that inspire me to keep on doing research on this particular topic. Next, I will give a detailed account about the population, procedure, and the insights generated by this analysis.

Population

With the objective of including the whole spectrum of English language teaching, I compiled the opinions of seven educators who have worked or are currently employed in private and public institutions. They have worked with children, teenagers, and adult learners, and they accumulate between five and twenty years of experience. Two of the participants chose to seek other job opportunities totally unrelated to education more than four years ago. Another contributor is still part of an organization dedicated to English language learning, but this person does not perform any teaching-related duties. The remaining four participants are active English instructors. Furthermore, in an attempt to collect honest statements and let them express themselves without any repercussions, their identities have been concealed. Henceforth, these individuals will be referred to as Participant number 1, 2, and so forth, and the number assigned corresponds to the chronological order in which they were contacted.

Method

This group was given an eight-question assessment that intended to appraise their well-being, measure their stress levels, and share the main reasons that caused that feeling. Sometimes, depending on each participant's comments, more than one question was answered at the same time without the need to ask all of them. Owing to the nature of the exchanges, a very organic interaction was created. As a result, questions that were not initially included yet pertinent to the inquiry were incorporated. The discussions took place in English and Spanish, and except for one particular case, all the interviews took place individually. Participants 1 and 2 joined the same video call via Zoom. Besides, as was mentioned above, Participant 4 shared written responses due to the inability to meet on the date agreed.

Results

Given that some items addressed personal matters, I will focus only on the ones that are exclusively connected to physical and mental wellness. As much as I would have loved to develop this section further, time was the main limitation. Even though I am only scratching the surface of this affair, I am convinced I will continue investigating this topic in order to incite change. Seeing as this is not a comprehensive review, I will summarize some of the responses. Still, I will expand on the one that has to do with stressors more thoroughly and include each answer separately.

The discoveries show that there is an association with the triggers described in the first part of this paper. Question number seven asked participants to rate their occupational stress level on a scale from 1 to 10, to

which six of them rated it above 7. In fact, this was caused by work overload, extra-curricular responsibilities, lack of emotional support, and administrative policies. Since two of the collaborators are not part of the teacher workforce, I asked them to recall how they felt. A crucial revelation was covered in question number three. Virtually all of those who continue working in the area of education are still passionate about their jobs. The complications occur when other tasks that are not related to their job, such as substitutions and sudden meetings, begin to steal time they could spend working on their classes. Another item, question number five to be precise, revealed unanimous agreement. No institution, public or private, seems to offer any kind of support when it comes to emotional health. There are not any policies or regulations they can count on, and initiatives that advocate teacher welfare are nowhere to be found. One final aspect in which all of them come to an agreement is the number of students in a classroom. All of them disapproved of twenty or more students in a single group. The last thing they were required to elaborate on had to do with the main issue that took the heaviest toll on their well-being. The following section covers what each one of them expressed.

Participant 1. One additional piece of information is that this individual was the one who rated the lowest stress level for one special reason, which is being currently inactive. In spite of this, what Participant 1 labeled as a major threat to teacher welfare was the lack of vision, leadership, and stubbornness that produces an imbalance in terms of work-related duties. Therefore, the shift is affected and the time dedicated to personal life is diminished substantially. In addition, there is a clear limit as far as professional development goes. In his current position, it is virtually impossible for this person to keep growing academically. This person was also disappointed in the fact that not having a specific degree prevents people from applying for a position, but having one does not necessarily suggest they are going to be compensated fittingly.

Participant 2. This person, who took the interview along with Participant 1, shared similar points of views. The main concern here is that the work schedule frequently merges with free time because there is just too much work. Aside from not being paid during this extra time, there is an excessive amount of meetings and last-minute incidents such as substitutions. This translates into very little time to plan and check assessments. Accordingly, Participant 2 feels trapped in a never-ending working cycle. One very important detail that I cannot leave out is that this educator has been looking for a new job on account of unbearable working conditions. Finally, this teacher spends two to three hours a day worth of extra working time.

Participant 3. Participant 3 criticized committees as the main factor that increases workload both in and outside the classroom. These groups are mandatory and, according to this participant, do not contribute to any significant impact. They represent a loss to their core responsibility as professionals in education. What should be more emphasized, this teacher said, is more training in terms of English resources and how to handle situations when students with special needs are involved. There is a lot of frustration and exhaustion because the public system does not seem to care enough about this, especially in rural areas. To conclude, this participant averaged an excess of four hours a week, including weekends.

Participant 4. This former educator blamed working schedules, sometimes more than twelve hours a day, and the unfair payment as the main stimulants to quit teaching. This individual went as far as stating that choosing that career path had been a mistake. There are many administrative policies that do not take side with the teacher, mostly when it comes to private institutions. Consequently, a teacher can feel overwhelmed and subjugated. Participant 4 said that the overall well-being greatly improved once instruction was no longer a daily hassle.

Participant 5. Another former teacher, Participant 5 pointed out that the relationship between work and money is perhaps the biggest issue. In the public sector, tenure grants collaborators with a permanent position, and it represents the possibility to increase their salaries. However, educators working in private organizations do not have the same benefits. One of the hardest things, this teacher narrated, was to fake a smile when sadness and fatigue were lurking around. Spending many hours away from home to make ends meet and then being forced to step down to find a better income is a story that is unfortunately too common.

Participant 6. The primary challenge derives from the way responsibilities are handled. This educator mentioned that even when passion has not been affected, the school manages to complicate their job by asking for things suddenly and rushing whenever they want to. What used to be an isolated situation has become normal, which in turn boosts anxiety levels. The value and the perception of being a member of that organization have changed over the last two years. Another element this teacher mentioned was the urgency to be trained and given the tools to deal with students that require special attention in virtual scenarios. To wrap up, this individual spends two hours a day working unpaid extra hours.

Participant 7. Grading along with planning constituted the most time-consuming duties for this instructor. Three to four hours a day of voluntary extra work, including Sundays, was part of a daily routine. Nevertheless, this educator

found a new job at another school due to a different reason. Not only was payment not good enough to stay, but the manner in which administrators and principal alike treated the staff. In this particular case, supervisors undermine the educator's role and support the parents since they are the ones paying for their children's schooling. This contributor pleaded for reforms that promote better compensation and a more robust system to have a better schedule.

Reflection

Up until now, I have presented mostly facts about what Costa Rican English language professors go through. I have not shared my opinion in view of the fact that I wanted to stay true to reporting what those people shared and maintain credibility. Here, I would like to interject and expand the discussion. What did I get after analyzing all that data? My takeaway is that no matter how many bales are piled on a camel's back, only one straw is needed to break it. I dare to say that factors such as workload, a lack of fair compensation, extended shifts, and scarce free time combined with too much pressure at work have the same effect of radiation. If you are exposed to it for a prolonged period, you will get sick. Being forced to choose between mental and physical health and a career is not easy. Even I have faced that dilemma because we have been led to accept that many of those conditions that were reported above are part of our job. I somewhat agree since all occupations have their pros and cons. However, abuse and neglect take over when stability is absent. This is what must be changed in order to prioritize welfare. We must be realistic and understand these difficulties are not going anywhere. What we require is a series of changes to balance personal and professional satisfaction.

Safeguarding Well-Being

I have been preaching about well-being for a while now, so I think it would be wise to define it before I dive into a series of recommendations to care for it. Sulis et al. (2021) offered several definitions. Nevertheless, the one that resonated with me the most had to do with life satisfaction. When hedonist and eudemonic standpoints are combined, well-being is characterized by five elements, which are positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. To put it simply, well-being is the subsequent balance between social, mental, and physical conditions and their challenges. For the sake of raising awareness and spreading its importance, I consider that the best way to do it is by sorting the strategies that the community of teachers may find practical. Manning et al. (2020) classified these into actions that can improve well-being temporarily and those which involve changes in the system. The first

category, activities that increase well-being provisionally, does not get rid of the stressors, but integrating them into a daily routine will surely keep dangerous stress levels at bay.

Temporary Actions

I feel a little ashamed to confess that sometimes I take for granted and overlook those small efforts that make a huge difference. While I know they are valuable, in early brainstorming stages, I was not even thinking about including them. I changed my mind for two reasons. The first one being that I have been putting some of them into practice for more than six months. I thought that empirical evidence would not be enough, but then I reflected on that. Had I left those actions out, I would have repeated the mistake of belittling their effectiveness. Second, I believe that we need every way, skill, action, and approach that can boost wellness. If I am apparently writing about the importance of welfare, how am I supposed to leave a piece of information that could be useful to others?

Anderson (2010) assembled a list of examples that we should take into consideration. For instance, something as simple as eating properly, plenty of exercise, sleeping well, and finding ways to detach from work can immensely put us on the right track as far as protecting our well-being goes. This author recognized the consequences of stress as well. One of those effects is susceptibility to anxiety and depression, as I have stated before. Equally, Bardach et al. (2022) conceded that burnout is the result of prolonged stress, and this one is composed of exhaustion, detachment of one's mind and body, and lack of personal accomplishment. Anderson (2010) asserted that we focus too much on others, while at the same time we ignore and fail to nurture our own needs. There is a piece of advice that I would like to give, which is related to disconnecting from your duty as a teacher, especially in this digital age. I encourage colleagues to stay away from their cell phone or ignore group chats in their free time. I used to be bombarded by text messages every day except Sundays. I was so overwhelmed that I just could not stand the sight of my device. Now the situation is different, and another key tip that we ought to follow is prioritizing ourselves.

In line with the suggestions in the last paragraph, Anderson (2010) provided a number of guidelines to organize ourselves, plan our time more efficiently and put ourselves first. This author concurred with the notion that educators do not have enough time, which highlights the significance of managing what we do every day. With the assistance of a schedule, I strongly believe that the sense of productivity heightens. Number one on the list is

recognizing those private life activities and obligations that we would regard as nonnegotiable. Once we have established that, we should then think about those other responsibilities that are not fundamental. By doing this, it should be easier to reduce workload and balance our spare time. The most difficult action, if you ask me, is learning to say no. How many times have we found ourselves agreeing to go the extra mile in detriment of our emotional or physical stability? Anderson (2010) argued that we comply because we do not want to let others down, yet in turn we end up hurting ourselves. Deep down, I believe that happens for the reason that we do not want others to imagine we are lazy or uncommitted. In order to function optimally, we have to focus on taking care of our necessities, and then, if possible, give a hand with a particular difficulty.

To conclude, I decided to name this section *Temporary Actions* considering they can increase our well-being. Still, there must be consistency too. There is very little a set of recommendations can do if we do not execute them. Looking after ourselves physically and mentally, arranging our schedule based on priorities, and making decisions that can benefit our well-being are actions that come from within. We are accountable for the changes we want to make too. Likewise, as soon as we have cultivated those habits, we must strive for keeping them around to steadily balance our personal and professional lives.

Organizational Changes

This may be the most challenging part. Making systematic adjustments in both public and private systems that can be beneficial is almost surreal. We have the variables, but the equation seems to be impossible to formulate. I have gathered some initiatives that might as well inspire others to look for a much more feasible tactic. However, while we wait for that holy grail to be discovered, I found that having a mentor and a group of people you can count on, as well as developing self-efficacy and mindfulness, proves to be a successful way to promote welfare.

Almost at the very beginning of the paper, I wrote that having a partner at work kept me from quitting. Well, it just so happens that research backs this up. MacIntyre et al. (2020) observed that, among the top coping strategies that language teachers implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional and instrumental support were key to sustaining well-being. Not every institution has consistent coaching practices, so trying to regulate and standardize this procedure could assist in improving this area. Gałazka and Jarosz (2021) described a few benefits of coaching sessions reported by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, they were able to express their concerns and

feelings, increased their self-awareness, and became better at problem solving. This surely could be employed on a national scale in our country. I had the opportunity to be a supervisor, and based on my experience, I guarantee instructors do need this kind of aid. In fact, they ask for someone who could tell them what they are doing right or what should be improved. In addition to this, they get an emotional relief when they can communicate their doubts. Equally, inexperienced pre-service teachers are among those who would greatly take advantage of this proposal.

Closely linked to mentorship and how important it could be to novice professionals in education in order to promote well-being and prevent future complications, mindfulness plays a huge role in professional development. Zimmerman (2018) defined mindfulness as the ability to be aware of what is going on around us and accept it. The reason mindfulness is significant lies in the premise that educators have to acknowledge and act upon a variety of situations. Most importantly, this quality strengthens resilience among them, which is obviously essential after having studied the many circumstances that affect their wellness. Finally, Bardach et al. (2022) confirmed that mindfulness can be included in teacher-training programs. This transformation might be slow, but fomenting this skill even from early stages is a massive step forward for education in Costa Rica.

Lastly, self-efficacy, which is described by Bardach et al. (2022) as the power to trust one's knowledge and talents to overcome a wide range of obstacles, ought to find its way into the system. Moreover, it is an ally of well-being. Anderson (2010) stated that great levels of self-efficacy have the potential to boost excitement and dedication to teaching. Bardach et al. (2022) manifested that self-efficacy may be promoted through a selection of techniques, for example, allowing teachers to take part in coaching sessions where their mentors can demonstrate how to handle difficult scenarios. Besides, another practice in which this can be encouraged is by fostering coordinated discussions to find answers on how to deal with typical situations they may possibly encounter at school.

I have provided some solutions that could be incorporated into the education system by means of training, workshops, and even courses at a college level. The topics of mentoring, mindfulness, and self-efficacy were based on research. However, I wish I could offer more. I wish I could address the issues of extended workload, a better salary, even reducing the number of students in a group. Unfortunately, those depend on policies, regardless of the evidence that suggests that educators are fed up with these conditions. I do not have anything to prove it, but the balance between the following elements are the

ones that would hypothetically skyrocket well-being. I am referring to a low number of pupils, ten to fifteen, and a fixed schedule that covers paid planning and grading time. I firmly believe this could be reasonable and achievable, if only there were a reorganization. Until that happens, this is as far as we can get.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have presented a lot of factors surrounding well-being. I first started with a number of stressors that afflict educators. I also presented a series of interviews and their findings concerning the well-being of English language educators in Costa Rica. Finally, I suggested some actions that can be performed to boost wellness at a personal and structural level. Of course, there are some limitations, and I am aware that this is a very superficial analysis, which is why I would like to do a more methodical research on the topic. What motivates me is that any teacher that gets to read this piece will feel identified, or so I feel. The other purpose that makes me want to continue studying this is to reverse the perception of the triggers I showed so that they are not deemed normal. All of us deserve a fulfilling life, and doing what we love for a living should be a blessing, not a daily torment.

I would like to conclude this essay on a high note. Therefore, I would like to finish telling my story. I am still a teacher, but I ended up quitting my previous job. Not because I hated it although I fell prey to various situations I mentioned before almost on a daily basis. I simply was not given another choice. I was pushed to decide between a living and my own professional and academic development. I knew what I wanted to do, so I focused all my strength and energy on pursuing a master's degree in education. Not everything was bad. I can honestly say that I have had enough time to reflect on what I want, what I will not tolerate, and how I want to be treated at work. This time allowed me to rekindle my passion for teaching, just as I have learned to appreciate where I am mentally and how happy that makes me feel. Happy, inspired teachers make a difference, and currently I have six people under my wing that enjoy learning English as a consequence of how they feel. That is the best compliment I can get.

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Boosting English Reading and Writing Skills Through the Implementation of Technological Activities that Promote Phonological Awareness in First-Grade Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the usage of activities that promote literacy acquisition with the assistance of phonemic awareness and technology. It seeks to promote processes that can support literacy in first grade students. Also, this paper will attempt to define phonemic awareness, literacy, and the benefits that technology and e-learning activities can bring to literacy.

Keywords: activities, innovative, learning, literacy, phonological awareness, reading, technology, writing

Introduction

Education's main purpose is to help students with their integral development as people. Based on this, and according to Geng et al. (2017), teachers need to be prepared to develop innovative strategies, meet the pedagogical expectations in the classroom, and help students achieve the necessary skills to succeed in society and in life situations. The twenty-first century and a globalized society demand more abilities such as creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and the use of technology, among others. Teachers need to work with students to integrate all those abilities to potentialize their skills and motivate them to learn.

English teachers face a lot of challenges when teaching to children. A challenge a Teacher of English as Foreing Language can find is the limited classroom language opportunity for the learners to practice the language. In Costa Rica, at the first grade, students start their literacy process in the Spanish language. Since six years ago, with the new lesson plans for English as a Second language in Costa Rica, students are also able to start a literacy process with the introduction of phonological awareness (MEP, 2016).

Moreover, phonological awareness is an ability that is generally developed during pre-school and school level. Phonological awareness is essential in learning to read (Knoop-van Campen et al., 2018). We will initially define critical concepts such as phonological awareness to understand the subject better. Lederberg et al. (2019) mentioned that "phonological awareness is the ability to attend to and manipulate the sublexical structure of words (syllables, rimes, and phonemes)" (p. 401). Authors have defined it as the ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds of a language to read and identify sounds, letters (vowels and consonants), syllables, and words (Rokhman et al., 2020).

Furthermore, phonology is the linguistic domain relevant for early literacy development because explicit instruction of the phonemic structures of a word can help children draw connections between the spoken word and its written representation (Gillon, 2018). In addition, when phonological awareness is introduced at an early age, children recognize sounds and distinguish a word from another (Kalia et al., 2018). It is essential to mention this because, in Costa Rica, students initiate their literacy process in first grade. Research has shown that phonemic awareness plays an essential role in the early stages of beginning reading in different languages. It is always important to include phonemes because it has been demonstrated that identifying and recognizing English phonemes is a skill that supports English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in their English productive and receptive skills (Adams et al., 1998).

On the other hand, technology usage has become very popular, and children use it for different activities. Further, technology has been included to improve the learning of a foreign language and skills to promote different strategies in the classrooms. According to Wang (2005), there are many advantages integrating technology in classrooms especially for English as a Foreign Language students. To be able to improve language skills like writing, reading, listening and speaking, English language learners use computers, online dictionaries, and software programs to check their work and correct themselves, improve their language skills; use the Internet, listen to songs, read or listen technology texts like stories, communicate each other even worldwide. Implementing technological activities could be seen as an opportunity to include tools to enhance the use of the target language. Wang (2005) also stated that "technology integration in foreign language teaching demonstrates the shift in educational paradigms from a behavioral to a constructivist learning approach" (p. 2).

Teachers need to organize their lessons by considering different initiatives that captivate the students' attention. Activities that include technology are considered meaningful tools in the development of human beings

(Tashkenbayevna et al., 2018). According to Genç (2015), teachers need periodic reinforcement in their specific areas so that they can transmit all the tools and materials to students. Periodic training for professors is relevant to develop different skills that allow them to update processes and strategies in the classrooms. Clements and Sarama (2003) declared that teachers can find different technological materials that can be used for specific purposes and with practice educators can adapt those materials to different levels. Through the use of technology, many authentic materials can be provided to learners, and they can be motivated to learn the new language.

In addition, teachers need to be aware that the technological moments should be planned and focused on the learner's learning process. It is critical thinking and meaningful connections through the use of technology that can help children during their learning process. According to Oblinger (2004), interactive activities can stimulate engaging students in interactive, multisensory activities that promote elaboration, solving problems, learn from their actions, and improve student engagement and academic performance.

On the other hand, in Costa Rica, students learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Frequently, English teachers find out that their students are reading words, but they do not know what they mean or cannot read or pronounce them even after first grade (Gilakjani, 2011). Also, many students are not exposed to the foreign language as much as they are involved in their native language. For this reason, teachers must create environments that allow students to be exposed to different situations so that they feel attracted to the new language during the English lessons.

Undoubtedly, it is necessary to address pronunciation and improve the literacy process situation in the early years. It is essential to be aware of developing good reading skills in primary school. Indeed, the Ministry of Public Education in Costa Rica (MEP in Spanish) introduced the new English curriculum in 2016. Teachers started to apply for the new study program in first grade. This curriculum certainly includes phonemic awareness and phonology which are defined as "the ability of children to hear, identify..., and manipulate sounds in spoken language" (MEP, 2016, p. 44). The new program also includes the importance of technology usage in the classrooms based on the idea that new learners feel attracted to the Internet and technological tools.

This proposal is focused on the usage of technological activities that promote the use of literacy with the assistance of phonemic awareness. It seeks to promote processes that can support literacy in first grade. Moreover, this paper proposes to boost the use of technology to improve literacy skills and seeks to answer the following questions: What is phonemic awareness?, How

does technology help students in education? What are some classroom obstacles?What are the benefits of technological activities that promote phonemic awareness?, and What are some e-learning activities that can promote literacy?

Literacy Acquisition

Reading is a complex process involving cognitive, intellectual, cultural, and linguistic processes. During first grade, students in public education start their formal literacy process. As mentioned by Hoover and Gough (1990), to comprehend a text, the reader needs to be able to recognize the sounds of the words, the letters, syllables at the same time, and apply their background knowledge to make meaning and be able to pronounce and read. Also, Seidenberg (2013), stated that "the beginning reader's initial challenge is to learn how the spoken language they know relates to the written code they are learning" (p.6). There are different techniques used for literacy. According to Snow and Mathews (2016), "fundamental literacy skills can be classified as constrained skills which are readily teachable because they're finite: for example, the 26 letters of the alphabet, or a set of 20 to 30 common spelling rules" (p. 57). Also, unconstrained skills are relevant for children's long-term literacy success (e.g., critical thinking). It is relevant and necessary to mention them here because curricula, schools, teachers, and parents focus on constrained skills but little on unconstrained skills at early ages.

Moreover, Muhamad et al. (2020) mentioned that reading is related to the identification of letters or words, organizing them correctly, and including the ability to understand the meanings. In fact, the connection between phonemic awareness and reading is logical; "investigating reading strategies is thus needed; and this, the researchers' thrust, requires an intervention on grade one children's phonemic awareness to improve their reading performance" (Melesse & Enyew, 2020, p. 387). Melesse and Enyew (2020) mentioned that students in first grade need teachers' guidance on letters, vowels, words, sentences, and analysis to develop a critical understanding so that later they can construct different ideas. When teachers add phonemes to the structures, students will be able to connect sounds in words (Melesse & Enyew, 2020). Therefore, it will be possible for students to develop different skills that will allow them to read and write later.

Phonemic instruction in early reading includes the teaching of words and sounds. Children need to identify and discriminate between different sounds of oral language to achieve understanding. According to Brown (2014), learners also

need basic knowledge about the written alphabet, sounds, and relationships because these are the basis for decoding and reading comprehension skills. Brown (2014) stated the following:

> Learning to read is a developmental process. Most children follow a similar pattern and sequence of reading behaviors as they learn how to read: from appreciation for and awareness of print to phonological and phonemic awareness to phonics and word recognition. (p. 35)

Furthermore, according to Jimenez et al. (2014),

> One of the critical skills children must develop when learning to read and write in a second language is oral language proficiency. As for linguistic competence (vocabulary and oral comprehension), this is one of the critical skills that children also begin to develop when learning to read. It refers to comprehension and oral expression skills as well as knowledge and control of the oral language, including the phonological component, vocabulary, morphology, grammar and pragmatic skills. (p. 532)

In other words, students need to be able to understand, express, and analyze the oral language, sounds, grammar, expressions, and cultural contexts to communicate with other people.

According to Stanovich and Siegel (1994), another skill that directly influences the acquisition of reading and writing is phonological processing. Research has identified three main components of phonological processing: phonological awareness, phonological recoding, and phonological memory. Gillon (2018) stated that "phonology is the linguistic domain relevant for early literacy development because explicit instruction of the phoneme structures of a word can help children draw connections between the spoken word of a word and its written representation" (p. 3). Phonemes are essential during the reading-writing process because they help students identify and recognize sounds, letters, and words.

Moreover, researchers have investigated what it takes to teach reading. Spear-Swerling (2018) agreed on the importance of investing time in well-structured teaching environments that promote literacy at early ages, which will help students to be more suited to perform successfully in future challenges. Providing examples and modeling the task that students need to perform can clarify questions that students may have. Teachers need to keep in mind to provide a scaffolded mediation in which assessment is closely linked to what the student can do. "In the early stages of instruction, when students' decoding skills are relatively limited, most approaches have students read decodable texts, those constrained mostly to the specific phonics patterns that students have been taught" (Spear-Swerling, 2018, p. 3).

Technology in Language Education

Technology is here to stay, and teachers improve their classes with different activities focused on learning a new language. Kern (2015) explored the importance of technology mediation during language teaching and stated that "communication technologies are designed in particular social and cultural contexts, and their use is adapted in creative ways by individuals" (p. i) . This means that technology can be used for different needs, and in this case, literacy plays an essential role in improving various educational aspects of society. She created a connection between humans and technology that allows educators to find an action plan for their student's education (Kern, 2015). Moreover, during the pandemic context, technology became more relevant because it was the only link between students and schools. Teachers had to implement different activities in a virtual environment to promote the learning process differently.

On the other hand, human interaction is necessary. It is fundamental to consider the future professional activities that the students will have in their lives. Also, it is very important to find innovative solutions to teach foreign languages skills such as reading, listening, and speaking. Capodieci et al. (2020) pointed out creative approaches and combined activities with individualized classes that could help learners who need more time to enhance literacy and improve their skills. Educators need to be conscious and be able to control situations to visualize and understand students´perceptions, and improve the educational process.

Furthermore, the use of technology needs a purpose. When students play games or watch videos without any goal, they are not learning. Professionals in education need to be aware that having the Internet and a laptop in the classroom to do activities without the planned intention of learning can affect children's learning process. According to Belibi (2021), planning is a key to the development of educational tasks. When educators plan, they are also reflecting and analyzing the best options for students. When the educators analyze what students should learn, how to motivate them, how to make them learn, and what teaching resources to use, it allows organizing the expected learning. In other words, teachers can observe and balance their lesson plan based on their students´needs.

Nevertheless, based on Erben et al. (2009)," the way in which teachers can stimulate the language development of English Language Learners is by providing what is known as an acquisition-rich classroom" (p. 15), which makes clear the importance of options in a class. This focuses on helping teachers to integrate technology with various options to improve different skills. In addition, it exemplifies possibilities for different realities so that educators can diversify the activities and strategies in the classroom.

In a world of options, we encounter different technological activities that can be included to motivate them and improve their pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, and reading skills. It is essential to assist students with the best option to engage them in using specific activities to learn.

On the other hand, there has always been apprehension about using new technology. Based on Pazilah et al. (2019), some teachers are more traditional, others may think that students can get distracted or educators do not know how to use it . However, teachers should know that technology can be a helpful tool to practice and improve skills in specific moments. In addition, teachers need to learn how to use the e-learning activities they want or plan to use. Also, they need to test the materials before the classes and try to use them with a "student point of view." It is important to start with small activities and avoid assigning extensive homework or activities if you know the students do not have Internet or gadgets at home.

Furthermore, educators can customize and create their materials and use technology and applications to provide examples in the classrooms, such as audio files or short videos focused on the topics that need to be covered. Professionals in education need to make sure that the way they use technology highlights the content they want students to use and improve. Teachers want students to use the content to learn and not that they have something "cool" that they do not know how to use. If an activity is complicated for teachers, it will probably be more difficult for learners.

There are several activities that can be used in the classrooms to help and assist first graders in the literacy process. The first strategy that can be used is digital story-telling. Web pages for children contain reading activities in different formats, some of them can bring the reading and the images, others can be animated, or with audios. According to Mayer (2003), "learning with multimedia tools encourages students to learn in-depth, by combining words with visual images, and educational messages included in multimedia tools enhance meaningful learning" (p. 125). Teachers can work with different vocabulary and show the pronunciation as well. Web pages such as StoryLine online and Story Place provide images, subtitles, and audios to listen and see the book story. From that, teachers can work with different activities in the classroom such as vocabulary practice, pronunciation, rhyming, fluency, and intonation.

The second activity can be to sing songs and say tongue twisters. These can help students to become aware of sounds, pronunciation, and fluency. Tongue twisters are phrases or sentences that are difficult to pronounce. Tongue twisters are a great way to practice and improve pronunciation and fluency.

Third, kids are not unfamiliar with YouTube videos. YouTube is a place where children can find several songs, gameplay and movies. According to Purnamasari (2018), students mentioned that YouTube helped with pronunciation and many other skills. The students also mentioned that with the web page or mobile application they could watch videos, see images, add comments, and listen to pronunciation and grammar . Many channels on YouTube are dedicated to guiding people with the proper pronunciation of words. Watching videos with a purpose can have a huge impact on your child's English speaking.

Also, web pages such as Starfall, PBS Learning Media, and Phonics Bloom provide games and activities for children related to phonics, rhyming, matching sounds,learning to read, interactive readings with specific phonemes and its pronunciation, songs that are free and useful in the classroom and that if parents have the possibility to use them it can be a great resource for children to improve their abilities.

Students can also use the learning to read program Phonics Games for School, a tool created by Sophie Cooper, an elementary school teacher who wanted to help students with the aim to read in a motivating way. It has videos and songs to practice and reinforce content.

In addition, the web page LearningApps.org is an application created to support the processes of teaching and learning with interactive modules. Teachers are able to use and create interactive activities with purposes that can be used for their classes.

Also, The Alphablocks guide to phonics is a show from BBC that helps children to learn through phonetics. Teachers can find materials such as flashcards, videos, games, among others. Furthermore, the Usborne Publishing Foundation created a free game called Teach your Monster to Read, this resource has received several awards and it has become a very useful tool for reading. You can find games, children can create their own characters. It has many interactive games and videos that allow teachers, children, parents, and classes to apply knowledge through exciting ways to learn.

Conclusions

It is necessary to train teachers about the necessary process to make a student read accurately and fluently a foreign language. Professionals in education need to know how phoneme identification and recognition eventually make students decode and blend phonemes. Teachers can also learn that this process develops reading competence, which eventually and under other processes can help students comprehend a text.

Another recommendation would be to share with teachers the names and examples of activities linked to the techniques that help students become competent readers. In addition, it is necessary to create web pages dedicated to specific literacy purposes and specific countries so that teachers can contextualize situations with the help of different activities.

Also, teachers need to know that they can create original material on the web in different web pages such as Genially, Wordwall, among others. These web pages allow the creation of interactive material and animated educational content. In addition, the material will be original, meaningful and personalized for learners. Professionals in education can have the opportunity to teach students to use these websites so that they can create their own projects.

Teachers need to diagnose students more regularly and apply sound discrimination on time to recognize students' capacity to produce the phonemes studied previously to avoid a significant gap. Some students can identify sounds but cannot decode and blend them.

Finally, educators should pay attention to the phonemes and words proposed by the study program they must follow in schools. However, they also need to introduce the didactic sequence techniques to enrich the learner process.

In conclusion, the development of technological competences can be useful in the classrooms. However, previous training is necessary for teachers to develop original materials and to look on the web for different options based on the plan objectives. Teachers can be able to offer different options in the class so that students can also learn about different games or platforms that they can use at home.

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Challenges and Possible Solutions for English Teaching and Learning in the Province of Guanacaste, Costa Rica

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Abstract

This essay explores and presents challenges and possible solutions associated with English teaching and learning in Guanacaste, Costa Rica. It covers the reality of public bilingual education in Guanacaste, single-teacher schools, and the rural university context. The proposed solutions are contextualizing the educational ambiance, communication between the school and the parents, alliances between the public and private sectors, strategies to handle negative emotional factors and to promote motivation among students.

Keywords: bilingual education, challenges, Guanacaste, rural, solutions, vulnerability

Introduction

Most Costa Rican rural places maintain tourism as their principal economic activity, meaning that in these places, English learning is a must to have better opportunities and benefits for the future. Guanacaste is the main example of this because of its amazing attractions, wildlife, culture and beaches. From being a receptionist to being a business administrator, mastering English is essential to apply for a job. However, the reality that people face while learning this language there is not adequate at all.

The main institution for education in the Pura Vida country is called *Ministerio de Educacion Publica*[2] (MEP). It is supposed to provide equal opportunities for Costa Rican students, the same resources and the same content. Nevertheless, the gap for those who live in the metropolitan area is visible if we compare it with the pupils from rural areas. Being originally from Guanacaste, I noticed the gap once I moved to an urban place, around four years ago. I perceived that young adults from the metropolitan area had more

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knowledge, and they were able to keep a conversation in English, while people the same age from villages were learning the simple present tense. How is that possible if we have the same education system?

First, educators who work at single-teacher schools have few learners per level. Each teacher is in charge of different subject matters and deals with individuals who might have various disabilities. The same instructor teaches all the levels and sometimes he or she must be in charge of the library, the dining room and the cleaning for the whole school. Cartín (2018) indicated that this type of elementary school originated in 1960. These schools have less than 30 students and are helpful for the population who live in villages. In addition, most of these institutions do not have English in their curricula.

Apart from this, the pupils who live in villages or rural areas have less favorable circumstances. Herrera (2015) established that rural areas are exposed to poverty, exclusion and inequality, and the fact that people who live in the city have more opportunities and access to goods and services. In rural areas, we do not have adequate technological equipment; we do not have intercultural interchanges with foreigners to train our ears with different accents, and we do not have the ideal resources to teach our students.

Guanacaste is one of the hottest provinces in Costa Rica. A class at one o'clock is literally hell. If that annoys educators, imagine how hard paying attention gets for the children and youngsters! Air conditioning is a meaningful asset in *Guanacastecan* classrooms; I remember that one of my teachers used to bring us under a huge tree because it was not possible to stay in the classroom. Moreover, it is difficult to adapt the class in an appealing way because schools do not provide different resources to the teacher, just some chairs and a board.

The main concern is when trainees from villages or small towns start taking English courses at the university. Most of them do not know how to conjugate the verb to be, and they get disappointed with the level that the class demands, or they start comparing themselves with other classmates. For this reason, some of them believe that the eleven or twelve years spent in both primary school and high school were in vain. Mora (2016) stated that most of the students who come from rural areas face significant challenges related to emotional factors once they register at the university. Thus, this essay intends to show the main challenges of English teaching and learning in Guanacaste, Costa Rica and possible solutions to these, such as strategies to develop a meaningful learning process for *Guanacastecan* population, the importance of contextualization, communication between the school and the parents, how the private sector may support public schools and the way the government should help the rural education system.

Bilingual Job Opportunities in Guanacaste

Guanacaste is one of the provinces which provides many kinds of jobs related to the use of the English language. From call centers to Real estate, it offers bilingual occupations, and, in some way, some wealth is concentrated in this region. The irony is that most *Guanacastecans* are unemployed. Of course, the lack of jobs affects all the provinces in Costa Rica; however, the main requirement for *Guanacastecans* to get a job is to speak English.

One of the most recent examples is the establishment of the company Sykes in Liberia, Guanacaste. They used to hold massive job fairs approximately every 5 months in which they applied English certification tests such as the Business English Language (Test BELT). Last year, *Guanacastecans* had the opportunity to take an online test about grammar, reading and listening from home, or they went to the laboratories at the *Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje* (INA)[1] to take the test. The individuals who got a B1, B1+, B2 or B2+ also took a speaking test as a requirement to request a job position. However, last year, the company's director stated the following: "we have 500 positions. But do we have 500 people who speak a high level of English, with a high school diploma or other technical proficiency who are looking for a job? I don't know" (Cisneros, 2021, para. 3). Scenarios such as these are common even for people who have a university major.

Private and Public Bilingual Education in Guanacaste

Regarding what was described above, it seems that the population in this rural province has not received a bilingual education. However, in the zone, there are public and private educational institutes. Some private institutions such as La Paz Community School are pursued by wealthy foreigners, first because Costa Rica is an ideal destination and second because the institution "reflects the ideals that parents are craving for their kids as well as themselves" (Porter, 2019, p. 2). This school was founded in 2007; it is located in Brasilito and teaches preschool to 12th grade. Their philosophy covers experiential learning and critical thinking, and the learners are considered problem solvers. According to the prior data, Porter stated that

> [i]n less than a decade, La Paz has managed to receive national recognition from the Costa Rican presidency, attained Costa Rica and International Baccalaureate (IB) accreditation, and has become an academic model visited by educators from the United States and around the globe. (2019, p. 5)

1. Costa Rican public institution that focuses on technical education

On the other hand, public institutions belong to MEP which is the main entity in charge of education in Costa Rica. MEP offers specific English programs for kindergarten, primary school and high school, meaning that *Guanacastecan* individuals start taking English classes when they are 6 years old. They take more than three lessons per week; some high schools such as the technical ones offer academic and conversational English courses. For conversational English, the learners take around five lessons per week. In addition, the teachers who work there have licentiate and/or master's degrees. Apart from that, the institution asks for a C1 level to hire them. By this, I mean that the educators are well prepared to teach English as a foreign language to the pupils. Even so, after considering that *Guanacastecans* have taken English classes since their youth, they are not able to speak English, and foreigners prefer to pay expensive fees to the private system instead of the public system which is free.

The first problem is the lack of resources that public learning centers have. Students in Guanacaste do not have adequate spaces to learn English, starting from the fact that there are more than fifteen learners in a classroom, it does not allow the teacher to provide enough attention to each pupil. Sometimes centers do not have English laboratories or classrooms with basic equipment, such as desks, chairs, markers, whiteboard erasers, speakers, projectors, and books. Some institutions have a library; however, they do not even have books. According to a research from *Estado de la Nación*[1] (2021), from nineteen to twenty-four libraries mentioned in the study count on less than a book per student in the province of Guanacaste. The consequences of not having enough books in the libraries represent a limitation to develop specific tasks in the classroom related to literature.

Another resource which is not tangible but vital in this era is the Internet, especially a Wi-Fi connection. Wi-Fi has become a useful resource for instructors in order to implement online activities for their virtual or face-to-face lessons. Students may use Wi-Fi for accessing online dictionaries which are useful for foreign language classes. Nevertheless, for regional supervisions in rural areas such as Sulá, Peninsular, Grande de Térraba, Aguirre, Santa Cruz, Nicoya, Coto, Cañas, Limón, Turrialba, Norte-Norte and Puriscal, there are 751 teachers without an Internet connection (Estado de la Nación, 2021).

Regarding the fact that most people have digital devices and know how to use social media, we can infer that students may have a stable Internet connection at home. Guanacaste does seem to show an increase in the percentage of homes with Internet access between 2016 and 2019. In 2019,

1. Costa Rican institution in charge of conducting participatory research to promote sustainable human development

82.5% of households had Internet access (Sanabria, 2020, para. 2). Once the pandemic started, the alternative for not stopping the learning process was to teach through online classes. Virtual classes began, and the trouble became evident for the MEP population and higher education since most *Guanacastecans* have Internet issues. At least, 41.7% of the learners get connected from postpaid mobile data, while 13.9% use prepaid mobile data, which shows discouraging digital gaps in respect to the reality that students live (Chanto & Loáiciga, 2021).

Single-Teacher Schools in *Guanacastecan* Villages

Apart from the limited access to the Internet, villages in Guanacaste also have schools in which just one teacher is in charge of all the subjects and of teaching all the levels. These learning centers are called single-teacher schools; they have less than thirty children and are linked to the public education system that Costa Rica has. In addition, during 2012 and 2016, the number of single-teacher schools grew according to the total of I and II cycle public institutions; in 2012, 36.2% of schools were single-teacher schools, meanwhile in 2016, these schools represented 39.5% of the public schools over the country (Cartín, 2018).

The aforementioned shows the fact that this kind of school has become more widespread and common. Day by day, we realize that the rural area population wants to grow, and parents go the extra mile to keep their children studying. Most parents in these areas are farmers and peasants. For this reason, more than 50% of public institutes located in the school districts from Nicoya, Grande de Térraba, Puriscal, Cañas, Peninsular, Los Santos, Turrialba and Aguirre are single-teacher schools (Cartín, 2018).

Moreover, these institutions maintain subject matters such as Mathematics, Social Studies, Spanish and Science. Language classes have been implemented recently, and the only foreign language that single-teacher schools teach is English. However, this foreign language is taught in less than one fourth of single-teacher schools. By this, I mean that not all the pupils from these centers have the opportunity to learn a foreign language such as English, which is a requirement for most jobs in Costa Rica. The situation about English learning is not the only concerning issue; for these schools, social interaction has become problematic. Violence cases among students inside of these institutes are superior to those which are registered in mainstream public schools (Cartin, 2018), and the teachers who work in these institutions have to deal with this frequently.

Other social problems that pupils from rural areas are exposed to are drugs, alcohol and a low income per household. It is very common to hear that high school students started to work since they needed to pay for their studies.

It may be rumored that a someone dropped out of school to work, postponing her or his studies. Some other finish high school and put off going college in order to start working; however, Cisneros (2021) stated that

> [i]n Guanacaste, we have a population of more than 400,000 people. Thirty percent of those people are between the ages of 16 and 35. At least half of those people, we are talking about more than 100,000, have completed high school. And of those, more than 50,000 people with high school completed, many are young people who are unemployed. (para. 12)

Guanacastecan Rural University Context

For those who get a high school diploma and decide to start a major at the university to pursue their dream to become professionals, the reality they find is more complicated than they thought. Most freshmen realize that the knowledge they gained in high school cannot be compared with the content they study at college, especially, with English courses. At Universidad Nacional, Chorotega Branch, this is a common situation for Systems Engineering and Commerce learners. Furthermore, some of them continue their majors with success, yet they get stalled in the complementary English courses and spend more years to graduate, meanwhile other less constant students see their future truncated because of an inflexible system that ignores the emotional part of their learners (Mora, 2016).

The emotional factor plays a vital role in the learning process. If individuals do not feel good, they will not have a satisfactory performance. The interference of emotional factors is a common problem, especially in university classrooms. Speaking in front of an audience may represent an emotional challenge as in oral presentations or production activities. Mora (2016, p. 60) stated that "[a] significant part of the problem derives from affective factors such as: anxiety, lack of motivation, student's attitude, professor-student and student-student interaction, poor emotional stimuli, evaluation and methodology".

Another situation that affects the emotional part of undergraduates is the treatment they receive from some professors. I agree with the fact that individuals should not be spoiled, but pupils are more than an ID number at college; they are human beings, and ridiculing them is not fair. On the contrary, instructors should motivate the students and encourage them to continue studying.

Besides, a learner may feel a roller-coaster of emotions because the rest of the students may make fun of them due to his or her basic level, or some classmates may not include someone because they consider him or her "silly."

The participants may feel excluded by some classmates when teamwork assignments come up; it is noticeable that some individuals tend to keep out the students who they identify as being less knowledgeable about something. I have experienced this, and it is not a nice feeling, especially if you are doing your best; that makes you feel less capable. This is a common situation for beginners, and for people from rural areas who did not have the knowledge they needed from high school, being rejected by classmates can affect their performance and even their motivation. A motivated learner can progress more effectively towards the adequate use of the language; his or her intrinsic motivation and his or her emotional status would be strongly overshadowed by external situations such as judgments from classmates (Mora, 2016).

It is important to consider that universities in Costa Rica have central campuses in the metropolitan area and maintain branches in rural areas. This applies to both public and private universities, yet focusing on public universities, Universidad Nacional (UNA) has seven branches in rural areas, Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) has six branches in rural areas, Universidad Técnica Nacional (UTN) has four branches in rural areas, Tecnológico de Costa Rica (TEC) has two branches in rural areas and Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED) has thirty-two branches in rural areas. The Estado de la Nación stated that there is evidence that supports that failure is higher in branches out of the central valley; at UCR, the phenomenon is mostly present in the Pacific, Caribbean, Athlantic and Southern branches. At UNED, the institutional average is exceeded by the branches in Talamanca (58%), Los Chiles, Limón, Cañas, Liberia, Santa Cruz and Nicoya with a failure rate varying between 40.1% and 42.8% (2021). The last four branches are located in Guanacaste.

Furthermore, this was noticeable when the pandemic started, and classes were taken virtually. Most of the freshmen dropped out of their majors in the middle or at the end of the first year. It was common for participants to have a broken voice, a frozen image or a problem with a video chat platform which tends to leave them out of synchronous sessions. Another circumstance was having to travel to relatives' or neighbors' houses for long distances because they did not have access to a stable connection. The Internet connection for most of the students who live in villages was a chaos; some of them did not even have an adequate device to take classes or do assignments.

To elaborate on the disadvantages for this kind of class, I can mention the use our students make of technology. Due to the fact that we live in a technological era, it is easier for the pupils to use devices, apps, and other technological resources. In general, 68.7% of the student body indicate that they

understand just enough according to the level of knowledge of the technological instruments. However, there is always scarcity of digital tools (Chanto & Loáciga, 2021), and we may find more disadvantages that are not related just to Internet connection failures. The main one is the distraction in the houses during class time, which causes a low learning performance. Apart from this, some students believe that because they are taking a virtual class, their responsibility is less important. In my experience, some pupils have told me that they drive in class time, run errands or even go to work; the other day, a student turned on her webcam, and she was straightening her hair in class; some of them do not take virtual learning seriously.

Another disadvantage is the lack of digital skills by most teachers. The implementation of platforms for teaching such as Zoom and Google Meet was the pillar to give classes during the pandemic, especially for universities. Teaching online goes beyond those platforms; there are several tools that instructors may add to their classes for different activities with specific purposes. Before, during and after the pandemic, some instructors have been afraid of technology and avoided it. It is vital to train our instructors for the usage of platforms and apps. Chanto and Loáiciga (2021) stated that Universidad Nacional must expand the resources to innovate the teaching and learning process and guarantee the progress of the curriculum in which professors should become literate in ICT management. Some universities such as Universidad Técnica Nacional promote training related to educational technology. This year, there was a virtual Expo week that contained free presentations and workshops about some apps and virtual methodologies such as collaborative learning. Because of the schedules, it was challenging for most educators to attend a vital and free access event such as this.

Possible Solutions for the Improvement of English Teaching and Learning in Guanacaste

Strategies to Handle Negative Emotional Factors and to Promote Motivation among Students

To face low motivation, low confidence and anxiety in the classroom, the teacher may look for different strategies to implement. It is common for pupils to feel anxious when they are in charge of oral presentations, role plays or impromptu talks. The mask is a strategy for language trainees to use during or after the presentation of a topic, when the audience asks questions about it. To wear a mask lets the pupil hide in some way, so he or she will feel less nervous. This strategy was applied at Universidad Nacional Chorotega Branch for English major learners; Dover (2011) stated that "during the presentation they wear the

mask and they felt more relax, they were not worried because if they were a little lost during the presentation their classmates could not notice them worried because they could not see their face" (p. 184).

Moreover, individuals may feel nervous because they should keep a straight posture while speaking. For this reason, a strategy called *comfortable chair* should be implemented for students to be seated while they give their speech. The students can be focused on their speech without feeling worried about their posture mainly. Some prefer to walk around the class, however; "if they are seated it is not necessary to do that, which at the end helps to the concentration during the activity" (Dover, 2011, p. 184).

Another strategy that may be implemented in the classroom is the top banana. It may promote motivation between the pupils to do their best during the course; it shows their monthly improvement. The aim is to clarify to the participants the purpose of this plan at the beginning of the course and explain that each month, a short ceremony will be developed among the class, the professor and the coordinator of the major; an accolade will be given to a distinguished student. "That will keep them motivated and with a goal of getting it as many times as possible, and this will improve their learning and acquisition process, as well" (Dover, 2011, p. 185). The dynamic may be modified for the instructor in charge; it can be done every two months or at the end of the cycle or trimester. If we teach in high school, the principal should be included in the ceremony.

Contextualizing the Educational Ambiance

To promote motivation and innovation, the teacher may create resources according to the reality that the students face. Most of the time, the resources we manage from our curricula are not adapted to our country or our culture. Generally, the activities, pictures and listening exercises we have as a complement for our classes are associated with North America and Europe because their native language is our target language. The lack of online or tangible materials adjusted to our students' context may create boredom and disinterest. "The type of resources used in online teaching do not always comply with the learner's cultural background and individual interests, which leads to lack of motivation towards the acquisition and practice of the language" (Mojica, 2021, p. 2). As a solution, we can think outside the box by creating online resources for our students without investing money if the institution we work for has computers, headphones or speakers and a stable Internet connection.

Educators have the possibility to use and to implement free online platforms such as Google Classroom, Strikingly or Weebly as Mojica (2021) did. Mojica (2021) created a website for 8th English students from *Liceo Experimental*

Bilingue de Santa Cruz called "Mastering the Beast," and it was focused on listening skills. The graphic design looked appealing for the pupils, and it included pictures, vocabulary, readings and activities related to the Guanacastecan culture. Mojica (2021) stated that "[t]hrough the visualization of the province, its identity, and people; the language functions developed in the learners [would] be related to Guanacaste's uniqueness" (p. 11).

Something that caught my attention was the name of the website and its logo, which is a bull's face; both are representative of Santa Cruz's canton. Fiestas Típicas of Santa Cruz are a strong pillar of Santa Cruz's traditions, and they are popular in Costa Rica as well. In the fiestas, there are bull riders who practice mastering the beast and take a risk. This is a comparison of the learning process that needs risk taking and practice. Regarding this metaphor, Mojica (2021) established the following:

> Students, like bull riders, need to work on methodologies that can help them "hold on the language" as much time as possible, and the ultimate understanding of the message is the rewarding experience that motivates learners, as much as mastering the beast encourages *Guanacastecos*. (p. 6)

Teachers in Guanacaste must be updated about technological innovative education; this is vital for the learning process in a technological era. During the recent viral event, a common problem was the lack of technological skills that instructors had during the pandemic. Mojica (2021) stated that "it was urgent for teachers to have taken over online environments and virtual education, most of them without prior experience in online teaching and not even enough resources or connection in some locations of the country" (p. 4). Virtual classes during the pandemic represented a hard stage for the educators, particularly for the ones who are not accustomed to deal with technology very often.

To attend seminars or conferences may be complicated for our work schedules; but if we have a stable Internet connection we are able to take online training even for free. On a different note, there are various websites offering training or courses about online education focused on English as a foreign language; one of them is Coursera. Coursera is a platform in which you register, look for courses of your interests and learn in an asynchronous way. If the applicant does not have money, he or she may ask for a scholarship and once he or she completes the course or training, the candidate will get a diploma of the program that was finished. It is important to mention that Coursera works with worldwide universities; I have taken courses there, and it was quite a meaningful experience.

Believe it or not, virtual platforms included in our planning have a meaningful impact on our students; they can be executed in face-to-face classes which enriches the environment, especially now that we are back in the classrooms. To apply ICTs in the pedagogical development as a virtualization tool, in general terms, looks for achieving objectives such as optimizing teaching and as a result and obtaining high and stable academic benefit of the learner; this takes into consideration that, as with every tool, we must be updated in terms of the implementation of ICTs, or we may face the opposite of the objectives already mentioned (Chanto & Loáiciga, 2021).

Materials and resources are not the only alternative to be contextualized; the curriculum should be as well. Again, to contextualize instruction is vital for the pupils' motivation and the awareness of skills for life in general. MEP and university branches should offer to the population a curriculum that promotes knowledge to face the social factors that disturb the learners' reality. A curriculum that really has an impact that is not only educational but also social to be useful for the work area and life (Rugama, 2017).

Communication Between the School and the Parents

Another solution to consider for rural areas' schools is communication. In general, the only contact that the school has is a meeting to inform about the children and teenagers' performance three times per year. However, to offer workshops for parents may be vital to promote skills to the relatives and to improve the communication between the institution and the families. I am pretty sure that teachers are busy planning lessons and helping students; still, counselors, psychologists and the English coordinators or supervisors may develop and supervise these kinds of activities.

The Role of Public and Private Sectors in the Improvement of English Teaching and Learning in Guanacaste

The private sector may be part of the improvement of educational institutions, especially with tangible resources and infrastructure. Donations can be asked to private companies by Juntas Directivas which are the bodies of directives from MEP in charge of managing each school's assets. If a donation is not possible, actions in return from the institution should be done. For example, we can have agreements with environmental foundations; they may donate resources while the participants help to plant trees or to give environmental lectures. In Osa, there was a similar project related to environmental awareness;

according to Selby et al. (2020), "[a]fter participating in the program, the students describe environmental leadership as requiring persistence, forethought, and a willingness to care for both the environment and community" (p. 1594).

From conditions to curricula, the main solutions must come from the government. There must be encouragement towards a political and responsible participation in elections of citizens who are experts in education, so the candidates must know and understand the needs in rural areas (Rugama, 2017). If laws and orders are taken by individuals who are ignorant of the educational panorama, they just promote fallacies. We may come up with real politics by leaving behind the interests of few individuals and creating actionable proposals. It is vital to ask for permanent consultations with educators in rural learning centers, and research may result in benefits for these areas (Rugama, 2017).

Conclusions

To implement the English language in Guanacaste is more than a requirement; it is basically an obligation to get a job in this place. However, Guanacaste is one of the most heavily affected provinces in Costa Rica regarding the English teaching and learning process. That includes aspects such as a lack of conditions, resources, equipment, motivation, contextualization, Internet connection, motivation, adequate use of technology from educators and absence of language classes as it happens in most single-teacher schools.

We may have possible solutions such as implementing strategies in the classroom like the mask, comfortable chair and top banana to decrease negative emotional factors from our students. We may try to contextualize the resources to implement in class by taking into consideration the learners' needs and their social background. Besides, communication is a relevant aspect between the school and the parents, especially with workshops or activities to provide specific skills to support children. Sometimes it is complex to coordinate assistance from our public system, so asking for donations or alliances with private organizations may help. In an ideal world, we should get everything we need from the government, yet we will not find alternatives until the mindset regarding politics changes from the elected ministers starting with the fact that they must be well prepared and aware of the education system's reality to issue rules and decrees.

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The Use of the Dialogic Teaching Approach to Promote Communicative Competencies with a Group of Intermediate English Adult Students

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Abstract

This essay intends to explore how the use of the Dialogic Teaching Approach enables my intermediate English adult students to acquire communicative competencies in a globalized society. Many Costa Ricans have been moved to learn a foreign language for monetary reasons; however, their intentions should go beyond that. Through dialogue, students can holistically learn communicative competencies to interact as social agents in different globalized communities. They are invited to embrace diversity, debate their personal conflicts, find solutions, and overall, create a better world. I conclude that, through dialectical methods, students can find a democratic space to decolonize the English language from globalization, make their voices heard, and make meaning in their daily life activities.

Keywords: dialogic teaching, communicative competencies, globalization of the English language, adult teaching

Introduction

As humans, we use language every day to communicate. We can express our feelings, emotions, and desires. Compared to other species, we have developed large linguistic codes to convey meanings. We have established unique phonetic sounds, morphosyntactic structures, and diverse representations of sounds and symbols to express ourselves. Not only does learning a language enable us to transmit knowledge, culture, and customs, but it is also a valuable tool to learn about others and spread ideas quickly. At the end of the day, we use it daily to go to church, work, school, the supermarket, and so on.

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Language is necessary to build relationships and create a sense of community. However, Freire (1995) also considered that language goes beyond being a simple instrument of communication. He thinks it is not neutral, and it is also a way to impose a set of ideologies. It shapes identity and culture. As an English language facilitator, I have to be aware of the power of language and how it assists us in better understanding the way we behave and think. With words, we can define ourselves, establish limits, get others to agree with us, show acts of love and hope, or just replicate what the majorities believe is true.

Put it differently, communication has a tremendous influence on our personal relationships, social development, and political spheres. According to Thabit and Pawar (2018), communicative competencies (CC) comprise the ability to produce utterances using appropriate language conventions, cultural references, non-verbal signs, fluent discourses, and strategic ways to persuade the target audience. We use different language aspects congruently to convey a message or to socialize with others. Some of them are tone of voice, the structure of the message, fluency, coherence, context, turn-taking, sentence structures, and discourse intentions, among several others.

With this being said, I have found it is not simple to promote dialogue and fair relationships inside the classroom. Not only do CC entail more preparation and adequate resources, but they also require a mindset change within the whole population. Teachers should promote abilities that relate to creativity, cooperation, social relationships, semantics, pragmatics, and critical thinking, just to name a few. As active agents, my students should be able to use the language to criticize the reality in which they operate, build knowledge with their peers, and overall build a better place to live in. Social change is not an issue of street demonstration, but an act of intellectual activism. From this perspective, this essay intends to reflect on how Dialogic Teaching Approach (DTA) encourages Intermediate English adult students to enhance their English CC and cultural understanding in a globalized society.

English Learning and Teaching in Costa Rica

Costa Rican teachers have been adapting to constant changes in learning approaches, population mindsets, and emerging class methodologies since a couple of decades ago. According to Sevilla (2017), educators have to be ready to face any unpredictable struggles. With autoethnographic research, he narrated some incidents with which teachers have to deal every day. Those exemplify how teachers have to make witty decisions to prepare their students to acquire communicative skills, face unpredictable emotional reactions from the class

members, and adapt to the current social complexities. Teachers have to fight with the system and do their best to guarantee the well-being of all. They cannot isolate themselves from the public spheres and global issues.

In the last decades, economic and political forces have also pushed the population to communicate in bilingual job environments. Fallas et al. (2016) explained how globalization and corporate-oriented ideologies have influenced language learning in Costa Rica: "English has no official status but [in Costa Rica] it is largely used as a foreign language" (p. 157). After examining language programs, analyzing advertisements, reviewing English books, and reporting 30 Costa Rican University students' opinions, they mentioned how the highly capitalist economy has pushed individuals to learn English as an almost-mandatory option to get a job and to comply with global business demands. Therefore, it is critical to counteract the monetary and career-based motives. Teachers have to advocate more democratic spaces, where both teachers and learners can debate critiques towards dominant discourses.

Sevilla (2017) and Fallas et al. (2016) described how teachers struggle to cater for language socialization developments according to the students' contexts and interests. I consider it is necessary to experiment with other reasons to learn a language rather than monetary motives. My students' voices should be listened to in order to transform their reality and democratize their reasons to learn a language. Their internal moves should define their own personal development and social well-being. It has to go beyond the capitalization forces and repercussions.

Globalization, Technology, and Communication

Globalization has made the society in which we all live evolve. It has changed the way we behave, consume, think, interact, and even communicate with others. Such phenomenon has transformed our living conditions by interconnecting us in the political, cultural, and environmental spheres. Steger (2013) defined globalization as "the expansion and the stretching of social relations, activities, and interdependencies" (p. 9). It also "involves the intensification and acceleration of social exchanges and activities" (p. 11). Globalization has shifted our mindsets.

Nowadays, we rely on digital devices, mostly smartphones, and computers. Steger (2013) commented that "the Internet relays distant information in mere seconds, and satellites provide consumers with real-time pictures of remote events" (p. 11). The merger of globalization and the Information and Technology (IT) revolution has made us hyper-connected and

interdependent. As social beings, we should now have the tools to become more interdependent, collaborate with others, and be part of global events. Such rapid adaptations are evident in the educational system and our daily life activities as well.

My students, for instance, are connected with their colleagues and friends through their computers or smartphones. They are exposed to different digital forms through the Internet and social networks. They communicate with their coworkers through emails, collaborate through Google Drive or Outlook, find new friends on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, buy online through Amazon, get some entertainment through Disney or Netflix, and search for information on Google or YouTube. With this merger, students have been obliged to get certain skills that were irrelevant in the past but are more predominant now. Some of them are English language and communicative skills.

Therefore, English language teachers have been forced to teach a specific set of skills alongside the language. We should be at the forefront of enhancing their ability to survive with the rapid-constant social developments. According to my experience as a teacher and English user, I have found the need to use IT and the foreign language as means to remove cultural barriers, break boundaries of space and time, and increase economic opportunities. It is crucial to understand how languages are interacting and the impact that they have on their speakers.

It is not a secret that globalization has increased the spread and interconnectedness of languages, in particular English. It has become universal. Gamboa and Rodríguez (2021) suggested that English is a language of business, commerce, and entertainment in Costa Rica. It is now used in different fields such as movies, literature, arts, science, and tourism, among other social and political environments. It also plays a critical role in the accessibility to education and job opportunities.

Globalization of the English Language

English is a Lingua Franca. Several people around the globe speak it as a first, second, or foreign language. It has become one of the most predominant means to interact between cultures and communities that are even non-native speakers of it. As was aforementioned, it is evident that some underdeveloped countries, such as Costa Rica, have to acquire a foreign language to adapt to economic, academic, and political demands. The English language has become a vehicle of cultural and linguistic domination. Such expansion has also endangered the global linguistic diversity because some languages and dialects are disappearing.

As an English teacher and learner living in an undeveloped country, I feel that it is part of linguistic imperialism. According to Canagarajah and Ben-Said (2011), "linguistic imperialism refers to the imposition of a language on other languages and communities" (p. 338). Such a theoretical construct denotes why some languages are more important and used than others. The global expansion of English is the primary example of imperialism. Different ideologies, assumptions, and values are expressed through discourses, idioms, and phrases. Imposing one language over another one is a way of segregating a culture and a community identity.

Such a spread has also challenged the traditional normative of language teaching, and it has become difficult to define English. According to Kubota (2012), there are infinitive "world Englishes," dialects, and identities to explore. Even though some have wanted to impose a specific accent and structures, it is not easy to find a common ground, and instructors end up choosing one over the other. In some cases, the selection has been based on proximity or majority, segregating other users who have different dialects. Some of them are also more politically prominent than others, mainly when teaching. The relationship of power decides which one is taught. For example, many schools teach New York's or London's dialects, instead of Cockney or Black-Vernacular dialects.

There is even an assumption that English native speakers are better teachers than those who are not. According to Fallas (2018), native speakerism ideas are even predominant in Costa Rican universities: "English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs are often filled with practices and discourses that idealize native speakers of English and construct them as the models to follow" (p. 19). According to this belief, the best teachers are native speakers. The argument is that they have better pronunciation, cultural understanding, and lexicon. However, that ignores the variety of "Englishes" and its hybridity as a result of the spread of languages and mixtures of identities. It also ignores their experience as teachers and EFL learners.

Due to the linguistic imperialism and globalization forces, it seems inevitable for some people to prefer to forget their own language and be willing to acquire the culture and discourses of a powerful group. However, as a teacher, I can make small ruptures. I can identify and explore the local ideologies and demands of each group, as well as understand the role of power that language and education play inside the classroom. I can take a critical position toward the language and methodologies that we use to teach. I feel the need to figure out ways to use my hidden curriculum. Maybe I cannot change the fact that English has become a Lingua Franca and that we need to learn English to get a job or even to publish an academic article, but I can foster critical thinking, reasoning, and autonomy in my students.

With this said, I should teach according to my students' needs and interests. Most of them want to learn the language to communicate with others, negotiate meanings, and solve problems together in different bilingual environments. In their bilingual job places, they might interact with people from different nations. They also need to have a bigger panorama. Teaching only American culture excludes the other countries and people who also speak English. Then, we need critical and dialogic education to make our students aware of their own context and conflicts, according to their age, language proficiency, and personal interests.

Adult Language Learners

Regardless of age, humans are in a constant learning process. We all have the ability to create mechanisms to adapt to new environments any time we get in contact with something that is unfamiliar. From the day that we are born, we have the capacity to acquire new information, values, behaviors, and skills. Such a process continues until the day that we die because of ongoing experiences and interactions among different people and contexts.

However, adults learn differently from children and teenagers. Although it is impossible to generalize, I have realized that adults are more responsible, autonomous, and goal oriented. It means that they are intrinsically moved. According to Cozma (2015), "[they usually] have a sound reason why they are studying, and that reason will be their primary motivation" (p. 1210). My students usually perceive education as a way to change their reality and improve their self-image, get better opportunities, or increase their chances to change job positions.

When acquiring a FL, most of my students have an intrinsic motive. I am aware that most of them are studying English because they perceive the language as an opportunity to get a better job position, travel, or communicate fluently with their colleagues and friends. Therefore, my role as a teacher is to facilitate the required tools that enable them to reach their goals. I let them hold themselves accountable for their learning process, make their own decisions to succeed, and take responsibility for their own achievements or failures.

Perhaps, such an approach and their age have made them more motivated, self-directed, and collaborative. In most cases, they are mature, and they are aware that they need to put some effort into acquiring the language. They self-assess their process and reflect on what else they can do to improve. For this reason, according to Moore (2010), "adults need to know why they need

to learn something before undertaking to learn" (p. 3). As an example, I have noticed that my pupils prefer to measure their success based on their performance rather than theory. They prefer instruction that can be practically applied and utilized in their current daily activities.

When teaching, I also consider their aptitudes. There is also an argument that aging slows down the learning process. Borg (2020) suggested that adults have more challenges memorizing information and recognizing speech sounds. It is necessary for them to "reflect on the language being learned and make extensive use of their knowledge of the language rules, since they have a greater ability for abstraction and systematization, when compared to younger learners" (Borg, 2020, p. 59). I have noticed that they are excellent critical thinkers. They memorize better when they compare and differentiate their L1 from their FL.

Furthermore, there is an outgoing discussion on Lenneberg's Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). Slabakova (2013) explained that language may be like any other neurological development process and that there is a window period in which people have more chances to get a native-like level of proficiency. It is argued that it becomes more challenging for the brain to acquire a language after puberty. After any experience, children can bring their development to normal ranges. However, neurophysiological mechanisms are suppressed when the brain ages, preventing users from the ultimate language attainment goals. It usually affects pronunciation and speaking abilities.

Despite the brain plasticity loss, my pupils seem to be more cognitively flexible. They can offer higher-level thinking activities and engage with abstract thoughts. They have lots of experience and existing frameworks that are concrete to them. As Cozma (2015) suggested, "adults come into the English classroom with a rich range of experiences – regarding not only learning, but also life in general" (p. 1213). They are able to link previous experiences with new ones, letting them create more solid concepts and mental connections.

All of these considered, I should guarantee their needs are covered according to their age, preferences, backgrounds, and aptitudes. Even though adults may have language struggles, they can overcome them if they are motivated and hold accountability for their learning process. My pupils tend to have strong critical thinking skills, and they can create mental connections with previous experiences. Their self-determination and former backgrounds can assist them in succeeding if I also consider their proficiency level.

Intermediate English as a Foreign Language Students

I find it personally challenging to define a proficiency level because several skills and abilities are not included in tests or certain guidelines. Most of my students have had several teachers and exposure to Anglo-Saxon culture.

There is no specific pattern to determine who is a beginner, intermediate, or advanced. However, according to my experience, I can recognize intermediate language users because they can freely communicate in conversations and texts, making common mistakes. Intermediate English speakers are capable of talking about themselves, describing places and people, narrating events, elaborating opinions on familiar topics, expressing wishes, asking questions, and some other language functions. According to the Council of Europe (2020), similar characteristics belong to the B1 or B2 performance levels. They are described as follows:

> • B1 users are able to comprehend the main points of written and spoken texts in standard language. They "can collaborate with people from other backgrounds, showing interest and empathy by asking and answering simple questions, formulating and responding to suggestions, asking whether people agree, and proposing alternative approaches" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 92). Also, B1 users can interact fluently with topics that are familiar such as study, work or leisure. They "can convey the main points made in long texts expressed in uncomplicated language on topics of personal interest, provided they can check the meaning of certain expressions" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 92). They are able to make connections, describe ambitions, and provide explanations and reasons to support their personal opinions.
> • B2 speakers have more advanced proficiency, and they are more independent than the previous level. They "can establish a supportive environment for sharing ideas and facilitate discussion of delicate issues, showing appreciation of different perspectives, encouraging people to explore issues and adjusting sensitively the way they express things" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 92). Even though the users are not advanced, they are able to understand and be understood across several environments and situations. They "can convey the main content of well-structured but long and propositionally complex texts on subjects within their fields of professional, academic and personal interest" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 92). They can build on others' ideas, participate in meetings, and debate topics of their interest.

With this said, intermediate students should be exposed to topics that let them discuss their personal incidents, argue about familiar issues, and debate their opinions. To expand their input, I naturally immerse them in the language,

having them watch videos and read articles online. I can guide them to identify advanced grammatical rules, unfamiliar lexical items, and pronunciation patterns. When tutoring them, I consider all the previous knowledge that they have. To promote CC, I expose them to different contexts and environments.

Communicative Competence

During the last decades, many programs have been designed to foster competencies rather than teach merely theory. According to Levine and Patrick (2019), competencies are more implemented now than before: "It is a major shift in school culture, structures, and pedagogy focused on ensuring that all students succeed and addressing the fundamental shortcomings of the traditional model" (p. 2). In this way, users are able to expose themselves to challenging situations and be equipped with certain abilities. They can navigate through their own professional and personal experiences while using the target culture.

Competence is the ability to complete a task successfully. The Council of Europe (2020) considered competence a set of identifiable abilities, definable skills, measurable knowledge, or other deployment-related characteristics. It means that it is a desirable characteristic for a human being to have such as an attitude, behavior, or physical and mental ability, and that is necessary to perform an activity within a specific business or social activity. There are different types of competencies. Some are specific capacities for a particular job or field. Some others are more general. For example, CC caters for natural interactions in any social environment.

CC encompasses both language knowledge and the ability to use it within the appropriate contexts. They include the abilities that individuals require to communicate as a member of a given socio-cultural community. Tarvin (2014) defined CC as "the ability to use language, or to communicate, in a culturally appropriate manner to make meaning and accomplish social tasks with efficacy and fluency through extended interactions" (p. 2). Language is taught in a comprehensive way, including the different types of language competence. Thabit and Pawar (2018) described four of them:

• Grammatical skills are related to grammar, spelling, phonology, and lexicon items. They involved the most methodical structures of the language, such as phonetics, morphology, and syntax. Thabit and Pawar (2018) explained that accurate elaboration and accommodation of phonemes and morphemes enable users to interpret sentences and phrases. They are the ability to produce and recognize linguistic patterns to encode and decode words and communicate effectively.

• Sociolinguistics competencies refer to the sociocultural conditions, conventions, and manners such as rules of politeness, and norms governing relations between generations, sexes, classes, and social groups. Thabit and Pawar (2018) also discussed that these abilities also entail the strategic use of language in a particular social environment, according to the intention and the communicative situation. Users should be able to understand the context that develops the language. Their speaking acts should be framed within a place, time, and community. The meaning of the phrase can change if it is used in a business meeting, instead of in a stadium.

• Discourse competencies are related to rhetorical elements and the organization of ideas. They are concerned with the functional use of linguistic resources such as speech acts, cohesion, coherence, figures of speech, and some others. According to Thabit and Pawar (2018), they are "the ability to combine language structures and language functions into a coherent and cohesive text" (p. 306). In other words, they are the way that conversations flow. They are the skill to combine sentences and language forms to persuade and create elaborated meanings in a text or a speech.

• Strategic competencies go beyond verbal utterances and words. They are the ability to correctly use the elements such as signs, gestures, personal space, eye contact, tone of voice, turn-taking, and vocal qualities among other types of nonverbal communication. According to Thabit and Pawar (2018), this type of communication expresses attitudes concerning their interlocutors and what they say. These competencies are related to paralinguistics, and they are part of communication outside sentences or words. For example, we can infer anger, happiness, fear, surprise, or another emotion just by reading facial expressions.

In other words, CC can be defined as not only using the language correctly but also knowing when to use it according to the given environment or context. Then, language is taught through legitimate social scenarios. Its performance is described in behavioral or functional terms, rather than theoretical constructs. According to Lyle (2008), social interactions are opportunities to nurture class engagement, positive relationships, interdependence, and reasoning.

Then, my pupils should be encouraged to cooperate as active agents and to actively contribute with their peers to solve problems, negotiate concepts, or achieve common goals. Cook (2008) reckoned that such kind of socio-cultural

interaction fosters an unconscious learning process. Then, I expect my pupils to use the English language as a tool to communicate. Through dialogue, they can learn how to control their feelings, persuade people, and create emotional boundaries.

When learning a FL, we acquire a new culture, a new way of behaving and socializing. Speaking entails building micro-skills and abilities. Tarvin (2014) believed that they can vary from the management of the common thread of the subject to the negotiation of the meaning of the words or gestures. It means that holistic development also includes vast abilities, such as planning a speech, negotiating the meaning of a sound and sign, or controlling the tone of voice, intonation, and diction among other aspects. These micro-skills are not only developed by the speaker, but also by the listener.

That is why memorizing structures is not enough. Knowledge has to be linked to a specific culture or a learning environment so that it can be used effectively in varied contexts and situations. When acquiring these abilities, it is insufficient only to handle surface-level structures or grammatical rules. My students need to navigate different socio-cultural aspects to generate speech acts as they do with their first language. To do so, they have to mediate between their first language and experiences with the target culture. They must be flexible to adapt to a variety of dialects, purposes, and contexts.

Consequently, grammatical and phonetic aspects should not be taught in isolation; instead, class members should be integrated within speaking communities to develop fluency, order of ideas, affective factors, and some other linguistic elements. When simulating authentic communication, students can develop these linguistic competencies. As with any conversation, it requires at least two users, a speaker who puts oral expression into practice and a listener who receives the message and provides feedback. Then, students need their peers to acquire the language together.

As social agents, my students should be able to interact as equals and convey messages to their peers. As Zhang (2019) granted, English should not be treated as a "subject to be learned, but as a means of communication, where the focus is on the meaning first, then on the form of the language" (p. 99). My pupils should explore resources to their fullest, get more opportunities to develop their linguistic skills, and use the language in different environments. Then, the participants should be the ones who make the most meaningful contributions, taking a protagonist role.

In this vein, my students should be fully supported in developing academic knowledge and abilities to apply what they have learned in real scenarios. As Fulcher (2010) suggested, CC enhances their innate ability to

communicate, which satisfies a social function to naturally express thoughts and interact with other individuals. In a foreign language, users should express their desires and needs, exchange information, develop social interactions, fit into social etiquette and routines, and overall be understood by others.

Bearing all of this in mind, the CC considers the usage of the target language as an instrument or a tool in oral and written communication. It allows for a better understanding and interaction of thoughts, behavior, and emotions. CC refers not only to the ability to handle a language, but also to understanding how to place oneself in the communicative context of each specific community, in its diverse social, cultural, and ideological formations. Therefore, all its components should be taught together, and not any of them is more important than the other. My students should be able to spontaneously interrelate with others as they do in their first language.

Dialogic Teaching

The Dialogic Teaching Approach is the opposite of the traditional monologic classrooms. Instead of the teacher being the supreme authority of knowledge, students' voices are heard and considered to create a better understanding of the world in which we all live. It is an ongoing talk among class participants to build on each other's perspectives. Everyone is encouraged to actively contribute to logical and coherent lines of inquiry. DTA uses the harness of dialogue to promote learning, critical thinking, and motivation. It stimulates learning, develops social skills, and enhances imagination and creativity.

Before moving on, dialogue is defined as a conversation between two or more individuals. They equally interact to exchange ideas, cultural perspectives, and personal points of view towards a specific issue. According to Rule (2015), "this kind of conversation involves turn-taking: one person speaks, and the other replies and the conversation develops from there" (p. xvii). In other words, it is an open-ended talk, and participants do not know how it will end up because their contributions also depend on their peers' comments. It aims to develop a mutual understanding and gain consensus between members.

As with any other social activity, dialogues can vary depending on the context, the relationship among participants, common knowledge, shared codes, and other factors. Its development goes beyond ordinary conversations. It extends to being ourselves, when expressing our set of beliefs, using discourse elements, and negotiating meaning through our perspectives. "Dialogue, therefore, constitutes an act of knowing that they did not know what they thought they knew, a cognition of not knowing or a decognition" (Rule, 2015, p. 4). It aims to comprehend the world that we all share through language.

However, to accomplish an ethical and philosophical conversation, it is important to encourage a Dialectical Dialogue instead of an Echo-Dialogue or Dialogue-of the Deaf. Fishelov (2013) described Echo-Dialogue as one participant repeating what others say, Dialogue-of the Deaf as two participants talking without being able to understand each other, and Dialectical Dialogue as the capacity to create a logical discussion of ideas. The last one is intended for participants to understand others' problems. My pupils should know how to listen to their peers' points of view and be engaged in some forms of giving and taking. Hence, they can view issues from multiple perspectives, get to common grounds, find reasonable stances, and bring reconciliation among opposite forces.

Socrates' teaching techniques are a great example of dialectical dialogues. Rule (2015) explained that "Socrates places himself in the position, not of a teacher who gives instruction, but of a pupil or learner who ostensibly seeks instruction from his interlocutor" (p. 8). In other words, he did not consider himself a knowledgeable person capable of instructing others. His way of teaching was through dialogue, guiding others to think and answer questions. He created a critical space within the discourse, and he was open to getting to know others. He was merely "concerned with the nature of virtue itself and other virtues, such as justice, wisdom, courage and piety" (Rule, 2015, p. 4). His teaching style made an emphasis on ethical questions on how we, humans, should live and participate in civic life.

Also, Paulo Freire has used dialogue as means of emancipation. To provide such spaces, Freire (2000) encouraged educators to listen to their pupils' needs, nourish love, cater for hope and encourage critical thinking. His pedagogy consists of creating trust and rapport, overall allowing participants to put theory into practice. His philosophy is based on social change, consciousness-raising, and transformation of the oppressed classes. He also challenged the idea that the teacher is the absolute authority of knowledge. Instead, he thought the class members were social agents full of experiences and abilities. Their backgrounds are valuable to be shared with others.

Freire encouraged students to cultivate values and abilities to adapt to any society. Dialogue was a tool to enhance a better understanding of the world and bring some critical awareness of our reality and conditions in the environments in which we all coexist. In this sense, dialogue represents horizontal relationships between participants who are full of mutual trust and respect. "Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humanity, faith in its power to make and remake, to create and re-create, and faith in its vocation to make people more fully human" (Shih, 2018, p. 233). It is a humanizing action.

In other words, Freire (2000) invites his students to communicate because, through dialogue, they can recreate themselves. Dialogue is an act of love, hope, and faith. It requires mutual respect, trust, cooperation, organization, critical thinking, and cultural synthesis. Through cumulative discourses, speakers can build critically on what others think is true, creating a common ground of knowledge. Dialogue is a way to work on communicative abilities, mediation strategies, social inclusion, and even students' autonomy. According to Alexander (2005), DTA should be purposeful, supportive, collective, reciprocal, and cumulative.

DTA has had successful results within the English as a Second Language program. Gupta and Guang-Lea (2015) suggested this method as a way to enhance oral skills: "[It encourages] students to express their ideas, practice language, interact with others, stimulate thinking, and build concepts through engaging in dialogue and interactions with peers" (p. 16). Students have to work with their peers to increase the quality and quantity of talk. According to Piccardo and North (2018), we are human-making subjects. It is natural that we negotiate with our peers to solve problems together and build an identity as a community.

With this said, DTA intends to promote critical communication inside the classroom. The outgoing cumulative talks between class members provide opportunities to enhance communicative competencies in real scenarios through peer-peer interaction and dynamic assessments. Chick (2014) argued that this approach bridges the gaps between theory and practice. It engages learners in exploratory discussions, debates, and conversations to foster language awareness, contextualizing linguistic inputs. To put it differently, when using English, they interact with others through several social environments and contexts, most of them being a result of globalization and technology.

Dialogic Teaching with a Group of Intermediate English Adult Speakers

DTA perfectly fits with the target population. My intermediate pupils require a space to provide their opinions, debate issues, and discuss the way they perceive their world. DTA lets them dialogue on relevant topics, bring up social events, and raise awareness to embrace together a better place to live. Furthermore, my adult students have some accumulative knowledge. They all have lived enriching experiences with their first language, and they can socialize such backgrounds with their peers in their FL. English should be the vehicle of negotiation between different public and private spheres. As Picarado and North (2019) believed, "languages are the vehicles of our cultural, political and

economic existence in society" (p. 2). They should be able to use the language to foster social sensitivity, raise cultural awareness, and negotiate through different scenarios and groups.

My adult students can share their knowledge and backgrounds, which are enriching for class development. Their depth of experience and knowledge increases over time, varying considerably with their communicative abilities and language skills. For example, most of them have studied other subjects in school and high school. They have learned how to write, deliver a speech, and persuade their peers. Therefore, as Kees de Bot et at. (2005) suggested, they are more cognitively mature. Their experience lets them comprehend several social environments.

The Use of Dialogic Teaching to Promote Communicative Competencies

DTA enables us to negotiate the class curriculum. Then, my students have the opportunity to interact as social agents. Cano (2021) discussed it as an ethical concern to "explore and adopt ideas and proposals that connect to social analysis and social action, producing transformative and dynamic interactions" (p. 5). DTA can transform their language learning environment into an inclusive, communicative, and cooperative one. When my pupils make decisions on what they want to learn, they tend to be more engaged in their individual and collective growth.

Therefore, classes should be focused on the learners' interests and backgrounds to motivate them to talk. Lasala (2014) pointed out that interactive programs cater for written and oral abilities, enhance performance in various contexts, and encourage students to utilize the target language in real scenarios. The power of talk should be harnessed to its maximum, and my students need to be stimulated to respond to questions, real-life examples, and daily problems. Instead of asking them to identify the right answer, they should be challenged to narrate, explain, justify, summarize, or even speculate on a topic. They should be also encouraged to evaluate the content, have a better understanding of their realities, and make well-informed decisions.

My students have to be able to analyze their political, social, and economic realities. In this way, they can acquire communicative language comprehensively. It requires some other linguistic aspects, such as pragmatics and semantics. It should be meaningful across several social discourses. Language should be a tool to debate concepts, arrange agreements, and mediate in our daily conflicts. When discussing viewpoints with their peers, my students will have the chance to critically examine their own beliefs. Global markets require English users to interact with people from divergent backgrounds

and mindsets. In this vein, DTA exposes my students to work on their communicative competencies, socialize with their peers, respect others' opinions and overall handle diversity with grace and maturity.

The Role of Dialogic Teaching in Globalized Communicative Environments

As was mentioned previously, globalization has put pressure on Costa Rican citizens to learn EFL, and teachers have been confronted to adapt their methodologies to enable their students to acquire a set of skills to compete in the current job markets. Teaching communicative competencies through dialogic learning is a way to decolonize language. Cano (2021) argued that DTA is a way to democratize education, integrating social relationships, cultural understanding, and authentic interactions in the target language.

As a facilitator, I need to keep in mind that teaching is a political act. We decide the number of students, contents, materials, approaches, and so on. Now, teaching English also plays a political agenda. Students can always ask: Why do we need to learn a language? Why are you imposing on me a set of values and cultures that are foreign to my reality? Why do you want me to socialize in a different way than I normally do? These questions and some others that they may ask definitely play a political act.

English teaching is fundamentally moral because through language, my students develop their social and interactive skills. It plays a role of power. They can use it to help others, motivate people, respect, and lead teams. However, they can use language to make fun of others, insult or argue. Through language, they talk about their likes, perspectives, and experiences. It can determine the social status, level of education, and identity of a group or an individual.

Hence, I should be extra careful how I implement the class curriculum and be aware that my stance can either call for diversity or segregate others. DTA, for example, "aims at creating an ethical engagement with the subaltern Other and transforming the epistemological representation of subaltern populations" (Rodrigues et al., 2019, p. 4). Dialogues enable me to better understand their reality, advocate for their wellbeing and deconstruct hegemonic discourses. It is a space for my students to criticize their world, question the status quo, destabilize dominant ideologies, and favor the subaltern voices.

When teaching communicative competencies, I should opt for the decolonization of the English language. Not only should my adult students be challenged to use the language efficiently, but they also need to be able to criticize the world they all live in. English Language learning already has a purpose. It is our decision to keep using it either for monetary purposes mostly

or to find other transcendental motives. I think that the value of language should be to emancipate people, unify communities and encourage diversity and inclusion, mainly of the otherness.

I find DTA is a useful approach to contrast globalization influences on EFL. This approach enables my students to get the desired skills and let them be interdependent social agents. They can interact with several groups and backgrounds. Together, they can recreate their worlds and support each other with their internal fights. DTA also is an invitation to revolution, to oppose the dominant forces, and even to create small ruptures in the system. It is naive to think that the oppressors would think of the interest of the oppressed (Freire, 2000). We are the ones who need to initiate the change.

With this, I find an invitation to raise cultural consciousness and cater for emancipation. For example, I can start by thinking that my students do not need to sound, look and think as US citizens do. Instead, it is an invitation to respect the diversity of English users around the globe. As Zúñiga (2015) stated, "critical language learners, who are conscious about their reality, must not forget where they come from and what their identity is to be able to use two (or more) languages successfully" (p. 193). In other words, they need to understand their own world and the others' to successfully interact with different people. They should be aware of existing stereotypes, cultural events, and historical backgrounds to better tolerate and embrace diversity.

In this line, my students also have to be knowledgeable of the political, social, and cultural phenomena. It is a fact that we cannot separate language from context. However, we can decide what context we can utilize in the classroom. Instead of imposing a foreign culture and set of values, we can discuss local problems and personal perspectives. Through dialogue, my students find a space to solidarize with each other, decolonize their minds and reconsider what is common sense. They can explore the world and discover that everything is not binary. Overall, they can look for someone to share their struggles with and find together a purpose in their lives.

Conclusions

DTA is a way to implement critical education principles to transform the population's realities and make their voices heard. It is a way to fight against the repercussions of globalization and avoid using language to segregate communities. My pupils, instead, should articulate ways to create a better world to live together, regardless of the other's economic status, nationality, and living conditions. My praxis should also contribute to discourses that link pedagogy, society, and educational reforms from a dialectical relationship. For instance,

when teaching CC, I should focus less on content, manuals, and books, but I should offer more opportunities to enhance awareness of the world in which we all live and emphasize linguistic structures and students' elaborated ideas.

I can create a free community of bilingual people in the class only if I create awareness of the teaching methodology. Language should be a tool to liberate, promote cultural understanding, and minimize the "otherness" concept. Then, I teach English from the students' reality. I think that they have to explore new cultures and see the world through their own lens. I am aware that the English language has imposed a set of values and ideologies, but I am the filter to make these ideas influence my students positively. Instead of creating divisions through their identities and the others. I can promote a space of multicultural environments which embraces respect and tolerance.

At the end of the day, part of my curricula should be to include others and promote diversity. It means that people should be accepted and included in the classroom with all the characteristics and backgrounds that make them unique. The English language is part of this linguistic and cultural diversity. We should broaden our minds and think out of the box to unify people, languages, and cultures, without imposing one over the other. Learning English should be more than earning more money or getting a better job. It has to go beyond business purposes. Students should also be moved to learn a foreign language to understand another culture, socialize with more people, or communicate fluently in different environments. We have to find more intrinsic purposes so that students can be moved by their own convictions and not others'.

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Promoting the use of Cartoon Characters to Motivate First Grade Students of Porrosatí School to Engage in the English Language Learning Process

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Abstract

This article proposes to promote the use of cartoon characters to motivate first-grade students to Engage in the English language learning process. To do so, a qualitative research project was conducted. The participants were six first-grade students of Porrosatí school, in Costa Rica. In the study, cartoon characters were depicted as educational pictographic characters, images, and visual aids purposely created to engage the pupils in the learning process. Their use aims to appeal to learners' imagination and creativity to foster a safe and welcoming learning atmosphere that makes them feel motivated and engaged with the new language learning process. As a result, pupils felt safe in a welcoming environment that fosters access to their imagination and allowed them to develop meaningful cognitive connections, addressing the target language learning process's beginning challenges and enabling their active participation in English language classes. Consequently, challenging aspects that negatively affect the optimum development of the target language learning process such as fear of facing an unknown language and foreign language anxiety can be overcome. In conclusion, promoting the use of cartoon characters is an effective teaching-learning technique to motivate first-grade students to engage in the English language learning process.

Keywords: cartoon characters, creativity, fear, foreign language anxiety, imagination

Introduction

The transition between the preschool and the elementary stages in Costa Rica is a meaningful step taken by first-grade students because this will be the first time they face a new language without previous formal knowledge. Since

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the English language is not taught in the educational institution where I work, Porrosatí School, during the preschool stage, first graders face their first encounter with the English language in a formal way when they attend their lessons at school. This should be a joyful moment for them since they are going to start to learn and experience new school situations. However, some challenging aspects can negatively affect the optimum development of the target language learning process. These are fear of facing an unknown language and foreign language anxiety. For this reason, learners' age and educational background must be taken into account to provide them with a safe and welcoming learning atmosphere that makes them feel motivated and engaged with the new language learning process, letting fear and foreign language anxiety aside.

Porrosatí School is located in Paso Llano, San José de la Montaña, Costa Rica, a rural area located near Barva Volcano's National Park. It is a D1 school[1] with a total of 37 students, six of whom are in first grade. The first-grade group has two girls and four boys, who are around seven and eight years old. All of them enjoy and actively participate in the English lessons. Another aspect to consider is their geographical context. The main community places in Paso Llano are the school, the church, and a small public playground. The town's productive activities are focused on cattle caretaking and small touristic startups such as a few restaurants and some street dairy products. There are no essential services such as a grocery store, a police station, or public telephone access. Amusement activities for students are related to helping parents with their duties and going to the river or the volcano for a hike. Most of the students come from local families who have lived there for many years. Some others come from nomadic families who rotate from one farm to another as cattle farm caretakers. To reach school, many of them have to walk long distances under harsh climatic conditions characterized by heavy rains and cold temperatures. These traits make it difficult to achieve a balanced level of proficiency in the development of the proposed curriculum because, unlike most Costa Rican public schools, English is not taught in the preschool stage at Porrosatí school. Therefore, it is necessary to offer these students pedagogical strategies that allow them to develop the confidence required to interact in the new language by providing a healthy and safe learning environment.

In consequence, to provide a welcoming learning environment that inspires the students to be involved in the development of the target language, it is necessary to offer teaching strategies and materials that appeal to their age,

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socio-cultural environment, and previous educational background. So, to reach this goal, it is necessary to use innovative, creative teaching methods to address the learners' needs. Mesén (2021) has declared that teaching creatively requires innovative procedures to engage school children in learning. An innovative approach can lead the teacher's quest to offer his or her students a respectable amount of learning that requires their creativity and critical thinking to face different projects. Thus, it is also important to acknowledge that first-grade students' ages range from six to seven years old. Hence, they are in a developmental stage where imagination plays a significant role. Therefore, there is a rich field to be explored and exploited to use a different educational approach to take advantage of this specific learning trait.

For this reason, to motivate first-grade students to engage in the English language learning process, appealing to their imagination will play an important role to offer them a harmless and friendly learning environment. "When children are educated in environments where they feel safe to explore language without feeling anxious, they not only enjoy learning but also flourish in their learning targets" (Kiaer et al., 2021, p. 19). To lead them to reach this goal, cartoon characters can be used to create a welcoming, friendly and safe atmosphere and to help them to develop meaningful cognitive connections that will address the target language learning process' beginning. Their main purpose is to motivate students to actively participate in the English language learning process, feeling safe and willing to learn a new language. Thus, this paper will address the implementation and results obtained from the experience of using cartoons to teach English in hopes it can inspire teachers in similar contexts.

Challenges: Fear and Foreign Language Anxiety

One of the key challenges teachers need to face to promote a fruitful target language learning development is to offer a safe space for children where they feel secure and free of fear. As Halmatov and Aleksandrovna (2021) have manifested,

> one of the most common emotional reactions in childhood is fear because the instinct for self-preservation is strongly expressed, and life experience has not yet been formed. Fear helps children be careful in unfamiliar situations and prevents them from developing, showing confidence and independence. (p. 97)

There are different types of fear present in each stage of children's life, which portray the kind of emotions, intellect development, and social context experienced by younger students. However, children in the preschool stage and

first cycle stages can recognize harmful environments and other situations that might represent a threat to their emotional and physical well-being. In this sense, fear shows on as an emotional tool to identify potentially dangerous atmospheres. Therefore, welcoming, creative strategies that appeal to students' positive emotions and imagination, providing a safe space for expression, will help them to overcome the fear of being exposed to what they might consider an unfamiliar situation.

Similarly, foreign language anxiety is another condition that could prevent children from being engaged and motivated in the English language learning process. Oruc and Demirci (2020) stated that foreign language anxiety expresses as a nervousness felt when communicating with their teachers and peers that prevent students from engaging in their learning process. On the other hand, participation in foreign language learning environments requires particular cognitive circumstances, emotional predispositions, and social skills. In addition, it requires students to be attentive, motivated, concentrated, and willing to achieve the proposed objectives to develop the target language. However, as Eylem and Cavide (2020) stated, for most students studying the target language in non-English speaking countries, foreign language anxiety appears to be a predictable trait in which they experience psychological barriers against language learning. Therefore, to prevent this condition a creative teaching approach must be present.

Creative, Innovative Teaching

For us teachers, it is vital to consider the unique challenges and traits that affect first graders' encounters with English language classes to design creative and innovative pedagogical strategies. These strategies must appeal to the student's imagination and motivate them to engage in the new language learning process. A creative approach can lead the teachers' quest to offer their students plenty of learning opportunities that require creativity and critical thinking to face different projects. It also adds weight by giving the teachers the task of determining how and when this creative process must take place. Mesén (2021) claimed that "instructors also make judgments based on their knowledge to decide whether creativity should be requested as an option to determine learning success" (p. 79). Therefore, when teachers propose a creative approach, they aim to appeal to students' creativity to improve their language learning progress. Undoubtedly, "learners' creativity helps them make decisions and be more critical of their learning and context" (Mesén, 2021 p. 79); then, it will be necessary to provide them with meaningful and creative learning resources.

Likewise, Rus (2020) proposed to offer a creative approach that stands from a critical point of view that uses innovative pedagogical tools to develop the proposed learning goals. This educational approach has considered the student's needs, skills, and psychological and social context to offer them learning experiences that engage them in the process and allow them to express the vivid image of their reality. For this reason, innovative teaching is required to achieve this goal. As Rus (2020) has claimed, "innovative teaching is the process leading to creative learning, the implementation of new methods, tools, and contents which could benefit learners and their creative potential" (p. 340). Therefore, the implementation of a creative and innovative approach that considers learners' age traits and educational background to provide a safe and welcoming learning atmosphere aims to make Porrosatí School first-grade students feel motivated and engaged with the new language learning process, without feeling threatened by fear or anxiety and allowing them to adapt themselves in the new language learning environment.

On the other hand, Bowkett (2010) defined ways of using different kinds of pictures to improve the student's language literacy. He has manifested a need to develop originality and creative teaching approaches that allow students to find a healthy way to express themselves and develop confidence. Bowkett (2010) stated that creativity requires students to establish new cognitive links. To achieve this, it is necessary to view things from different angles and analyze the possible solutions from each of them. Once this perspective is achieved, it will be possible to generate an autonomous, original, and innovative thought. Because of this, "the more practice a child has in being original on this individual level, the greater the chance that one day they will have original thoughts that are new to everyone" (Bowkett, 2010, p. 1). Therefore, by considering the inner world of students and promoting teaching techniques that allow them to bring it to light, it would be possible to develop confidence, creativity, and critical and original thinking.

Appealing to Children's Imagination

Veraksa et al. (2022) stated that imagination is defined as the dexterity to create new meanings through image combinations, colors, and blueprints at the mental level. These novel creations are vital because they allow meaningful connections to be made with the real world that children experience. From there, meaningful cognitive links are established to develop skills, process and organize information, determine decision-making, and manage an emotional response with visuospatial working memory and cognitive flexibility. Therefore, "the role of imagination in cognitive activity is of great importance since, by its virtue, we can see the connections and laws of the world around us through

images" (Veraksa et al. 2022, p.1). As a result, reality is visualized through images, symbols, and forms such as drawing letters, used in speech, writing, play, and drawing. Therefore, appealing to children's imagination is a good way of promoting cognitive development.

In addition, Veraksa et al. (2022) have stated that there are two types of imagination: Passive Imagination and Active Imagination. Passive Imagination includes daydreaming and dreams. On the other hand, Active Imagination generates new graphic elements in an original creative way considering the particularities of the child's environment, blending reality with fantasy; which leads to the production of new and original content in its cognitive and linguistic background. These processes are necessary to face unknown scenarios and unravel the conditions of an uncertain and changing environment where there is a basic motor pattern, but its form and the result of the action can vary. Therefore, fostering students' Active Imagination by using cartoon characters will allow them to be more productive, creative, and able to carry out linguistic tasks that will make them feel secure to perform in the target language.

On the other hand, Nipriansyah et al. (2021) have mentioned that imagination emerges as a mental process generated by recognizing the environment from a deep observation and evaluation of it. Therefore, "in early childhood cognitive development, visualization is still necessary to transfer knowledge; this learning process requires interesting means or tools to stimulate children's motor development" (Nipriansyah et al., 2021, p. 80). Hence, Nipriansyah et al. (2021) stated that creativity in the early school years is a mental process that allows the creation of new cognitive content through the efficient inclusion of imagination and aesthetics. Consequently, safe, inclusive, pleasant spaces are required to appeal to children's imagination and creativity. From this environment, it will be easier for students to develop soft skills such as communication, cooperation, analytical thinking, and creative thinking. These cognitive tools will allow them to adapt to their school environment with self-confidence and overcome the fears caused by fear and anxiety.

Cartoon Characters

Cartoons can be seen as teaching materials that effectively enliven the classroom atmosphere and ensure better learner motivation and participation while making the teaching and learning of English an enjoyable, stimulating, and memorable experience. For example, Thakur (2015) has defined cartoons as "drawings that exaggerate some physical feature, action, or quality of a person or thing depicted" (p. 4). Besides that, he claimed that "visual elements, with or without a caption, in a cartoon give us a bunch of starting points for discussion

and could be used as a springboard for any amount of language work "(Thakur, 2015, p. 4). Therefore, the use of cartoons in English language classrooms is an effective teaching/learning resource that appeals to the learners' imagination and creativity to foster interest and engagement with the target language lessons. In addition to that, "cartoons can be used as an effective tool for teaching critical thinking and promoting higher-order skills" (Thakur, 2015, p. 4). Hence, it will be easier for students to create the language content's cognitive links through visual images that arise from their context and share emotional and social bonds. As a result, they will feel welcome and safe within a learning environment that provides access to an imaginary and creative space where they can leave fear and foreign language anxiety aside.

Cartoons have the power of visual communication and change people's minds. For example, Gamage (2019) has defined a cartoon as "graphic media containing interpretative pictures using symbols to create a brief message and quickly change an attitude towards people, situations or specific events" (p. 108). Therefore, cartoons are reliable authentic teaching-learning materials to provide a safe and welcoming learning atmosphere by allowing pupils to assume a positive attitude toward the target language lesson that makes them feel motivated and engaged with the new language learning process. Hence, by using them, it is possible to reach "better learner motivation and participation, transforming the teaching and learning experience into an enjoyable, stimulating, and memorable experience" (Gamage, 2019, p. 107). For instance, Gamage (2019) claimed that the use of cartoon characters facilitated students' speaking skills, making the input more understandable and attractive while performing collaborative learning. Furthermore, cartoons' use can improve students' relationships with classmates and promote peer learning (Gamage, 2019). Consequently, using cartoon characters to engage students in the English language learning process can provide pupils with an attractive, safe, and welcoming learning atmosphere.

On a different note, Bowkett and Hitchman (2012) have highlighted different techniques to use comic characters to improve language literacy. They also considered the need of developing emotional intelligence by taking into account the person's holistic nature. They acknowledge emotional intelligence as a critical factor to avoid fear and foreign language anxiety. The use of cartoon characters, as suggested by these authors, then provides ways of accessing cognitive tools necessary to develop a successful second language learning process, for example, observation skills and vocabulary expansion (Bowkett & Hitchman, 2012). As Bowkett and Hitchman (2012) manifested, creating quick characters has the following learning benefits: "Reinforces the value of clear,

succinct writing and carefully chosen words. /Develops observational skills. Encourages consideration of the whole person, rather than just the physical appearance, creating an opportunity to develop emotional intelligence" (p. 91). Consequently, cartoon characters provide meaningful ways of accessing the cognitive tools necessary to develop a successful second language learning process.

Cartoon Characters in the Classroom

Using cartoon characters in the classroom is an ideal strategy that will allow teachers to access students' imaginary worlds to motivate first-grade students of Porrosatí School to engage in the English language learning process. To do so, within this paper, "cartoon characters" will be depicted as educational pictographic characters, images, and visual aids, drawn on the board or made out of paper, cardboard, fabric, or any other recycled material or digital composition. Besides that, cartoon characters not only represent pictures of what is narrated in a text like other visuals in the list. Sometimes callouts might be added to express phrases' meanings. They also will stand for graphic representation of grammatical elements presented within the content to be studied. For example, question marks, letters, phonemes, nouns, and adjectives, among others. They will be delimited as images or drawings purposely created to engage the pupils in the learning process.

For this, the scaffolding practice was carried out during the introduction of contents aimed at fostering the results. According to Garcia et al. (2013), the learning of a second language is developed through a process of transition and scaffolding toward a continuous practice that requires the willingness, effort, and dedication of the learners. This group of elements will result in a significant transition between the new language input (declarative knowledge) and mastery of it through continuous practice, to automatically access it through the automation process (procedural Knowledge). Therefore, significant communicative tasks are required to lead to the production of an authentic language. These tasks must be designed to promote the development of specific linguistic elements and the language used to be practiced considering the assertive guidance and active participation of the students. It also requires meaningful feedback delivered at the right time and in the right situation. Therefore, the practice of scaffolding steps will be carried out during the development of content to help in the transition from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge.

Consequently, to develop this strategy, the action plan was developed for five weeks, from February 22nd to March 25th. It was expected that during this time, the students would feel safe in a welcoming environment that fosters

access to their imagination. The aim was to develop cognitive links that enable them to actively participate in English language classes. Besides that, the purpose was for learners to learn new vocabulary words and linguistic patterns that allow them to talk about personal information; for example, name, age, and grade, among others. And finally, the students created a cartoon booklet where they could translate cartoon images into spoken language. Therefore, to implement this process, the action plan was designed to be developed by following the Ministry of Public Education's (MEP, 2016) corresponding study program for the first cycle, first level, Unit 1: All About Me. The unit content included language functions such as greetings and saying goodbye in proper contexts, introducing themselves, identifying personal traits and feelings, and getting to know others. Those functions were developed in the four linguistic skills by using cartoon characters.
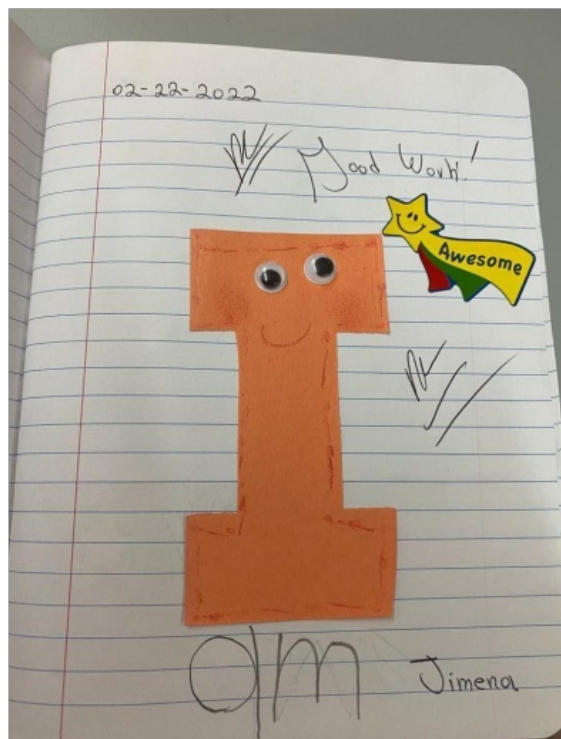
Activities

Week 1: from February 22nd to 25th. The content to be studied included the vocabulary words *I* and *am*, and the question word *who*. Besides that, punctuation marks, and question marks.

- Warm-Up: It is made by telling a story about how words are made by letters. Throughout the storytelling, different cartoon characters representing different letters were introduced.
- Activating Prior Knowledge: Students' names are randomly selected and "written down" on the board using letters' cartoon characters.
- Modeling: The vocabulary words *who*, *am*, and *I* were presented through cartoon characters representing individual letters that joined stand for a word. They were modeled and clarified by the teacher and repeated and practiced by the students.
- Task Rehearsal: The students made their own I-cartoon character using cardboard, colored pencils, and plastic eyes, among others (See Figure 1.).
- Task Completion: The students identified the words *I*, *am*, and *who* when they were presented through the corresponding cartoon characters.
- Task Assessment: The assessment was done throughout the lesson development by observing students during each one of the stages in the performed activities. This allowed the teacher to take action in the present moment and make any adjustments in the process to improve students' outcomes when it was necessary.

Figure 1
I-Cartoon Character

Note: Cartoon designed by one of the first-grade students

Week 2: from March 1st to March 4th. The content to be studied included the vocabulary words *not*, *a boy*, and *a girl*. The previously studied vocabulary words (*I* and *am*, and the question word *who*) were recycled and used in a scaffolded sequence to develop a new syntax structure.

• Warm-Up: It is made by introducing boy and girl cartoons used as puppets. These elements act out by singing the song "I am a boy; I am a girl."

• Activating Prior Knowledge: The students brainstormed the vocabulary words learned in the previous lesson.

• Modeling: The previous vocabulary words *who*, *am*, and *I* were reviewed. Besides that, the new words and fragments not, a boy, and a girl were presented. They were modeled and clarified by the teacher and repeated and practiced by the students.

• Task Rehearsal: The students made their ID cartoon characters using cardboard, colored pencils, and plastic eyes among others (See Figure 2.).

• Task Completion: The students learn to join the pronoun *I* and the verb

am with this cartoon representing their names. Besides that, they identified the words *I, am,* and *who, not, a boy,* and *a girl* when presented with the corresponding cartoon characters (See Figure 3.).

• Task Assessment: The assessment was done throughout the lesson development by observing students during each one of the stages in the performed activities. Students used the cartoons to orally construct sentences by linking cartoons sequentially.

Figure 2
ID

Note: Cartoons designed by first-grade students

Figure 3
A Boy

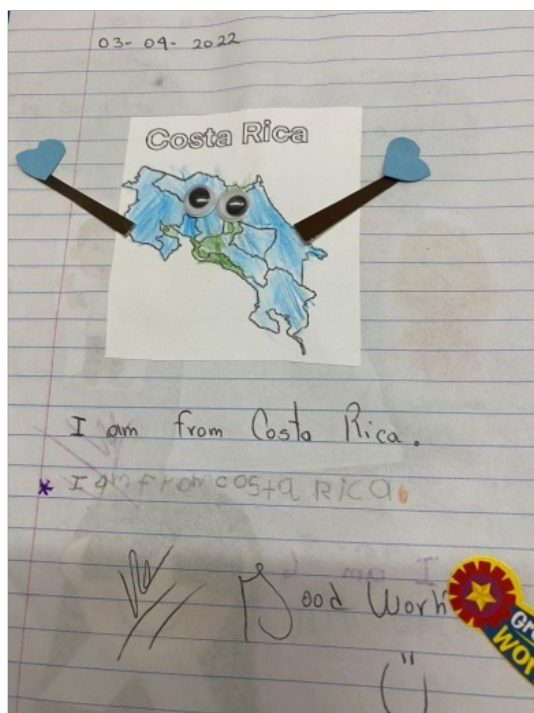*Note:* Cartoon designed by one of the first-grade students

Week 3: from March 8th to March 11th. The content to be studied included the vocabulary words including numbers from one to ten and the words from previously studied vocabulary word sets were recycled and used in a scaffolded sequence to develop a new syntactic structure (*I am six/seven, and I am from Costa Rica*).

> • Warm-Up: It was made by presenting the video Numbers Song - Learn to Count from 1 to 10.
> • Activating Prior Knowledge: (Mono-bingo Game) Bingo cardboards with the studied cartoon images were handed out among the students and they moved the token to the corresponding place as they heard their names.
> • Modeling: Previous vocabulary words were reviewed. Besides that, the new words (numbers one to ten) and the preposition were presented. They were modeled and clarified by the teacher and repeated and practiced by the students producing the corresponding sentences in oral and writing forms.

• Task Rehearsal: Students colored a worksheet containing figures of the numbers. Besides that, they made the "from Costa Rica" cartoon by coloring a map using cardboard, colored pencils, and plastic eyes among others to cartoonize the image (See Figure 4.).

• Task Completion: The students identified the lesson's words when presented with the corresponding cartoon characters. They read aloud the new fragments and sentences.

• Task Assessment: The assessment was done throughout the lesson development by observing students during each one of the stages in the performed activities. This allowed the teacher to take action in the present moment and make any adjustments in the process to improve students' outcomes when it was necessary. Besides that, the students used the cartoons to role-play in front of the class the learned vocabulary and orally constructed sentences by linking cartoons sequentially.

Figure 4
From Costa Rica

Note: Cartoon designed by one of the first-grade students

Week 4: from March 15th to March 18th. The content to be studied included the vocabulary words *student, school, first, grade,* and the preposition *in.*

• Warm-Up: (Chant) I am a student, and I love my school.

• Activating Prior Knowledge: (Wheel of Fortune Game) key vocabulary words' cartoons and an arrow were placed on a board, taking the form of a wheel. The students whirled the arrow, and according to what the cartoon arrow indicates, they made oral sentences using the learned vocabulary words and language structure.

• Modeling: Previous vocabulary words were reviewed. Besides that, the new words (student, school, first, grade) and the preposition were presented. They were modeled and clarified by the teacher and repeated and practiced by the students producing the corresponding sentences in oral and writing forms.

• Task Rehearsal: The students made a mini-mural representing the vocabulary words.

• Task Completion: The students identified the lesson's words when presented with the corresponding cartoon characters. They read aloud the new fragments and sentences. Besides that, while working in pairs, the students used cardboard images to complete a template on the board to produce oral sentences (See Figure 5.).

• Task Assessment: The assessment was done throughout the lesson development by observing students during each one of the stages in the performed activities. This allowed the teacher to take action in the present moment and make any adjustments in the process to improve students' outcomes when it was necessary. Besides that, the students used the cartoons to role-play in front of the class the learned vocabulary and orally constructed sentences by linking cartoons sequentially.

Figure 5
Board Template

Note: Designed by first-grade students

　　　Week 5: from March 22nd to March 25th. During this week, the purpose was to put hands-on and elaborate a cartoon booklet where students could translate cartoon images into written and spoken language.
　　　• Step 1: Pieces of Bond paper were handed out among the students.
　　　• Step 2: Students pasted the cartoon characters made out throughout previous lessons following a progressive sequence.
　　　• Step 3:　Cardboard callouts were handed out among the students so they could write the sentence corresponding to each one of the pictures.
　　　• Step 4: The booklets were assembled.
　　　• Step 5: The students illustrated the cover page.
　　　• Step 6: Students presented their projects in front of the class (See figure 6.).

Figure 6
Booklets

Note: Cartoons designed by first-grade students

Results

The information collected throughout the evaluation process was carried through a qualitative process during different stages of allotted time including different types of information gathering instruments, for example, observation records, checklists, and goals evaluation rubrics, among others, provided the necessary information needed to measure the scope of the results achieved throughout the process. These instruments showed that cartoon characters could be used to create a welcoming, friendly and safe atmosphere that encouraged the students to feel comfortable and secure when developing the proposed activities. In addition, it made it easier for the pupils to understand and learn the new vocabulary words and sentence structures.

Furthermore, recycling information from the previous activities allowed them to feel familiar with the content and make meaningful cognitive links that allowed them to easily read and understand what they had learned. Consequently, it was possible to develop a scaffolded learning process where the students had the opportunity to use what they already knew and mix it with the new content, expanding their area of output and performance. The students manifested that the activities were funny and easy to do and that they enjoyed doing them. Thus, they were able to foster confidence and feel motivated to

interact with their peers by engaging in the English language learning process within a healthy and welcoming environment. As a result, at the end of the process, the learners were able to produce oral and written sentences with language content relevant to their social context that they could also read and understand.

Finally, they also were able to understand the oral presentation of their classmates and enjoy the different kinds of cartoons that were created. Therefore, considering learners' age and educational background to address their needs led the teacher to create innovative and creative teaching methods that motivate students to engage with the classes. Besides that, it encouraged the students to overcome the obstacles that were preventing them to develop a positive attitude towards the new language. Hence, they gained confidence and felt motivated to healthily grow their aptitude and successfully engage in their foreign language learning process, leaving fear and foreign language anxiety aside.

Conclusion

The first-time young students who face a new language without previous formal knowledge is a meaningful experience that might define their attitude toward the new language and its educational process. However, some challenging aspects could negatively affect the optimum development of the target language learning process. These factors were fear of facing an unknown language and foreign language anxiety. For instance, "students who suffer from foreign language anxiety get use avoidance techniques in their language production, making many preventable errors and showing an inability to participate in spontaneous conversations" (Kiaer et al., 2021, p. 25). For this reason, the learners' age and educational background, were taken into account to provide them with a safe and welcoming learning atmosphere that made them feel motivated and engaged with the new language learning process. This was a joyful moment for them since they were going to start to learn and experience new school situations. Whereupon, utilizing educational pictographic characters fostered opportunities to create a welcoming learning environment.

Indeed, there were some complexities considered before making this teaching proposal. These mainly were students' age and social background. Kiaer et al. (2021) stated that socioeconomic status, parental education level, and pre-existing learning disabilities, are factors that might lead them to experience foreign language anxiety in young learners. Therefore, the challenge was to design, plan, and implement teaching/learning activities and teaching resources and materials that motivate students' active participation. These resources considered students' age and social background to reach a meaningful learning

process that prevented them from developing fear or foreign language anxiety. For this reason, cartoon characters provided ideal opportunities to foster a safe learning environment that appealed to learners' imagination and positively engage them in the target language learning process.

In essence, the use of cartoons as educational pictographic characters created a welcoming, friendly and safe educational environment where the students were encouraged to feel comfortable and secure when developing the proposed teaching/learning activities. In addition, its use fostered students' development of meaningful cognitive connections. It made it easier for the pupils to understand and learn the new vocabulary words and sentence structures. Besides, it allowed us to address the target language learning process's beginning challenges fruitfully. As Kiaer et al. (2021) manifested, if children are cultivated in milieus where they experience a harmless environment where they can discover new languages without feeling anxious, they not only enjoy learning but also flourish in their knowledge endeavors. For this reason, cartoons used as educational pictographic characters provided ideal tools to create and offer this safe space for learning.

Finally, it is necessary to raise awareness of the importance of constant professional development that will help us to gain knowledge regarding new teaching/learning approaches, technological advances, and current educational streams. We need to continue in our quest for knowledge, develop our autonomy, and take advantage of the particularities of our working environments. This endeavor will help us to generate research that frames authentic results and allows us to tackle the current challenges that prevent us from offering the best possible educational proposal. Furthermore, we need to be willing to be exposed to different educational approaches and methodologies that consent us to develop experience from diverse sources considering that experience can not only be reached throughout time but also from experimenting.

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The Pertinence of Addressing the Affective Filter in EFL Costa Rican Classrooms and Strategies to Lower It

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Abstract

This paper explains the relevance that the affective filter has on students' learning processes and the different approaches that can be implemented to reduce its negative effects. At this time, several studies have confirmed the role that the affective spectrum plays on students' proficiency in a foreign language and how necessary it is to address this issue. In order to collect information about the negative impact of the affective filter and the strategies that can be used, an exhaustive analysis of different studies was carried out. This analysis shows that when students' affective filter is 'high'—e.g. feeling anxious, frustrated, stressed—students eventually become uninterested and unmotivated about the subject matter and the activities carried out in class. Also, they could become apathetic to the relationships that could be built with other classmates due to the fear of being criticized, and as a result, students' learning process would be hindered. Moreover, some effective methods are discussed as well, such as using humor as a tool in the class, having discussions about the topics that are to be introduced, using English captions, applying relevant topics to teach, implementing songs and games, introducing self-soothing strategies, and creating teacher-student rapport to encourage a healthy and comfortable environment within the classroom. Overall, it is concluded that students having a 'high' affective filter leads to a learning process being negatively affected. Then, the importance of examining possible procedures to help students succeed is emphasized as well.

Keywords: Affective Filter hypothesis, effects, foreign language, learning process, strategies

Introduction

Can the way students feel inside a classroom facilitate or hinder their learning process? This is an issue that has been debated over time and that needs to be contemplated in the development of language classrooms. When it

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comes to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, it is fundamental to take into account several factors that tend to influence students' learning process. Learning a foreign language is a difficult task that requires specific cognitive abilities that sometimes have to be developed in the class to reach proficiency; however, this process can be even more difficult if instructors overlook significant external and internal elements of students' linguistic development. One of the most decisive aspects complementing the learning process of students is the affective domain; as a matter of fact, several studies nowadays prove this reality in spite of the hesitation that has surrounded this topic. For example, Shao et al. conveyed that "anxiety may also interact with linguistic ability and task demands in predicting L2 learners' performance, and the correlation often becomes negative when language tasks are complex" (2019, p. 8). It should be noted that progressing and achieving goals in language learning can be primarily attributed to what people feel when they are learning and how they relate to other peers in the classroom; hence, the Affective Filter hypothesis becomes tremendously relevant in the process of learning a language.

The Affective Filter from Stephen Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition refers to the emotional "barriers" students can unconsciously pull up when they are learning a language (Krashen, 2013). When people learn a new language, they can come across different feelings that could impact their learning process negatively; for instance, if they feel anxious, afraid, or have a low self-esteem, they could understand the input provided in class, but it would not necessarily reach their language acquisition devices. For instance, Dover (2011) noted that students starting the English major at Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica showed different reactions including "fear, nervousness, involuntary movements on legs and hands, shaking and quivering" (p. 180). Also, students reported feeling phobia, nervousness, and stress, as well as forgetting the information they had to talk about in presentations. There is also Díaz-Ducca (2015) who carried out a study in an English language program offered by a public university in Costa Rica; he declared that students usually expressed that the anxiety they sometimes feel when using English originates from previous negative experiences they went through in the classroom and that also this anxiety comes from their personalities.

In general, students could feel motivated to participate in a class that is relaxing for them, that is, having a teacher that supports them, does not make fun of them, and does not get angry if they make mistakes since this could reduce students' anxiety or fear within the class. These factors can hinder students' learning process, so it is necessary to address the topic to understand why this phenomenon takes place in the first place and also discuss possible

strategies to help students lower the affective filter. Overall, being a teacher does not mean that the ultimate goal is to transmit knowledge to students, but rather, it means that teachers must acknowledge that learners are human beings inside the classroom, whose learning processes could also be altered by affective factors. This situation is a major responsibility for teachers, and it requires them to comprehend and improve their praxis to help students as much as possible. Altogether, this paper aims to provide English teachers with information regarding the academic implications of the affective filter within the classroom, as well as possible suggestions that language instructors could employ to lower students' stress and anxiety levels in order to promote more successful language learning processes.

Importance of the Affective Spectrum within the Classroom

In recent years, there has been a growing necessity to analyze the effect of affective aspects in the process of language learning. Arnold (2019) emphasized the importance of evaluating carefully the methods that teachers use to guide students. She stated that "many studies from the neurosciences that deal with learning show that a positive affective environment puts the brain in the optimal state for learning: low stress and high interest in the learning process" (2019, p. 11). There is a compelling relationship that could be overlooked between confidence and proficiency in a language, and it is necessary to strengthen the way students view themselves so that they become better at coping with setbacks during the process of learning. Huang and Hwang (2013) expressed that for students who have a limited competence in a foreign language, trying to express their ideas can be very threatening for their "self-image" since they could eventually have a negative perception about themselves. Also, they said that when it comes to the affective aspects that influence students' learning process, the main ones would be emotional reactions and motivations (Huang & Hwang, 2013). Although it is difficult to state how anxiety would influence each student exactly, the importance of the problem lies in the fact that it always hinders students' learning process significantly.

Zayed and Al-Ghamdi (2019) expressed that there are nine different affective factors that take place in EFL classes; they are motivation, attitudes, inhibition, extroversion, introversion, self-confidence, ethnocentrism, anxiety, and social class. When dealing with these, it is not necessary to determine which is the most important aspect since they are all interrelated, and each of them constitutes an important element of students' learning processes. They referred to how, for instance, improving students' motivation could make them obtain good results in their language competence (Zayed & Al-Ghamdi, 2019); also, if

their self-image improves, they could perceive themselves as capable individuals who have become more proficient over time in the language. As a matter of fact, Mustafina et al. (2020) explained thoroughly the way in which emotions and learning are correlated; for instance, if learners are interested in a topic (may that be due to a personal or situational preference) they could eventually enjoy learning about it. According to them, "enjoyment is linked with joy, excitement, delight leading to concentration" (Mustafina et al., 2020, p. 320), and these tend to be called "achievement emotions," for they usually lead to an effective learning (Mustafina et al., 2020). Hence, these emotions are responsible, or the basis, at least, for student engagement within the class.

Mustafina et al. (2020) referred to the way in which personal issues affect students' learning process and how that could take up students' energy and motivation to progress. Past experiences have an impact on how students approach language learning too. That is, if they had negative experiences, it will be difficult for them to have a positive attitude at the beginning of their learning process. Some examples of negative experiences are having a teacher who made jokes about them or was not patient whenever they made a mistake using the language, comparing themselves with other peers, having academic assignments that are too challenging with no guidance or support, among others. If students experience shame or fear of participating, they will hardly do any task assigned to them, and as Mustafina et al. (2020) suggested, "fear and shame are closely connected; they both aim to protect from painful emotions in future" (p. 321). The downside to this matter is that students' learning will be prevented from taking place. Needless to say, the most important aspect is for teachers to develop an environment in which students feel safe to participate and expand their linguistic skills.

It is also vital to consider the possible reasons why students tend to feel anxious, which could be attributed to various external factors, for instance, the interaction with others in the foreign language, the fear of being evaluated negatively because they fear social expectations or judgements, and the uneasiness about tests in case they do not get good grades. This uneasiness can be coined as the term called Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), which according to Jin et al. (2021, p. 3), "is of concern to both teachers and learners not only because it can be an unwelcome experience but also because it has been shown to negatively affect the learning process." Moreover, not only do external factors affect students but also internal factors such as low self-confidence, low motivation, and high levels of anxiety do. Hence, considering that these elements have a profound impact on students' learning process, in connection with Krashen's theory, is crucial.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen (2013) referred to different issues pertaining to the process of second language acquisition in his theory. For example, he discussed the acquisition-learning theory, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the comprehension hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this paper, emphasizing the affective filter hypothesis is essential. According to Dover (2011, p. 173), Krashen "focuses his hypothesis in the relationship that exists between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition, and consequently to the strength or level of the student/learner's Affective Filter." Ni (2012, p. 1508) also declared that "Krashen argued that [the] affective filter is a kind of psychological obstacle that prevents language learners from absorbing available comprehensible input completely." Hence, this illustrates that the affective domain can affect the learning process either positively or negatively.

Dover (2011) talked about how the affective filter that is sometimes "created" within an EFL class affects the information trying to reach "the language acquisition device." The term "language acquisition device" was coined by Chomsky to refer to "the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition" (Krashen, 2013, p. 4). Krashen (2013) maintained the conviction that learners have a filter in their brains that gets activated when they do not feel emotionally comfortable within the class. He specified that when students' Affective Filter is high, their motivation and confidence decrease, which causes them issues when interacting with the new language (Krashen, 2013). Overall, the main concern of this hypothesis is that anxiety, self-confidence, and low motivation could surface when students are studying English as a Foreign Language, and they could act as "barriers" that prevent students from fully emerging themselves into the learning process. Basically, if students in English classes are constantly anxious and overwhelmed, they will have a more challenging task trying to become proficient in the language.

Effects of the Affective Filter on Students' Language Learning Process

As previously stated, students' learning process can be negatively impacted by their low motivation, anxiety, and low-self confidence; these issues are intertwined with the Affective Filter. Most of the time, students aim to reach native-like proficiency, which can, as a result, make them worry whenever they have to talk in front of the class to participate or give an oral presentation. That is, the desire to use the language as a native speaker can turn into frustration and anxiety. Dover (2011) found that there are different ways in which students display their anxiety, such as "fear, nervousness, involuntary movements on legs

and hands, shaking and quivering. They act without realizing what they are doing or saying; mainly during some learning activities that force them to interact in the new language" (p. 180). Also, during oral activities, students stated that they get scared and forget what to say if professors or peers ask them questions or try to interact with them. More specifically, "their feet shake and they feel butterflies in their stomach" (Dover, 2011, 180). According to Lim, whenever students dealing with a high affective filter engage in communicative activities, they try not to speak or involve themselves in situations in which there could be "follow up questions from the teacher" (2020, p. 473). As he reported, students are usually fearful that they are being judged whenever they speak their mind in class (Lim, 2020). Moreover, he indicated that students could also avoid situations in which they would have to socialize with others, which would, as a result, cause them to be indifferent to the relationships they could build with their classmates (Lim, 2020).

Students also get extremely stressed if they have to do oral presentations; as a matter of fact, they usually implement "fillers" such as "uh, well, mmm, eh" even if they have prepared well for the presentation. Dover (2011) also conveyed that when students have a high Affective Filter, they tend to feel fearful, and as a consequence, they have low motivation within the class; in fact, they show little to no interest in the classroom. For example, Dover (2011) shared that two students did not want to participate in one of the activities developed by the professor, and that they expressed that most of the time, they were not interested in the tasks they had to carry out in class, but they would do them anyway since they needed to pass the course. Hence, considering these outcomes in students' learning process, it is necessary to address the issue by employing strategies and activities that will 'lower' the affective filter.

Lowering the Affective Filter

Sometimes, teachers tend to be excessively focused on the subject matter that is taught within the class and not so much on the way students are relating to that content and also to the language. According to Alrabai, language anxiety leads to low motivation, and these factors "influence the quality of different aspects of language learning and usually result in unsatisfactory learning outcomes even for those learners who possess high learning capabilities" (2014, p. 8). Moreover, Alrabai (2014) discussed which factors can increase this anxiety, for instance, students' personalities, the instructor's beliefs, and the procedures carried out in the classroom. He also addressed which considerations teachers should have in order to identify if a learner is suffering from anxiety, for example, avoiding participation, having a lower performance, freezing in oral activities,

going blank while participating, and demonstrating physical symptoms of anxiety (Alrabai, 2014). Due to this, it is necessary to explore what strategies can work well with students in order to lower the affective filter.

Given the fact that students might suffer from anxiety, it is imperative to analyze every aspect that could be making students' affective filter "rise." Many studies are focused on the methods and procedures that should be carried out, but they often tend to overlook the importance of teachers' personality within the class. Bilokcuoglu and Debreli (2018) conveyed how humor is an invaluable tool when teaching a foreign language. This is not to say that language classes should not be taken seriously, but rather to address how "humorous messages that the instructors utilise should lead to increase in student motivation, rise in attention and to the creation of a positive effect" (Bilokcuoglu & Debreli, 2018, p. 355). They also suggested that through the implementation of humor, motivation and attention can be activated, as well as evoking a better performance and more suitable opportunities to provide feedback from a respectful stance (Bilokcuoglu & Debreli, 2018). Nevertheless, over-using humor in the class could have negative consequences as well; hence, there has to be a balance. Overall, its implementation should be to always try to create a more comfortable environment for learners while not losing the focus of the class.

Díaz-Ducca (2015) explored different techniques that can be used to reduce language anxiety during oral tests. While learning a new language, students can face different challenges, but one of the most common issues is language anxiety. Unfortunately, this topic is not usually discussed, and students could ignore the negative effects that the affective filter could have on their learning process. Nevertheless, delving into which methods decrease students' anxiety is necessary. For instance, Díaz-Ducca (2015) stated that using relevant topics for students, using English captions, having discussions beforehand about the topics that are going to be studied, carrying out teacher and peer scaffolding, and providing students time to plan their personal notes are crucial. These activities could help students to reduce different affective issues they tend to go through.

There is also Lin (2008) who embraced the significance of employing other techniques to make classes more dynamic and lessen stress levels. She considered that using games could stimulate students' motivation within the class; Lin (2008) suggested that using games can boost students' skills to gain knowledge as they can work as experiential activities or training in the subject matter. Songs can work as great support for students' language learning as well; indeed, "songs develop students' language abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing and can be used to teach sentence patterns, vocabulary,

pronunciation, rhythm, adjective, adverbs, and so on." (Lin, 2008, p. 117). Furthermore, using films in English classrooms can also be beneficial for students since they give students the opportunity to learn how grammatical structures, vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation, and so on take place in real-life situations. Undoubtedly, if films are to be used within a class, they should have an academic purpose, and before watching them, students should be introduced to some vocabulary, background, and context (Lin, 2008).

Jin et al. expressed that "techniques that promote inner peace, self-awareness, and kindness and compassion towards oneself and others can also have positive effects" (2021, p. 4). That is, the implementation of self-regulation strategies is imperative in their learning process; indeed, they declared that in their study, students who were part of the experimental group and implemented these strategies, experienced a significant difference in their relationship to the language (Jin et al., 2021). For instance, these learners indicated that they have experienced specific progress when it comes to communicating, delivering speech, reading aloud, and using authentic English expressions. Also, there was an enhancement in the way they perceived themselves and the class; that is, they felt more confident and also showed more interest in the subject matter. If teachers aim to help students reach relaxation, less fear and anxiety, they should guide them on the appropriate techniques that could be used.

In addition to the strategies mentioned before, creating teacher-student rapport within the class is vital to generate a healthy classroom environment for students to feel safe and comfortable. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to specify which steps could be taken. First, teachers should have the urgency to comprehend students' needs; for Ratliff (2019),

> Instructors who understand and meet students' individual needs help to increase student satisfaction, motivation, and persistence. When instructors are not attuned to students' needs, it may lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, which may also result in withdrawing from the course. (p. 33)

Moreover, teachers should try to create a "sense of community" (Ratliff, 2019, p. 39). Ratliff (2019) pointed out that students have to develop an identity within the class and recognize who they are; that is, they have to be conscious of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as trust themselves and their peers during the process. Interaction among learners should also be encouraged by teachers so they can work together to achieve shared educational objectives and promote learning. Apart from this, recognizing students' skills is a vital action that should be adopted; for this, it is important for instructors to carry out activities in

which students develop essential problem-solving skills so that they do not feel frustrated. Overall, instructors must embrace students' skills to make them feel valued and generate a "sense of belonging" (Ratliff, 2019).

Altogether, teachers need to be a positive influence on learners' beliefs, that is, making constructive comments, paying attention to students, showing interest in them, and transmitting confidence since these can be highly beneficial. Briefly, as instructors, it is necessary to motivate students and make them feel that they are appreciated and capable of becoming proficient in the new language.

Conclusions

The affective filter is an issue that has been deliberated on throughout time due to the several challenges that teachers commonly face in the classrooms; sometimes these situations are related to students' personal problems, but other times, these situations are attributed to the affective filter and its high influence on students' learning process. Overall, the main objective of this paper was to refer to the negative consequences that high levels of stress and anxiety could have on students' learning processes and also which procedures could be carried out to help students lower their affective filter so that they can improve their linguistic performance.

Although there has been some debate on the subject, it is clear that the affective spectrum influences the way students progress – academically and linguistically speaking. If learners are in a constant state of anxiety and stress, it will be difficult for them to understand and internalize the subject matter. Despite the fact that stress and anxiety are two emotions that are constantly talked about when discussing the affective filter, they can actually act as triggers to other emotions or states of being, such as motivation, self-confidence, inhibition, extroversion, introversion, and so on. As a matter of fact, the affective spectrum is extremely broad; hence, considering the way emotions are interrelated among them and also with the learning process is fundamental.

Krashen (2013) believed that emotions acting up negatively conformed the "affective filter." When students do not feel comfortable or safe within a class, the filter will be "higher." Indeed, the higher the filter, the less likely it is for students to be able to understand the information; the lower the filter, the more likely it is for students to comprehend better the subject matter, and they will be open to receive input. There can be different motives for students to feel anxiety in English classes, such as fear of negative evaluation and judgment from instructors and peers, fear of public speaking due to a constant desire of a native-like proficiency, lack of self-confidence, low motivation, and an

inadequate treatment from the teachers. Moreover, several courses of action have been suggested so that students' learning process can be carried out in a pleasant environment, for instance, resorting to humor to create a light-spirited class, teaching new topics in a way that becomes relevant for students by making connections to real-life events, using different games and resources such as songs and movies, introducing students to self-regulating strategies, and creating healthy relationships with students so that they feel their needs are important and considered within the classroom.

In general, creating a classroom climate that intentionally tries to lower students' affective filter is crucial. As teachers, it can be easy to get lost in the day-to-day tasks and expect students to be in a good emotional state every time one needs them to pick up on new information, but that is not always the case. The truth is that every student that enters one's class is dealing with different issues, and although little can be done by teachers most of the time, there are some cases in which help can be provided. Actively looking for ways to assist students when they are learning a new language is necessary so they can progress; hence, teachers must try to develop classes in which students feel safe enough to participate even if that includes making mistakes. At the end of the day, providing a secure space to learners in order to help them feel they are capable of accomplishing different objectives is what teaching is about.

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Understanding and Coping with Foreign Language Anxiety

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Abstract

Foreign Language Anxiety or FLA has become one of the most constant and persistent issues to be faced in the English classroom; thus, FLA is currently a complex obstacle for students to achieve a meaningful learning experience. Research has shown how students who undergo FLA are able to understand what they are doing in the classroom; nevertheless, "understanding" a topic or activity in class does not equate to going through a significant learning process. Considering the effect FLA can have in the students' learning experience in addition to the rise in the public's interest for concepts such as "mental health" and "anxiety" in recent years, it is of uttermost importance for teachers to be up-to-date with regard to this issue. This paper is based on current literature about the meaning behind FLA, its causes, its effects, and coping strategies for it. The analysis of the literature demonstrated all EFL students can experience FLA if one or more factors intertwine and trigger a crisis. This is because age, gender, proficiency, or emotional intelligence level do not contribute to a learner undergoing FLA. Moreover, it was clear that learning about the causes of FLA is the first step for an educator to create an anxiety-free classroom. Getting to know the triggering factors can not only help a teacher identify anxious students, but also inspire them to question their own pedagogical praxis. Finally, it is important to highlight that the inquiry indicated the relevancy of teachers instructing students on coping strategies for FLA since this can make a difference not only in class but in the learner's life.

Keywords: causes, coping strategies, effects, English as a Foreign Language, Foreign Language Anxiety

Introduction

The possibilities for students to experience a variety of feelings while learning a new language are countless and unstoppable; nevertheless, it is how those feelings will affect the learning process long-term that should be a main concern for both students and teachers. This is because students who

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experience negative feelings may be able to understand the provided input, but they would not necessarily undergo a language acquisition process. For instance, a student who feels anxious during class may be able to understand a topic or an activity; however, it is necessary to emphasize that "understanding" does not equate to going through a meaningful learning experience. Krashen (2013) referred to this phenomenon by explaining that "affective variables do not impact language acquisition directly but prevent input from reaching what Chomsky called 'language acquisition device,' the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition" (p. 4). Taking into consideration the impact of negative feelings in class and the rise of the public's interest in concepts such as "mental health" and "anxiety" during the past 10 years (Google Trends, 2022), it is of utmost importance to keep oneself up-to-date with regard to these topics. In fact, a recent survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) has shown how—in comparison—people born between 1995 and 2010 (Gen Z) are more likely to report mental health concerns than older generations (Bethune, 2020). This aspect portrays Gen Z as the most anxious generation and, consequently, alerts experts from all fields about the rapid decline in mental health younger generations are experiencing.

Due to the rise of mental health awareness during modern times, alarming precedents are being set for what it is to come for new generations; hence, preparing teachers and others to deal with this issue is necessary. For this, it is important to highlight that anxiety feelings are triggered by one or more factors (Bethune, 2020) which may vary depending on the field of study. For instance, in language learning, this matter has its own name: *Foreign Language Anxiety* or FLA.

The reality is that there are multiple factors that can make an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student feel embarrassed of speaking in the target language in front of their peers; however, in this specific field, all these factors tie together in the same issue—FLA. Furthermore, due to the prevalence of this matter and how much it can affect the learning process of students, it is not surprising that this has become an indispensable research topic for EFL teachers and researchers nowadays. As a result, the purpose of this essay is to seek a better understanding of FLA and propose strategies that English teachers can implement in their classroom to help their students cope with this condition.

What is Foreing Language Anxiety?

Before going into the causes and effects of FLA in the English classroom, it is essential to establish what FLA exactly means as well as the reason why it is important for teachers to explore, acknowledge, and tackle it—if encountered in

their classroom. In this particular case, the definition of the concept not only expresses what it is, but also sheds light on the major problem FLA represents for students. According to Horwitz (2001), "anxiety when associated with learning a foreign language is termed as 'second/foreign language anxiety' related to the negative emotional reactions of the learners towards foreign language acquisition" (p. 113).

As established in the definition, FLA is the apprehension toward Second Language Acquisition (SLA), which represents a major setback for the students' learning process. For this, it is extremely important for teachers to take action to address this matter with the seriousness it requires. If this issue is not properly tackled by the educator, the results can be detrimental for the students' second language acquisition since their linguistic skills could be restrained from being fully developed. As a matter of fact, Brown (2008) provided a great example of how FLA can prevent students from learning and taking advantage of the target language in scenarios which would be considered a "must" to make use of English.

Brown (2008) conducted research which showed how FLA prevented multiple international students from not only gaining a high proficiency in the target language due to their immersion but also undergoing "culture shock" after moving to a foreign country. The twelve-month project allowed the author to observe the struggles the students went through as well as the progress they made.

Because of the nature of the study—ethnographic research—it would be expected that most findings in it were about the "culture shock" aspect and not as much about the language; nevertheless, that was not the case. Throughout the research, the results showed that students were more concerned about their language skills than about the cultural differences they were facing. This finding undeniably shows that without the appropriate language skills, adjusting to a new culture is nearly impossible (Hofstede, 2005). Owing to this factor, it is possible to reinforce the importance of acknowledging FLA in the English classroom. Brown's research (2008) made it clear that, no matter the context, students who are suffering from FLA are missing minor and major experiences alike during their learning process; thus, the relevance of informing educators and learners about this condition as much as possible emerges.

Causes and Effects of FLA in the English Classroom
Causes of FLA in the English Classroom

As was previously stated, because feelings of stress and anxiety are provoked by specific elements, the first step to be taken by a teacher who wants to keep FLA out of their classroom is to get to know which are the most common triggering factors. Later on, by carefully studying their current group, teachers should be able to discard some of those stressing factors and identify the aspects which trigger their students the most.

Before delving into the factors, it is critical for teachers to take into consideration that all students are susceptible to FLA. To support this fact, first, Fallah and Movahed (2014) established that there is no correlation between age, gender and FLA. This was later confirmed by Drakulić (2015) since her study determined that "FLA is equally relevant to language learning among children, adolescents, and adults" (p. 127). Furthermore, Martínez (2013) stated that the level of proficiency will not interfere with whether the student will experience FLA or not. That is to say, not only do beginners experience FLA, but so do advanced learners. Lastly, according to Shao et al. (2013), it is also important for educators to avoid assuming that FLA—and anxiety itself—is related to an under-developed emotional intelligence. The reality is that no matter how developed one's emotional intelligence is, anxiety can be experienced by anybody under the "right" circumstances.

With that being said, there are various authors who have listed the same aspects as the most "common" triggering factors for FLA despite their diverse backgrounds. For instance, Gkonou (2013, p. 65) listed "self-efficacy, language skills, the teacher, mistakes made in class, high reliance on marks (grades), tests, and extrinsic motivation" as the most common triggering factors for students who suffer from FLA. Further, in a more recent study, those factors were supported when the author listed "the teacher, error correction, fear of negative evaluation, low proficiency, the lack of discipline, and test anxiety" (Drakulić, 2015, p. 127) as the most influential triggers for her students. All these factors were also supported by another author who not only mentioned the factors listed above but also brought to the table students experiencing FLA due to their fear of being "left behind," and emphasized that "oral production in L2 is viewed as one of the greatest sources of anxiety in the classroom context" (Martínez, 2013, p. 831) in his specific study group. In addition, most of the sources consulted presented parallels in terms of the harm negative emotions can have on the students' learning process as well as emphasized "the teacher" as one of the key agents influencing students experiencing FLA (Drakulić, 2015; Fallah & Movahed, 2014; Gkonou, 2013; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Shao et al., 2013).

Effects of FLA in the English Classroom

After studying the causes that may trigger FLA in an English classroom, it is decisive for teachers to learn about its harmful effects on their students' learning process to understand the urgency to address it. Even when such authors as Hewitt and Stephenson (2012) have tried to look for proof to support theories that pose FLA as a tool to boost the students' learning process, they have been unable to do so. On the contrary, Dewaele et al. (2017, p. 11) declared that "FLA may have negative academic, cognitive, and social effects on learners."

The truth is that most of the outcomes a student gets from experiencing FLA are negative. A significant example of this is how high-anxiety learners are more likely to stop their studies than low-anxiety ones (Fallah & Movahed, 2014). Besides, it is not surprising to see low performance as a consequence of FLA since anxiety is perceived as a negative factor in the English classroom because of its direct effects on the learning process (Martínez, 2013). As reported by Hewitt and Stephenson (2012), "the higher the levels of anxiety experienced by learners, the poorer their language skills tend to be" (p. 172).

Nonetheless, for this section, it is also relevant to point out that most students tend to be motivated when starting to learn a new language; however, negative experiences can—and most likely will—affect the students' perception of the class, and, subsequently, the language. As Drakulić (2015) affirmed, "early negative experiences may affect the quality of further language acquisition" (p. 127). This illustrates how, even when students may have had a "strong" start, triggering factors intertwining will result in a "domino effect" letting the learners experience FLA and its negative effects.

Strategies to Overcome FLA

As was contemplated before, all students can experience FLA no matter their age, proficiency, or level of development in terms of emotional intelligence. This is why it is very important for all educators to be prepared with effective tools to help students overcome FLA. Although all cases are different and one should always research which are the strategies that fit best the group or student who one is trying to help, getting to know some "standard" strategies can save some time until the specific ones are found. Thereby, this essay will cover four basic strategies: one to help students prevent FLA, two to help students overcome a FLA crisis, and one for teachers to help reduce FLA in their classroom.

A Strategy to prevent FLA
Mindfulness and Coping Self-Efficacy (CSE)

Due to all the implications FLA can have on the students' learning process, it is important to look for ways in which learners can avoid getting those feelings if possible. Aside from only looking for relaxation in one specific moment of anxiety, "Mindfulness" is a strategy that can be used for helping students avoid stress and anxiety altogether. Further, instead of separating "Mindfulness" and "Coping Self-Efficacy" (CSE), it is preferable to keep them together since one is likely to improve the other. For instance, "Mindfulness" is a strategy that helps the subject calm when anxious; nonetheless, it seeks to prevent this situation from happening as well. Organization techniques; for example, are used as a way to prevent learners from being anxious in class (Corti & Gelati, 2020). Study planning and time management are two organization techniques students can be instructed in so that they can better organize their study activities. This way, students are not only going to be preventing themselves from feeling overwhelmed or lost in class, but also—because of the nature of these techniques—they are going to be improving their self-efficacy beliefs. Both techniques help students acquire effective tools that will allow them to feel prepared for their classes which improves their confidence in terms of the class (Fallah, 2016). Furthermore, if they are prepared for their classes, students are more likely to feel calm during the sessions (Corti & Gelati, 2020). As Fallah (2016) mentioned, "it is expected that higher levels of mindfulness will be associated with lower levels of FLA including communication anxiety, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation" (p. 4). In simpler words, helping students feel prepared for their classes will ultimately make them feel more confident in terms of self-efficacy which will, undeniably, lower their chances of experiencing FLA.

Strategies to Overcome a FLA Crisis
Self-Soothing Strategies

Firstly, it is important to highlight that although this paper is focused on FLA, Self-Soothing Strategies can work on any anxiety-provoking situation since they are self-reliant. Moreover, this is also a relevant detail to mention because, as students grow older, they tend to seek mental and behavioral independence, which stresses the importance of students learning and implementing this type of strategies to regulate their emotions whenever they feel stress or anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2017).

Having said that, in the English classroom, these strategies are intended for the student to leave behind the feelings of stress and anxiety triggered by one or more of the factors previously established. These type of strategies can

include—but are not limited to—taking deep breaths, progressively relaxing their muscles, and applying techniques such as the "five, four, three, two, one method" which consists of acknowledging five things they see, four things they can feel, three things they can hear, two things they can smell and one thing they can taste (Smith, 2018).

Positive Self-Talk

When students are instructed to carry out a difficult task or take an exam, there is a high possibility that they will engage in the process of self-talk that could either be positive or negative. As a matter of fact, it is necessary to remark that internal dialogue is commonly used to better understand feelings and beliefs to later instruct oneself on how to properly proceed (Sánchez et al., 2015). When it comes to FLA, students could eventually find implementing "Positive Self-Talk" useful in order to carry out the activities and having, as a result, decreased their levels of anxiety, not to mention that because this action plan is supposed to lower their levels of FLA, it would also be preventing their learning process from being negatively affected. Wolters (1999) pointed out that

> [r]egarding the purpose of motivational self-talk, the self-affirmations expressed by students help them to maintain or improve their degree of motivation in academic situations by emphasizing the main objective or goal of their learning efforts and the reasons to persist in, or complete, the task. (p. 290)

Moreover, not only can "Positive Self-Talk" be used to increase motivation and reduce anxiety, but also to have students reconfirm the process they need to follow to carry out a task. For instance, DeCaro et al. (2010) stated that instructional dialogue helps students control anxiety and stress when facing a difficult task. Overall, guiding students towards implementing "Positive Self-Talk" can be highly beneficial for the learning process whenever they experience FLA.

A Strategy to Reduce FLA in the ESL Classroom
Collaborative Activities

"Collaborative Learning" or "Collaborative Activities" are currently and widely used in education due to the benefits they have brought to class. In fact, according to Srinivas (2019),

> [c]ollaborative teaching as well as learning creates a situation where learners aggressively cooperate by sharing their experiences and undertake

various roles. In collaborative learning, the learners work on the main tasks including problem-solving, collaborative writing, study groups, discussions, group projects and some other activities that are related to finding a solution. (p. 4)

Students need to share their work, socialize, support each other, and exchange ideas in order to achieve certain goals in a collaborative class. Hence, when these conditions are met within a classroom, a relaxing environment for students to work can be created. "A pleasant, congenial and harmonious climate in the English classroom will help the English teachers not only to reduce the anxiety of their learners but also to grab the focus of their learners when they are learning English" (Srinivas, 2019, p. 6). Additionally, since students' are supposed to be in charge of their own learning process, teachers should play the role of facilitators which creates a learner-centered class so that students can develop critical thinking, solve difficult assignments, share knowledge with others, and improve their public speaking skills (Srinivas, 2019). Everything considered, carrying out collaborative activities can bring several benefits to students' learning process regarding their anxiety, self-confidence, and language skills.

Conclusions

Although it has been mentioned throughout the paper that all cases are different, this is not to say that it is likely for all teachers to find a group of students who are immune to FLA. In reality, many educators—if not all of them—have felt that anxiety related to language learning is more of a "constant" than a "variable" in the language classroom (Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012). As a matter of fact, it should not be considered "alarmist" to expect anxious students in one's classroom in this day and age, especially considering it is such a prevalent issue to be faced in EFL classes. As was previously mentioned, students' experiencing FLA is a matter of having the "appropriate" circumstances to trigger it. Age, gender, proficiency or emotional intelligence level will not interfere if one or more factors intertwine and trigger a crisis for a student (Drakulić, 2015; Fallah & Movahed, 2014; Martínez, 2013; Shao et al., 2013). As a result, it is not an understatement to classify anxiety as a negative factor in the classroom that all teachers should know about due to its obstructive effect on the students' learning process.

With that being said, getting to know the most impactful triggers for FLA in the English classroom is truly the first step to create an anxiety-free space for learners. The truth is that it is impossible to avoid FLA, but it is every teacher's

responsibility to prevent it or tackle it in the best way possible. This could be done in various ways. Firstly, as a teacher, self-reflection always comes in handy. It was seen in the "causes" section that most studies pointed at "the teacher" as one of the main anxiety-provoking factors. This does not mean that all teachers are "mean" or "spiteful," but it calls them to have moments of introspection in which they can question if they are being kind, if they are using the proper words to convey what they want to say, among others. Some of the cited authors in this paper even affirmed that the teacher's emotional intelligence directly affects the students' learning process due to an assertive communication aspect (Shao et al., 2013). This conclusion is not to be taken as an impossible standard for teachers since they are constantly learning from research and their experiences on the job, but it is intended to encourage educators to do the most every time they try to improve their praxis.

Moreover, speaking of the coping strategies proposed in the paper, it is of the utmost importance for teachers to be able to instruct students on strategies which will help them cope with a crisis; however, encouraging students to constantly work on overcoming FLA is equally relevant—if not more significant. As has been mentioned, neither teachers nor students can escape FLA; nonetheless, giving students the proper tools to prevent it is always a reachable option, not to mention that this tactic will be more helpful long term for anxious students since it will help them reduce their anxiety levels.

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This ebook comprises a collection of essays written by students from the Master's Program in Education with an Emphasis on English Learning from Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica as part of their graduation project. In each of the manuscripts contained here, a Costa Rican English teacher reflects on some of his or her educational experiences and encountered challenges and proposes strategies to tackle them so that any English teachers out there facing similar situations may benefit from these ideas.

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