

ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE BRUNCA REGION OF COSTA RICA:

A Collection of
Case Studies by
Undergraduate
Students in 2024

Editors

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Table of Contents

Contents

Presentation.....	4
About this Publication.....	6
Foreword.....	8
Analysis of the Social Environment in Students' English Language Learning in a Public High School in Corredores	11
Digital Content from Social Media as a Didactic Resource for the Development of the Listening Skill in High School.....	25
Understanding the Role of Student In-Class Attention: A Case Study in the EFL Learning Field	41
Unfolding Connections in the EFL Classroom: Students' Perspectives on the Relationship Between Rapport and their Engagement	63
Student-Teachers' Perspectives about the Teaching of English to a Mixed Proficiency Class: A Case Study in a Social Outreach Program at a Public University	88
Teacher's and Students' Perceptions of the Contribution of Interactive Activities for Oral Production Skills of Advanced EFL Students	102
Critical Thinking Development: A Case Study of English Language Professors and English Teaching Students' Perceptions at a Public University in the Brunca Region	126
Oral Production Skills: A Case Study on the Role of L1 in a University-Level EFL Classroom in the Brunca Region	148
Choosing English Teaching as A Major: A Case Study of First-Year Students in the Brunca Region in Costa Rica.....	170
Afterword.....	194

Presentation

Research training in English language teacher education is crucial for developing reflective, informed, and effective educators who can enhance their teaching practices, contribute to the field, inform their context realities and ultimately improve student learning outcomes in their local communities. The research training of pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at Universidad Nacional (UNA), Sede Regional Brunca ensures evidence-based practice as it equips them with the skills to critically evaluate and apply research findings to their future teaching practices. By applying and incorporating their knowledge in their lesson plans and overall instructional decisions, they rest assured that their teaching is grounded in evidence rather than mere tradition. Likewise, pre-service teachers who are trained in research sharpen their observation and data analysis skills which might translate into the ability to choose the most effective approaches for their specific classroom contexts. Through our experience as research trainers, we have witnessed that, through the different in-class and out of class activities, research training empowers our students, future teachers, to contribute to the broader field of English language teaching. We are sure that once they complete the whole research training process, they can conduct their own studies, share findings with small and large audiences, and participate in discussions that advance the profession and improve educational practices.

Throughout a four-year learning experience in the English Teaching Major at UNA SRB, students completed courses to develop their pedagogical and linguistic expertise to be able to become teachers that contribute to the solutions of their professional practice (Bolaños-Villalobos et al., 2013). The course ELM400 Seminar on Innovation, Field Research, and Educational Production (SIFREP) is paramount in this regard because it fosters a critical understanding of the socio-educational phenomena that take place in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. The course provides students with opportunities to conduct disciplinary research in a particular educational context to devise proposals that strengthen the learning-teaching of EFL in the classroom. Additionally, it is important to highlight that research is a competency expected to emerge in the formation of teachers so that they can make research-based reflections upon their curricular practice, pursue agentic ongoing professional development, and propose courses of action that solve problems through innovation (Marco Nacional de Cualificaciones para las Carreras de Educación: Resultados de Aprendizaje de la Carrera de Enseñanza del Inglés, pp. 49, 54, & 60).

The faculty at UNA, SRB have made efforts to reaffirm the importance of the SIFREP course as one of the cornerstones in the major. Since 2015, professors teaching this course at Coto and Pérez Zeledón campuses have agreed to collaborate in the co-construction of the course assessment, reading material, and the mediation strategies used in the course with the purpose of helping students achieve the expected outcomes as future

research-oriented professionals. In 2024, the course professors from both campuses joined forces to publish a book that portrays students' research practice; the book was titled *English Teaching and Learning in the Brunca Region: A Collection of Case Studies by Undergraduate Students*. The book compiled the research studies developed by English teaching students enrolled in the course. The topics covered in the book included areas, such as the teaching of language skills, EFL classroom mediation, and realities beyond the EFL classroom, which were of particular interest to understand the realities of high school, outreach projects, and higher education in the Brunca Region. Similar to what happened in 2023, the professors from both campuses compiled students' case studies reported during 2024 in a book. Once again students addressed phenomena that can better shape their teaching-learning process and their skills and competencies as professionals. The publication of their work is expected to have an impact in the teaching and learning of English in peripheral regional contexts and the undergraduate researchers' future professional life as agents of innovation in the EFL curriculum.

The Editors

About this Publication

English Teaching and Learning in the Brunca Region of Costa Rica: A Collection of Case Studies by Undergraduate Students in 2024 is a compilation of research projects conducted by pre-service teachers as part of an academic requirement needed to conclude their bachelor's degree in English Teaching at a public university in the southern part of Costa Rica. The projects showcased throughout this publication represent some of their first experiences in field research, providing them with valuable insights regarding the complexities of foreign language teaching and learning. Carrying out this research process enhances their ability to address challenges in the English Teaching field and serves as a foundation for continuous learning and professional development. Beyond the impact that engaging in research has for these students' professional development, this book offers relevant information for English teachers, foreign language learners, administration, researchers, and language education enthusiasts as it contributes to the ongoing conversation about language teaching in diverse educational contexts. The research projects reflect the contribution of 27 students that completed this with the guide of their professors.

The book is organized into three sections that describe different language learning contexts: high school, outreach projects and higher education. The pre-service teachers have had the opportunity to experience these contexts either as practitioners or as learners of EFL. The section about high schools refers to the role public high schools have throughout the Brunca Region of Costa Rica. The section explores challenges and opportunities that arise when teaching English to students in this educational system and reports on the realities faced when implementing the curriculum in this context. The second section, outreaching programs, reveals experiences about English language instruction and learning beyond traditional school environments in the southern part of Costa Rica. The studies presented here shed light on the impact of non-formal EFL education in local communities and broader social contexts. Finally, the higher education section delves into issues concerning the public university context and learner experiences when faced with the challenge of learning English at this tertiary level. Together these sections offer a comprehensive look at English teaching in the Brunca Region across different educational systems and age groups providing valuable insights for teachers, researchers and education professionals.

We wish to invite students, teachers and researchers who are interested in the teaching and learning of EFL to engage with the findings offered through each chapter and to reflect on their own teaching and learning experiences. Each research project offers valuable insights into the realities of English language education in the Brunca Region; thus, it encourages teachers and other professionals interested in the education field to

question, adapt and innovate practice. By embracing inquiry and critical reflection, we can create more effective learning environments. This collection of research projects can serve as a foundation for future studies, inspiring new inquiries and approaches to continually innovate English language teaching.

Foreword

It is with great pleasure that I present this collection of research articles, a work dedicated to sharing teaching experiences, enhancing innovation, and promoting critical thinking. Currently, we live in a world where research has a prominent role in all areas of expertise; thus, it is imperative to provide a forum for the intellectual exchange of new trends in the educational field. This book showcases a diverse collection of research articles that contribute new insights, question existing paradigms, and propose innovative solutions to contemporary challenges. Each manuscript has undergone a strong editing process, ensuring a high standard of academic excellence. The nature of this compilation of case study reflects the growing need for collaborative work to address issues in foreign language teaching. I extend my deepest gratitude to the authors, reviewers, and editorial board members whose key contributions have made this publication possible. Their commitment to innovative teaching practices is the core of this issue. As you explore the research presented, I encourage you to reflect on the findings, engage in meaningful discussions, and apply the knowledge gained to further inquiry and reflection. I hope this serves as both an inspiration and a valuable resource for researchers, professors, and students as well.

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THEME 1

High School
Setting



High School

The teaching of English was formally established in 1957 by the University of Costa Rica (Olivares-Garita & Barrantes-Elizondo, 2023) and has since been reformed a number of times, with many government (national and regional initiatives) to amend the flaws and weaknesses of previous English syllabi, reflected both in students' inability to reach the desired outcomes established by the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) as well as the desired level of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers according to the Common European Framework (CEFR) bands, and prior global evaluations and English proficiency indexes such as the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and the EPI (English Proficiency Index, which labelled the country as low. There is a myriad of reasons to highlight the importance of English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Costa Rican secondary education context. Currently, the Costa Rican education system follows an Action-oriented Approach (AOA) towards language teaching. As Cadenas Bogantes and Castro Miranda (2021) pointed out, this approach is deeply rooted in the goal of becoming bilingual, promoting learner-centered instruction, building knowledge through real life experiences, and transforming learners to become social agents and can accomplish societal tasks, beyond the scope of language-related ones.

AOA seeks to move beyond its Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) predecessor in the Costa Rican context. Along with it came a change in the development of competences. The new program now focuses on two groups of competences: general and specific ones, making no distinction among them in terms of importance (Cadenas Bogantes & Castro Miranda, 2021). Thus, it is important to project how these competences are being taught, formed, assessed and monitored throughout the language learning process, especially along four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking). Given the backdrop of the globalized world, with trending increases in productivity in fields such as commerce, business, tourism, entertainment, social media, and many other sectors, the integration of technology is another aspect to consider as it has become rather synonymous with secondary language education. In fact, in the post-COVID 19 pandemic wake, abundant teaching training programs and investment in technological systems and advances were made precisely to bridge the digital gap (Dhawan, 2020). This also brought about a change in the understanding of the traditional classroom and the “new” normal, especially in light of the integration of technology for educational purposes.

Analysis of the Social Environment in Students' English Language Learning in a Public High School in Corredores

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Abstract: This study analyzed the role of the social environment in the English Language classroom and its importance in student's learning. This research is based on a qualitative approach aimed at analyzing the perception of the participants in regard to the social environment in the English classroom. The members of this study were selected using cluster sampling method. The participants were from a public high school in Corredores. This study used focus observations, interviews for the teacher and the students, and two focus groups. The results showed that there is social interaction in the classroom, and the participants expressed that there is a good relationship between them. Despite this, the evidence from this study suggests that the students' use of English in the classroom is reducing considerably, as the students do not perceive the need to learn English. Considering the findings, we designed a lesson plan with a worksheet as an action plan, aiming to help the teacher to implement the social environment in the teaching/learning practices.

Key words: Social environment, interaction, English language

Introduction

The environment prepared by the teacher for the classes can provide multiple opportunities to develop different skills required when students are learning English as a second language. The methods, techniques, and approaches used by the teacher will have an influence on the education of students. Teaching is composed of a variety of approaches that boost the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the students (Nwokedi, 2023). One of the elements of classrooms is the social environment, which is an essential aspect to develop an optimal process of learning English in the classroom. Successful educational environments not only include academic elements. Classrooms require social relationships among the students. Social environments improve the motivation of students, the performance of output skills and promote task-related interaction. Additionally, the social environment significantly moderates the classroom behavior because students are allowed to interact with their classmates and teacher (Patrick & Ryan, 2005). The implementation of

social activities creates good student relationships, allows the teacher to encourage the learners' participation in the classroom, and improves their output skills. The preparation of teachers to develop the social environment in English classrooms in public high schools in Costa Rica is a challenge. Matamoros (2024) mentioned that an adequate methodology in the formation of teachers is required to create a positive classroom environment. Moreover, teachers should be good models and feel comfortable sharing the knowledge in the classroom. The social environment evidences a direct and indirect influence in the learning field and how the professors build the classroom environment to maximize the positive effects in EFL students. Zhang (2023) investigated the impact of the quality of the social environment on students and the importance on their learning outcomes and experiences. Having a positive social environment improves the learner's motivation and promotes an improvement in the English learning process.

Although some researchers (Bartholomey, 1994; Qureshi et al., 2021) have investigated the social environment, there is still a gap in the implementation of social activities in the environment of English classes. It is important to prepare a favorable social environment in the class, engaging the students in the different activities in which they interact with their classmates and the teacher developing more output skills in such students. As Zuñiga and Barrantes (2021) explained, it is frequent to find teachers who use the teacher centered method in each classroom year after year with no implementation of social activities that enrich students' knowledge and provide spaces to develop the social environment where students can practice their output skills.

During our teaching practicum, it was possible to observe that teachers did not focus on all the linguistic elements instead they covered only basic grammar and the implementation of a complete plan for the classes was not well structured; moreover, the use of teacher centered approach was developed in the majority of the classes. These aspects influence the social interaction process of students and the lack of linguistic abilities of students becomes more evident. By studying this situation, we can learn how to improve the social environment, as well as the teacher-student relationship and how to overcome the difficulties in the students' gap in English learning. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to analyze the factors that shape the social environment in a group of EFL students at a public high school in Corredores. Therefore, it is important to explore the implementation of social activities that the teacher uses in the classroom to promote interaction between students.

This study has an influence on the social environment and the learning process of students. Identifying the social environment of students learning the English language will help teachers to improve and design their classes including more social approaches. A variety in the learning environment will help teachers and students to boost English learning. Also, research on how the social environment influences the students will allow the professor to consider and use different approaches to enhance the learning process. This

study will bring recommendations on how to promote students' interaction that teachers can implement in the classroom; language teachers can clarify how to engage the students in the EFL classroom and encourage learners to develop their linguistics competences through the interaction.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What factors shape the learning classroom environment?

Subordinated Questions

1. How can the social environment contribute to the language learning of students in a public high school?
2. How is the relationship between teacher and students key to having a good classroom environment?
3. What are some social recommendations for teachers to implement in the classroom?

Literature Review

This literature review explored the foundations of the social environment and the role of the pedagogical environment in language learning. This paper will not cover the physical environment nor the pedagogical environment, yet it will examine different patterns of interactions that also play a role in shaping the social environment. We focused only on the elements of the social environment that influence the language and teaching process in ESL classrooms. The information was taken from online websites such as journals, articles, and book chapters focusing on the aspects that shape the social environment. Primary and secondary sources of information were used: the databases used were EBSCO, JSTOR, ERIC, and Google Scholar.

Social Environment: Historical Background and Definition

Ghosh (2015) explained that the concept of environment refers to several aspects such as atmosphere, tone, physical, social or climate that constructs the learning environment. However, this research will focus mainly on the social class environment. Before introducing the social environment, it is important to introduce historical information about the learning environment as a whole to understand the roots of the concept. According to Ghosh (2015), the learning environment started in the early 20s in the United States. It focused on the key aspects that contribute to the power of the environment and its effects to determine the conduct of the students. Later in the 60s, experts such as Bartholomay (1994) started exploring the social classroom environment, which refers mainly to the interaction of the students with other students and the teacher in the classroom and the ways that the environment contributes to social relationships.

The first stages of the learning process focused only on oral proficiency, which achieved only a part of the goal of teaching a second language. To fully achieve this goal, an adequate learning method was needed. As such, the learning environment required a teacher who could transform common knowledge into teachable knowledge and of categorizing the different types of knowledge and transforming the most important topics into pedagogical content (Gudmundsdottir & Shulman, 1987). Teaching content alone with no other support was not enough for a proper learning process. The teacher needed to create conditions to stimulate the pedagogical perception of learners by stimulating their senses, manipulating the environment for their students, and analyzing the students' behavior in response to those changes (Martin, 2002). By observing the behavior of the students, the teacher improves the classroom environment, producing positive responses, improving the learning process, and causing the students to be more interested in the class.

Patrick and Ryan (2005) explained that the classroom social environment consists of the students' perceptions about how they are encouraged to interact with others, such as classmates or the teacher, and includes the dimensions of teacher support, mutual respect, promoting student task-related interaction and promoting performance goals. Bartholomay (1994) describes that the characteristics of the classroom environment include the students' active involvement in class activities, interactions between students and the teacher, and completion of tasks related to the class. Emphasizing the social classroom environment and creating an environment where the students feel encouraged to use English language, leads to an interactive classroom in which the students actively participate in the class, and eases their learning process. In summary, active learning methodologies help promote and sustain an appropriate social environment.

The Role of Social Environment in Language Learning

It is required that the learning environment catches the attention of the students in order for them to acquire the knowledge in a more efficient way. Every human has the capacity to learn a new language; it is an innate skill; from the moment humans are born the learning process starts, and eventually the language learning process comes forth. A question made by Cazden (1973) reflects the necessity of looking for this skill in people, "How can we create educational environments which activate the natural language learning abilities which all children have?" (p. 4). The teachers should build a classroom environment which promotes the students' confidence, allowing them to feel comfortable developing their linguistic skills.

Learning a new language could be difficult for EFL students because they are not immersed in the social environment of the language. For these reasons, teachers have to create a learning environment with a variety of didactic resources to achieve the goals of all the tasks in order to avoid teaching simple book knowledge (Franklin & Harrington, 2019). The learning environment should reinforce the skills necessary to learn English, avoiding

memorization and creating production, and problem-solving activities that promote in-depth understanding.

Another important aspect to consider is the fact that the types of interaction in the classroom can shape the social environment. Children become socially involved through different activities. Pedagogical activities such as group work require social interaction (Tanic et al., 2012; Sasson et al., 2021). The implementation of social activities could help consolidate a positive learning environment, e.g., through the interaction between teachers and students. The study by Lu et al., (2014) highlighted the importance of the relationship between teacher-students as a positive learning approach where students overcome learning difficulties in the classroom environment and receive the support of the teacher to improve critical thinking.

The learning environment resulted from the necessity of effective language learning, where the learning process focused only on a few aspects such as speaking proficiency and left aside the other skills necessary for a proper language learning process. In response to this issue, the teachers implemented methods that produced positive reactions in the students and observed the changes in behavior. The implementation of a stimulating environment caused an improvement in student-teacher interactions. The learning environment is influenced by multiple factors such as the students' response to the tools used by the teacher, the type of activities, the behavior of the teacher, problem solving tasks, and different approaches to learning as well as the teacher- student and student-student interaction. The learning process can be refined by observing the response to the social interaction in the classroom and the reaction of the students to the approaches used by the teacher. The teacher must be able to pinpoint these changes and design new approaches to find the approach with the best results for the classroom.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to analyze the impact of the social environment in students' English language learning process in a high school in Corredores, Puntarenas. This chapter aimed to answer the research questions of the case study and details the procedures to collect the data analyzed in this paper about the social environment in students' English language learning. This section consists of the description of the research approach, the design of the study, participants and context, the institution where the study was conducted, age and level of the participants, number of participants, and the data collection procedures of the study.

Research Approach

This study is based on a qualitative approach as its goal was to learn about the perception of the participants. According to Creswell (2015), qualitative research is an approach to obtain a complete scene of a phenomenon using flexible approaches to deeply

understand the opinions, ideas, and points of view of the participants (p. 16). The qualitative approach seeks to analyze and understand a topic in a specific context, requiring more than statistics to reach the goal of the study. Additionally, the design of the study is a case study, the research studies a single unit in- depth; the unit to be investigated in this paper is the social environment in the English classroom between a high school teacher and her students in a public high school in Corredores, Costa Rica. Case studies investigate a daily life phenomenon in the natural context in which it occurs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The daily phenomenon that occurs in the designated institution for the investigation is the social interaction between the students related to the English classroom, and the relationship between students and teacher.

Participants and Context

The case study took place in a technical high school in Corredores, whose subjects were agriculture, computing, and administration with different approaches. The participants were students from eleventh grade and their English teacher. The number of students was 10, and they belong to section 11-2; their ages go from 16 to 17 years old, 5 of which are male and 5 are female. The English proficiency level of the students was lower than the standards established by the MEP syllabus at their grade; this was pointed out by their teacher and observed by the investigators, as the students rarely used English to interact in the class. When they used English, they requested help from the teacher to say their ideas.

The sampling method used in this case study was the criterion sampling method which, according to Palinkas et. al (2013), involves selecting individuals based on the assumption that they possess knowledge and experience with the phenomenon of interest. For this case study, the criteria used for the participants, and the teacher is based on the social environment in which the students are naturally exposed within the institution, such as interaction between students in relation to the English classroom, and the student-teacher relationship. The level of the students was decided considering the time and experience the students have within the institution and its teaching methods. The participants' recruitment process was based on the collaboration of the teacher in the teaching practicum, and the participant students were selected considering their participation in the classroom based on the collaborative teacher's opinion and the observation process of the case study. To gain access to develop the research, gather information through observations, and perform the interviews, the researchers presented letters of consent to the institution.

Data Collection Procedures

To collect data and analyze the social classroom environment, the instruments have to provide reliable and detailed information to develop insightful answers for the case study and the questions proposed in this research. The instruments include focused observations, an interview for the teacher, and a focus group. The focus observation contains a checklist with statements to obtain more details of the classroom, such as the social environment,

students' interaction and the student-teacher relationship. The interview for the teacher focuses mainly on the teacher's perspective. Lastly, two focus groups were conducted, which included 4 eleventh-grade students in each group. All the instruments were created, taking into consideration the questions that this paper will answer.

Focus Observation

The first instrument was a focused observation with the purpose of collecting specific details about the classroom development as well as the dynamics used by the teacher to promote students' interaction in the classroom activities. Focused observation is a method that involves collecting data using one's senses, especially looking and listening in a systematic and meaningful way (McKecknie, 2008, as cited in Smit & Onwegbuzie, 2018). The type of observation is non-participant. This will help collect information from the social environment diminishing the interference in the development of the classroom.

This type of instrument was appropriate for the research because it clarifies the interaction, as it provided an example to the researchers about the natural interaction in the classroom. The instrument was administered in two face-to-face classes in the high school classroom in the month of September 2024. The researchers used a checklist to guide the observation. The checklist was created with four main areas: learning aspects, social aspects, student interaction and student-teacher relationship; this instrument helps to analyze all the aspects that shape a social environment in the classroom.

Interview

The second instrument prepared for the research was a semi-structured interview with 10 open-ended questions for the teacher, which was conducted in approximately 20 minutes. A semi-structured interview is known for being flexible, allowing the interviewee to bring detailed and open answers (Bryman, 2012). This aspect helps the interviewer to adjust possible problems that arise during the interview. It was designed with the purpose of obtaining the perspective and opinion of the teacher about the social environment in an English classroom. The instrument was appropriate for this paper, as the researchers could understand the teacher's reality when dealing with the social environment. The instrument was administered face-to-face in the high school in Corredores in the month of September. It was conducted to the teacher by the researchers of this study. Additionally, it was necessary to add extra individual interviews to two students to obtain more information.

These instruments count on some follow-up questions to guide the conversation in case the researchers require extra information from the teacher. Additionally, the interviewers can add more questions if the situation requires it.

Focus Group

The third instrument is a focus group for the students. According to Bryman (2012), the focus group technique is usually implemented in qualitative research because it provides an open environment where the interviewers obtain a deeper understanding of the participants' point of view. The purpose of this instrument is to understand not only the teacher's point of view but also the students' perspective and opinions regarding the social classroom environment. This instrument was appropriate to obtain detailed answers from the students since they expressed their opinions with confidence. Each group consists of four students, one with two students that actively participate in the classroom and the other with two students that prefer not to participate or do not participate at all; these students were identified through the observations performed by the researchers.

The interview was developed face to face in the high school where the study took place in September; the focus group was divided into two groups of four students, for a total of eight students. It was conducted by the researchers of the study. The interview guide had 12 questions. Some of the questions were open-ended questions while others were answered with a scale to facilitate the understanding of the interviewer.

Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this section is to answer the research questions of this paper showing and analyzing the data collected from the three instruments implemented: observation, interviews and focus groups. The findings are categorized by themes that emerged from the codes generated by a digital tool called Atlas.ti and other codes created by hand, which allowed the researchers to organize the information and relate it to each research question. This section presents the findings that are organized into subcategories regarding the social impact on the English learning process. This section examines each sub-category that was obtained through inductive analysis. Then, the section ends with an analysis triangulating the data and presenting the most important aspects.

Data Analysis

The data for this paper were collected through observations, interviews, and focus groups. Thematic analysis was used to organize and present the results. Thematic analysis involves the identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the transcribed data (Nowell et al. 2017). Inductive coding was used. This type of coding involves analyzing the codes and the data as they appear in the process (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017).

The coding process was developed by using Atlas.ti; this tool allows dividing the data into codes, some of which were generated by Artificial Intelligence. The sub-categories provide an answer to the research questions. The subcategories are described in this chapter. The type of strategy for the analysis of this paper was triangulation. This

strategy is used to connect the information obtained in the findings with the literature review provided in this study (Bingham, 2023).

Social Environment Contribution to Language Learning

Social environment deals with the interaction that takes place in the classroom. The first aspect relevant in this area is the participant's interaction. We observed that the classroom was arranged in small groups. Groups of five or six tables were organized forming circles around the classroom for all the activities. The arrangement contributes to engaging students' collaboration and interacting with their classmates.

Moreover, during the interviews, all students expressed that their participation in class is more frequent when the interaction is required by the teacher, and sometimes they do it voluntarily. The main purpose of social interaction is to create an environment that contributes to communication during language learning. However, the teacher pointed out an obstacle in the interaction among students. She recalls that "They don't talk in English, never. Actually, the students don't want to learn English, but not only English, all the subjects" (personal communication, October 17, 2024). This experience produces demotivation in the teacher because the purpose of an English lesson is that students learn and implement the language at least in the classroom.

Meanwhile, we observed that the students constantly share their opinions in Spanish rather than English, and on some occasions, the teacher addressed this issue, making the students speak in English. Although the teacher requested students to speak in English, this did not occur fluently in the class; the students frequently talked to each other about class topics in Spanish, and they requested help from the teacher in Spanish as well. Furthermore, the students often completed the activities assigned by the teacher; however, on other occasions, the students were using their smartphone in the class and paid no attention to the English lesson. Likewise, the students mentioned that the majority of the activities were more traditional than technological, and activities emphasized individual work but then they supported each other when they did not understand the activity. The teacher shared that she preferred individual activities most of the time because she likes a quiet classroom.

Through the observations, we noticed that the classroom environment calls for the participation of the students that are willing to work in class. Most students were constantly participating and interacting in the activities of the teacher, which helped them as much as they needed to. Moreover, it is important to continue improving in the English environment because the use of real scenarios benefits students to explore the language in a broader way. Implementing activities that allow students to apply the language that they already know will also encourage them to understand the importance of learning and using the language.

Relationship Between Teacher and Students

In regard to interaction, the relationship that unfolds between the students is important for the classroom environment. We could observe a friendly relationship among the students. Juan, Sol and the eight participants of the focus groups expressed that they had a good relationship with their classmates. The students supported each other during the activities and shared ideas about the classwork. Sol shared that she works in the activities assigned, and then she interacts with her classmates about different topics not related to the class. Furthermore, Sol, Juan and all the students from the focus group perceive a very good environment in the class. On the other hand, Sol and Juan commented that the relationship is not good all the time because sometimes students are more restless, and some came to the class in a bad mood.

Regarding the relationship between the teacher and students, the teacher expressed that “the relationship is good. Yes, it's good. Some of the students have bad behavior, but it's okay” (personal communication, October 17, 2024). We observed how the teacher promoted a respectful environment, calling the attention of students when they insulted their classmates. We also observed how the teacher approached the students when they were doing classwork by walking around the class to check their participation and to clarify doubts during the activities. In the perception of the students, nine students considered that they have a good relationship with the teacher. On the other hand, two participants expressed during the focus group that the teacher did not interact much with them, but still, they have a good relationship with her.

There is mutual respect shown in the classroom. Despite the occasional misbehavior from the students, they respected the teacher and corrected their behavior when necessary. If the students have a good overall relationship, they will be more willing to participate in the activities and pay attention to the teacher; these aspects contribute positively to the development of the class.

Social Recommendations for Teachers to Implement in the Classroom

Addressing the topic, the teacher gave some recommendations to implement in the classroom. First, she mentioned that it is necessary to analyze the group and the topic because each group is different. Educators should consider different activities to encourage the participation of the students. In some groups, students communicate more of their opinion, participate voluntarily, and interact; however, in others these aspects have to be developed to engage and motivate students to participate in the class. Second, it was commented that, to encourage participation, open and personal questions could be used to engage students. Applying activities in which students feel integrated motivated them to interact in the class.

Similarly, motivation is necessary as sometimes students do not see the importance of learning a new language. The teacher commented that oral presentations and group activities can encourage students to use the language. On the other hand, the teacher expressed a concern in terms of authority. Participation in the class sometimes is complicated because students do not respond to the teacher's request. Martínez (2024), considered that “we as teachers are doing our part, but sometimes we feel that students and parents are not doing it”. The teacher explained that students misbehave during class, but they cannot tell students anything; this creates a negative environment that affects the class development.

The recommendations are intended to motivate teachers to create an environment where they can implement social activities while students develop the language. Social environment increases the possibility of creating interest in students to use English in real life. Additionally, the use of more open activities allows interaction between the participants, helping the relationship and the language function in the classroom.

As Tanic et al. (2012) and Sasson et al., (2021) explained, social activities, such as group work, consolidate a positive environment in the classroom. Likewise, the relationship between teacher and student allows the participants to become more involved in the classroom and develop their linguistic competences. In the process of comparing and contrasting, our results show that social interaction is helping in the classroom to develop the social interaction of students. The collaboration between the participants motivates them to participate; however, the interaction does not mean that students are improving their linguistic skills. As mentioned by Zuñiga and Barrantes (2021), the teacher centered method used in the class and the preference for individual activities render the possibility to create a social environment where language function is being developed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This section consists of three parts: the conclusion of the study, recommendations for the teachers and future practitioners, and the action plan resulting from this research. The research question, what factors shape the learning environment, was broken down into three sub-questions were about how the social environment can contribute to the language learning of students in a public high school, why the relationship between teacher and students is key to having a good classroom environment, and what are some social recommendations for teachers to implement in the classroom. Based on the conclusions derived from the study, the researchers developed recommendations for future teachers, and an action plan based on the outcome of this paper.

This study has found that the teacher does not always have knowledge about the social environment in the classroom, thus the activities implemented do not always favor interaction. The methods used to carry out the classroom activities can discourage the students. This situation affects the environment in the class, reducing the interaction

students have in the target language. The teacher proposes activities that require interaction between students, but the linguistic skills are not being used in such interactions. The research showed that, even if the students interact and help each other in the classroom, such interaction is not necessarily in English but rather in Spanish, unless the teacher asked the students to talk in English. This issue is important to address because students might not progress in the target language, as they do not have the previous knowledge required to use it while interacting with classmates.

The researchers recommend teachers implement more interactive activities in the classroom to develop students' language skills in the target language. Another recommendation is to foster the use of English in every type of oral interaction within the classroom, including greetings at the beginning of the class, and off-topic conversations within the classroom. We recommend other researchers improve the methodology of this research by using more open-ended interview questions in order to receive more detailed information from the participants.

Action plan

Based on our conclusions, we aimed at designing a workshop to inform about the importance of the social environment in the teaching/learning context. Knowing the concept and benefits of the social environment encourages the teacher to implement it in the classroom. The teacher can engage students to learn and use the language. Considering this, we propose to create a workshop that includes a lesson plan with 3 activities. The plan seeks for teachers to include social interaction in the English classes. The plan includes guidelines and steps for teachers to develop these activities in two classes. The activities involve three different skills: reading, writing, and speaking. Including these ideas can make students aware of the importance of learning and using English.

First the teacher introduces the workshop with a pre-task to activate the prior knowledge of students. Taking into account the linguistic level of students, task number one contains a script that learners read and practice in groups to present a short role play. This activity seeks to involve students in the class environment where they can feel comfortable speaking the language. The second part of the workshop consists of a writing task where students share their ideas with more independence, interact with their classmates and write a short story. The last part of the workshop is a speaking task where students can talk with their classmates and teacher by using their notes to describe certain elements to the class. The goal is to let the students participate in an open activity, where they can practice English and interact in the class. The idea of implementing the workshop in two different classes has the intention of creating an environment where students start using the target language. The activities proposed ask for students to use their linguistic knowledge step by step and create an environment where the students feel more comfortable to participate in the social environment in class.

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Digital Content from Social Media as a Didactic Resource for the Development of the Listening Skill in High School

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Abstract: Different social media is used in daily lifestyles for different purposes; such is the case of English language education. Traditional teaching methods have become monotonous and obsolete, which is why the use of digital content from social media is a good option that can be implemented for English language teaching in public high schools. Furthermore, in this study, different advantages were analyzed regarding the implementation of social media, such as TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, to teach the listening skills in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. A qualitative case study was conducted to describe the type of social media used to teach listening activities in the EFL classroom, what students perceived about using social media in the development of listening activities and what teachers recommended for a good development of listening activities by using social media. This research has demonstrated that the use of social media content to teach listening is useful, versatile, and easy for teachers, as well as engaging and motivating for students. This implies that teachers should take advantage of the use of social media for academic purposes, and more specifically, for teaching listening skills. Additionally, this paper provides a booklet with ten different listening tasks which contains all the stages and guidelines requested by the Ministry of Public Education of Costa Rica (MEP).

Keywords: social media, ELF, listening, teaching, didactic resource.

Introduction

Throughout the years, technology has been changing every aspect of people's lives, especially with the rise of social media and its daily use. Social media can be considered a technological component that has the potential to become a didactic resource in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. This study aims to explore the needs of teachers in the use of social media as a tool to teach English, which might improve not only the application of innovative teaching methodologies but also the enhancement of the listening skill. According to O'Brien (2020), teachers should implement teaching techniques and

extracurricular resources to use social media as a didactic tool. In addition, using social media for teaching purposes involves not only the use of apps through gadgets but also requires teachers to be well-trained in the use of the apps as well as in the management of other types of equipment.

According to Kohli and Sharma (2021), educators require two specific skills that are key for the successful use of online tools and social networks; these are technological knowledge and classroom management. We encountered an English teaching environment where the role of social media was not taken into consideration or even explored to teach linguistic skills, but most importantly it was not implemented in the listening skill. The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the use of digital content from social media in the development of the listening skill in eighth grade students at a public high school in Corredores, Costa Rica.

This research is a source of information for English language educators in the region that shares potential advantages that digital content from social media can bring to EFL classrooms. Not only educators but also students might be interested in the implementation of a resource that they have access to in their daily life. Our research questions aim to analyze how social media can contribute to students' development of listening skills, the type of social media that is currently used to teach in English classrooms, the students' perceptions when it comes to using this content in the classroom and lastly teachers' recommendations in terms of digital content that is suitable for the skill.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following central question and three subquestions.

Central Question

How does the use of digital content from social media contribute to the development of listening activities for a group of EFL eighth grade students at a public high school in Corredores, Costa Rica?

Subquestions

1. What type of social media is being used to teach listening activities in the EFL classroom?
2. What are students' perceptions about using social media in the development of listening activities in the ESL classroom?
3. What do teachers recommend for the development of listening activities when using social media?

Literature Review

This literature review gathers studies that highlight the importance of social media in English teaching, focusing on its evolution, the ways in which people interact within online communities and the perception of teachers and students in the implementation of social media in the EFL classroom. It also analyzes the implications of using social media in EFL classrooms, the possible resistance to the change, and the principles behind the development of listening skills. All the information for this literary review was gathered from different articles that were available online in different databases and academic repositories. Because of the scarce literature on the use of social media to teach listening in the EFL classroom, this review also focuses, though not exhaustively, on the use of technology and multimedia which could be incorporated into social media to develop listening skills.

Evolution of Social Media

Social media has changed communication since the first social network (Six Degrees) emerged. In agreement with Haythornthwaite (2005, as cited in Shu & Chuang, 2011) social media not only promotes the use of online communication to meet strangers but also makes people strengthen their offline relationships, and it allows them to be visible to others. In the early 21st Century, social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have emerged and are pivotal for communication among people. González Sanmamed et al. (2017) highlighted that social networks have changed the way people learn and communicate with others. Additionally, social media and gadgets, such as computers, smartphones and smart TVs, are currently used for teaching purposes, so education has been diversely updated in recent years. However, we consider that social media is not fully used nowadays in teaching even though a variety of digital content can be found there, such as videos, reels, songs, news, and pictures.

The Role of Teachers and Students in the Use of Social Media Content

Namaziandost and Nasri (2019), in Saudi Arabia, conducted a survey involving EFL teachers and students to evaluate their perspective about social media used in their teaching and learning process. A group of teachers participated in this survey and the results showed that most of them are in favor of the use of social media as a didactic resource in the classroom. As stated by Namaziandost and Nasri teachers considered the potential of social media, mentioning that it provides students the chance to practice English because of the nature of the digital environment that evokes motivation and serves as a helpful tool to improve learning. Teachers' perspective strengthens the purpose of this investigation, to explore the potential of this resource when teachers embrace social media instead of avoiding it. In the student's case, the survey highlights the benefits this type of didactic resource can provide to a classroom. These authors also stated that social media provides advantages like managing time properly, connecting remotely with people, and expressing

ideas freely and confidently. Their analysis portrayed an environment where social media is supportive and safe for students to be creative and learn about different people and cultures around the world.

Social Media in EFL Classrooms and the Principles for their Use in Listening Activities

Faizi et al. (2013) claimed that social media is an environment where people can collaboratively share life events and current events through multimedia. This can be beneficial for students in EFL classrooms by providing a realistic source of information which they are in contact with daily. On the other hand, these authors also mentioned that several researchers have started questioning the potential of social media in learning content, claiming that those kinds of resources might cause distractions among students from traditional learning skills and destroy the common roles of the teacher and learner (Faizi et al., 2013). The diverse opinions about social media portray a scenario where not every educator or student agrees on having social media implemented in their English language classes.

Snyder (2017) reported a qualitative study where a group of veteran teachers were interviewed to know their perspective related to changes in their English classes. The participants were around 50 years old and had teaching experience of at least 20 years. The researcher found a variety of opinions related to the perception of change in the educational field. One of the author's participants shared his opinion related to these changes. Snyder noted that one of the participants showed his unwillingness toward developing initiatives despite his interest to make changes in his classroom to increase the effectiveness of instruction; he stated, "most of my resistance is passive resistance, I do the minimum to meet whatever guideline it is and then I go in my room, and I teach. You hear that from a lot of veteran teachers" (p. 28). This point of view expresses the reality of most teachers that find it unnecessary to adapt to new teaching methodologies, proving that this pattern of unwillingness is mostly found in educators that have been teaching for a long time. They have adapted to a specific teaching style and leaving that comfort zone by trying to implement new ideas in spite of the possibility of causing discomfort that, in their logic, could be spared if they just continue doing what they are asked for by the authorities they work for and the institution because it has worked for them all these years.

On the other hand, the author has a record of one of their participants explaining her feelings about this same topic. Snyder (2017) expressed that Mrs. Smith shared her viewpoint when she said, "I like the change, I always grow when I change, when I have these new opportunities, it is just more exciting, I like coming to school and figuring out the next thing (p. 26)." This perspective is substantially relevant to reveal the possibility of teachers being willing to embrace any type of changes; the fact that the participants of these study are veterans provides the opportunity to prove that if someone who has been teaching for more than 20 years and is as open to change as Mrs. Smith is, everyone can, at least,

give it a chance to bring a new didactic resource to their classes and move along with the changes society has to offer.

The Principles Behind Developing Listening Skills

Listening is a skill that can follow two different processes for comprehension. In agreement with Nunan (2002), the listening skill is essential to speak the language appropriately. The author highlighted the importance of the skill even though it is the most underestimated skill in language acquisition. To understand the whole picture about what happens with the information that is given and is meant to be listened to, it is important to understand how the mind encodes this information. The processes, known as the bottom-up processing view and the top-down interpretation view, have ruled language pedagogy since the early 1980s (Nunan, 2002). These processes are key to understanding the listening process in general. In the bottom-up process, the listener can understand small units of the language, and, from that, he or she can start creating connections and building bigger sentences that will turn into more comprehension of what the person is listening to. Basically, it is a step-by-step process until the listener can understand what is being said. On the other hand, the top-down process is broader than the previous one. It goes beyond just acquiring units and putting them together. This process relies on the previous knowledge that the listener might have.

Thanks to this background information, the listener will be able to make predictions, infer situations, and understand the message quickly. Walker (2014) highlighted that teachers should encourage each student to find their own way of understanding what they are hearing. It is important to raise self-awareness of their metacognition process, but to make this possible, it is important to consider the bottom-up and top-down process. According to the Council of Europe (2011) there are main points that define the understanding of audio media and recordings:

- extracting concrete information
- understanding key points and relevant information
- catching important information
- identifying speakers' points of view, mood and even attitudes.

In the end, this process is a constant in individuals' daily life. This is how people analyze the information they perceive through hearing. It is relevant for teachers to be aware of this process, to understand how the information they are sharing with students is being processed and if this information is not received correctly. By following the ideals of these processes, a teacher can provide opportunities and make sure that the audio or video being shared is achieving its goal, which is for students to extract, understand, catch and identify information from it.

Taking into consideration the correct processes of human perception of an audio and the underpinnings of a successful understanding of an audio allows teachers to create listening tasks based on listening principles and gives them the opportunity to understand their students' perception better when it comes to the elaboration of listening activities. In terms of the most appropriate order to carry out a listening task, it is important to take into consideration the stages suggested to guarantee a successful activity. According to Chou (2016), the sequence of a common task-based listening activity consists of three parts: the pre listening, the during and the post listening stage. The pre-listening stage is for preparation, that is, the first contact before the reception of the audio. During the listening stage, the teacher looks for general or detailed understanding from the students. Finally, the post listening stage takes place when the teacher looks for a reaction to the content already covered by focusing on specific features and by encouraging spoken or written replies to the information perceived in the audio.

In terms of the video or audio chosen to teach the listening skill, its length should be considered. In a qualitative research conducted, the researchers observed a group of high school students that were completing a listening task. According to Rismawati (2017), teachers should consider appropriate lengths, especially short segments which are meant to cover students' needs and learning proficiency. Hence, teachers should select audios that are inside a reasonable length depending on students' proficiency level to keep them focused instead of causing a loss of interest with a video that is too long. This will give students the necessary time to analyze what they are perceiving and to accomplish the activities.

The Use of Social Media Content to Teach Listening

There are studies about the receptive skills and the advantages that the implementation of social media content can bring to the table. George (2018) stated that, in current teaching and learning environments of receptive skills, it makes a huge difference if the teacher is open to utilizing the content available online and even in Google Play Store. This author highlighted the impact of the content found on the internet and how its use can make a difference from classes that do not incorporate this kind of content. Other authors have found that some platforms have relevant information that can add to their English classes and enhance their listening task. There are plenty of Instagram accounts that grant people with information in the English language, and this represents an advantage for students to increase their vocabulary and improve their listening abilities (Agustin & Ayu, 2021). In addition, this author explained that being in contact with the target language through a common platform such as Instagram, provides students with the opportunity to have authentic material and practice in their hand learning new words and listening to them as well.

Finally, another study described the impact of this kind of content, specifically the use of YouTube. Lestari et al. (2023) stated that the most common platform used to teach is YouTube. The channels from YouTube consist of audio-visual content which is sound supported by a set of images that are very helpful for students to increase their listening comprehension. They found that not only do teachers use social media content in their classes, but also that there is a pattern where the teacher's favorite platform is YouTube because of its visual nature. Social media content can be a helpful tool that is available to any teacher around the world with internet access, especially those with the optimism to give it a chance to be part of his or her classes and for the ones who already proved its benefits when it is implemented.

Research Methodology

The research approach that we used is qualitative, which generally starts with interpretations of theoretical frameworks that help pinpoint research problems (Cresswell, 2013). The qualitative approach allows researchers to adequately address the problem found, administer the necessary instruments, and collect data in the natural environment of the participants of the study, which, in this specific case, is a Conversational English classroom in a public high school in Costa Rica. Qualitative analysis provides patterns to establish the outcome of the study. The design of the research is a case study, which gives the researcher the opportunity to investigate a topic in-depth with numerous participants (McLeod, 2019). In fact, conducting a case study was appropriate, as we intended to explore the participants' insights about the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis is the use of digital content from social media as a didactic resource to teach listening skills in a public high school.

Participants and Context

The study was conducted at a public technical high school located in a rural neighborhood on the border between Panama and Costa Rica in Corredores. The participants in this study were a group of 14 eighth graders around the age of 13 and 14. On the other hand, the teacher collaborating in this investigation was 47 years old and had 20 years of experience in public high schools and is in charge of the Conversational English course of the eighth graders participating in the study. The kind of sampling used to select the participants was criterion sampling. Due to our previous experience from the teaching practicum, we determined that the students and teacher were suitable for the investigation. The first reason was that the teacher-participant showed an interest in being updated with current resources and tools available, which was key to gathering the necessary data since the project focused on this topic. Additionally, the students have been her students in previous years, meaning that they have been exposed to the same kind of didactic resources before, making them valuable and knowledgeable informants.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process consisted of three observations focused on the students and an interview with the teacher. These instruments were designed to gather data to answer the research questions proposed, centered on the use of digital content from social media as a didactic resource for the development of the listening skill in the EFL classroom at a public high school in Corredores, Costa Rica.

Observation

Two in-site class observations were conducted. The observation was divided into five different sections and a total of seventeen criteria which were designed to describe teaching activities and students' reaction to them during the classes. Moreover, the way the educator teaches the listening skill, the order of stages and the activities in which students took part were also observed. For Creswell (2013), observation is one of the most appropriate instruments for qualitative research because it allows researchers to obtain specific information that is collected by observing the students in their natural settings. The purpose of this instrument was to collect data about general aspects of the listening task: the pre-listening activities, the social media content used in the listening for the first and second time, the post-listening activities and, lastly, the students' reaction to the content used to develop the listening skill.

Interview

The objective of the interview was to collect data about the teacher's perspective regarding the use of social media content to teach the listening skill. The interview was administered to the teacher through a video conference platform. Creswell (2013) believed that the information for qualitative study that was gathered through the internet provides advantages reducing costs of travel and time. It also provided the interviewee with the time and flexibility to be able to answer the questions of the interview. The interview included 16 questions. The first two were icebreakers. Then, it continued with eleven open-ended questions that were key to the study, and lastly, three follow-up questions that were meant to be used just in case we required deeper information regarding the teacher's answers. The questions focused on topics such as the participant's perspective about social media in general, social media as a didactic resource, and social media used to teach listening skills.

We directed questions focused on which types of social media the interviewee used to teach the listening skills, which criteria she considered for selecting the social media content, how her students reacted to this type of resources, and what she recommended to other English teachers regarding the use of social media content.

Findings and Analysis

We decided to use a model of analysis called the Wa-Mbaleka model. Wa-Mbaleka (2017) suggested first classifying the questions into different codes, then categories, and, finally, from categories state the emerging themes. We used this technique starting with the preparation and organization of the interview transcription by highlighting the information that significantly fitted our research.

In vivo was the type of coding process used. Wicks (2017) mentioned that in vivo codes are done manually derived from the actual language used, usually the actions relayed by participants each of them producing varied but equally relevant insights valuable for the qualitative data. We decided to choose this coding because of the small-scale nature of our project, the amount of information to analyze was manageable enough to do it manually. We gathered all the data, analyzed it, and found the most recurrent ideas and grouped them according to categories and themes using the model previously mentioned. At the end of the coding process, we determined the themes that had emerged and developed them to provide the analysis.

Social Media for EFL Teaching

The data revealed a variety of social media platforms that are used to teach listening skills in EFL classes, such as TikTok, Instagram reels, and YouTube. The teacher mentioned, *“I’m a follower of many YouTubers and TikTokers who teach English. So, I save some useful and interesting videos to use in my classes”*. She highlights how practical these platforms are and acknowledges that one of the possible motivations and considerations for using them, in her case, is that the content is created by other English teachers. The teacher mentioned, *“I have used reels from Instagram and videos from TikTok to teach different topics such as food, journeys, numbers, and so on”*. This demonstrates the flexibility of the materials that can be found online which allows teachers to select the content that better suits the class. Consequently, due to these platforms being available to everyone, it is up to the teacher how many times digital content from social media is used. In this particular case, the teacher stated that *“our national program is divided in five scenarios and each scenario is divided in two themes, so I try to use social media at least once per theme”*. According to the Ministerio de Educación Pública (MEP, 2021), a theme is the main topic taught each week that refers to a real-life scenario encouraging context over content (p. 21). This topic represents the variability of content that can be found in this platform considering that the teacher finds the specific content that she needs no matter which theme she teaches according to the guidelines of the Ministry of Education (MEP).

Conversely, social media must be exploited in the English classroom with the aim of exposing the L2 learners to the target language as much as possible (Çakir, 2006, p. 70). These platforms provide a wide range of videos and audios that suit the needs of every teacher such as short videos that engage the students and help them to increase their motivation to participate in listening activities.

Teacher's Criteria for Content Selection

In terms of characteristics of social media content in an ELF classroom for listening activities, there are some important aspects that make a video or audio ideal to develop the activity in terms of the appropriate length and pace of the audio or video. During the interview, the teacher emphasized that “when videos or audios are too long, students feel frustrated”. This might cause students to get lost and forget about the goal of the task due to the amount of information in the audio or video. Hence, shorter videos are easier for them to focus on and comprehend the material and accomplish easily and successfully what the teacher requests. Additionally, the teacher emphasizes the presence of the subtitles in the videos to enhance students' understanding of what they are listening to, allowing them to make the connections between what they are listening to and the written text above.

The teacher mentioned other features she pays attention to are time and pace. This is a suitable observation considering her students' linguistic level and does not want to confuse them with an audio or video that involves a native speaker talking at a fast pace. The audios that she played during the observations lasted between one to three minutes, which is suggested by the teacher for students who have a low linguistic level of English.

The interview helped to reveal key aspects related to the teacher's selection of the digital content from social media in listening skill activities. The teacher mentioned, “I choose videos according to the vocabulary and grammar that they are learning at the moment, and I take into account time and speed”. Based on the data shared by the teacher and what we observed, she not only takes the contents into account (grammar and vocabulary) when selecting audios or videos but also the speed and the length. This helps as a support to what students are currently learning. One of the main considerations in the teacher's selection of the content is the accurate resemblance with video or audio to their current level of understanding.

The teacher also mentioned, “I like TikTok because videos are short and easy to download. Some of them have subtitles, so it helps students understand them faster”. According to what the teacher said and what we observed during the second observation, she used subtitles to allow students a better understanding of the content in the videos. Although captions are not supposed to be used during listening activities, they help that low linguistic level students understand the words or phrases they listen to. In agreement with Boltziar and Munkova (2024), using captions when teaching listening helps students learn the correct pronunciation and spelling.

Students' Engagement with the Content

The students were very interested in the type of resources used by their teacher during the listening activities, such as videos and reels taken from TikTok because it is a type of content to which they are frequently exposed. Ningtyas et al. (2024) highlighted that

increasing students' exposure to social media motivated them to learn and participate actively (p.184). Additionally, the students understood both the main ideas and specific details of the audios and videos used for the listening activities. Additionally, they participated actively when their teacher asked them to come up with the answers. We observed that, when the teacher projected a video from TikTok, the students were paying close attention to what the speaker was saying and all the illustrations shown.

Not only did the students get to understand the content they were exposed to better, but they were more interested in the content because it was from social media. The teacher recalled during the interview that “students like those kinds of videos. Sometimes they are funny and interesting, and they enjoy the class”. This information suggests a resemblance between what was seen in the observations and the teacher's point of view. The teacher sees her students' reactions every time that she uses a digital resource from social media to teach the listening skill and turns out to be a good idea that not only helps students in terms of engagement and understanding but also helps the teacher to accomplish the goal set for the listening task.

Stages for a Listening Task

Regarding the observations, the teacher did not follow the didactic sequence requested by the MEP. During the listening task, the students were supposed to “understand respect as a better way to strengthen our planetary citizenship with identity for a new world and show respect for all those aspects that encompass a cultural exchange when traveling around the world” (MEP, 2020, p. 137). To accomplish these goals, the teacher was supposed to follow the didactic sequence which was based on the following stages: pre-listening, during listening and post-listening.

In the first stage (pre-listening), the teacher did not provide the name of the audios, nor videos used; instead, she let the students know what the videos and audios were about. Then, during the second stage (listening for the first and second time), the teacher played the audios and videos twice, so the students could understand the main ideas and specific information provided. We could see how they shared their insights orally when the teacher asked them to provide the answers for them while listening and during the pair-group feedback task. Finally, in the third stage (post-listening), the teacher did not conclude the listening task with a reflexive activity. She just made sure that the students understood the audio; thus, the post-listening stage was avoided.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The teacher who was interviewed believed that social media content is a valuable tool to teach listening skills. The evidence from the study indicated that the use of social media content is an effective tool that successfully fulfills the necessities and requirements that a listening task requires. The teacher repeatedly used social media content which

suggests that she is more than familiar and prepared to implement social media content in her classes and make the most of this resource, especially when teaching listening skills. This implies that the teacher not only actively implements digital content from social media in her classes, but also successfully meets the objective of the listening activity as well. This is important to highlight because this caused her students to be more motivated and encouraged to complete a task where something as familiar as social media is involved in classes since they have contact with this source in their personal lives.

In addition, the observations showed that the teacher did not let the students know the name of the videos and audios used during the listening tasks. This implied that, although it was observed that some students understood most of the information from the audios, there were a few students who did not recognize what the video was about after a few seconds of the audio being played. Due to the lack of a well-structured pre-listening activity, low proficiency level students were confused and could not be properly familiarized with the audio to which they were about to listen. It is important to provide the name of the audio or video used during the listening tasks for a better comprehension of the students, which will collaborate to set the ground and prepare them for the listening activity.

This study has also shown that the students were interested and motivated during the listening tasks due to the use of social media content. This implies that the students could be interested and motivated in other types of tasks if social media content were used. This is important to remark because the students might enhance their English level through the use of videos and audios taken from social media in class and outside the classroom.

In terms of recommendations, we advise teachers to follow the didactic sequence in listening tasks (pre-listening, listening for the first and second time, and post-listening) for a better performance and understanding of the students in all of the stages of this task to make sure that the goal is achieved. Second, we could perceive that the teacher used subtitles in some videos to help the students understand better. We suggest English teachers should use subtitles just when they acknowledge the reality of their beginner students related to their low linguistic level of English, and that using subtitles would help them relate what they read with what they hear. We also recommend teachers to implement the use of social media content in other linguistic skills, such as speaking, reading, and writing, as well as for teaching grammar and vocabulary because this might promote students' engagement and motivation to the learning of the English language. We would also say that the teacher should consider their linguistic level to make sure that they comprehend both the main idea and specific details of the audio or video.

Action Plan

This plan proposes ways to strengthen the weaknesses found in the study. To improve the quality of the listening tasks using social media content, the action plan is designed to

be implemented in a high school. It includes 10 listening tasks that match each of the themes that eighth graders have to study according to the national curriculum. Each scenario has two themes, and we suggest creating a listening task that will involve social media content to propose possible materials to teach the skill. For example: the third scenario to study is called “Going Green” and that scenario has two different themes:

- Sustainable Development: A Pathway to the Green Transportation, Waste Management and Air Quality.
- Growing our Food: My Backyard Garden.

Objective

The objective is to find relatable information that matches the goal of the listening task and resembles the theme to study. We designed a booklet mentioning the purpose of our plan and what the teacher should do with it. Then, each scenario and theme will be designed with catchy illustrations to resemble the vocabulary.

Rationale

The purpose is to create a booklet with different listening tasks that involve social media content related to the theme the educator is teaching according to the MEP curriculum. This will work as a guide for the teacher to implement these tasks whenever she decides to.

Implications

The creation of a booklet aims to increase the use of social media content specifically in listening. First, it is one task per theme, the teacher can decide to implement it at any time the theme is developed, and the task needs to match what she is teaching. Second, each task is created by considering the listening objective of the theme. This means that not only does the listening task match what is expected to be accomplished at the MEP, but it also implements social media content that matches the objective. Third, students will feel more interested if the content they are about to be exposed to comes from a platform they are in contact with every day. This will make them realize that social media is more than just entertainment and is also a great learning tool.

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Understanding the Role of Student In-Class Attention: A Case Study in the EFL Learning Field

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Abstract: Student in-class attention (SICA) can be defined as students being on task and actively involved in the class activities. This topic has been widely studied in the field of English language teaching. However, in today's technological era, where attention spans are diminishing, teachers find it increasingly challenging to keep students engaged in the classroom. This research paper aims to analyze the role and implications of SICA, as well as the teacher and students' strategies to sustain it. This qualitative case study was conducted in a Costa Rican public technical high school in the Brunca region. Data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured student interviews, and a semi-structured interview with the teacher. The research question that guided this investigation is, What is the role of student' in-class attention during conversational EFL lessons in a public high school? The findings evidenced two main student in-class attention distractors: cell phone usage and negative peer influence. More specifically, students did not consciously perceive their cellphones as a distractor, although it represented a disruptor of attention. Another important finding was the negative influence of classroom conditions. These results underscore the need of teacher strategies to maintain student attention. This case study reported the role of student in-class attention to reflect that this is a phenomenon that is shaped by various factors, which can directly affect students' academic performance.

Through these findings, EFL educators will be able to expand their knowledge on SICA not only to understand the term, but to evaluate their teaching methodology and effectiveness to better capture their students' attention. A final section in this paper describes an action plan: a workshop for students about awareness of SICA's role and some strategies to maintain it.

Key words: Case study, EFL teachers, EFL students, student in-class attention, distractors

Introduction

Student in-class attention (SICA) is essential when learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Different elements can disrupt students' attention and interfere with their learning process. In light of this view, attention is defined as a perception of stimulus which depends on various constitutional and environmental factors (Al-Hejin, 2004; Tremolada et al., 2019; Pllana, 2020). EFL learners might perceive SICA as a state in which they are actively engaged in the learning process; it also contributes significantly to students' advancement of their language learning. Most teachers are aware of the impact that the lack of attention can have on students' performance in learning a new language, which has made them show concern on searching for a solution to the stated problem (Olivares Garita, 2013; Al'Omairi & Al Balushi, 2015; Cicekci & Sadik, 2019). The importance of investigating the role of student in-class attention lies in identifying some of the common factors that may affect students' attention spans and, in parallel, searching for strategies to mitigate the implications of the lack of attention students experience during EFL lessons.

In today's world, the overwhelming number of stimuli people receive might make being focused on a difficult task. High school students are not the exception to overstimulation. In fact, this issue was noticed by the researchers during their high school teaching practicum. In the experience, all the researchers dealt with the lack of student in-class attention. The student-teachers perceived that SICA was difficult to maintain for even short periods of time and noticed that many students did not have an active participation in class tasks. The problem is that being active in all in-class activities is essential for students to effectively learn (Crosthwaite et al., 2015; Almosa, 2024).

During the practicum, students' physical presence seemed not to be an indicator of students being on task and following the development of the class because they were often distracted. Despite how creative the teaching activities were, the gamification of some classes, and all the efforts to keep students focused on the class, many of them became distracted and were off task. Most students had difficulties completing the assignments, following instructions, and even understanding the content of the lessons because they were using their phones, talking to each other, and doing non-class related activities. Therefore, this research seeks to provide answers on the role of SICA during conversational English classes at a high school in Pérez Zeledón to understand the possible implications this situation might have on students' language learning. Moreover, this study aims to

investigate the factors that are affecting student in-class attention as well as what the teacher is doing to address them, the teacher's and students' perceptions, and the implications that this can have in EFL language learning.

Students need to have an active role and assume responsibility for their own learning in an EFL classroom as that enhances autonomy, motivation, and deep engagement with the language. In this sense, their in-class attention might play a crucial role in their learning process. This case study may be of significant contribution to teachers, school authorities, and students because it aims to provide valuable insights by gathering information through direct observation and interviews within the classroom setting. By identifying specific factors that influence students' attention, this study seeks to inform decision-making processes regarding classroom management and teaching strategies.

Additionally, by revealing the actions currently taken by teachers, the study might be able to determine which practices are most effective in improving in-class attention and engagement. Once teachers identify the strategies that meet their students' needs, they can create a more interactive classroom where students are engaged most of the time, which is likely to make learning more enjoyable and meaningful, contributing to significant academic performance. This information can serve as a means for the educational field to obtain an authentic sample of the stated problem which might inform similar scenarios. Lastly, it is of relevance to understand that, as the world evolves, the factors influencing education may also evolve and suffer changes. For example, digital technology, especially mobile devices, have transformed education and expanded digital learning globally (Abid et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). It means that the tools and strategies used in the classroom might also evolve to obtain desirable outcomes.

After analyzing previous literature on the topic and contrasting it with the researchers' experience in their teaching practicum, three research questions regarding the role of SICA in EFL learning emerged. The main research question is stated as follows: What is the role of student' in-class attention during conversational EFL lessons at a public high school? Along with this general research question, two subsequent research questions need to be answered to provide a wide perspective on the topic. These are, what actions do teachers use to sustain student in-class attention? What are the implications of student in-class attention for English language learning? By answering these questions, a deep understanding of the phenomenon may be provided.

Literature Review

This literature review explores the role of SICA in educational settings, examining its definitions, types, and the factors influencing student engagement and learning outcomes.

Attention in Today's Society

Attention plays a crucial role in human beings' daily lives for several reasons. Defining attention might be complex because of the wide variety of meanings that can be found in different sources. Attention is perceived as an evolved cognitive process that contributes to the adaptation and effective election of behaviors. It also enables the focusing, sustaining, and processing of information coming from different stimuli which depend on constitutional and environmental factors (Al-Hejin, 2004; Cohen, 2011; Tremolada et al., 2019; Pllana, 2020; Krauzlis et al., 2021). This process encourages human beings to learn and recall significant data. Attention is divided into two categories. The type of attention that perceives the physical stimulus is known as external attention, and the one that deals with cognitive stimulus is recognized as internal attention. External attention is focused on the information gathered through the senses. On the other hand, internal attention is responsible for the proper functioning of the working memory (Chun et al., 2011; Lim & Pratt, 2023; Serin & Günseli, 2023). Since these two types of attention are essential for human beings' everyday cognitive and physical responses, the significance of attention is irrefutable.

Attention is relevant for humankind, for it is responsible for choosing the most important data among all the stimuli perceived in the world. Attention is essential for daily life activities (Peelen & Kastner, 2014; Kida et al., 2017) because, nowadays, it can be difficult to keep people focused on a single task as their brains might usually be overloaded with information (Firth et al., 2020, p. 2). In this sense, attention helps people discard unuseful data and focus on what is worth paying attention to (Kida & Kakigi, 2015). Humans have the unique ability to direct their attention intentionally. By taking advantage of this skill, students can take greater responsibility for their learning progress and outcomes. Attention allows humans to actively participate in the world rather than just receive information (Healy & Proctor, 2003, p. 269) and involves certain cognitive processes including perception, memory, and experiences. It can be difficult to define, yet different types are known: internal, external, on-topic, and off-topic attention (Lodge & Harrison, 2019; Keller et al., 2020). Recognizing the role of attention in people's lives may be useful for understanding why it is essential within the classroom context.

Attention in the Realm of Education

It may be worthwhile investigating the distinctions between on-topic and off-topic internal and external attention within the educational context. In general terms, the in-class attention in relation to course relevance is considered on-topic while what is not-course relevant is understood as off-topic. To be specific, on-topic external attention refers to the student reading the lecture slides, participating in a pair/group discussion, and reading a book or any written material. On the other hand, on-topic internal attention means that the student is thinking about a prompt, connecting new concepts to prior knowledge, and

reflecting on their own learning process. In contrast, off-topic external attention refers to the student checking the clock, noticing a pencil tapping, and listening to the cell phone buzzing. In addition, off-topic internal attention hints at students planning their weekend, making a mental list of groceries to buy, and noticing physiological signals such as hunger or thirst (Keller et al., 2020, p. 3). Attention was not always as widely spread and researched as it is today; however, thanks to the interest in this topic, the term in-class attention is also used to refer to this topic, and it has also been understood as crucial for effective learning (Chun et al., 2011; Olney et al., 2015). Different ways have been found to define in-class attention, for example, students being on-task and/or off-task. In simple terms, when students are on-task, it means that they are focused on the learning task, while off-task means that the students are preoccupied with other activities unrelated to their in-class activities. It has become a daily-challenging behavior for teachers to handle (Godwin & Fisher, 2011; Beserra et al., 2017). Ultimately, grasping these distinctions is essential, as they significantly impact in-class attention, which in turn affects student engagement and learning outcomes.

In-class Attention: Factors and Influence

In-class attention may be compromised by several factors that affect not only students' attention span but also their learning process. In today's digitalized world, technological devices have become the main in-class disruptor, especially cell phones (Attia et al., 2017; Soyemi & Soyemi., 2020). Students' distraction caused by technology is a common issue that educators encounter (Lang, 2020, p. 8). Even though technology plays a major role in distracting students, a variety of stimuli, which include the learning environment, their peers, and even their teachers, can affect students' attention and distract them from the class (Cicekci & Sadik, 2019, p.15). Since in-class attention may be considered an important issue in the education field, educators might need to implement certain strategies to cope with this phenomenon. In fact, collaborative work, seating arrangement, and emphasizing the importance of classroom rules, are teaching strategies that might be useful for catching students' attention (Rido et al., 2016, p.95). Surprisingly, it was found that another common factor that affects the student in-class attention is non-technological. It is mind wandering, which is the change of the state of paying attention to what is happening externally to internal thoughts, which has to do with the fading of memory of students in class. Besides this, it not only affects students while on task, but also when they are studying (Risko et al., 2011; Smallwood & Schooler, 2015; Unsworth & McMillan, 2017; Robison et al., 2020). In-class attention is influenced by various factors, making it essential for educators to find effective strategies to keep students focused.

The Role of Student In-class Attention in EFL Learning

In the context of EFL learning, student in-class attention plays a crucial role in enhancing language acquisition and overall academic performance (Neil, 2020, p. 58).

Research indicates that paying attention during lessons significantly benefits students by improving their comprehension and retention of material, leading to better language proficiency outcomes (Keller et al., 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, teachers perceive that maintaining student engagement is essential for effective teaching; they often use different strategies to capture and sustain attention, such as interactive activities and clear instructional goals (Cicekci & Sadik, 2019, p. 16). Teachers recognize that when students are attentive, they are more likely to participate actively, which promotes a rich learning environment and enhances educational experience (Sezer et al., 2017, p. 56). To address the challenges of in-class attention, educators have developed several strategies to minimize distractions and promote focus. These include implementing structured lesson plans, utilizing multimedia resources, and promoting a positive classroom atmosphere that encourages student participation (Qiu, 2022; Zannan, 2023; Jalaluddin, 2023). Additionally, teachers have discussed the importance of building rapport with students, as strong teacher-student relationships can lead to increased motivation and attention during lessons (Utami et al., 2023, p. 351). By using these strategies, educators can effectively reduce attention issues, facilitating a more productive learning environment for EFL students.

Research Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach. It sought to explore and understand the role that in-class attention plays in a public high school's conversational English class, its significance on the student's learning process, and the actions teachers take to sustain their students' attention in class. Through a qualitative approach, this research provided a deep understanding of the phenomenon studied rather than from literature. Qualitative research is particularly effective for gaining a detailed insight of the phenomenon, as it closely examines the real-world context where these interactions naturally occur (Creswell, 2015). To exemplify, the instruments being used in this study included observations conducted on the research site and interviews that were administered face-to-face with the participants. The researchers complemented the information gathered in the interviews by observing the students' behaviors, which allowed this research to be indirectly involved in the everyday students' experiences and learning outcomes.

The design selected for this research was a case study. Some experts in the field have declared that this design can provide an insightful description and analysis of the bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). Providing a deep analysis and understanding of the data was a priority for this research which was the main reason for selecting this design. The case study focuses on the unit of analysis, which is one group of seventh grade students at a technical high school located in the Brunca Region. This research also followed the idea of prioritizing the unit of analysis rather than the topic itself. The characteristic previously mentioned agrees with the theory, which implies that the unit of analysis is more significant than the topic under study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 38).

The purpose of this case study is to analyze student in-class attention and the factors that might compromise it by considering the students' and the teacher's perspectives regarding this manner as well as observations from the field.

Context and Participants

The setting where the case study took place is a public technical high school in the Brunca Region, which is located in the southern area of Costa Rica. This geographical area is mostly characterized as a rural area. The high school's population is among 1049 students. This public institution offers its students three different English programs: Technical English, Academic English, and Conversational English. Up to this point, it is well-known that this research was conducted with a group of Conversational English; some information regarding its syllabus is that it has adopted the socio-constructivism theory of learning, which promotes students' active participation in their learning process and adaptation to the environment (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2016, p. 19). The syllabus created by the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) seems to have strong roots and it is the one used for secondary education all over the country.

The participants of this case study were students from a technical high school as well as their English teacher. In this case, the focus was on conversational English lessons even though students also attend academic English lessons as part of the institution's curriculum. Students attended six 40-minute lessons per week. According to MEP's syllabus, seventh grade students in conversational classes are expected to achieve a linguistic level of A1-A2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale. The class under study consisted of 16 seventh grade students of ages from 12 to 15 years. Students come from different social backgrounds. The teacher participant holds a licentiate's degree in English teaching. His teaching experience includes over 15 years in the classroom. To convey confidentiality, participant names were changed for the data analysis process.

The sampling strategy used for this case study was purposeful criterion sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The selected participants were required to meet three specific criteria. First, participants needed to be part of the same educational setting to ensure they shared a common context. Second, students should be seventh graders taking conversational English classes. Finally, participants had to be willing to share their experiences with the researchers. This openness was essential for gathering rich, qualitative data that reflected their perspectives and insights. By using these criteria to select participants, the study ensured that they were well-suited to provide valuable information relevant to the research objectives.

Data Collection

In this investigation, two types of instruments were used for the purpose of gathering rich data about the role of student in-class attention in an EFL classroom. First, the researchers designed a structured observation instrument to observe the group during eight lessons and obtain first-hand data. Then, two structured interviews, one for the teacher and one for the students, were conducted. To carry out this research, the participants were ensured confidentiality. As a result, the researchers used pseudonyms to refer to the participants and their responses. The name of the institution and its location were not revealed throughout the process. Participants were asked for permission to audio record the interviews, as they accepted all the interviews were audio recorded. Providing that the students involved in the research were seventh graders, their parents were given consent forms, which they had to sign for their children to be interviewed, and audio recorded. Hence, the researchers followed ethical considerations that guaranteed a reliable investigation.

Observation Scale

This observation instrument aimed to collect significant data to provide a wide view of student in-class attention. This semi-structured observation consists of two different parts. Part one records behavior about major disruptors of student in-class attention. This part consists of seven statements referring to common distractors of SICA like the environment, their peers, and technology. It also includes a tally to keep a record of the number of times students became distracted and a comments section. The second part of the instrument collects behavior about the environment alongside the students' and the teacher's behaviors. This section consists of 11 questions with observable answers about SICA. The researchers carried out four face-to-face observations of two lessons each. Every observation lasted 80 minutes. In each class, there were from ten to fifteen students.

Interview with the Teacher

This data-collection instrument shed light on the teachers' perspectives. This instrument followed a structured format and used a guide composed of 11 open-ended questions regarding the role of SICA from the teachers' perspectives as well as its implications, main distractors, and strategies to sustain it. This instrument was administered only to the EFL teacher in charge of the group under study through a virtual Zoom meeting. The information obtained was audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

Interview with the Students

This instrument collected valuable information from students through a structured interview consisting of 16 open-ended questions. The main focus of this interview was to understand students' perspectives on in-class attention, its impact on their learning process, possible disruptors, and implications. Five students answered the interview questions in a

face-to-face modality: three males and two females. Students' answers were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed through an inductive coding method.

Trustworthiness

This study is trustworthy because of several key features. First, the data used in this research was gathered from multiple sources, including interviews with students and the teacher, as well as eight observations of SICA's role in the classroom. Also, the researchers dedicated a month immersing themselves in the phenomenon under investigation and obtaining first-hand data. The data were transcribed and coded by following patterns in the answers obtained after a deep analysis. To ensure consistent data analysis, the four researchers involved in the study collaboratively coded all the collected data. This teamwork reduced the risk of individual bias and inconsistencies as they engage in interrater reliability. Finally, this research is transferable to other contexts because the researchers provided a deep description of the process followed. They carefully described the study's context and setting, allowing readers to evaluate how the findings might apply to their own situations. All these features enhance the study's credibility, dependability, and transferability, making it a valuable contribution to the field and a possible useful guide for future research.

Findings

Once the data analysis process was complete, four main themes were identified: the role of classroom and equipment conditions in student in-class attention, effective strategies for teachers and students to boost SICA, the role of attention levels in learning and challenges, and technology and class environment as main distractors.

The Role of Classroom and Equipment Conditions in Student In-Class Attention

Classroom conditions proved to have a role in SICA, though not a major one. The classroom in which the case study was conducted was observed to have certain characteristics that affected student in-class attention. The classroom was dark and humid, and the windows were small and locked, which did not allow the air to flow in and out of the classroom. The lack of proper ventilation and the high temperature prevailed and negatively affected SICA. This situation was evidenced in the way students were constantly complaining with each other about the heat during the observations; some of them fanned themselves with sheets of paper and lost focus. The fact that students were distracted was noticeable because they repeatedly asked for the instructions the teacher previously gave; this was a constant behavior. It happened even if the teacher was giving the instructions in the students' mother tongue. Even though such factors affected students' attention span and performance throughout the lessons, none of the participants referred to them during the interviews as main disruptors of in-class attention. Another issue concerning classroom conditions was the lack of a door in the room. Throughout the observations and the

interviews, the hallway noise and the weather conditions, like heavy rain, perceived through the open door deviated students' attention to outside of the classroom. As an example, Max, one of the participants shared in an interview that the rain was a current distractor for him. Even though in the data gathered from the interviews the participants did not express explicitly that the classroom conditions truly affected their in-class attention, its influence was present.

Classroom equipment conditions and its misuse proved not to have a profound impact on student in-class attention. During the observations, the researchers noticed that the classroom had many technological devices (one TV, seven computers, and two fans); however, it was evidenced that some of these technological devices were misused. Some students used the computers facilitated by the teacher to look for off-topic information, which deviated their attention from the lessons. Besides that, another disruptor of SICA evident in the observations was the hot climate, adding to the fact that only one of the two fans located inside of the classroom worked. The data gathered through the observations demonstrated that the classroom arrangement was another cause of the lack of SICA. This information obtained from the observations consistently revealed that the classroom was arranged in rows and the majority of the students were sat on the last row. The problem was that not all seats were taken, and some chairs remained on top of the tables. Because most of the students sat on the back of the classroom, the chairs that were on top of the tables negatively affected the flow of the class. It was evident in the way the teacher had to move around to make eye contact with students and the fact that the learners sitting in the last row seemed to be more comfortable speaking, playing and using their cellphones than the ones sitting in the first rows. Even though these factors proved to have a negative impact on SICA, no participant mentioned anything concerning equipment conditions and its use during the interviews.

Mastering Attention: Effective Strategies for Teachers and Students to Boost SICA

Data suggested that students who stayed focused in class implemented a series of strategies for maintaining in-class attention. Observations indicated that those students who seemed attentive to the class, appeared to use certain strategies, such as sitting in the front rows, paying close attention to the teacher's instructions, asking for clarification immediately before completing the tasks, keeping their phones away, talking to their classmates about class-related matters only, remaining seated, and working silently during individual tasks. Although students did not state that their phones distracted them, it was noted that some students intentionally kept their phones out of their sight and even placed them in their backpacks. This was a useful strategy, which gives evidence of students' awareness on how distracting they can be. In addition, the interviews revealed that many students identified peers as significant distractions and found that a key strategy for maintaining focus was to avoid sitting next to those classmates with whom they usually talk the most. Miguel, one of the interviewed students, expressed that when he sits next to his

friends, he tries to ignore them when they talk to him. He shared that he even prefers to sit where nobody distracts him. From the teacher's point of view, being attentive to his explanations is a key strategy that can enhance the students' learning process. He remarked that "there are excellent students who always care about the lesson and the teacher's explanations."

The EFL teacher in charge of the group implemented certain strategies to obtain and sustain SICA throughout the development of the lessons, especially by monitoring students' work. The teacher paid close attention to students' progress, called them out when off-task, asked them to put away their phones, and reminded them of potential consequences for disrupting the class. Observations indicated that students were more focused when the teacher checked on them. From the teacher's perspective, monitoring students is crucial to preventing distractions. The teacher mentioned that if he engaged in other activities instead of walking around the classroom, students would quickly become distracted.

During the interview the teacher did not talk about using disciplinary reports or assigning specific seating positions as strategies to sustain SICA; however, students identified these as forms of classroom management. Most students' mentioned in their interviews that the teacher could give them disciplinary reports as a strategy to keep them on task. Also, three of the interviewed students suggested that assigning them structured seating positions is a useful strategy to prevent them from getting distracted. It was observed that the teacher did not usually give students disciplinary reports, nor did he assign them seating positions either. Nevertheless, whenever he told students that any of these disciplinary actions were being considered, students' behavior changed considerably. These results seemed to suggest that while for the teacher monitoring students was the leading strategy, students consider that disciplinary reports as well as structured seating arrangement are more effective strategies to stay focused in the class. Ultimately, a combination of active monitoring and the implementation of corrective actions, such as the use of disciplinary reports, may lead to more effective teaching practices in maintaining student attention.

SICA Through Student Eyes: The Role of Attention Levels in Learning and Challenges

Students emphasized and described that paying attention in class means being actively engaged with the teacher to fully comprehend the subject matter, materials, and concepts being taught. As it was exemplified by Max, one of the students, referred to SICA as paying attention and understanding what the teacher explains. Interestingly, one student made a connection between the concept of SICA, class participation, and how SICA is related to learning styles. Miguel mentioned that the importance of paying attention in class represents a significant factor when taking a test and, given that some people learn by listening, not paying attention could affect if a student has the specific learning style.

Moreover, most of them noted the importance of paying attention in class as a means to do well in their tests and acquire more valuable knowledge of English. Consequently, students expressed that by losing focus in class they might struggle to understand the class content needed for their tests. Overall, students' insights seemed to agree on the importance SICA has on their academic success when it comes to acquiring the language, understanding and interacting with the class content, and doing well in their tests.

The varying levels of attention among students significantly impact their learning experiences and highlight the challenges they face in the classroom. Miguel and Max pointed out that distractions from peers can disrupt their focus, and they believe this adversely affects their learning. Miguel emphasized that while teachers provide materials, detailed explanations cannot be replaced, and paying attention during this time is essential for deeper understanding. In contrast, Daniela's experience demonstrated a positive impact; she reported that paying attention facilitates her study process; with this she highlights the benefits of maintaining focus. However, María's mixed feelings about her attention level suggest that occasional lapses of distraction do not hinder her learning, thus indicating a less complex relationship with focus. Alonso's perspective adds another layer, as he describes his attention level as "regular," noting that he gains a clearer understanding of the material when he avoids distractions. These insights illustrate that while students encounter various challenges related to their attention levels, the effects on their learning processes can range from negative to positive. This underscores the need for strategies to enhance attention.

Technology and Class Environment as Main Distractors

Mobile devices proved to be a major distractor for SICA. Even though students denied the use of their phones during conversational English classes in the interviews, observation results and the teacher interview demonstrated that phones negatively influence SICA. When students were asked about their phone use in class, they denied its use. In contrast, observation reports revealed that the same students who denied the use of mobile devices were using their phones repeatedly. Some students wore headphones during all the lessons observed. Certain students kept their phones on their tables and checked on them regularly. Students were constantly checking Tik Tok, Instagram, and other different types of social media platforms. Showing content and distracting others was a common practice among students. In fact, the teacher reported that, according to personal experience, phones are the main challenge teachers face to sustain SICA. The teacher made a contrast between classes before technology and classes in the technological era, emphasizing phones as the main student attention disruptor in today's classes. He mentioned that "there weren't so many distractors as we have right now, there were no smartphones". The information gathered showed a contradiction between students, teacher, and observers' perceptions of phone use throughout conversational English classes. One possible interpretation for this contradiction is that students lack awareness of cell phone use during the class. It seems to

be that they do not perceive they are actually using their phones repeatedly during class, which might be the reason for their answers in the interviews.

Peers can negatively influence student in-class attention. Even though the teacher did not mention classmates as a distractor in the interview, students' answers in the interviews showed that they consider their classmates as a main distractor. Some students made it clear that their classmates were very noisy. They always talk about other topics, and even interrupt the teacher's explanations, which makes it difficult to focus. It was observed that certain students were a distraction for others. In contrast, it is important to note that peer influence can also have a positive impact on SICA. One student pointed out that sitting next to a classmate who pays attention helped him to sustain attention. Based on this information, it can be inferred that for most students' peer influence is key for SICA.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study indicate that if the classroom and equipment conditions are not appropriate for the students' and teacher's needs, they can impact SICA negatively; however, their repercussions are not widely perceived by the participants. Regarding classroom conditions, the researchers found out that distractions like weather conditions and damaged equipment to cool the classroom were disruptors of SICA. Furthermore, some recommendations for the institution are to monitor the inventory to know whether to buy new equipment or fix the available one. Additionally, they could consider remodeling to allow better airflow to come inside the classroom, refreshing the environment and creating a setting to enhance SICA. The research team also concluded that the classroom arrangement was a distraction. The classroom was arranged in rows and the untaken seats had their chairs on top of the tables. Concerning the previously mentioned issue, the main problem was that the last rows were overcrowded, and the untaken seats were situated in the first row, which limited the flow of the class, impeded communication, and disrupted SICA. Consequently, some recommendations for the teacher are setting the classroom arrangement differently (a semicircle, one large table, a full circle, a rectangle, among others) to potentially benefit attention and performance.

The data obtained from the observations and interviews showed that certain strategies can significantly enhance student in-class attention. Important conclusions drawn from the data analysis include that students were more attentive when they sat in the front row and put their phones away. Also, when the teacher kept an eye on their behavior by approaching their tables, students seemed to stay focused for a prolonged period of time. Consequently, various valuable recommendations for the teacher are to encourage students to choose seating arrangements that benefit their concentration, ask them to use technology only if necessary, and to constantly monitor their progress. It is also crucial for students to understand that their seating choices and the use they give to technology can impact their ability to concentrate. Relevant recommendations for them are sitting away from friends

who might distract them, avoid using technology in the classroom unless it serves educational purposes, and ask for clarification when required. By embracing these recommendations, both the teacher and the students can create more attentive and productive lessons.

Researchers can also conclude that there is a strong connection between SICA and students' academic performance. Students acknowledged that their difficulties in paying attention can lead them to not understanding the class content and, consequently, do poorly on their tests, which seemed to be their biggest concern. Likewise, the gathered data proved that a primary disruptor for students experiencing lapses in concentration is the overwhelming presence of environmental noise, such as chatter from peers or background sounds, which hinders their ability to focus on lessons. To address these findings, it is important that while the teacher plans strategic seating arrangements, students also need to select a seat where they can avoid the distractions with which they struggle, away from the door, windows, and chatty peers. Students could also bring colored highlighters to help them retain more information from the material to study for their tests and do note-taking to keep themselves on task. In addition, the teacher needs to consider that each student is different, and they strive to focus through different actions. This might require the teacher to do continual check-ins and tailor individual strategies for those more prone to lose focus. For instance, teachers can try to have informal conversations with students to obtain genuine answers from them and create an environment of trust. Having informal conversations with students can help teachers connect with them and find ways to address the issue of not paying attention. It is essential that students along with teachers find ways to work toward the same purpose. The connection between students and teachers can make a huge difference on the students' attitude toward the class.

One of the most significant conclusions is that students did not perceive cell phone use as relevant and influential to their in-class attention. Students were distracted by two main factors: cell phone use and negative peer influence. Cell phones distract students and interfere with the flow of the class, influencing SICA significantly. Negative peer influence directly influenced SICA. The students who interrupted others and the class in general were a source of constant distraction, making focus difficult for the rest of the class. Students who interrupted the teacher often caused other students to lose track. The evidence from this study suggests that teachers and institutions might develop certain strategies such as workshops to inform students about these distractions and raise awareness. By following this recommendation, students might become aware, lower their cell phone usage, and avoid interrupting their classmates. Techniques including building rapport with students and being an authentic teacher might contribute to improving the classroom environment, having a direct impact on students' in-class attention. Visiting existing literature on classroom management such as Scrivener's (2012) *Classroom Management Techniques*

may help teachers obtain a wider view of certain strategies to cope with classroom management.

Action Plan

The findings of this research have demonstrated that students have difficulties keeping the focus during class because of technological, environmental, and social distractions. To boost SICA, researchers have proposed a series of workshops to teach students strategies that can help them to maintain in-class attention and to promote some level of self-awareness regarding its key role in their academic performance. The objective of this action plan is to provide students with a repertoire of strategies to diminish or even eradicate the lack of SICA. These workshops are to be implemented every three months with the intention to provide ongoing support, reinforcing the importance of paying attention in class throughout the school year. The target audience of the workshops is high school students of public institutions. The workshops can be facilitated by any English language teacher who is interested in providing this information to students. Considering the attention span of a teenager, the workshops should last no more than 40 minutes. Below, there is a visual representation of a sample of one of the workshops in which the initial grounding of the topic is implemented where important facts are shared (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Sample Information for Workshop: Initial Grounding

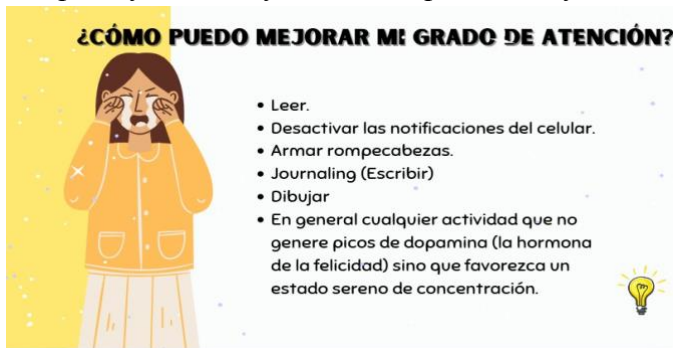


Note. This image corresponds to information to foster reflection in students about the use of technology.

A very important part of these workshops is to prove to students their lack of in-class attention through certain social experiments that later teach them strategies that can support them to maintain in-class attention. It is also important to provide students with pieces of advice that they can adopt. A visual representation of these pieces of advice is provided from a larger PowerPoint presentation that is a sample of one of the workshops (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Sample Information for Workshop: Pieces of Advice



Note. This image corresponds to advice and strategies provided in the workshop for students to improve their attention.

For a clear understanding and efficiency, the workshops are suggested to be implemented in the students' mother tongue (Spanish). Besides, each workshop must include interactive activities such as discussions, role-plays, and online games, among others that make the experience meaningful enough for the students to retain the message for long periods of time. A sample of these interactive activities is provided from a larger PowerPoint (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Sample Information for Workshop: Interactive Activities

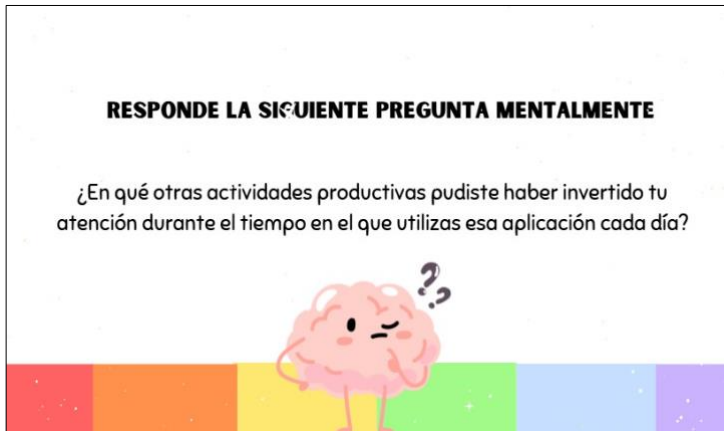


Note. This image corresponds to a suggested activity to test students' attention through the implementation of interactive activities.

In these workshops, students will have the opportunity to do real-life applications of the most common distractions, to see themselves from another perspective, find the experience more relatable, reflect on their role in their learning and their concern about the topic. There are two samples below of the workshop sample designed for this plan of action (see Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4*Sample Information for Workshop: Reflection Time*

Note. This image corresponds to a suggested activity that encourages self-awareness and reflection regarding the overuse of the cell phone.

Figure 5*Sample Information for Workshop: Reflection Time*

Note. This image corresponds to a suggested activity of the designed workshop that promotes self-reflection.

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Unfolding Connections in the EFL Classroom: Students' Perspectives on the Relationship Between Rapport and their Engagement

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Abstract: In the EFL classroom, rapport refers to the positive relationship that the teacher and the students build during the learning process. In most cases, the lack of rapport might affect engagement in the classroom, which might lead to learning challenges.

Consequently, understanding how rapport develops is essential to identify its connection with learner engagement. Hence, the purpose of this study was to understand the way rapport unfolds in the classroom and the connection that it has with learners' engagement. For this qualitative case study, data was collected by means of structured interviews with the students and the teacher in a public high school in Costa Rica. Additionally, five observations were carried out in the classroom to collect data in the students' natural setting. To this end, the findings showed different aspects regarding how rapport connects to the learners' engagement, including the influence of students and teacher's attitude, the impact of classroom events on students' feelings, the challenges to build rapport, and the teacher's perspective on rapport development. These findings concluded that rapport, as a two-way relationship, is influenced by both the teacher and the students' actions, which affects learner engagement. This research reveals the implications for building positive teacher-student relationships to ensure successful academic performance.

Keywords: Case study, EFL, rapport, high school, engagement, connections

Introduction

The teacher-student connection and relationship, whether positive or negative, might be an influential factor that determines student engagement and well-being when

learning English as a foreign language (EFL) (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020; Li, 2022; Noble et al., 2020). Teacher-student rapport is often described as the positive ties and connections teachers aim to develop with their students (Bardorfer, 2024, p. 227). According to Noble et al. (2020), students who face poor teacher-student connections are more likely to present a lack of engagement (p. 9). Consequently, the seeming connection between rapport and student engagement in the class might be a key step to improving the quality of students' performance and development. Establishing positive relationships during the learning process is one of the ways through which engagement and well-being can be positively influenced (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020; Li, 2022). Accordingly, the teacher should be considered an "important source of support for students during classroom activities and learning processes" (Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021, p.2). Teacher-student rapport might then be an essential means to enhance student engagement and well-being in the EFL learning process.

During the observations for the teaching practicum, it was noticeable that students could not understand basic vocabulary or express their ideas in simple words, which affected their engagement in class. It could also be perceived that communication and comfort in the classroom did not allow the establishment of a meaningful relationship between teacher and learners. High school students showed themselves to be negatively impacted by the lack of rapport, especially when referring to engagement. Therefore, the connection between rapport and student engagement was then questioned. A diagnosis was conducted in which students were interviewed to hear their thoughts on this topic. The questions asked students to rank the relationship with the teacher from one to ten and how much they considered it affected their engagement in the class. The results showed a rank of the relationship with the teacher with some negative numbers, with even one student writing -1. For the second question, the results revealed that students considered rapport as an element affecting their engagement, in this case negatively.

For this reason, this study aims to understand further the connection between high school EFL teacher-student rapport and learner's engagement. Studies suggested that rapport-building is crucial in EFL classes and that positive relationships between teachers and students may significantly enhance the student's educational experience (Katz, 2021; Bardorfer, 2024; Sybing, 2019). By focusing on key constructs such as teacher-student rapport and learner engagement, this research seeks to be aware of the relationship between these elements. In the same vein, to comprehend how rapport unfolds in the classroom, along with learners' perspectives on its impact in the learning process. The relationship between teachers and students may boost engagement in the classroom, and therefore, the learners' academic development may improve as well, leading to some explicit positive outcomes (Martin & Collie, 2019; Zhou, 2021). Hence, to ensure this understanding, a qualitative research approach will be used to gather information from students, allowing a deeper recognition of how teacher-student rapport affects their engagement when learning a

foreign language so that strategies can be developed to foster an improved learning environment, enhancing students' outcomes and language acquisition.

Some researchers have considered that engagement might play a significant role in the learning process of students since it influences the accomplishment of learning goals and the development of knowledge (Abdoulai, 2024; Soffer & Cohen, 2019; Zhou et al., 2021). Moreover, lack of engagement may result from the classroom environment in which students usually spend more than two hours per day or the learning strategies implemented by the teacher. These factors might make the development of knowledge ineffective. According to Zainullah et al. (2023), if the teacher establishes an understanding and respectful learning environment, students may be motivated and engaged in the classroom (p.81). For that reason, it is important to deeply analyze and understand the connection between rapport and student engagement in class so that alternative ways can be found to enhance meaningful relationships and make students feel interested and committed to academic achievement.

In the classroom, the engagement might depend on the kind of interactions to which students are exposed. One of the relations that can be found in the EFL classroom is the teacher-student interaction. Teacher support is one of the exchanges that happen between learners and instructors. Rapport and teacher support are two concepts that go hand in hand, as both have the same positive impact on the learning process (Aryaeian & Rezaee, 2023; Barus et al, 2022; Zhang, 2023). With this impact in mind, this study aims to find ideas and strategies that could benefit the classroom environment and learner engagement when interacting with students (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020; Shakki, 2022; Sun & Shi, 2022). In order to analyze and understand the issues of this topic, questions arose. The general research question for this case study focuses on discovering how rapport connects to high school EFL learners' engagement. Consequently, it led to two subsequent questions which refer to how rapport unfolds in the EFL classroom, and what the learners' perspectives are regarding how rapport influences their engagement in the EFL classroom.

Literature Review

In the following literature review, there are three main topics that are necessary for the research to have its bases. The first topic is teaching and learning processes in High School EFL Classrooms. The second one is the significance of rapport. Finally, the third one is information about learner engagement in the EFL classroom.

Teaching and Learning Processes in the EFL High School Classroom

The process of acquiring EFL in public high schools involves teaching, the learning journey of students, and other factors that could hinder their language learning achievement. The first aspect of the process is teaching. Some authors define teaching as a path in which a person helps others to learn by guiding and assisting them to acquire

knowledge which is characterized by giving clear instructions and having knowledge in different areas (Al-Seghayer, 2017; Benzerrouh, 2021; Metruk, 2020). Teachers that provide clear information and that are willing to help people are effective and play an important role in the learning process. According to Achieng (2023), effectiveness in the teaching context refers to the positive learning outcomes that come from meaningful pedagogical methods that are engaging and motivating for learners (p. 515). By being efficient and following teaching techniques that benefit students' well-being in the classroom, English language educators might help students become active agents in the learning journey.

Each learning process' efficiency may vary depending on the curriculum, teaching techniques, and learners' path. In public high schools in Costa Rica, the methodology suggested by the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) is the Action-oriented Approach (AOA) which follows task-based instruction principles and prepares students to be globalized citizens who, as mentioned in the MEP syllabus (2016), "recognize his/her own rights and responsibilities and the ones of others, participate in peaceful conflict solving, and express in words and actions values of justice, equity and human relations" (p. 54). According to MEP (2016), through the Action-oriented Approach, students increase their communicative competence skills, obtain knowledge from different English cultural perspectives, and develop their potential to become global citizens (p. 25). In addition, AOA encourages scholars to learn by completing tasks and communicating while doing so. As it is established in the MEP's principles, "the students are social agents that use the target language to perform specific actions in real life contexts meaningfully, and enabling communicative activities are task-based and real-life" (p.25). Likewise, AOA could connect to the principles of teaching and learning provided by Brown and Lee (2015), who stated that to help learners be successful, their interests should be appealed, and they should use their existing background knowledge (p. 57). Effective English language learning for high school students might make them become social agents whose interests and needs are taken into consideration.

It is important not only to understand these approaches but also to identify possible challenges that students might encounter. Classroom environment and emotional factors are two examples of challenges that could hinder students' success. Kekare (2015) discovered that there is a relationship between classroom environment and students' achievement (p. 72). The physical environment can influence learners' ability to learn given that those students who are not comfortable do not get as much information as those who are (Suleman & Hussain, 2014, p.72). In other words, the condition of the environment is an influential aspect of the learning process for students to achieve their full potential while learning. This situation might also affect their emotions.

Emotional factors such as feelings and personality also affect the process. Language learners may feel overwhelmed, nervous, frustrated, excited, confident,

or confused, among other emotions, because they do not learn without emotions (Ismail, 2015, p.19-20). Thus, feelings are an important part of learning. In a study carried out by Brand et al (2015), they concluded that although personality was not the only influential factor in the learning process, high linguistic performance students “held a sanguine type of personality temperament” (p. 128). These emotional experiences play an important role and those people that do not have that personality may face difficulties when learning. Mendez and Peña (2013) stated that the emotions students experience during foreign language classes are important to understanding what learners go through and making the necessary adjustments to reduce the influence of negative emotions on learners' motivational energy (pp.112-113). Challenges are part of the EFL classroom; however, it is important to know how to minimize their negative impact on students' behavior and engagement. The building of rapport can be beneficial to avoid the negative consequences these challenges can have. That is when the significance of rapport has to be acknowledged.

Significance of Rapport in the EFL Classroom

In the EFL classroom, rapport has been proven to have a significant value regarding both the teaching and learning process (Brown & Lee, 2015; DaLuz, 2015; Hagenauer et al., 2015; Zainullah & Riniati, 2023; Zhou, 2021). Researchers have given this term a wide variety of definitions that lead to the same concluding idea. Thus, rapport refers to the positive connection or bond that teachers aim to build with their students, which is based on trust and respect (Bardorfer, 2024; Brown & Lee, 2015). According to Brown and Lee (2015), these connections are built by following a set of steps that include showing interest in each student, their ideas, and feelings; valuing and respecting their thoughts and ideas; and creating an enjoyable collaborative environment which leads learners to feel competent, capable, and creative (p. 203). In this case, rapport might then play an important role in the classroom, in creating a positive environment (Brown & Lee, 2015, p. 202). Building these positive relationships, according to Zhou, (2021) is “among the top priorities of teachers in any educational setting” (p. 1), for they might help develop a safer environment during the learning process.

Meaningful connections between the teacher and the learners can positively impact the development of the EFL class (DaLuz, 2015; Hagenauer et al., 2015; Zainullah & Rinitia; 2023). In the development of rapport, the teacher becomes a key element of the process. Sadoughi and Hejazi (2021) stated that the frequent teacher-student interactions in “language classes” make the teacher an important source of support during the learning process (p. 2). Additionally, positive teacher behaviors may influence the student's learning process. Positive teacher emotions are essential not only for their well-being but for students' well-being too (Hagenauer et al., 2015). In other words, rapport is important for students in any educational setting (Zhou, 2021), which may help to build successful linguistic development in the classroom. Supportive relationships between the teacher and the students might motivate and provide a sense of security that led to positive academic

outcomes (Zainullah & Riniati, 2023, p. 78). In short, rapport is significant to ensure students' well-being and to improve the outcomes of the learning process.

Learner Engagement in the EFL Classroom

Classroom engagement has proved to have great significance on student's acquisition of EFL (Soffer & Cohen, 2019; Zhou, 2021). Understanding classroom engagement is crucial to recognizing its impact on the learning process. For instance, active presence and interest in learning are key aspects of engagement in the classroom (Abla & Fraumeni, 2019). Engagement can be also defined as the condition in which learners are committed to aiming for greater knowledge and understanding (Abdoular, 2024; Soffer and Cohen, 2019; Zhou et al., 2021). Being engaged could provide several benefits to the students. Hence, it helps learners achieve exceptional linguistic outcomes (Abdoulai, 2024; Zhou et al., 2021). Engagement helps students improve their language learning.

Another aspect to consider in understanding the influence rapport has in classroom engagement is the role of the affective filter. Students can have positive and negative emotions when learning a foreign language. These emotions may impact their academic results and overall language learning. Moreover, an effort should be made to understand the external factors that lead to disengagement (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2021; Noble et al., 2020). Negative emotions can be an influential factor in students' disengagement, causing their outcomes to become deficient. On the other hand, learners' attitudes toward positive stimuli can boost their academic performance; this effect is often enhanced by the quality of teacher-student interactions, as strong rapport is essential for fostering classroom engagement (Barus et al., 2022). Active engagement in the classroom helps learners boost their academic outcomes, particularly when combined with strong teacher-student rapport and a positive emotional environment, which together create the conditions for more effective and meaningful language learning (Abdoulai, 2024; Soffer & Cohen, 2019; Zhang, 2023).

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature, as it aims to analyze the connection between rapport and student engagement in its natural context, which in this case is an EFL classroom. Qualitative research aims to reach a clear understanding of social phenomena and to explore and comprehend how individuals perceive their surroundings in their natural environment (Ugwu & Eze, 2017; Creswell, 2015). In line with this claim, this study provided the opportunity to understand specific aspects by focusing on the natural flow of the events in their natural setting and based on the individuals' (teacher and students) points of view. Therefore, by using this approach and the corresponding data collection instruments, the researchers had the opportunity to deeply explore and analyze how teacher-student rapport is connected to student engagement in the EFL classroom. It helped to study the case extensively and to collect information based on the target individual's

experiences. Using a qualitative approach was then important to obtain further data regarding the perspectives and natural environment of the teacher and the students.

This research followed a case study design because it focused on the in-depth exploration of a specific matter. According to Coombs (2022), a case study “requires in-depth investigation conducted into an individual, group, or event to gain understanding of a real-life phenomenon” (p.1). In this way, this design allowed the researchers to gain a deep understanding of the issue under study. Coombs (2022) also stated that the goal of case study research is to obtain detailed knowledge of the case (p. 1), as establishing the unit of study is the single most characterizing aspect of case study research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p.38). Thus, the unit of analysis of this research is a group of high school students and their teacher in an EFL classroom. This allowed the researchers to generate descriptions of how rapport unfolds in the EFL classroom and how it is connected to student engagement. By following this design, the researchers were able to explore different perspectives, data, and theories that led to the development of important conclusions concerning the connection that might exist between rapport and student engagement in the EFL classroom.

Context and Participants

This case study was developed at an academic public high school in the Brunca Region. The population selected was a ninth-grade group of 27 students, 15 boys and 12 girls with ages ranging from 14 to 16 years old. According to the Ministry of Public Education (2016), students reach a B1 linguistic level according to the Common European Frame of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which describes that students can “express themselves reasonably accurately in familiar, predictable situations and know enough vocabulary to talk about family, hobbies and interests, work, travel, and news and current events” (p. 9). The other key participant in this research was the students’ academic English teacher who has been teaching English for more than ten years, meaning that she has considerable experience with high school students. Additionally, the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) requires English language teachers to be “certified with B2/C1 English language proficiency” (p.28). Therefore, the selected teacher and students fit in the context required for the purpose of the research, which is the EFL classroom.

This group of students and the teacher were selected by using the criterion purposeful sampling method. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), this method needs participants to meet one or more criteria and use a randomization procedure respectively. In the case of this research, the specific criteria that students met was to engage in a student-teacher relationship that showed results on how rapport happens in the classroom and showed how students engage in the classroom and how that helped to build rapport. As mentioned before, this class was observed in the teaching practicum and they showed a lack of class engagement. In the case of purposeful sampling, for the interview,

the researchers chose to randomize which students to interview with the purpose of finding their relationship with the teacher without having a biased opinion about the teacher. Using purposeful sampling, the researchers had a sampling process that allowed credible data by permitting researchers to reach conclusions with unbiased information.

Data Collection

To conduct this qualitative case study, a set of instruments was created and administered to gather information and answer the research questions. These instruments consisted of classroom observations and interviews with the teacher and the students. A total of five class observations were carried out for three weeks to gather pertinent data to continue with this research. Consequently, one interview was administered to the teacher after class, and five students were interviewed in the institution to obtain insights on their perspectives on how rapport connects to learners' engagement. These data-gathering instruments aimed to collect information to understand the relationship between teacher-student rapport and learner engagement in the EFL classroom.

Instrument 1: Classroom Observation

This case study used a non-participant-focused observation instrument that aims to gather information about how teacher-student rapport unfolds in the EFL classroom. Five observations were carried out in a class of high school students. Two of them took notes on students' behavior in a class of 40 minutes on Tuesdays and three of them in a class of 80 minutes on Fridays. The observation scale consisted of a chart to gather information about the activities developed in the classroom. The observer identified the stage of the lesson in which the activity takes place and followed its development, which helped to gather information about how rapport unfolded throughout the class. After that, there was a section in the observation guide to write general details about the development of each class. It also included two columns: one for the observer to describe how rapport unfolds and another one for the reaction of the students. In this way, the researcher could gather specific information to interpret student's reactions in class. This description provided rich information on what occurs concerning the connection between rapport and student engagement.

Instrument 2: Interview with the Students

The interview with the students aims to collect data regarding the connection between teacher-student rapport and student engagement to analyze EFL learners' perspectives. The interview was semi-structured and consisted of ten open-ended questions that directly addressed the relationship they have with their academic English language teacher and the way it influences their feelings and engagement in the learning process. It was conducted with six ninth-grade students in high school while their classmates were in class. In this way, researchers did not interrupt the lesson and were able to gather the

necessary information by establishing a comfortable space for students to share their answers. The interview, which was sound recorded, lasted approximately six minutes and to conduct it, students had to bring consent signed by their parents or legal representatives approving their participation in the interviews. Through this interview, researchers could better understand students' perspectives on the role rapport plays in their engagement.

Instrument 3: Interview with the Teacher

This instrument was essential for the research because it aimed to gather information about teacher-student rapport and its connection to student engagement from the teacher's perspective. It consisted of ten open questions about how the teacher-student relationships develop in the classroom. This interview was administered to a high school academic English language teacher, to whom the researchers asked for previous consent. The researcher used a structured method to ask the questions because they were designed to collect the necessary data. Moreover, during the seven minutes that the interview lasted, the teacher had the opportunity to describe her experience and opinion about how rapport influences students' engagement and their reactions toward the learning process. In this way, this instrument helped to collect valuable information from the perspective of an important individual in the EFL classroom.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness in this qualitative research, three key criteria were considered to guarantee rigorous results. Credibility was met by making sure the participants' perspectives on the topic were accurately presented (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 1). To do this, interviews and observations were carried out to gather data directly from the teacher and the students. The researchers had first-hand exposure during the process of collecting multiple sources of data, assuring the reliability of the outcomes. Then, dependability enriched the transparency of the research process because providing detailed explanations of the data-gathering process allowed the results to be reliable (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 2). During the data analysis process, all research team members coded and analyzed the results to avoid biases and ambiguity. Finally, transferability allowed research to be a mirror in other fields of education. Although this research is specific to one group, by providing a detailed account and descriptions of the contexts, participants, and research process, it is expected that this case study might be useful for other researchers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p.2). It would allow researchers to make comparisons and even apply the insights to their own research. Adhering to these principles ensured that the research process was both rigorous and transparent, providing reliable findings with potential applicability to other educational contexts.

Findings

After conducting a thorough data analysis, four main themes were identified: how rapport unfolds, how rapport and student engagement connect, what students and the teacher believe about rapport, and how rapport and disruption develop.

Unfolding Rapport in the EFL Classroom

The environment influences EFL class development and significantly shapes the unfolding of rapport. The teacher tried to keep students engaged and promoted a safe learning environment by using encouraging words and even calling them by their names to have them actively participate in the class. Once she walked around the classroom while students were working to monitor them and made sure they were focused on the class activities, but this was as far as her efforts to build rapport went. Nonetheless, some students seemed as if they were not interested in the class because they were not paying attention to the lesson. The classroom was also not properly arranged, and the students' personal space was poorly organized, hindering active learning and suggesting a lack of will to build rapport. During class, students would frequently go in and out of the classroom, have conversations about unrelated topics even when the teacher was giving instructions or during listening activities, and make a lot of noise, affecting their engagement in the class. In addition, the teacher did not try to correct the students' behavior; instead, she chose to ignore this giving the impression of being disinterested.

Students expressed discomfort with how questions were addressed in the class providing that answers were vague, and no further examples were provided. During the observations, it was noticed how, in fact, when answers were responded no body language or visual aids were used to accompany these explanations. Also, the observations revealed that it was difficult for the teacher to clarify questions from the students in the back, as she was always in front explaining class work. No classroom management techniques like walking around the class, approaching students at their desks, or ensuring clarity of the topics being studied took place during the observations. Samantha said that it made her feel that the teacher could not answer her questions. All of this showed that rapport unfolds poorly in the classroom and that there was not a bond between the teacher and the students.

Some students felt that the sense of closeness was missing. During the interviews, students reported that the relationship with the teacher was neutral or normal. Samantha and Randall answered that they had a good and trustful relationship with the teacher. However, Alina answered that her relationship with the teacher was not friendly. Throughout the interview, Alina stated that she was afraid to participate or ask questions due to her lack of trust. Without this sense of trust, students expressed to not be motivated and felt not confident to ask questions. Yet, the teacher stated that she tried to build a safe environment by having a respectful and professional relationship with the students. Esteban stated that the teacher needed to have more communication skills, explain better, and develop a better

relationship with everyone. Students expressed different opinions about their relationship with the teacher; overall, it was neutral, but they expected more. All these opinions led to the result that the key to having a good development of rapport is not only to establish a respectful environment but to create a bond and a sense of closeness in the classroom. An example of this situation is the affirmations of Alondra, who stated that she participates in classes where the relationship is positive.

Rapport and Student Engagement

Rapport between teachers and students played a key role in fostering student engagement and motivation. It is important to highlight that, to build rapport, there were two parts involved, and it was observed that in this specific context, students made little to no effort to build it. From the teacher's perspective, the relationship that she tries to foster with students might affect students' willingness to participate. As observed, some students seemed to be disconnected because they were not working and were doing unrelated activities, like using their phones, putting makeup on, and making animal noises among the class. The teacher asked students to stop being noisy, but students did not pay attention to her and kept doing what they wanted which means that the teacher's efforts to build rapport met with uninterested students. Randall, Esteban, and Samuel expressed that the relationship that they have with the teacher made them feel uninterested because she seemed like she was bored or did not listen to them. For that reason, they do not pay attention in class. Besides this, they said that they participate in other classes where their opinions are heard and that with this teacher, they hesitate to ask a question related to the subject because she does not inspire the confidence to do so. Thus, it could be seen that there are other factors affecting students' engagement, other than rapport.

The way rapport unfolds, and students behave affects the way interactions take place. Alina, Randall, and Samantha expressed that a class where a student's relationship with the teacher is positive provides a better sense of trust, comfort, and confidence. For instance, there were times when they could ask confidently, as mentioned by Randall. During the observations, this behavior was performed only a few times when the teacher made efforts to establish rapport like saying very good, saying ok, encouraging students to work by themselves, and not copying. Therefore, some students approached the teacher to check if they were doing their work correctly and aimed to understand new vocabulary. However, it was evident that most of the students in the classroom seemed to not be interested in connecting with the class. This was shown when some students were caught copying their classmates' work and even making fun of the teacher when she confused the name of a student. Meaning that, in this case, some students were not willing to build an empathetic and positive relationship with the teacher. Alina said that she decided not to ask questions because she did not feel confident to do so, which can also be a sign that rapport has not been fully developed by the teacher. In this way, students' response to rapport varies depending on their own attitudes and actions.

Students and Teacher Perspectives on Rapport

Students' perceptions and feelings toward rapport are influenced by the events that happen in the classroom with the teacher. Some students, like Alondra, mentioned that in a class where the relationship with the teacher is not good, she does not participate, and this decision affects her grades. Instead, when she trusts the teacher, she has the confidence to ask when she needs to do so. This was mentioned by most of the students interviewed. Also, Samantha and Esteban reported that they felt more comfortable when they learned with a teacher who aimed to listen to them and who was friendly. Therefore, they also expressed that they chose not to participate because, as Esteban said, he felt afraid. However, Alondra stated that sometimes students do not behave properly, which can be taken as an influential factor in the development of the class. These perspectives give responsibility to the learners in the EFL classroom regarding the construction of a positive relationship and environment. Students' perspectives and feelings differ minimally, but it is important to remark that the establishment of rapport depends on both the teacher and the students.

Despite the teachers' noticeable intent to develop positive practice during class, the interviewed students expressed that it negatively impacted the engagement and learning process during the observations. The teacher performed various supporting practices, such as actively checking on students' work, using encouraging words, and promoting a respectful environment by asking students not to say bad words and behave properly. These types of attitudes were not frequent, but they did happen a few times during the class. Also, the teacher tried to promote student participation and autonomy by encouraging them to work individually and not to copy their classmates' work. To ensure students completed tasks, she repeated the instructions and the audio several times in the listening exercises. However, the interviewed participants shared a contrasting perspective which indicated that the teacher's attitude, such as not looking for alternatives to call everyone's attention, or answering basic questions students had, caused the loss of interest in the class. Some students like Samantha, Alondra, and Randall expressed that the teacher did not explain and did not listen to them. Randall added that the teacher's attitude negatively influences his engagement because he does not feel comfortable participating in the class and asking questions. In short, these results seem to suggest that the teacher's attitudes do not fulfill the learners' needs and wants, which results in the negative perspective of the events.

Furthermore, the results indicate that communication issues between the teacher and students resulted in the use of the mother tongue repeatedly and the student's lack of understanding in the class. A key pattern found during the observations was the low language proficiency skills of the majority of students and the use of basic vocabulary and pronunciation. For example, students tended to ask basic day-to-day questions such as "Teacher, may I go to the restroom?" in Spanish because they were too lazy to say it in English, did not know its equivalent in the target language, or seemed to be afraid of trying

to say it to avoid being laughed at because of their pronunciation. There were communication barriers because students did not understand the teacher's explanations and, as a result, she ended up using the mother tongue to be understood. Even though the language used was basic, half of the interviewed students expressed that they needed clearer explanations. Moreover, another fact that made communication difficult was the background noise caused by the majority of the students, which did not allow the teacher to listen to the questions and answers of those students who were engaged in the class. Samantha and Randall stated that explanations were not clear and that she should speak clearly because a key characteristic of an outstanding teacher is to be good at explaining. This sentiment was echoed by another participant, Alondra, who mentioned that they constantly need the teacher to explain the subject and provide clearer explanations. Because of this lack of understanding, the use of the mother tongue stands out.

Building rapport is a key aspect of the EFL classroom that influences students' performance and that should be carefully developed without crossing important limits. The teacher established in the interview that she tried to build an environment of respect with the students and mentioned that it is important to listen to students not only on academic topics but about personal issues as well. In this way, supporting students beyond the academic field might prevent external factors from affecting their academic performance. During the observations, she showed that she wanted to build rapport by walking around the classroom, cold-calling students to foster participation, and using encouraging words, which might have served as an aim to develop a sense of companionship and encouragement to the learners. That is, putting effort into building rapport with the students seemed to be a way to avoid consequences that might influence students' grades and academic progress, considering that their lack of involvement might have a negative impact in their learning process. From the teachers' perspective, the previously mentioned methods helped the students become engaged in the class. Therefore, ensuring student engagement might be a priority in the classroom, and being active in the rapport-building process can be beneficial to avoid poor outcomes. In short, it was shown that there were apparent efforts in establishing rapport from the teacher's perspective, which, in fact, required her conscious and active effort to develop properly.

Rapport and Disruption

The analysis shows that distractions and disruptions in the classroom created challenges to build rapport and maintain student engagement in EFL classes. These disruptors, which affected their commitment and focus during most of the class time, were noticed several times during the observations. One of the main issues was students' off-task activities during the lessons. As observed, these repeated behaviors were visible when students spoke about unrelated topics, used their cell phones, and even took pictures. These actions caused students to shift their attention away from the class, and this loss of focus provoked a disruption in the class flow. Moreover, students moving around was also a

distraction. Some of the disruptive behaviors that were observed were students walking around the classroom, lying on the floor, playing with their cellphones, combing each other's hair, and applying makeup. Thus, it was difficult for the students to keep focused due to their interest in doing activities that fell outside of the EFL classroom scope; that is, these actions were clearly disruptive. These students' behaviors toward others were the main distractions in the class, which promoted a chaotic learning environment and affected the concentration of the whole class by encouraging them to walk around, speak of unrelated topics, and go in and out of the classroom even when the teacher was explaining.

Data revealed that students' behavior and attitudes during the class hindered the building of rapport. Because students were doing activities that were not related to the class work assigned, the development of rapport was negatively impacted, as it did not allow the teacher to connect appropriately to the students. Instead, she frequently corrected their behavior and asked them to pay attention. Also, students left the classroom without permission and made animal-like noises, which not only showed poor behavior but also a lack of respect for the teacher and the learning process. However, not all the students behaved this way. There were around seven or eight students that were properly arranged and sitting at the front desk working along with the teacher, which could be a sign that these students might have been actually connecting with the learning process and the teacher. After all, the teacher gave the same treatment to all of them. These in-class behaviors showed that the rapport-building process depends on the students' actions too, and if they are not willing to be active participants in this relationship, then rapport might not develop, and students will end up misbehaving all the time. On the other hand, if they want to build this relationship, then rapport might develop positively and successfully. The behaviors mentioned are correlated to other students' attitudes, which result in a lack of commitment, and them struggling to stay focused due to the frequent disruptions. In this way, a common theme that is found is the lack of student engagement in the class. These results may then suggest that the learner's attitudes also influence the building of rapport and engagement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

After extensive analysis of the data gathered, the findings suggest that building positive rapport in the classroom is a tool that helps EFL teachers. Poor rapport building and lack of engagement are the results of ineffective techniques in building a sense of closeness in the classroom and the lack of interest in the learning process. Students did not collaborate when the teacher tried to use rapport building techniques. They did not seem engaged in those techniques. The neutral relationship between teacher and students resulted in disconnecting. Hence, as a recommendation, teachers should explore and implement more effective rapport-building techniques such as showing interest in students' emotions and ideas, by taking them into account when planning the lessons. For example, this can be done by letting students choose the song that they would like to hear in a listening activity

and letting them talk about how the song makes them feel. Teachers should not rely on minimal interactions to build rapport.

Through this research, another conclusion reached is that rapport is a two-way process and students' efforts in building it are necessary. Some students perceived that the teacher's attitude influenced their engagement because they felt that the teacher's relationship with them was neutral, did not inspire them to trust, and did not allow them to share their questions. However, some students were not willing to play their part in the process of developing rapport because they did not show interest in establishing a relationship; they were even making fun of the teacher because of the way she mispronounced the name of a student, instead of correcting her. It was observed that students did not make conscious efforts to connect with the class; they were on their phones, talking to each other, making animal noises, combing each other's hair, and putting makeup on. Rapport as a two-way process requires the action of both sides to maintain a meaningful process. Therefore, a recommendation for students is to acknowledge the fact that their academic success also depends on them and their attitudes towards the learning process, which would help them to create a more comfortable environment during the class. In addition, it is important to highlight that English language teachers should encourage students to be involved in the rapport building process, by encouraging them to answer how they feel, whether they are feeling uncomfortable or need help in a task or life.

The study also reveals that the techniques used to build rapport were not as effective to foster teacher-student relationships because the efforts were not translating into the desired classroom dynamics. The result is a negative development of rapport and student engagement. This, naturally, led to negative classroom dynamics. According to this conclusion, a significant recommendation that arises is that English language teachers should consider obtaining regular feedback from students, so they can share their needs and perspectives with the teacher. This might allow the teachers to work with them. Additionally, analyzing the students' behavior and classroom environment could lead to the design of better techniques in order to promote rapport and diminish any possible weaknesses. In this way, the techniques employed by teachers to build connections and establish a positive learning environment are by far one of the most important elements in the English language classroom.

Action Plan

Based on the core findings behind this case study, an action plan to foster rapport is suggested. It is titled *Fostering Connections: Enhancing Rapport in EFL Classrooms* and its objective is to provide English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers with a kit that might help enhance class rapport. Its target audience is EFL teachers at the Ministry of Public Education in Costa Rica.

Description of the Action Plan

The Ministry of Public Education syllabus follows the Action-Oriented Approach principles in the design of the lessons. According to the MEP, this approach sees “students as active agents responsible for their own progress in learning and sees communication as a social activity designed to accomplish specific tasks” while the teacher “works in the development of learners’ meta-cognitive, meta-affective, and metasocial strategies” (p. 25). In this way, the teacher might foster engagement and ensure rich academic performance. Brown and Lee (2015) emphasized the importance of establishing rapport to create a positive, stimulating, and energizing classroom environment, so that students feel capable, competent, and creative (p. 203). Therefore, to help teachers create a supportive classroom, work with demanding groups, and enhance engagement in students, a teaching kit was created which could potentially be shared in the MEP’s teaching toolbox website. The teaching kit aims to provide insights into the importance of creating emotional connections in the classroom, encouraging teachers to reflect on their practices and improve them based on theoretical information. Teachers can access this kit to gain practical strategies for building rapport, learn about effective teaching techniques that foster engagement, and promote a productive learning environment. Among these techniques is the implementation of interactive activities that encourage learners’ engagement. Adipat et al. (2021) pointed out the importance of games and how they can help students feel more engaged in the class and enhance their learning process. A game can engage students at the same time as help them learn and review class material. For this reason, a bank of sources is provided so that teachers can have a better understanding of how to build rapport and implement the knowledge gained in their classes.

Teachers can learn about theory related to rapport and also access a repertoire of websites that can be helpful to build a more effective environment. The home page consists of the definition of rapport and an overall description of the kit’s function and content (Figure 1). The first section of the kit focuses on articles about theories, actions, and analysis of material of authors who have contributed to rapport-building research (Figure 2). In the last part, there is a repository of websites such as Kahoot, Wordwall, Educaplay, Nearpod, and Mentimeter that are useful for the development of dynamic activities to use in the class that could ease the rapport-building process (Figure 3). The teachers will be able to enter the Rapport kit by using this link

<https://view.genially.com/671adb35dd7cdc253cfd3e5b/i-interactive-image-imagen-interactiva-esencial>.

Figure 1*Home Page of Rapport Kit*

Note. This image corresponds to the digital material designed by researchers.

Figure 2*Article Section of Rapport Kit*

Note. This image corresponds to the suggested articles about rapport in the kit.

Figure 3*Website Section of Rapport Kit*



Note. This image corresponds to the tools to aid rapport building available in the kit.

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THEME 2

Outreaching Projects



Teaching and Learning English in Outreaching Projects

A key reminder before discussing outreach projects is the centralization of the opportunities for academic growth, which are scarce in the southern region of the country. That is, as has been the trend since 2005, the higher education academic offer is concentrated in the Central Region, with 59.4% of the majors being offered there while the second place is shared by the Brunca and Chorotega Region with a staggering drop to 9.9% (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2023). In terms of state university branches, the case is the same, where 43% of these are in the Central Region, 16% in Chorotega, 11% in Carribbean Huetar, 11% in Brunca, 11% in Central Pacific, and 9% in the North Huetar Region. Additionally, in the most recent evaluation of the country's coverage of access to university education, while most countries of the OECD have increased their coverage by 10%, Costa Rica has only achieved a 5% increase in the amount of university graduates in the past ten years (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2023).

Because a higher education institution must be responsible for sustainable growth, part of that sustainable growth is understanding that the sum of its parts, the pillars on which it is founded upon, are intertwined in its standard of excellence. A way of attesting to this is promoting development in four different areas: teaching, research, production, and social extension. These respond to principles, values, societal needs, public policies, scientific and technological development as well as the integral development of people (Universidad Nacional, 2015). Although social extension and outreach projects may differ in their conceptualizations, for the purpose of this section, the term used will be outreach projects. Bolaños et al (2017) presented operational definitions of social extension or outreach for each of the five public universities (UCR, UNA, TEC, UNED, UTN), which also outlined the main lines of work, as follows: social service for the underprivileged, technological support for communities, sports and recreation activities, artistic and cultural expressions, multimedia diffusion of knowledge, non-formal education and training programs, community organization and self-management initiatives, sales of services in technology and innovation.

As Duarte Quapper et al. (2019) stated, one of the fundamental components of the university's social outreach is that it produces knowledge from the experiences shared with diverse communities. These then help shape and conceptualize the work that is carried out, to elaborate on what has been learned and promote any new initiatives that may stem from the experience. As Berchin et al. (2019) forwarded, the importance of social outreach is that it serves as an extension of the university practice in communities, it functions as a living laboratory that integrates both formal and informal learning processes of academic faculty, students and community members, which and should lead to sustainable initiatives intended to intervene a community or space and develop lasting changes. In short, the low levels of language proficiency in Costa Rica, previously presented in this book, and the lack of

programs that allow a better coverage and development of linguistic proficiency in the region showcase the need for social outreach projects, especially in the Brunca Region.

Student-Teachers' Perspectives about the Teaching of English to a Mixed Proficiency Class: A Case Study in a Social Outreach Program at a Public University

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Abstract: This study explored the reality that student teachers face when teaching mixed proficiency classes in a social outreach program at a public university in the south of Costa Rica. This research followed a qualitative approach. The design of the methodology was case study. Two different instruments were used to collect data, semi-structured interviews and classroom non-participant observations. The study revealed that student proficiency was measured by classroom performance. EFL teachers faced challenges such as balancing time, managing class size, and designing activities when dealing with mixed proficiency classes. Despite these challenges, teachers used differentiated instruction, scaffolding techniques, and collaborative work to cater to all levels and promote meaningful learning. This study concluded that the participant dealt with her class appropriately despite the challenges she faced. For this reason, the participant needs more training to handle mixed proficiency classes. For our action plan we suggest creating a webinar for teachers, where they will learn some strategies of how to deal appropriately with mixed proficiency classes.

Keywords: EFL teachers, mixed proficiency class, teaching strategies, challenges.

Introduction

In the current globalized world, English classrooms are becoming more diverse and often include students with different levels of proficiency. According to Barrantes (2022), a mixed proficiency class entails having students with linguistic proficiency levels ranging from basic to advance in a single classroom. Consequently, having mixed proficiency classes represents pedagogical challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers (Gustiani, 2018). Currently, teachers are expected to have a significant amount of pedagogical knowledge, technological knowledge, and content knowledge in terms of theory regarding how to teach language effectively, but the practice of theory in the classroom must also be contextualized, especially in the case of students with mixed proficiency levels. According to Santos and Castro (2021), Technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) refers to the knowledge required by teachers for integrating technology into their teaching in any content area, this knowledge requires an integrated and continuous training process.

Some teachers are not well prepared to face a mixed-proficiency class. There is a lack of proper training and innovative teaching strategies to handle mixed proficiency levels. Barrantes (2022) identified two main issues: one for beginners and the other for intermediate students. She mentioned lack of confidence, insecurity, lack of motivation, reluctance to participate, and fear of mockery as negative experiences for beginner students. On the other hand, intermediate students reported that classes were slow, easy, and boring and that their teachers did not take their questions seriously. This evidence shows the necessity to do research on how to deal with mixed proficiency classes and provide effective strategies and techniques for teachers. Also, in a previous study by Gustiani (2018), she found that understanding students' needs in a single classroom improves teachers' pedagogy in terms of planning and creating material; therefore, it improves the academic achievement of students. While there is research in terms of the challenges a teacher faces when teaching in a mixed proficiency classroom, there are significantly fewer studies that provide effective strategies for coping with these contexts. Additionally, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the reality that student teachers face when teaching mixed proficiency classes in a social outreach program at a public university in the south of Costa Rica.

There is a high requirement for new strategies to deal with mixed proficiency classes. It is important for educators to create a classroom environment where all students, regardless of their level of English proficiency, feel confident and supported. This research also aims to provide teachers with a guide containing appropriate strategies and techniques that benefit students with different levels of proficiency in a class. In short, teachers achieve their teaching goals and students achieve their learning goals.

Research questions

Central question

How does the instructor in a social outreach program of a public university in the south of Costa Rica address the mixed proficiency class?

Associated Questions

1. What are the distinguishing features to classify mixed proficiency levels?
2. How do EFL teachers deal with students with mixed proficiency levels?
3. How can EFL teachers improve the teaching-learning process when dealing with mixed-proficiency classes?

Literature Review

The following section addresses the review of relevant literature that contributes to identifying, analyzing, and synthesizing in various investigations on the topic of teaching in

a mixed proficiency class. This literature review will cover proficiency level classifications, the main challenges in teaching a mixed proficiency class, and the strategies used when teaching mixed proficiency classes. The information was taken from academic journal articles, theses, and book chapters, focusing on the characteristics of mixed proficiency classrooms. Primary and secondary sources of information were used: the databases used were ProQuest, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. The keywords for this search were language proficiency, heterogeneous classes, teaching strategies, teacher training, and differentiated instruction.

Classifying Mixed Proficiency Levels

The literature regarding proficiency levels reveals different terminology for this term. In general, language proficiency refers to one's ability to use language for a variety of communicative purposes (Renandya et al., 2018). The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has been used as a broad guideline to describe the language abilities of foreign language learners in three broad categories: basic user, independent user, and proficient user. Each user can accomplish different linguistic feats. At the basic level, language use is limited to communicative functions like providing personal information. At the independent level, language use has a degree of fluency and spontaneity, whereas at the proficient level, language use is complex, fluent, and varied (Renandya et al., 2018).

Barrantes (2019) referred to students' proficiency levels by considering the quality and quantity of the learners' performance and participation in the classroom. The place where students with a higher proficiency level may take an active role, while students with a low proficiency level may display passive behavior that limits in-class engagement. Bhandari (2020) explained that advanced students have more knowledge of the language and only need to be explained once, while more explanations should be given to students with a moderate and low level because they do not have much knowledge and therefore their comprehension is lower.

Main Challenges for EFL Teacher

Ramesh (2023) stated that teachers face challenges in teaching mixed proficiency classes, where students have a wide range of language proficiency levels, making it difficult to accommodate the learning needs of all individuals (p. 6). Among the main challenges are the following: having a large class size of more than 30 students, not meeting students' needs, maintaining students engaged, providing feedback, and dealing with off-task behavior and individual attention. (Sudrajat 2021; Heng et al., 2023). Furthermore, lack of training of EFL teachers is considered a weakness. As pointed out by Heng et al. (2023), teachers are unable to instruct mixed proficiency classes effectively without adequate training. This idea is supported by Al-Subaiei (2017), who agreed that teachers are also faced with the shortage of training programs and strategies to prepare them for such situations at the school.

Strategies to Teach Effectively in Mixed-Proficiency Class

The use of strategies is crucial and instrumental in ensuring success in students' learning experiences. In the context of mixed-proficiency classes, these are the main strategies: maintaining student interest, promoting collaboration, using game-like activities, asking open-ended questions, giving visual materials, and pacing in each stage appropriately (Kotob & Abadi, 2019; Wroblewski & Majerová, 2019). Moreover, the use of differentiated instruction is a good strategy; for instance, teachers put learners in different groups (according to their level), present different sets of exercises, give more support and feedback to a slow reader, provide challenging materials for bright students, demands or less strict standards, allocate more or less time, and give more encouragement to certain students (Suprayogi et al., 2017).

Engagement and collaborative work are two of the strategies that teachers implement in mixed proficiency classes. For instance, Zabihi and Ghahramanzadeh (2022) and Dao and McDonough (2017) argued that teachers, in mixed proficiency classes, can keep students engaged in class by assigning collaborative work where all students are challenged. This can be done, for example, by pairing low-high proficiency or in a homogeneous way where students can reach learners' outcomes through the pair/group work. However, Yu and Hu (2017) stated that low proficiency students can benefit more from group/pair work. Another important strategy is adjusting the task difficulty for each student. For example, Abbott (2018) suggested that low proficiency students can be asked to make short comments about a task while high proficiency can be asked to give further detail. Similarly, in tiered task strategy teachers can ask all students to work the same task but when required to give responses lower proficiency learners could answer match tasks, mid-level learners could answer multiple-choice questions, and high-proficiency learners could answer open-ended questions (Abbott 2018; Pourdana & Shahpouri Rad, 2017). Furthermore, during the research, it was found that implementing scaffolding techniques helps when facing a mixed proficiency class. Scaffolding, when aligned with curriculum objectives, improves learners' outcomes. For example, simplifying language, asking for completion instead of generating, and using visual aids significantly improves students' learning experience (Yildiz & Celik, 2020).

To summarize, EFL teachers deal with mixed-proficiency classes, having students ranging from basic, intermediate, and advanced levels. For this reason, EFL teachers face many challenges when addressing the different needs of the students. Thus, language teachers should be able to apply different teaching strategies that benefit students with different proficiency levels in a classroom.

Research Methodology

This research followed a qualitative approach. Cresswell and Poth (2023) highlighted that qualitative research uses interpretive frameworks to study social problems.

Researchers use an emerging approach, collect data in natural settings, and use inductive and deductive methods to identify themes and the final report includes participants' voices, researcher reflexivity, a complex problem description, and contributions to literature (p. 66). For this reason, in our research we considered that the qualitative approach is appropriate to analyze the perspective of the student-teacher through an interview and two observations. The design of methodology is a case study, an intensive and systematic investigation of a person, group, or unit with the aim of generalizing it over several units, whether it is a single case or multiple cases (Heale & Twycross, 2018). In this study, the single case study method allowed us to analyze perspectives that the student-teacher has when teaching in a mixed proficiency English class.

Participants and Context

The research was developed in an outreach program at a public university in Corredores, a rural area in the South of Costa Rica. The outreach program offers free English courses for public high school students. At the beginning of the year, around 150 students enrolled out of their interest in improving their English proficiency level. The outreach program is directed and coordinated by a university English professor. The teacher-participant was a woman that has one year of experience. The group had 25 students, 13 boys and 12 girls, whose ages ranged between 13 and 16 years old and language levels varied from basic to advanced. The students lived in borderline places such as Ciudad Neily, Paso Canoas, La Cuesta, and Laurel.

This group was selected through criterion sampling, having a group with mixed proficiency levels. Moreover, in qualitative research, criterion sampling can be used to select a case from a closed-ended question for deeper analysis (Omana, 2013; Shasheen et al., 2019). Shaheen et al. (2019) stated that criterion sampling is used when participants are selected based on pre-established criteria. This type of sampling method is usually used in qualitative research when focusing on specific information that may reveal key points of the issue studied to provide improvement. Among the criteria used to choose this outreach program was that the program enrolls students from different high schools, which means they have different linguistic backgrounds. For this reason, there is a high probability of having mixed-proficiency students in each class. The group was recruited through a formal letter sent to the coordinator of the outreach program in the university, the university's academic director, and the student-teacher in charge of the group.

Data Collection Procedures

In this case study, two different instruments were used to collect data. First, the semi-structured interview and, second, classroom non-participant observations. Both instruments were carefully designed to gather information about the student-teacher's perspective of teaching in an EFL mixed proficiency classroom.

Instrument #1: Semi-Structured Interview

The purpose of this semi-structured interview was to obtain detailed responses from the student-teacher's perspectives and experiences in teaching mixed-proficiency classes. This interview had 11 open-ended questions that aim to explore the student-teacher's understanding of mixed proficiency, the criteria to identify students' proficiency, the way that she deals with such a class, the strategies that she uses to address the diverse needs of her students, the plan that she uses for mixed proficiency class, and the tone of voice that she used in a mixed proficiency class. Furthermore, this instrument was suitable for the research because it is flexible, accurate, and it was designed to be ethically correct. As Nathan et al. (2019) highlighted, semi-structured interviews balance researcher and participant interests by asking open-ended questions, letting for quality and depth of perspective, and allowing for emerging questions when necessary (p. 393). Finally, the interview was conducted virtually using the Zoom platform in a quiet, comfortable setting, and the session was recorded for transcription and analysis. The interview lasted 20 minutes.

Instrument #2: Classroom Observations

According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), observation in qualitative research means taking field notes to apprehend participants' action and behavior within the study setting where the notes can be recorded following structured or semi-structure format, often guided by questions of interest that the research is exploring in the study. This was the case of this study in which there were two non-participant classroom observations guided by a format that included a topic of interest. The instrument has two sections: Part 1 collected general criteria, and Part 2 included yes/no questions to identify students' linguistic level (beginning, intermediate, and advanced students). Part 1 focused on evaluating the student-teacher's differentiated instruction, teaching strategies, teaching techniques, the environment, and class participation. Part 2 helps to identify which criteria the student-teacher used to align to each proficiency, including the following: Reformulating questions, giving extra time for task completion, adjusting tone of voice, and student's active participation. The instrument was suitable because it allowed us to understand how the dynamics of the class work. During the non-participant observations, the observer arrived 5-10 minutes early, and they sat in the classroom observing, taking notes, and filling out the rubrics.

Finding and Discussions

In this section, we aim to address the research question stated at the beginning of our research study. The research questions were covered by analyzing the data gathered from interviews and observations. The findings focused on the criteria used by the teacher to classify proficiency levels, the strategies employed by student-teachers to manage these differences, and the main challenges faced when dealing with mixed proficiency classes.

Additionally, in the data analysis we used In vivo coding obtained from the participant's interview and non-participant observation. Jugessur (2022) suggested that in-vivo coding is a method that focuses on capturing participants' exact words. On the other hand, to keep it anonymous, we used the nickname Jimenez.

Data Analysis

In this research, a *thematic analysis* was used to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the interview and observations. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) defined thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. In the process of coding, an inductive approach was implemented. Chandra and Shang (2019) described the inductive coding approach as one that relies on inductive reasoning, where key themes, topics, or patterns emerge directly from raw data through continuous examination and comparison. This allowed patterns and themes to emerge naturally from the data without predefined categories.

To add reliability to our research in the coding process, we used Atlas.ti, a software that facilitates the organization and categorization of the data, with our subsequent analysis. Triangulation was used by comparing data from interviews and two rounds of classroom observations, each consisting of four hours of observation. Then, a thick description provided a rich, contextual understanding of the classroom interactions and teaching practices. Finally, to further strengthen the reliability of the analysis, peer debriefing sessions were held to examine and improve the coding system. These combined methods helped to ensure that the findings were well-supported to depict the teaching dynamics in mixed-proficiency classes.

Mixed Proficiency Level Identification

Students can be identified at various levels of proficiency, such as A1, A2, B1, and C1, as mentioned by Jimenez (personal communication, September 14th, 2024). Also, the distinguishing features to classify mixed proficiency levels in a classroom can be identified through various aspects of student performance and understanding. Proficiency can also be assessed through reading and writing abilities. Jimenez shared, "*The identification of proficiency levels is based on the students' outcomes in various skills, including speaking, writing, reading and listening, understanding vocabulary, and grammar*" (personal communication, September 14th, 2024). This classification was based on their ability to understand and use the language, as stated by Jimenez "*Differences in how students express themselves can also indicate proficiency levels. Some may construct full sentences and engage in extended conversations with few mistakes, while others may have difficulty forming complete sentences or may make frequent errors*" (personal communication, September 14th, 2024).

Challenges Faced Dealing with a Mixed Proficiency Class

The instructor faced several challenges when dealing with students of mixed proficiency levels in their classrooms. Jimenez shared, *“the main problem, I would say, is that some students, the ones that have a higher level, finish first. So, they have extra time when the others haven't finished. So, some students that are at a higher-level finish like the first”* (personal communication, September 14th, 2024). This can lead to boredom for advanced students while waiting for others to complete their work. Teachers need to find ways to keep advanced students engaged, such as assigning additional tasks or encouraging them to assist their classmates. Another challenge is class size, which makes *“it necessary to adapt the materials and techniques for each student to help them understand the class, but that is very difficult when you have a room with 30 students”* (Jimenez, personal communication, September 14th, 2024). Lastly, designing linguistic activities that are accessible to all proficiency levels is challenging for the teacher. As Jimenez said, *“I try to understand what they require, then, I include different activities in the plan, ones that include a challenging part and one that is easier”* (personal communication, September 14th, 2024).

Teaching Strategies in Mixed Proficiency Class

Various strategies to effectively manage classrooms with mixed proficiency levels were implemented. One of the strategies was to implement differentiated instructions by adapting lesson plans and incorporating activities that cater to different proficiency levels. Jimenez indicated, *“I used slow speed, I repeat the instructions, I use synonyms, I introduce some Spanish words, I use the body language, and I explain again with easier vocabulary for them. I walk around the classroom all the time. That is how I used to do the instructions”* (personal communication, September 14th, 2024). Another strategy is peer support in group activities; the instructor strategically grouped students so that higher-level students could assist their peers. This peer support system allowed students to explain concepts to one another, fostering a collaborative learning environment. Jimenez argued that sometimes she chooses their groups strategically, including one who is at the highest level and one who is at a lower level, so the students support each other (personal communication, September 14th, 2024). Also, the use of scaffolding techniques; for instance, she explained the topic little by little so that all students understood. She followed the stages to teach them vocabulary first, pre-task, during task, and post-task, activities that made it challenging but not impossible for them to achieve the activity. (Jimenez, personal communication, September 14th, 2024)

Normally, the CEFR system is used to identify the proficiency level of the students in theory. However, in the classroom, teachers may identify the students' linguistic level based on their participation in the classroom. For example, teachers evaluate students' performance by assessing their comprehension of vocabulary and grammar, following

instructions, and expressing their ability to express themselves through speaking and writing. Time management, class size, and planning are the main challenges that EFL teachers face when dealing with mixed proficiency classes. EFL teachers use different teaching strategies to manage appropriately with mixed proficiency classes such as implementing differentiated instructions, utilizing scaffolding techniques, and encouraging peer support. Applying the previous teaching strategies helps teachers to develop a class in which all the students are engaged despite their proficiency levels.

Our findings confirm that student proficiency can be measured by the quality and quantity of their classroom performance, as Barrantes (2019) suggested. Dealing with mixed proficiency remains a challenging task for EFL teachers, particularly with time constraints. Often lower-level students need additional instruction while higher-level students finish tasks early and become disengaged; the teacher's task is to balance this situation. In large classes, where EFL teachers need to provide each student with individualized attention, this issue gets worse. Additionally, teachers lacked sufficient time to design activities that can fit all levels (Sudrajat 2021; Heng et al., 2023; Gustiani, 2018). Despite these challenges, one of the main strategies that the teacher used is differentiated instruction to try to cater to all levels (Suprayogi et al., 2017). Scaffolding technique has a huge positive impact on teacher performance when dealing with mixed proficiency levels in the classroom. Finally, the instructor tended to implement collaborative work to promote peer collaboration where advanced or intermediate guide low level and all meaningfully learn from each other (Kotob & Abadi 2019; Wroblewski & Majerová, 2019).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In the mixed proficiency classes observed, advanced and intermediate students tended to finish the task too quickly, most of the time, while beginners are just understanding the instructions. This led to advanced or intermediate students feeling bored and disengaged in class. Class size was another challenge; the number of students in a mixed proficiency class matter. Consequently, it was tough for the instructor to approach students and clarify their doubts. Even though the instructor needed to approach each student to clarify doubts, there was not enough time to do so because it was a large group, and time was limited. Lastly, designing inclusive linguistic activities that match the varying degrees of proficiency is challenging, as teachers must engage students in meaningful communication through speaking, listening, reading, and writing tasks.

The finding implies that EFL teachers require training and support to know how to effectively manage a mixed proficiency class. To address this challenge, teachers should learn how to manage time and how to combine techniques that may work with beginners, intermediate, and advanced students. Therefore, it is important to implement training that ensures that teachers receive adequate preparation in the use of strategies that specifically address the teaching-learning process in a mixed proficiency class. With proper preparation

and knowledge, teachers may be able to respond to most of their students' needs. Additionally, teachers with training would be able to address individual learning gaps, thereby improving the equity of learning experiences in larger mixed-proficiency classes.

Our recommendation is that MEP should implement a placement test when the students enter high school to place them according to their proficiency level. For example, when students go to the seventh grade of school, they are divided into groups; they can be classified as 7-1 advanced, 7-2 intermediate, and 7-3 basic. A placement test would place students in appropriate level classrooms. Such an approach could substantially reduce the workload of teachers who must deal with mixed proficiency classes. It would also make students more confident because they could study with peers of a similar level, which would provide better interaction and collaboration among peer groups.

For future researchers, we suggest working with a multiple case study instead of a single case study, to obtain a wide perspective about mixed proficiency classes. However, researchers must consider that they need more time for the research process. Also, it is recommended that future researchers analyze not just the teacher perspective but also the student perspective. Lastly, it was difficult to find articles, papers, books, and book chapters on official databases to support our research; this situation affected the research process. We advise future researchers to dedicate more time to looking for information to tackle this situation. The final recommendation comes in the form of an Action Plan.

Action Plan

Considering our conclusions, we suggest creating a webinar for teachers, where they can learn some strategies of how to deal with mixed proficiency classes appropriately. There will be one webinar of 2 hours. This webinar will be divided into three parts: the first part will be about strategies of how to manage appropriate time. The second part will be about how to manage large groups effectively. The third part will be about how to adapt plans and create linguistic activities. When the speakers finish explaining the three parts, the audience will work on a case study activity to put into practice what they learned during the webinar. When the audience finishes, the presenter gives them feedback and finishes the presentation with the conclusion.

This webinar aims to provide EFL teachers with practical strategies for managing mixed proficiency classes, such as time management, inclusive lesson planning, and student engagement. This webinar is designed for EFL teachers who work in settings with mixed proficiency groups, particularly in secondary education. It aims to support their work and help them to improve the efficiency of the classes. In this webinar, it is important to share recommendations regarding the use of teaching strategies to deal with mixed proficiency classes. Considering these strategies, teachers may improve their teaching approach, and students may have better outcomes. The platform selected for this webinar will be Zoom,

considering the advantages that this platform has such as recording the meeting and allowing hosts to divide participants into group work rooms for smaller discussions and collaborative activities. During the webinar, the presenters will use a Canva presentation that could be shared at the end to provide participants with take home material.

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Teacher's and Students' Perceptions of the Contribution of Interactive Activities for Oral Production Skills of Advanced EFL Students

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Abstract: Interactive activities (IAs) refer to tasks that actively involve students in various group activities in which there is a two-way communication exchange between the speaker and the listener. These activities encourage them to participate in spontaneous communication by listening and contributing verbally to discussions or conversations. Through these interactions, students may improve their ability to communicate. A program that develops IA for language learning is significant, specifically in a region where there is a need to prepare proficient English speakers to foster communication. For this reason, the goal of this qualitative case study was to understand the contribution of interactive activities for oral production skills of advanced EFL learners in a language program at a public university. For this case study, data were collected using structured classroom observations and structured interviews for the teacher and students. Findings led to a deeper understanding of key characteristics of IAs for oral production and the students' response to IAs. Also, findings revealed that the teacher provided both immediate and delayed feedback to promote deeper learning on their speaking skills. Finally, the findings showed how the learners' language grew and developed through the implementation of IAs. Based on core findings, the last section in this paper is an action plan that includes a digital booklet which describes ten interactive activities for speaking. The purpose of this booklet is to promote communication among students and foster a positive learning environment through IAs.

Keywords: Case study, EFL, language program, interactive activities, oral production.

Introduction

Given that English is one of the most used languages worldwide, there is an increasing demand for English-speaking proficiency in business, education, and international communication. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and

globalized, the English language has taken a crucial role regarding intercultural communication in which articulating thoughts and ideas coherently and persuasively has become a critical asset (Dewi, 2016; Tiu et al., 2023; Todorova & Todorova, 2018). Due to the communicative necessities that have emerged in different contexts in society, the English language has become a useful tool. This being said, language proficiency is achieved on the basis of the effective communication that speakers who use English can have, as well as the ability to understand, be understood, and express themselves in different educational, professional, or cultural contexts (Kumar, 2013, p.17). When it comes to learning a new language, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, one of the main goals is to be able to exchange ideas orally, for the speaking skill “is fundamental in language learning, as it allows individuals to express themselves, engage in conversations, and interact effectively in various social and professional contexts” (Mohammed, 2023, p. 269); this goal may be achieved by implementing IAs in EFL classrooms. Interactive activities are those activities that demand students’ engagement in diverse group-oriented tasks that require spontaneous communication. Through interaction, students can increase their oral production as they immerse in a two-way verbal communication exchange between the person who is listening and the person who is speaking, and vice versa, which may help their ability to communicate in different contexts (Brown, 2001; Huszti, 2022; Yusuf, 2015). IAs might be useful in developing EFL students’ oral production that enables communication in different contexts.

Through ongoing observation and analysis within the English teaching major, it has become evident that the number of English speakers in the Brunca Region, a socioeconomic sector in the southern part of Costa Rica, is significantly low. This is supported by a study, conducted by Coalición Costarricense de Iniciativas de Desarrollo [CINDE] (2020), highlighting inadequate English proficiency levels among residents, particularly in oral production skills. There is a regional demand for competent English speakers who can effectively address linguistic needs like spoken communication in fields such as education, tourism, business, and international relations. CINDE (2020) also mentioned that only 5% of people with completed higher education, 2% with a high school diploma, and 0% with a completed primary education in the Brunca Region reach the C1 proficiency level of English (p. 91), meaning that the low percentages indicate a significant gap in English proficiency, showing a serious need for improvement in English education in the region. For this reason, the urge for English language programs capable of preparing advanced speakers is clear and needs to be addressed. One existing linguistic program in the area aims to “provide the community with an accessible high-quality learning of English which has a clear emphasis on developing conversational skills” (Barrantes, 2013, p. 78). Working toward the development of competent speakers with high levels of English that “enables speakers of a language to interact effectively with each other” (Mayo & Barrioluengo, 2017, p. 57), this program focuses mainly on the development of students’ oral production skills through IAs. Some theoretical backgrounds have proven that the topic

of IAs in developing oral production skills in EFL students is worth investigating because these activities contribute to the enhancement of learner's speaking outcomes when implemented in the classroom. As shown by Ho and Long (2014), "Students got the improvement in oral performance because they spoke more fluently as they felt confident and had chances of practicing speaking with partners" (p. 1). Consequently, the purpose of this study is to research the contribution of IAs in the development of oral production skills of advanced EFL students in a language program at a public university.

This study holds considerable significance as it explores how IAs may contribute to the oral production skills of EFL learners. The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the contribution that these activities can have to EFL students when developing speaking skills. Furthermore, the findings may promote best practices and guide educators and stakeholders in refining and improving existing teaching methods, ultimately leading to more effective and dynamic language instruction overall. The information gathered from the sub-questions of this investigation could be instrumental in shaping future English programs that aim to address the need for proficient English speakers in the Brunca region, enabling students to develop their communicative oral skills fluently and confidently. Consequently, the research question that is developed in this investigation is: What are the perceptions of the contribution of IAs to oral production skills of advanced EFL students in a language program at a public university? The sub-questions to be developed to answer the main question are the following: What interactive activities for oral production are implemented in EFL classrooms in a language program at a public university? What are the students' perceptions of the implementation of interactive activities for developing oral production skills in EFL classrooms in a language program at a public university? What are the teachers' perceptions and role regarding the use of interactive activities for developing oral production skills in EFL classrooms in a language program at a public university?

Literature Review

In English Language Teaching (ELT), oral production may be a difficult skill to develop, especially for EFL learners. However, through the learner-centered approach (LCA) and Task-Based Instruction (TBI), students may enhance their oral production skills when implementing Interactive Teaching Activities (ITAs) in the EFL classroom. Therefore, the topics of principles for teaching oral production and relevant aspects of Interactive Collaborative (ICL) Learning and Game-Based Learning (GBL) are significant elements in the contribution of IAs to the oral production skills of EFL students.

Teaching Approaches in EFL Contexts

A Learner-Centered Approach (LCA) to English teaching in the EFL context emphasizes the active role students take in their language learning process to create an effective and personalized experience (Badjadi, 2020; Darsih, 2018; Villacís & Camacho,

2017). The LCA enhances a “more in-depth learning and facilitates students’ development into independent learners” (Darsih, 2018, p. 34), meaning that this approach takes action when students take control over their learning to improve their language skills and outcomes. Also, teachers play a pivotal role in the classroom by acting as guides and facilitators in the teaching-learning process and implementing the LCA during the lessons. Darsih (2018) mentioned that in this approach, teachers can support students’ cognitive learning process and give feedback. Also, students are the ones to reflect and answer questions instead of the teacher (p. 36). To reach this point, the teachers’ role is to boost students’ participation and motivation in the classroom. Also, in this approach, teachers should seek to discover students’ needs, goals, and learning styles to stimulate their interests. Additionally, Villacís and Camacho (2017) mentioned some characteristics that describe this approach such as active, deep, and reflective learning, responsibility, autonomy, interdependence and respect between teachers and learners (p. 383). Thus, when students try to build their knowledge, they may become critical, autonomous, responsible, and capable of making decisions because they learn by doing. In English language teaching, the LCA is said to be “crucial to maximizing their usefulness in terms of strategic pedagogy and enhanced target language development” (Badjadi, 2020, p. 10) to ensure effective learning. The LCA sets the learner as the main character; however, there is a need for the teacher to make it possible.

A key principle of the LCA is Task-Based Instruction (TBI), which promotes active learning by immersing students in real-world tasks using the target language (Olivares et al., 2020; Ha et al., 2021; Villacís & Camacho, 2017), rather than just practicing language structures in isolation. To this approach, a task is defined by Ha et al. (2021) as “an activity with a specific goal and performed by learners in classrooms with defined target languages. Moreover, learning tasks have a relationship with learners’ real world” (p. 3) so, tasks involve authentic contexts for which students had to use the target language. TBI tasks have “three phases: pre-task, a task cycle, and language focus,” (Villacís & Camacho, 2017, p. 383). In the pre-task, teachers instruct and prepare students with input to start producing the language. In the task cycle, students implement that input. Learners reflect, think critically, and receive feedback in the language focus, which is the last phase. Moreover, Olivares et al. (2020) stated that learners have an active role and interact with each other to complete tasks and increase mainly their speaking skill (p. 27), so this skill takes a crucial role in TBI given that students learn the language through oral communication to become competent users of the language. Through the tasks and activities implemented by teachers, EFL learners may boost self-confidence, collaboration, interaction, and spontaneous speech in the EFL classroom. Ultimately, the teacher's role is to create a meaningful outcome for students. They “guide learners to solve learning activities” (Ha et al., 2021, p. 6). In conclusion, the implementation of TBI may help EFL learners to become autonomous and prepare them for real life.

Principles for Teaching Oral Production Skills in the EFL Context

When teaching oral production skills in the EFL context, there are key principles to consider that allow students to become effective oral communicators of English as a foreign language in real-life interactions (Brown & Lee, 2015). There are several ways in which oral production can be described. According to Fuentes (2013), oral production is defined as “an ability to communicate with others. This process involves communication and expressing ourselves naturally and fluently through different activities” (p. 172). Regarding oral production skills in the EFL context, these abilities may be difficult to teach; however, Brown and Lee (2015) explained some key principles for teaching speaking skills to EFL learners effectively. First, they emphasized that effective teaching of speaking skills should focus on creating a balance between fluency and accuracy, enabling learners to produce language that is both correct and natural (p. 356), which is important to express our thoughts and also understand the ideas of others. The second and third principles state that the techniques used for practicing should match students' proficiency level and should increase their interest in authentic language in meaningful contexts (pp. 356-357) so that students are challenged to use their knowledge without being overwhelmed by the task and being engaged. The fourth and fifth principles explain how providing appropriate feedback and opportunities for students to initiate conversation helps them build confidence (pp. 367-358). In this way, students have the opportunity to learn from errors and improve over time with more confidence, leading them to engage more in conversations with their classmates. Finally, the sixth principle encourages teachers to promote listening and speaking exercises, as they are naturally interconnected in real-world communication (p. 358), helping students to better understand how conversations work in the real world. By applying these principles, teachers can create a supportive environment for developing oral production skills in the EFL classroom.

Task-based instruction emphasizes the use of language as a tool for communication, encouraging learners to develop their oral production skills when engaged in meaningful tasks (Richards & Rodgers, 2016). This approach is different from other approaches as TBI incorporates real-world activities that require active use of students' speaking skills. This way, students are encouraged to develop their oral production ability through meaningful tasks; for example, in a task where students organize a group trip, they would need to negotiate meaning and interact with others to achieve the goal (Ellis et al., 2019; Skehan, 2018), which involves directly the use of listening and speaking skills. Moreover, during these speaking activities, learners are exposed to meaningful contexts that mimic actual language use, preparing them for these types of interactions outside the classroom. In fact, this approach promotes the first principle suggested by Brown and Lee (2015) in which fluency and accuracy are balanced in the initial stages when starting to learn a new language (p. 356). Additionally, during and after the task in TBI, teachers provide effective feedback on content that focuses on improving students' oral production skills. As it is

suggested by Thornbury and Harmer (2005), "contextualized feedback is crucial for helping students refine their speaking abilities" (p. 50). The practice of communicative speaking tasks in TBI makes it a suitable approach for developing oral production skills.

Interactive Learning for Oral Production Skills

Implementing interactive collaborative learning may enhance EFL students' learning experience regarding the development of oral production skills (Liu & Tsai, 2008; Sembiring, 2018). Interaction has become fundamental in the EFL language learning process as it "has a significant impact on foreign language learning" (Sembiring, 2018, p. 126). In fact, an interactive learning environment in EFL classrooms, where students actively participate, can foster the development of oral production skills. Collaborative Learning Activities (CLAs) have been used by teachers due to their benefits. Thus, Sembiring (2018) added that "in cooperative learning, students are grouped so that they can learn and interact for creating a more comprehensive learning" (p. 127). CLAs might effectively develop students' language skills due to interaction in the classroom. Additionally, Liu and Tsai (2008) mentioned that "students can develop problem-solving and knowledge construction activities in the processes of peer discussion and interaction" (p. 2), so the implementation of discussion activities in EFL classrooms promotes collaboration and problem-solving skills, which are also beneficial for students' critical thinking abilities. Febliza et al. (2023) emphasized that "students need to be able to think critically" (p. 70), highlighting that discussions not only improve social skills but also contribute to an effective oral production. Thus, when EFL students are engaged and interested in learning, the use of interactive learning and discussions contribute to problem-solving and critical thinking skills, also enhancing their production skills.

In this context, EFL students' interaction may increase through the implementation of gamification and game-based learning activities (Figueroa-Flores, 2016; Sun & Hsieh, 2018; Pohl et al., 2009). Education becomes a more enriching experience for EFL learners when incorporating gamification into the classroom. Al-Azawi et al. (2016) stated that "gamification is turning the learning process as a whole into a game, while GBL [Game-Based Learning] is using a game as part of the learning process" (p. 134), so the emphasis of both methods is the use of games in learning. Figueroa-Flores (2016) mentioned that "gamification in education offers the learners an opportunity to interact among themselves as it's implied in a social game" (p. 513). Additionally, the use of gamified elements fosters various benefits for EFL learners. As Sun and Hsieh (2018) affirmed, "Through the use of gamified elements and interaction mechanisms, a learning environment that helps students become more engaged and motivated can be created" (p. 105) so that students are more likely to retain information and improve their language skills through enjoyable and meaningful activities. Additionally, the use of gamified elements fosters various benefits for EFL learners, as Figueroa-Flores (2016) mentioned that "gamification in education offers the learners an opportunity to interact among themselves as it is implied in a social

game” (p. 513). This approach allows students to develop their knowledge and improve their oral production skills through experimentation. In conclusion, the incorporation of gamification and GBL activities in EFL classrooms not only enhances student interaction and engagement but also plays a pivotal role in improving oral production skills, making language learning a more dynamic and effective process.

Research Methodology

The current study is qualitative in nature. This paradigm allowed researchers to investigate how IAs contribute to the oral production skills of advanced EFL students in a language program at a public university. The qualitative research approach was the most suitable approach for this study providing that it allows one to explore a phenomenon to answer the whys and hows of human behavior, opinion, and experience (Creswell, 2015; Guest et al., 2013). In other words, it enables researchers to deeply examine a problem by experiencing participants’ realities in their natural context. Additionally, the researchers can interactively explore, understand, and learn about the different perspectives on the topic, which was the case of researchers who conducted this study about IAs for oral production in English classes and used instruments such as observations and interviews.

This research followed a case study design as it focused on the understanding of a specific case. In this design, research focuses on in-depth description and analysis of phenomena human beings undertake within real life context (Kekeya, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This case study aimed to explore a particular event in an EFL classroom as it was possible to observe the IAs implemented and the students’ and teacher’s perceptions regarding the contribution for oral production. Moreover, this allowed researchers to build in-depth comprehension of the event under study. The unit of analysis of this case study is a language program at a public university.

Context and Participants

The setting of this case study was a language program at a public university in the Brunca Region. This study focused on an intensive two-year English program. That is an accessible and paid program for people from the age of thirteen who want to learn the language. They can enroll without any mandatory admission exam; however, they can take a placement test to measure their overall knowledge of English and be placed in a specific level. The program offered in-person and online classes consisting of eleven levels taught over a two-month period each. This program focuses its framework on the TBI approach which is defined by Olivares et al. (2020) as “an approach to syllabus design based on the search for genuine communication (...) centered on tasks” (p. 13). Finally, the program offers evening schedules during the week and daytime classes on Saturdays, and students attend lessons of five hours per week.

The participants of this case study were advanced students at level 8 from this program and their teachers. Once students finish the program, they are expected to reach the B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Their ages ranged from fourteen to thirty-four years old. The group was composed of fifteen students. Moreover, the teacher in charge of this group has three years of teaching experience working for the program and holds a degree in English teaching. He has also worked at a call center. The institutions he attended are Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica (UNA), Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR), and Universidad Latina.

The sampling technique used for this case study was criterion sampling because the participants fit the needs of the researchers carrying out the investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 333). The criteria used to select the participants include: being enrolled in an English language program, being in an advanced level, and being exposed to IAs during the lessons. These participants agreed on providing the information needed to answer the research questions. To ensure confidentiality, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms in this report.

Data Collection Procedures

To gather pertinent data for the development of this investigation, a total of three instruments were used: a structured observation guide, an interview for the teacher, and an interview for students. The structured observation guide aimed to identify how IAs for oral production skills were implemented in the EFL classroom. In addition, the interviews focused on collecting information based on the perspectives of students and the teacher of IAs. These methods were suitable for the research purpose because they allowed the researchers to observe real-life situations and to obtain first-hand information on students' and teacher's points of view about IAs for oral production. The collected information may contribute to a deep understanding of the topic from different sources. Finally, for confidential purposes, the instruments did not include the participants' names or any other personal information that could reveal their identities.

Instrument #1: Structured Classroom Observation Guide

This instrument aimed to observe specific behavior of how IAs for oral production skills are implemented in an EFL classroom. This structured observation guide consists of two parts. The first part includes a tally chart to identify if the activities developed met the criteria for IAs. The second part includes a chart to register the different activities developed at each stage of the class. It helped describe the focus and details of the oral production activities, such as materials used, the way students were grouped, the length of the activity, and students' reactions. The observations were conducted over two weeks in their English classes. Each class lasted approximately two hours and thirty minutes. The researchers kept all the information gathered confidential.

Instrument #2: Semi-structured Interview with the Teacher

This instrument aimed to collect information about the teacher's perspectives regarding the implementation of IAs for oral production skills. This instrument consists of twelve open-ended questions related to the use of IAs in an oral communication course. The next number of topics were covered in the questions: the interactive speaking activities, the factors that influence the choice, the frequency of use, the effectiveness of those activities in students' accuracy and fluency when speaking, the IAs used to promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills, the changes in confidence when speaking attributed to IAs, the ways of providing feedback to students in oral production activities, and the ways challenges are addressed. The interview was audio recorded to avoid missing information in the transcription process. The teacher gave the consent to record the interview only for research purposes. Researchers confidentially handled the answers provided during the interview by the participants and shared them only with the members of the investigation.

Instrument #3: Semi-structured Interviews with Students

This tool was designed to gather insights about students' views on the topic. This interview followed a semi-structured format that consists of twelve open-ended questions that aimed to explore different perspectives on the use of IAs in oral production. The questions addressed several topics, including students' experiences during oral activities, the IAs to promote oral production, their effectiveness in enhancing speaking accuracy and fluency, the IAs that aid in improving listening skills, progress in speaking confidence through the use of IAs, their feelings about teamwork and game-based activities, and the challenges students encountered. The interviews were recorded to avoid missing information during the transcription process. The interviews were conducted with five preselected learners during English classes. The teacher in charge of the group was asked for assistance in selecting the students according to their availability and willingness to participate. Additionally, the interviews were conducted in Spanish to allow participants to express themselves more comfortably in their native language.

Trustworthiness

This case study ensured trustworthiness by the standards of credibility, dependability, and transferability. First, to address credibility, the researchers collected data from multiple sources such as observation guides and interviews with students and the teacher. These instruments allowed researchers to analyze different perspectives from participants to reach a deeper understanding of the topic being investigated, so researchers read all the data collected from each instrument and analyzed the findings together. Second, to achieve dependability, three different data-gathering instruments were described and used to collect vast information to analyze. Third, to carry out transferability, the researchers provided a thick and in-depth description of the phenomenon that occurred in

the setting studied. Investigators described all the processes that occurred in the setting so that readers understand the context and determine if the study contributes to other contexts.

Data Analysis and Findings

After conducting a thorough data analysis, four main themes were identified: Key characteristics of IAs for oral production, students' response to IAs, teacher's feedback for enhancing speaking skills, and learners' language growth and development through the implementation of IAs.

Key Characteristics of IAs for Oral Production

One finding suggested that IAs shared three key characteristics: real-life situations, real-time conversations, and students' interests. IAs were designed to simulate authentic scenarios that learners were likely to encounter in everyday life. For instance, in the interview with the teacher Julián, he mentioned an activity implemented during the lessons. He said that if he was teaching a topic about medicine, he asked students to create a roleplay in which one was the patient and the other was the doctor. They used specific terminology such as prescriptions, symptoms, pills, and pharmaceuticals, among others. These activities were found to be effective ways to prepare students for future situations that they would encounter in their real lives and allowed using specific vocabulary in their speech. The student Santiago remarked in the interview that IAs that mimic everyday life are helpful for work, leisure, or traveling purposes. Moreover, Julián highlighted that language learning is not just understanding the topic but also applying it to real-life situations. Another relevant characteristic found when implementing IAs was real-time communication. Discussions, roundtables, roleplays, and debates were activities that in most cases did not require previous preparation. Learners engaged in dialogues to reinforce the topics covered in the class and express their opinions. Additionally, interviews were another IA applied in the lessons that enhanced real-time communication. For example, they were assigned roles; Student A interviewed Student B using an indicated set of questions. Student B did the same but with another set. The immediate interaction that students made during this activity was noticed to be effective in having natural interaction. Finally, it was observed that activities having learners, in groups or pairs, describe videos and flashcards, to later make guesses, successfully encouraged real-time communication. In summary, IAs effectively contributed to oral production skills by simulating real-life situations and encouraging real-time conversations that they can encounter.

Another key finding was that some IAs were designed to make students choose a topic based on their interests to make the content more relevant and engaging. One effective IA was role-playing, where students had the opportunity to make choices based on their preferences; for instance, in groups, one student selected a country he or she wanted to represent as a foreigner. Then, the rest of the group brainstormed recommendations, activities, places to visit, warnings to follow, and possible challenges that a person may

face in the country chosen. Additionally, group presentations required students to work together and make choices regarding their interests. For instance, in one activity, students worked in groups, agreed on a product they liked, and thought of ways to advertise that product to, finally, create an advertisement derived from their creative ideas as a team. This way students interact orally to make decisions based on their preferences. Julián mentioned in the interview that topics based on students' interests are really important because interest may be linked to participation and engagement in class work.

Students' Response to IAs

The results indicated that implementing IAs in the classroom evoked both positive and negative responses from students. In the interviews, several participants expressed a shared perspective on IAs; they mentioned that they felt more confident regarding their speaking skills when completing IAs in class. For example, the student Santiago said that IAs took him out of his comfort zone when it came to speaking; it encouraged him to speak more. This showed that students need gentle encouragement to overcome the natural fears that speaking usually produces for a learner of a new language. Moreover, the student Ian mentioned in the interview that public speaking has been the biggest challenge that he has had to overcome in his English classes because of his fear of public speaking. It was seen that those activities challenged students' emotions, but eventually, they made an effort to succeed in the task. Furthermore, it was observed that IAs allowed the expression of opinions, improving students' willingness to participate, as one of them, during the interview, mentioned that he did feel more motivated. Some students liked to participate in IAs without fear and nervousness; for instance, the student Santiago stated that he liked IAs because he did not care about making mistakes anymore. This made evident that some of them have gained confidence when speaking during these activities. Through the implementation of IAs in the classroom, students could feel confident regarding the speaking skill.

The data revealed that some students encountered certain barriers to the implementation of IAs in the classroom. During the interviews, students mentioned having difficulties when speaking in public. They expressed that they got very nervous and anxious during the speaking activities that they had to do. One example is Karla, who shared that she always felt nervous when she had to stand in front of everyone. Moreover, Daniel mentioned in the interview that another aspect that made speaking in public difficult was making visual contact with the audience, as he classified it as a terrifying action for some people. Furthermore, the teacher Julián affirmed that in some cases, when he had students participating orally, they (students) were constantly afraid of failure, embarrassment, and judgment, and sometimes they did not even speak loud enough. This might be one of the causes of students' unwillingness to participate in IAs for oral production. Moreover, during the observations, it was noticeable that some students rarely participated unless the teacher asked them a question directly. Another relevant aspect found was that participants

agreed in the interview on the idea that it was difficult for them to think in English when speaking. This affects expressing immediately what they think because they may need time to translate information into the target language. In addition to this, one student mentioned that every time he has to speak, it is hard for him to generate ideas with good grammar. Finally, the implementation of IAs in the EFL classrooms was a challenge for students due to their level of language proficiency and lack of confidence

Teacher's Feedback for Enhancing Speaking Skills

According to the data, the teacher offered two types of feedback: immediate feedback to correct performance and delayed feedback to promote deeper learning when implementing IAs in the class. A remarkable aspect found during the observations was that the teacher immediately gave students feedback regarding oral production during IAs when they made a mistake. The teacher corrected orally language use regarding grammar, pronunciation, and semantics in real time. It was a way to reinforce students' development during oral activities in the classroom. For example, in the interview with Julián, he said that if his students made a mistake when speaking, he repeated it to role model the appropriate way. He mentioned that he did not tell them that they had made a mistake; instead, he repeated the utterances students had said. The way the teacher gave feedback could encourage students not to feel afraid of failure or to make mistakes when expressing opinions. Another key finding related to feedback was the role of support that the teacher played during the implementation of IAs in the classroom. The teacher was always a guide and helped his students whenever they needed him. For instance, when students were planning or developing a role play, they sometimes asked the teacher for help regarding vocabulary or grammatical structures. Thus, the teacher went to the students' desks, listened, and then gave immediate oral feedback on what the students required. Moreover, in the observations, it was seen that when a student forgot a word in an IA and asked the teacher for help, the teacher explained the meaning of the word and never gave the equivalent in Spanish. It reflected that the mother tongue was not used in the classroom so that students would be more exposed to the foreign language and be encouraged to speak only English. Moreover, the teacher gave synonyms or examples of the words asked by students to explain the meaning effectively. In summary, the data consistently showed that the teacher's immediate feedback, along with a commitment to using the target language, seemed to foster an effective learning environment that may have encouraged students' confidence and engagement in their language development.

The results indicated that delayed feedback was also given after specific interactive activities to encourage deeper reflection. During the observations, it was noticed that Julián provided input at the end of each IA using the whiteboard. While students were doing an IA for oral production, Julián took notes on a piece of paper, writing any mistakes he found while students were communicating. After this, he wrote the mistakes on the whiteboard to help students understand the correct structures for future use. For example, a creative way

that Julián used to give feedback when the observations were carried out was called “the traffic light.” Every time students made a mistake, Julián took notes of it on the red color of the traffic light. Then, on the yellow light students were required to identify the errors and try to correct them. Finally, in the green light, the teacher presented the right way to correct the errors. A significant aspect Julián highlighted during the interview was that most of the time, students managed to correct errors as a group, especially for higher levels. This suggested that, when students reach advanced levels, they have enough prior knowledge to identify and address errors collaboratively through teamwork as a meaningful strategy. In general, delayed feedback lets students have a deeper understanding of their errors to correct them.

Learners’ Language Growth and Development Through the Implementation of IAs

The analysis showed that IAs enhanced students’ oral production and critical thinking skills. It was found that students developed oral production skills such as speaking, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, and the ability to structure sentences coherently. An aspect found was that they were very talkative and participative when it came to IAs, which was a positive aspect because it helped them practice and improve their speaking skills. For instance, one activity that Julián mentioned in the interview that helped students’ speaking skills was the implementation of images or flashcards to ask questions. The teacher asked students to describe the pictures and other questions related to it. Moreover, regarding fluency, the student Santiago mentioned that any activity in which they were asked to speak helped fluency since they started managing vocabulary, organization of words, and grammar. Also, pronunciation was another skill improved by the implementation of IAs. For example, in the interview with Julián, he said that he asked students to find out which words should be stressed in the text, which words can be linked, and which sentences should carry rising intonation or falling intonation. In addition, during the observation, the teacher always gave immediate and delayed pronunciation feedback, so Julián said that his purpose was for students to start mastering the pronunciation of some words. In conclusion, IAs helped foster an engaging environment where fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary flourished through active participation and targeted feedback.

According to the data, students experienced an improvement in their cognitive skills through the implementation of IAs. During the interviews with the students, most of the participants mentioned several benefits they had gained from IAs, which were not only improved language skills such as grammar and vocabulary but also the boost of their cognitive skills like critical thinking. For instance, during the observations, it was found that the teacher was always trying to take advantage of the IAs to make students boost their critical thinking. For example, debates, discussions, and roleplays helped students critical thinking because they could express their points of views making use of their prior knowledge. Moreover, IAs might increase their cognitive skills, as it was supported by Ian.

He shared that during classes, he wanted to give his opinion, a sign of growing critical thinking and confidence in expressing thoughts. This was also supported by the teacher, who emphasized that he actively encouraged students to speak more, fostering a supportive environment. In conclusion, these responses demonstrated how IAs not only improved their oral production skills but also their cognitive skills.

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the most significant conclusions in this case study is that some activities developed in the classroom reflected three main characteristics that made them interactive such as real-life situations, real-time conversations, and students' interests. Role plays were vital to enhance students' practice of the language in real-life situations because they mimicked everyday scenarios. Moreover, discussions, roundtables, and debates were implemented to encourage students to create real-time conversations where they express their opinions about the topics covered during the sessions. Finally, students' selection of prompts in roleplays and group presentations made them more interested and engaged in the activity. Even though the results found were positive regarding IAs and their characteristics, a recommendation drawn is to prepare a more varied repertoire of IAs for speaking that align to those three features. In fact, by bringing and integrating a variety of IAs into their program, students might improve their speaking abilities and encounter more effective learning results.

This case study has also shown that while IAs can engage students in their learning process, they can also cause negative reactions in students during speaking exercises. The results of this study suggested that IAs in the classroom were not effective for all students. While some of the learners found them engaging and helpful for their speaking skill development, as they felt more motivated to get out of their comfort zone and speak more, others considered IAs ineffective due to the discomfort with spontaneous and public speaking. As some of the participants explained, they usually become nervous when speaking with other classmates or in front of the class. Considering this conclusion, a recommendation for other teachers is to implement IAs by gradually introducing them to the class, from low-pressure activities to larger group interactions in a supportive environment, so that students would perceive them as a tool, not a threat, for their language development.

It was also concluded that the teacher gave both immediate feedback to reinforce students' development of speaking skills and delayed feedback to encourage deeper insights about the correction of errors made during the classes. In general, it was found that feedback was essential in the language learning process because it contributes to the correction of students' oral production errors during exercises. Both types of feedback work differently for each student, depending on their preferences. For some students, being corrected immediately is effective, and for others it is better to analyze their errors later. As

a recommendation, the teacher should ask the students to keep track of their errors in a print or online chart so that they can visually note their progress and motivate themselves. The teacher can devote some minutes per class to this activity to ensure the students complete the chart based on their errors during the classes.

This study has found that, generally, most students are aware of the positive impact IAs have had in their oral production skills. They reported that their fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary skills improved through their implementation. Also, there seems to be a development in their cognitive skills such as critical thinking and confidence when expressing thoughts during the IAs in which the teachers encouraged students to speak, fostering a supportive environment. Moreover, natural speech patterns were enhanced and students started thinking more spontaneously. This finding has shown that students might improve their oral production skills through exposure to IAs in the classroom; however it is recommended that students join language clubs. It is a way in which they can interact and practice speaking with others even outside the classroom so that they maximize the time spent in their speaking, making it a valuable addition to their daily language learning journey.

Action Plan: Interactive Activities Digital Booklet

The action plan consists of one digital booklet separated into two guides with ten interactive speaking classroom activities, the teacher's guide and the student's one. The main objective of these booklets is to promote speaking skills among students and foster a positive learning environment through IAs. The target audience includes both the teacher and students of level 8 of the language school where the observations were conducted. The activities and resources provided are tailored to meet the needs of this specific group, though they can be adapted to suit other levels or programs if needed. The booklets were developed in response to two key recommendations from this case study. The need for more time to be spent on IAs to maximize the development of students' oral production skills and the need to help students feel more comfortable and less anxious about speaking. To attain this, this action plan provides repeated, interactive exercises, so that students gain confidence as they practice speaking in small groups or pairs; gradually, they can build the skills needed to feel more at ease.

The booklet includes ten interactive classroom activities that focus on oral production. These activities focus on real-time communication, real-life situations, and align students' interests since they will speak spontaneously from prior knowledge. The activities cover grammar contents such as the use of gerunds and infinitives, the media, and stress patterns, among others, making them suitable for various learning contexts according to the dynamics and progress of students. In the teachers' guide, each activity is explained with its clear objective, a list of required materials, step-by-step instructions, suggestions for possible adaptations, helpful tips for the teacher, and motivational messages to support

their teaching process. With this booklet, the teacher has the flexibility to integrate the suggested activities whenever they fit best within the curriculum, as they are aligned with the themes covered in the course. However, since the activities are adaptable, they can also be used in other English programs seeking to incorporate IAs into their lessons. The students' booklet lists the objectives of the activities, step-by-step instructions, the benefits of engaging in IAs, vocabulary related to the activity topics, resources for real-time conversation practice, tips for improving oral production, and motivational messages to support their learning process. Motivational messages are placed throughout the booklet to inspire students to speak more.

To implement this material effectively, the teacher will first have digital access to both guidebooks to implement the activities during the speaking part of the lesson. Then, the teacher will share the student's booklet with them. The teacher familiarizes and reviews the guide thoroughly to understand the activities and objectives and identify which activities align with the learning goals. Then, the teacher gathers any necessary material described in the guide for a specific activity that the teacher wants to prepare and use. Finally, the teacher develops the activity in the classroom, and students can also access the details of the activity.

Figure 1

Action Plan Sample: Digital Booklet-Teacher's Guide

3

1

The Inner and Outer Circle

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Topic: Science

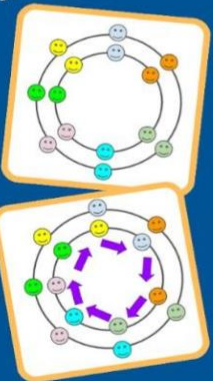
Objective

Ensure that all students get a chance to practice speaking through interactive conversation.

Materials


- A list of Prompts/Question
- Timer
- Classroom Space
- Whiteboard (optional)
- Evaluation or Feedback Forms (optional)

GIVING
INSTRUCTIONS



Questions / Prompts
for the activity

1. **Prepare Questions** - Have a list of discussion questions ready.
2. **Set Up Circles** - Divide the class into two circles: inner (facing outward) and outer (facing inward).
3. **Explain** - Tell students they have 1 minute to discuss each question with their partner. After each round, the inner circle moves one person to the right.
4. **Start & Rotate** - Announce the first question or write/display it on the whiteboard, start the timer, and start rotations after each 1-minute round.
5. **Wrap Up** - After the final round, lead a quick class reflection. Share feedback with students.



TIPS

FOR THE
TEACHER

- **Model First:** Show a quick example with a student.
- **Use Signals:** Use a bell or call "rotate" to keep transitions clear.
- **Keep it Brief:** Limit each round to 1-2 minutes.
- **Emphasize Listening:** Remind students to actively listen and respond.
- **Monitor Conversations:** Walk around and support where needed.

Note. This image corresponds to the material of the teacher's guide from the digital booklet designed by researchers.

Figure 2

Action Plan Sample: Digital Booklet-Student's Guide

3
Activity 1 **The Inner and Outer Circle**
Topic: Science

STUDENT'S GUIDE

Objective
Ensure that all students get a chance to practice speaking through interactive conversation.

Benefits

- Boost Speaking Skills:** Practice speaking clearly and confidently.
- Enhance Listening:** Improve your active listening and response.
- Connect with Peers:** Meet classmates and share ideas!

Vocabulary
CLICK HERE

+ Practice
CLICK HERE

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

- Read the vocabulary below.**
- Form Circles:** Half of you stand in an inner circle facing out. The other half stand in an outer circle facing in, so each person has a partner.
- Discuss the Question:** Listen to the question and discuss it with your partner for 2 minutes.
- Rotate:** When you hear "rotate," the outer circle moves one step to the right to get a new partner.
- Repeat:** With each new partner, discuss the next question. Keep rotating until we're done!
- Reflection & Feedback:** Be ready to share one interesting idea at the end.

TIPS FOR THE STUDENT

- **Listen Actively:** Pay attention to your partner's ideas.
- **Be Respectful:** Allow your partner to speak without interruptions.
- **Ask Questions:** Engage by asking follow-up questions.
- **Stay On Topic:** Focus on the question or prompt given.

"Every time you speak, you have the power to share your unique voice and ideas—let's make the most of it and inspire each other!"

Note: This image corresponds to the material of the teacher's guide from the digital booklet designed by researchers.

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THEME 3

Higher
Education



Higher Education

The teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in higher education in Costa Rica has its roots prior to the nation's declaration of independence. The first department dedicated to foreign languages, which included English instruction, was established in 1825 at Universidad de Costa Rica (Córdoba et al., 2005). At present, all public universities provide English language courses for students in different programs and three of them offer English Language Teacher Education Programs. Efforts to offer these programs have ensured widespread awareness and proficiency in the language in the Brunca Region (Olivares-Garita & Barrantes-Elizondo, 2024).

Learning English in higher education in Costa Rica might present particular characteristics that impact students' proficiency and overall learning experience. Due to contextual characteristics, students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, which can hinder their language acquisition. The prevalence of Spanish in daily life can restrict their immersion in an English-speaking environment. Fortunately, the widespread use and accessibility of the internet, more specifically, social media provides students with more opportunities to practice and be exposed to the use of this language in real life scenarios. Another characteristic is the curriculum relevance. Unfortunately, not all programs' curricula align with students' specific needs or professional goals. A lack of focus on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) can make it difficult for students to see the practical applications of their language studies (Brand & Segura, 2024). Transition from secondary to higher education has been identified as a crucial element for EFL learners' success. If their previous English instruction was not rigorous, they may struggle to meet the demands of academic English in a university setting (Ávila et al., 2024).

An important current consideration is that there has been a nation-wide ideological call to focus on all teacher training programs in higher education, urging a shift from viewing English Language Teaching (ELT) as merely an industry to recognizing it as a profession that actively promotes social and linguistic equality (Barrantes-Montero, 2018; Olivares-Garita & Barrantes-Elizondo, 2024). As a final thought, addressing EFL teaching and learning in higher education in Costa Rica requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving teacher training, enhancing curriculum relevance, and providing adequate resources. Most importantly though is to focus on the role of EFL teaching and learning as a resource for the rational development of the countries, rather than to increase inequality (Barrantes-Montero, 2024).

Critical Thinking Development: A Case Study of English Language Professors and English Teaching Students' Perceptions at a Public University in the Brunca Region

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Abstract: Critical thinking is the process of analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information to create judgments and make decisions. It is imperative to include this skill in education at all levels. The nature of oral expression courses in EFL teaching and learning allows the integration of students' critical thinking. For this reason, this case study aims to understand students and professors' perception of the development of critical thinking in oral expression courses at an English teaching major in a public university. For this qualitative case study, the data were collected by using observations along with two semi-structured interviews, one for the professor and another one for the students. The findings revealed the importance of developing critical thinking skills, the strategies used to promote it, and the obstacles when doing so, particularly in the light of the deficient critical thinking development in the Costa Rican educational system at different school levels. Another finding is that the participants understand critical thinking as a process that helps them judge and make decisions; and they are also acquainted with the key role this skill has in their lives. The final section in this paper describes an action plan that promotes critical thinking development through a workshop about self-confidence for students since participants reported this topic to be a challenge. This action plan also includes a set of classroom activities that can be implemented in oral communication courses.

Keywords: Case study, critical thinking development, EFL, higher education

Introduction

The development of critical thinking skills has a vital role in higher education in the Costa Rican and global context. There is a wide range of different ways to define critical thinking; however, most definitions concur with defining it as a process of questioning and evaluating that allows individuals to judge and make decisions regarding a fact, phenomenon, or idea (Universidad Nacional [UNA], 2015; Palacios Valderrama et al., 2017). Due to the demands in today's inherently complex world, promoting and fostering critical thinking at universities is essential to provide students with the tools to analyze and seek solutions to social problems that they will face in the future as professionals and as global citizens (Velásquez, 2012; Bezanilla et al., 2021; Mena, 2022). Considering the importance of critical thinking, some public universities in Costa Rica have assumed the responsibility of promoting it within their programs (Aveiro, 2017; Hernández, 2024).

Developing critical thinking at the university level has been essential to prepare students to successfully contribute to societal discourses. As Nickname and Royafar (2019) stated, promoting critical thinking skills is a fundamental principle in higher education to prepare students with enhanced abilities to analyze and make rational decisions (p. 55). Therefore, creating environments in which students put these skills into practice is vital. In EFL contexts, oral expression courses provide an environment where students may internalize critical thinking as a daily practice rather than an academic exercise. According to Pinza-Tapia et al. (2021), developing critical thinking skills enhances learners' improvement in speaking skills because critical thinking gives students the tools that help them to communicate effectively (p. 445). In this sense, oral expression courses might significantly improve EFL students' ability to express ideas and thoughts, present arguments, and question different points of view as language learners; having the spaces to develop their critical thinking can allow learners to expand their vocabulary and feel confident speaking in a foreign language. By focusing on critical thinking in this context, this research aims to understand and explore how critical thinking skills are fostered within oral expression courses and how this shapes students' overall critical development.

The complexities that university students face in modern society require them to have critical thinking skills. However, gaps in the development of critical thinking skills have been perceived in high school level students' lack of critical opinions, creativity, and motivation (Palacios Valderrama et al., 2017; Olivares, 2020). Students usually play a passive role in the classroom which might be the result of an educational system based on memorizing; this scenario does not guarantee a critical understanding of a topic. As Flores Guerrero (2016) and Cruz et al. (2019) stated, critical thinking is an essential aspect for a society that places a strong responsibility on universities to develop citizens capable of finding effective solutions to the arduous problems that come with daily life. Consequently, the results of this study will broaden the understanding of how critical thinking

development is addressed at public universities, taking into account students and professors' insights on the topic.

Critical thinking skills tend to be essential not only for students but also for teachers to enhance their teaching skills and strategies. These skills can encourage language teachers to navigate and work on the complexities that can be found in the language teaching field. In the findings of a study carried out by Li (2023), he explained that even though some teachers consider that aspects, such as self-regulation/correction and being flexible, are not part of critical thinking, there is research that directly relates them as abilities part of critical thinking (p. 585). Being able to self-correct and be flexible are vital elements for a teacher and might lead to the development of autonomy and encourage students to think critically. Senovska and Pryshliak (2020) mentioned that teachers should nurture their skills in self-assessment, self-planning, and self-correction to have an emotional and physical balance which is key in creating a positive, supportive, and effective environment in their work (p. 68). Therefore, as key guides in the learning process, teachers who develop critical thinking, self-regulation, and flexibility skills can help facilitate the acquisition of the English language and promote independent thinking of future EFL educators.

In today's world, the development of critical thinking is essential so that future professionals can face a world that tries to silence them. In this regard, the focus of this study is to explore how critical thinking is developed in oral expression courses in an English teaching major in a public university in the Brunca Region. With the results obtained at the end of the study, the researchers aim to share the importance of critical thinking and its development in English teaching students. This study provides insights for both instructors and students so that they can internalize the role of critical thinking in the current world. At the same time, this study can help instructors and future professors to improve their teaching practices regarding this skill and so close any possible gaps in the students' critical thinking learning process. On the other hand, students can have a glimpse of how critical thinking can help them not only academically but also personally. Therefore, the main research question that guides this case study is: how do students' critical thinking skills unfold in oral expression courses in the English Teaching Major at a public university in the Brunca Region? To answer this question three subsequent questions were posted, how is critical thinking addressed in Oral Expression courses? What are the instructor's perceptions about critical thinking development in the oral expression course? What are the students' perceptions about critical thinking development in oral expression courses?

Literature Review

The following section shows what recent literature says about critical thinking and its integration into English language teaching in higher education.

Critical Thinking as a Fundamental Cornerstone of Higher Education

Critical thinking is a fundamental cornerstone of higher education institutions in Costa Rica. According to Palacios Valderrama et al. (2017), even though thinking is inherent to all human beings, not all thinking is exercised in the same way because the process of thinking can be differently influenced and shaped by biases, beliefs, and arbitrariness (p. 195). Palacios Valderrama et al. (2017) further explained that critical thinking involves a process of observing and evaluating phenomena through a critical lens to ultimately generate rational judgment and make decisions (p. 196). Universities offer different definitions for critical thinking. In the case of Universidad Nacional (UNA, 2015), its statute defines it as the constant and systematic analysis of the national and international reality to identify its trends and issues and promote the formulation of solutions (p.21). Likewise, Universidad de Costa Rica's (UCR, 1974) statute describes critical awareness as the essential skill that students and citizens need to critically participate in society and creatively apply the knowledge they have acquired in higher education (p. 2, 12, 30). The statute of Tecnológico de Costa Rica (TEC, 2002) sets forth that this Costa Rican university's mission is to prepare professionals in conditions of excellence, allowing them to critically and creatively participate in the national production activities (p. 2). In this sense, being critical implies engaging in a more complex process of thinking that involves self-awareness, rational judgment, and decision making. It is noteworthy that most definitions of critical thinking in the Costa Rican public universities' statutes emphasize its role in the process of seeking, formulating, and building solutions, as well as its function as an instrument for developing socially well-rounded inhabitants.

In the case of Universidad Técnica Nacional (UTN, 2010) and Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED), their statutes do not specifically include the concept of critical thinking. The statute of UTN refers to the promotion of the freedom of thought and the improvement of the country in the social, ethic, and political dimensions (p. 3), while the statute of UNED emphasizes that its mission is the provision of instruments for the improvement of society through the promotion of the scientific, artistic, cultural, and civic spirit of the Costa Rican people (p. 2). Even though the statutes of the UTN and UNED do not include the concept of critical thinking, UTN's statute refers to freedom of thought, and both UTN's and UNED's statutes stress the importance of promoting the development and improvement of citizens. This aligns with the mission of preparing competent solution-oriented professionals and inhabitants posted by the other public universities.

The promotion of critical thinking in higher education through the instruction of professionals can positively impact education at its different levels. Aycicek (2021) claimed that critical thinking should be taught alongside academic subjects as a part of the core life skills students need to develop in society (p. 2). Other education institutions of different levels such as the Ministry of Public Education (MEP, 2016) stated in its curricula that the EFL program looks forward to promoting "critical human beings" under the premise of "teaching a new citizen" (p. 3). This goal of promoting critical thinking across different

levels of education stresses the relevance of critical professionals who are equipped with skills needed in today's world. In line with this, Bezanilla et al. (2021) argued that it is imperative to teach critical thinking to future professionals because of the social problems they will deal with on a daily basis once in practice. Beside this, Mena (2022) explained that critical thinking is important for professional performance but also for building local and global citizenship. Thus, it could be paradoxical to expect students to critically think if teachers lack experience at exercising and learning critical thinking. Considering the key role of critical thinking in Costa Rica, higher education institutions play an equally essential role, being responsible for promoting the critical sharing of knowledge among institutions and communities in a local and global extent (Aveiro, 2017; Hernández, 2024).

Critical Thinking in English Language Teaching and Learning

Over the years, critical thinking has gained a special focus in language learning and education in general (Bagheri, 2015; Tosuncuoglu, 2018). Therefore, making an effort to integrate critical thinking in an English teaching program is a viable action to help students reach a high proficiency level. Olivares-Garita (2023) explained that if students are guided in making the most of their resources, they will embark on an enjoyable path to successful language learning (p. 110). However, when trying to integrate critical thinking in the English language learning process, instructors and students might face some barriers related to language learning. Alnofaie (2013) and Saleh (2019) mentioned students' lack of vocabulary, culture, and attitudes as possible issues to face. Integrating critical thinking in English language teaching and learning might be troublesome, but once barriers are identified and addressed, the English language teaching and learning can flow smoothly providing that students will be equipped with the necessary abilities to internalize and understand what they are being taught.

Some people may think that there is no relationship between critical thinking and learning English, but there is. As mentioned by Ramezani et al. (2016) and Bagheri (2015), critical thinkers are successful language learners because they can ask relevant questions, analyze information, and draw reliable conclusions. Thanks to this, English language learners with high levels of critical thinking can develop their English skills more easily than those without them. For example, in their studies Nejad et al. (2022) and Indah (2017) concluded that students with critical thinking have better writing performance than others. In line with these findings, Sanavi and Tarighat (2014) and Arfae (2020) agreed on the impact of critical thinking on speaking proficiency, for it provides learners with the necessary abilities to learn a foreign language by, for example, enriching students' vocabulary. Considering these data, the relationship between critical thinking skills and English language learning is evident, and the importance of integrating these skills in the classroom can be appreciated.

EFL Learners' Critical Thinking Development in Higher Education

The development of critical thinking can have a positive impact on the students' learning process, which translates into several advantages. Critical thinking helps English language learners to be completely present in class and play an active and critical role through problem-solving activities that require them to creatively think (Ghaemi, 2017, p. 99). Critical thinking has also assisted the improvement of certain English language skills. For instance, students with high levels of critical thinking can achieve better scores in writing tasks than those with lower critical thinking skills as they can have a more effective organization of ideas (Golpour, 2014; Indah, 2017). Additionally, Ramezani et al. (2016) pointed out that critical thinking can also improve speaking skill. Overall, critical thinking skills have positively impacted EFL learning at different levels as they tend to enhance students' language abilities and academic performance.

Critical thinking is a cognitive skill that may be highly stimulated in higher education, particularly in the English language learning setting, allowing students to become more analytical. Critical thinking appears to be a higher order cognitive skill that fosters reasoning, problem solving, and learning (Addinna & Oktaviani, 2023; Da Silva & Rodrigues, 2011). In this context, encouraging critical thinking in EFL classrooms enables students to participate actively in societal issues. LeCompte et al. (2017) argued that addressing recent events, mainly controversial ones, can help students analyze conflicting beliefs and handle those issues more reasonably (p. 17). The urge to think critically in the classroom can be a basis for training citizens with the ability to become involved in current concerns. As Nold (2017) suggested, "integrating critical thinking tasks into course designs will help students improve attributes needed for success both in the classroom and in the workforce" (p.18). Consequently, developing critical thinking in English language learning and teaching in higher education may enhance language proficiency and prepare learners to succeed in making decisions and solving imminent problems in diverse professional environments.

Research Methodology

This study followed a qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2015) and Hignett and McDermott (2015), qualitative research focuses on understanding a phenomenon in detail. At the same time, Hignett and McDermott (2015) stated that "qualitative researchers are interested in how people make sense of their world and how they interpret and experience different events" (p.120). Therefore, this approach was suitable for this research because it focused on understanding how critical thinking skills unfolded in an oral expression class by collecting data from participants' real experiences. The different methods to collect data allowed the researchers to obtain authentic data of the phenomenon under study and give insights based on the participants' perceptions.

This study followed a case study design providing that it described a phenomenon in its natural environment and gave an in-depth description. One of the reasons why this design fits the case study is that the researchers collected the data by observing the phenomenon in a real classroom setting which is the real-life setting of the participants in this study. In addition, when summarizing the words of Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Patten and Newhart (2018), it can be understood that a case study is one in which researchers give an in-depth description and analysis of an individual phenomenon. Consequently, due to the rich first-hand data collected, the phenomenon under study was analyzed and described in depth. Finally, the unit of analysis of this study is the English teaching program in a public university in the southern region of Costa Rica.

Context and Participants

This case study was conducted at a public university in a regional campus in Southern Costa Rica, specifically an oral expression course for the English Teaching Major. In this program, future EFL teachers take four oral expression courses in which they develop their communicative competence to express ideas, thoughts, and points of view regarding different issues in society. Moreover, participants in this case study were third-year students enrolled in this program. The professor of this course, who was also a participant, holds an associate degree in English, a bachelor's in English teaching, a Licentiate Degree in Educational Administration, and a Master in Psychopedagogy. She also has six years of experience teaching English in an English program at a public university in the Brunca region, two years teaching English in a public technical institute in Costa Rica, and three years working in the English Teaching Major in the institution where this study took place. The professor's perspective and participation were essential to collecting data on the issue studied, as her expertise and experience provided significant insights for the case analysis.

The research participants were students enrolled in the course Oral Expression: Commerce and Economy. Their ages ranged from 20 to 23 years old. According to the syllabus of the oral expression course in which these students are enrolled, they build up their critical thinking by providing their opinions and points of view regarding the topics to be studied. The students' linguistic level is expected to reach B1 or B2 based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The participation of these students was essential to analyze the phenomenon under study as they can provide insights on how much critical thinking they have or have not developed. Therefore, the sampling technique used was criterion sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This technique fit the study because it requires specific conditions like students sharing certain features that help to collect the desired data for the present research. More specifically, they all were English language learners in the same program and enrolled in the same oral expression course, which suggests that they may have similar experiences.

Data Gathering Methods

To collect relevant data to answer the research questions of this study, three instruments were designed: a structured observation, a semi-structured interview for the professor, and a semi-structured interview for the students. These instruments were of importance for the study because they allowed the collection of significant data on how critical thinking unfolded in an oral expression course.

Instrument 1: Observation

The observations helped the researchers to develop a deep understanding of how critical thinking is implemented in a third-year oral expression course. A total of five observations were carried out during their class time. These observations lasted around one hour each. To carry out each observation, the researchers designed a structured observation guide with 10 yes/no questions and a comments section along with two open ended questions. Some of the topics included in this guide were critical thinking promotion, students' responses, and materials source. These types of questions were chosen because they allowed the researchers to focus more on what was going on in the class rather than writing everything that happened during each session. At the same time, the comments section was added for the researchers to back up the option chosen in each question. The last two questions were open ended. Each observation was carried out by one of the researchers.

Instrument 2: Interview for the Professor

This instrument aimed to collect data specifically from the professor responsible for the oral expression course under study. The interview followed a semi-structured format that included 14 open-ended questions that focused on gathering relevant information about critical thinking development in the English Teaching Major, information that only the professor can provide due to the role that she plays in the classroom setting. These questions gather information and relevant aspects such as the professor's understanding of critical thinking, her opinion about the importance of critical thinking, and the characteristics, source, and nature of the resources used to incorporate critical thinking in the classroom. This interview was carried out online due to the professor's tight schedule. The professor signed a consent form before carrying out the interview, which was recorded to keep track of all the ideas shared by her. The type of interview helped to add follow-up questions that strengthened and clarified the professor's ideas.

Instrument 3: Interview for the Students

The purpose of this instrument was to collect data on the issue under study from the students' perspective. The students who participated were a whole group from the English

teaching major whose ages ranged from 20 to 23 years old. Two of these students were women and the other three were men. The interview was semi-structured and made up of 11 open-ended questions in which the participants shared their understanding and experiences. By conducting this interview, aspects regarding students' personal definition of critical thinking, the nature of critical thinking, and the importance given to it were collected. Four of the interviews were carried out in a face-to-face setting, while one of the interviews was conducted virtually due to the participants' availability. All the interviews were recorded, and the participants signed consent for the researchers to use the information on the final report.

Trustworthiness

This work is trustworthy thanks to the rigorous research methodology process employed. To promote credibility, this research underwent a rigorous process of peer debriefing throughout all its development. As pointed out by Creswell (2018), a peer debriefer's interpretation beyond the researcher adds validity to the research because it enhances accuracy (p. 201). Furthermore, looking forward to promoting dependability, the coding and interpreting of the data gathered were done by the different researchers involved in this work. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), involving different researchers in the collecting and analyzing of the data reduces the potential bias that can result from assigning these tasks to a single individual (p. 202).

Data Analysis

Once the data analysis process was complete, four main themes were identified: the participants' understanding of critical thinking, the role of critical thinking in English language learning, critical thinking teaching strategies, the importance of developing critical thinking, and the obstacles when developing critical thinking.

Participants' Understanding of Critical Thinking

Most of the participants concurred on defining critical thinking as a process of analyzing an issue to give an opinion of their own. In the case of students, this can be first exemplified when Stephan shared that a part of critical thinking is "to give your version, your perspective." At the same time, George said that critical thinking is about "not taking everything for granted;" an opinion that is aligned with the critical thinking definition given by Palacios Valderrama et al. (2017) which refers to it as a process of judging to make decisions. The professor also shared that critical thinking is "a higher level of thinking;" therefore, the need to think and analyze to express themselves was an important aspect of the classes observed. Additionally, Elena, another student, mentioned that critical thinking is also about having personal opinions without being influenced by others; this comment was supported by her classmate, David, when he explained that the idea behind critical thinking is to share what they know and not what others know. Overall, critical thinking is

understood as a process in which people, in this case students, share opinions of their own after analyzing a topic under study or an issue of the current world.

Critical thinking has a significant role in oral expression courses in English language programs, as it contributes to the development of students' professionalism and discourse abilities. While the professor stressed the importance of critical thinking for the development of critical awareness, the students highlighted its role as a tool for introspection. The professor shared a key experience when, in one class, she explained the importance of the exercises used in oral expression courses to promote critical thinking to a student. According to the professor, the student asked "professor, we are gonna be teachers, so why do we have to talk about science and technology or society or you know, the issues in society or whatever?", to what she answered, "well, as a professor, you have to be ready to address any kind of situation that you may encounter, you have to be able to talk to your colleagues around the world about different subject matters, and, because you are part of a society, you cannot be isolated". Her experience reinforces the idea that critical thinking is a crucial skill teachers must have due to the nature of their job within society. Additionally, the professor stresses a concern for the lack of critical thinking development in previous levels of education: "we don't develop this skill, and we don't practice; we are not trained since primary school". On the other hand, students reported viewing critical thinking as a tool that helps them "to think about it (issue under analysis) and to reflect about what is your opinion, as well as "to analyze the information in a proper way." For the professor, critical thinking is a core skill that must be trained in higher education to fulfill that gap in students' critical thinking training. On the other hand, students emphasized the role of critical thinking as a tool to achieve independent thinking through the formulation of their own views and opinions.

Critical Thinking and English Language Learning

Students can develop their language skills as they develop critical thinking skills. In most interviews, students emphasized that their linguistic skills improved thanks to their critical thinking, especially in speaking, writing, and vocabulary. As Stephan mentioned, "I think that it (critical thinking) has helped me a lot in spoken production, spoken and written". Harriet added that students might improve their vocabulary because they are looking for alternatives to express what they want to say. These opinions show that the participants believe critical thinking enhances students' speaking and writing skills. Moreover, students consider it important to inform themselves so that they can exercise critical thinking skills. As Stephan explained, "I like to investigate, not that deep, but to have a clear view on the topic, so that when I get to class, I have my own opinion". Further research on a topic allows students to expand their vocabulary and to be able to express their ideas on specific topics. Additionally, findings showed that critical thinking strives to minimize bias and permits learners to share their perspectives instead of following or repeating what others say. George acknowledges this by saying that, by becoming

informed, he can avoid being biased by this thing or the other but instead have his own opinion. In addition to this, Elena declared that students on campus lack critical thinking skills because they just repeat what already exists. The interviews conducted and observations show how students at the university level improved their linguistic skills and their ability to make a point while developing higher order skills.

Certain in-class activities were considered more appropriate for developing critical thinking skills than others. Even though oral presentations are one of the most common activities to assess speaking skills in oral expression courses, there are some students who consider that they are not highly effective for developing critical thinking skills. For instance, Stephan stated that what most students do in oral presentations is to “memorize word by word with commas and all”. This does not reflect having a critical analysis on a topic. On the contrary, some students believe that there are other effective ways to foster critical thinking skills. George, for example, mentioned group discussions and impromptu speeches as the activities which have been helpful in improving his critical thinking skills in the oral expression course. The interviews also showed that the collaborative professor implements group discussions, debates, and questioning activities to prompt students to analyze a specific topic so that they reinforce their critical thinking skills by giving them the opportunity to discuss a topic and give an opinion on it based on the background information they have. Therefore, while oral presentations are commonly used to evaluate speaking skills, most of the interviewees agreed on the idea that debates and discussion activities seem to be meaningful techniques to improve students’ critical thinking as they feel encouraged to analyze, elaborate, and finally share their own ideas, which provides them with a better understanding of a topic.

Critical Thinking Teaching Strategies

The professor’s attitudes toward critical thinking stand out as a major factor for the presence and promotion of critical thinking in oral expression courses. From the participants’ perspectives, critical thinking is not effectively promoted in previous levels of the educational system. This idea is linked to the professors’ argument that critical thinking should be promoted in oral expression courses due to their nature. For the professor, other courses do not provide much space for exercising critical thinking; as she stated, “in grammar you are focused on other things, not critical thinking at all”. Furthermore, she mentioned that the integration of critical thinking in oral expression courses depends largely on the professors’ attitudes. However, for her, “that is your job (integrating critical thinking) as a professor, to make sure that your students do their best and enhance their skills.” Her ideas highlight the importance of the professor’s attitudes in the integration of critical thinking in oral expression courses.

Another finding was that the professor’s strategies to promote critical thinking heavily relied on asking follow-up questions to students and prompting them to expand

their answers and on the information, they are asked to analyze. For instance, Harriet said that “she always asks us a lot of questions to know our opinion about it”. Another student reported that the professor always asks, “why do you think so?” or “do you agree with this?” These questions make students elaborate on their answers, and they perceive them positively; as David said, these types of questions “encourage me to go deeper in my answers”. Additionally, another strategy that the professor uses to promote students’ critical thinking is not asking students for narrow or too specific answers. She said that, while doing listening activities, she tries not to ask for “exactly the info that they hear”. Instead, she asks them questions to check their understanding since, for her, it is more important to assess students’ understanding rather than assessing students’ memory. According to these findings, prompting students to expand on their answers and ideas is a strategy that might help them develop their critical thinking skills.

Importance of Developing Critical Thinking

Developing critical thinking enhances students’ cognitive competence. In the findings, participants expressed how the development of their critical thinking has provided them with numerous advantages, allowing them to be more analytical in the current society. As Elena mentioned, critical thinking is crucial in oral expression courses because it increases their abilities in real-life situations. Similarly, David emphasized that “you must be able to analyze certain topics in oral expression courses”. Moreover, in oral expression courses, students are asked to answer spontaneously to any topic under study, forcing them to use their own understanding and background knowledge. Stephan argued that “I think that it (critical thinking) influences my performance by making me think spontaneously”. As a result, it can be inferred that critical thinking helps students to naturally share their thoughts and ideas while using their analytical skills to provide well-informed responses.

The participants’ responses suggest that critical thinking skills can bring several benefits to students’ professional and personal lives. Stephan remarked that thinking critically has encouraged him and his classmates to be mature enough to be themselves, which is key to keeping their essence as students and professionals. Similarly, critical thinking development is considered a positive element in work scenarios. In the words of Stephan, this type of thinking helps people to “be a better person and be more original in the work” to be done. Being judged when sharing a point of view tends to be one of the main fears stated by the participants. However, Elena explained that critical thinking has positively impacted on her life as; nowadays, she worries about being part of a group because of what she is and not because of what she thinks. These responses contribute to the idea of critical thinking as a tool for people to grow personally and professionally.

Obstacles when Developing Critical Thinking

The analysis of the participants’ responses shows both external obstacles like people’s expectations and the educational system, and internal factors such as self-

perception, language proficiency, and attitudes, which interfere with their critical thinking development. First, the data suggests that the expectations regarding students' responses might influence what they share in class. Elena said that "sometimes people do not agree with what you think" and that "they (people) want you to be part of their thinking". The professor also mentioned that the students are afraid of people not agreeing with them. Therefore, they may change their answers to, as Elena said, "not be the opposite", which in simple words means to not be excluded. At the same time, the professor and participants agreed on the effect of the cancel culture and Costa Rican educational system on critical thinking development. Cancel culture refers to people "canceling" someone for something that was said or done. This affects the students because they avoid feeling judged at all costs and as expressed by Stephan, "sometimes you got to be careful with what you say because you can be judged". For this reason, cancel culture obstructs students from sharing what they really think. Along with this, Stephan believes that students' lack of critical thinking is because the Costa Rican educational system does not provide students with situations in which they need their critical thinking skills. This argument is supported by the professor when, as mentioned before, she said that critical thinking is not promoted enough in the educational system.

Internal factors were also mentioned as obstacles when developing critical thinking skills. Among these factors, students mentioned their self-perception. For example, Harriet affirmed that she does not trust herself a lot and, when she does not feel confident enough, she is not going to share what she thinks in class. Then, students' attitudes towards critical thinking also interfere with their development of these skills. In the words of Stephan, "some people do not like to think that way (critically)," and most of the time they just study what is assigned because they must. Therefore, when these attitudes are present, critical thinking development is disrupted. Finally, language barriers were also highlighted as obstacles when developing critical thinking. This is echoed by George who said that, sometimes, they find it difficult to fully express what they think in English. Elena followed this idea by saying that she struggles to express herself in class because of the need to know some vocabulary. A previous research study showed similar results (Alnofaie, 2013). Overall, the participants shared obstacles that they have faced when developing critical thinking, obstacles that can be addressed in the future to enhance students' learning process.

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the most significant findings that arose from this case study is that students at the university level improved their linguistic skills thanks to their development of critical thinking. Students reported that their linguistic skills, especially speaking, writing, and vocabulary, have flourished as they become more critical. This leads to the conclusion that critical thinking not only empowers students to express their ideas but also helps them to become more competent in the English language. Students recognized the importance of

informing themselves, building their own opinions and perspectives, avoiding bias, and expanding their vocabulary. In this sense, it is essential to emphasize that developing critical thinking in EFL classrooms fosters students' linguistic skills. A recommendation that might be considered from this research is to encourage professors to continue implementing pedagogical activities like round tables or debates in which students can defend their points of view and reflect based on their own beliefs and understanding. Opening spaces for students to share their ideas and knowledge about any topic studied is fundamental for helping them to develop their critical thinking. These activities not only allow students to actively participate but also to expand their vocabulary, improve their speaking skills, as well as develop their analytical and critical skills.

It can also be concluded that the professor plays a fundamental role for the integration of critical thinking in oral expression courses due to the significance of the professional's views on critical thinking and the strategies used to promote it. This study has shown that there is a relationship between the professor's perspectives and the actions aimed at implementing critical thinking in class activities. The findings suggest that the professor's overall awareness about critical thinking influences the integration of this skill in the course. Moreover, in-class strategies such as prompting students to expand, asking them for implicit information, building discussion, and asking follow-up questions align with the principles of Freirian thinking which emphasize critical pedagogy. Taken together, these findings support the idea that it is recommendable for professors to build a deep and practical understanding on critical thinking to ensure the successful integration of this skill in higher education programs. It is also recommended to implement techniques such as socratic questioning as part of the methodology implemented in the course. These recommendations become particularly relevant when considering that successful integration of critical thinking in this setting depends to a great extent on professors.

Based on the data in this case study, a significant finding revealed the contribution that critical thinking can bring to students' personal and professional lives. In the oral expression courses, the students are asked to provide their opinions on certain topics spontaneously. This has been highlighted as an effective way to motivate students to think on their own without the influence of any other external factor. Critical thinking is also considered key in helping students to be themselves in their personal, academic, and professional lives. The students-participants believe that since they are becoming English language teachers, critical thinking assists them to approach personal and professional issues appropriately while also keeping their essence as humans. Having considered these remarks, the researchers of this case study recommend encouraging teachers to include interdisciplinary tasks in the class which mix ideas from different subjects such as science, history, or even art. In this way, the students have the opportunity to apply and share the knowledge they have in particular topics. This can foster students' critical thinking and

problem-solving skills to face personal and academic matters with confidence and originality.

Taken together, the participants' responses yielded results from this case study that suggest that internal and external factors interfere with developing critical thinking skills. Aspects such as self-perception and language proficiency were considered internal obstacles that made it difficult to engage in higher thinking skills. On the other hand, people's expectations and the Costa Rican educational system interfered as external obstacles in students' critical thinking development. When these obstacles are identified, professors and students can work together on strategies to overcome them. For example, creating an environment where both parties feel comfortable enough to share their ideas without the fear of being judged is essential for developing critical thinking and enhancing English language learning. This can be reachable if the students are faced at the beginning of the oral expression courses with a class or workshop whose main focus is to improve self-confidence, respect, set class rules, and create a safe space. By doing so, the professor can help the students acquire the necessary self-confidence to share their ideas during the class. This can also contribute to students' language learning process as they become confident. After all, an environment where neither of the parties feels comfortable makes the learning process harder than it is.

Action Plan

Two significant phenomena observed while conducting this case study were the lack of students' confidence and the alignment of the professor's strategies with the principles behind Freirean thinking. This is why this action plan suggests the implementation of a workshop to introduce students to the production of discourse and critical analysis and to strengthen their overall awareness of the relationship between critical thinking and self-confidence while at the same time developing their oral skills. This workshop specifically aims at promoting critical thinking in oral expression courses and addressing the gap in students' development of analytical skills. This action plan also suggests the incorporation of activities such as Socratic questioning to develop students' critical thinking. As stated by Olivares (2020), one of the principles promoted by Freirean thinking for the integration of CT in higher education is the active use of questioning strategies such as Socratic questioning to disrupt passive thinking and to delve deeper into the topics under study. For this reason, including Socratic questioning as part of the lesson's activities is strongly recommended.

The target audience is the professors teaching any oral expression courses and, consequently, their students. These workshops start in the first year in the English teaching major, starting with a workshop on self-confidence, and then each year covering different themes related to critical thinking. The structure of each workshop suggests starting with a warm-up activity. Then, the facilitator gives a mini lecture on the focus of the workshop,

followed by the main activity and a wrap-up of the lesson. Finally, the professor can close the workshop with a reflective closing in which students share what they learned from it. Figure 1 shows a sample workshop agenda:

Figure 1

Workshop Guide

Workshop #1

Building Self-Confidence

Objective:
To offer students with a series of activities so that they raise awareness about the importance of building self-confidence.

- 01. WARM UP:**
Students introduce themselves by using a positive personal characteristic in the form of an adjective before their names.
Example: I am smart Maria.
- 02.**
The facilitator explains to the students what self-confidence is and why it is important.
- 03.**
The facilitator guides students increase to complete a personal SWOT analysis (Strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities). The purpose of this activity is to analyze their self-confidence. This activity is followed by a positive self-talk in which students list their self-doubts and change them into positive affirmations.
- 04. SETTING PERSONAL CONFIDENCE GOALS**
Students write down one or two realistic self-confidence goals. They use the SMART framework to do so.
Example: "I will participate at least once in each class this week".
- 05. CLOSING REFLECTION**
In a round table, students and the facilitator share what they learned from the activities developed in the workshop. Finally, students lists comments and recommendations to enhance their self-confidence.

Created by Itzel Montero, Jafeth Martínez, Massiel Arroyo, and Fernando Méndez.

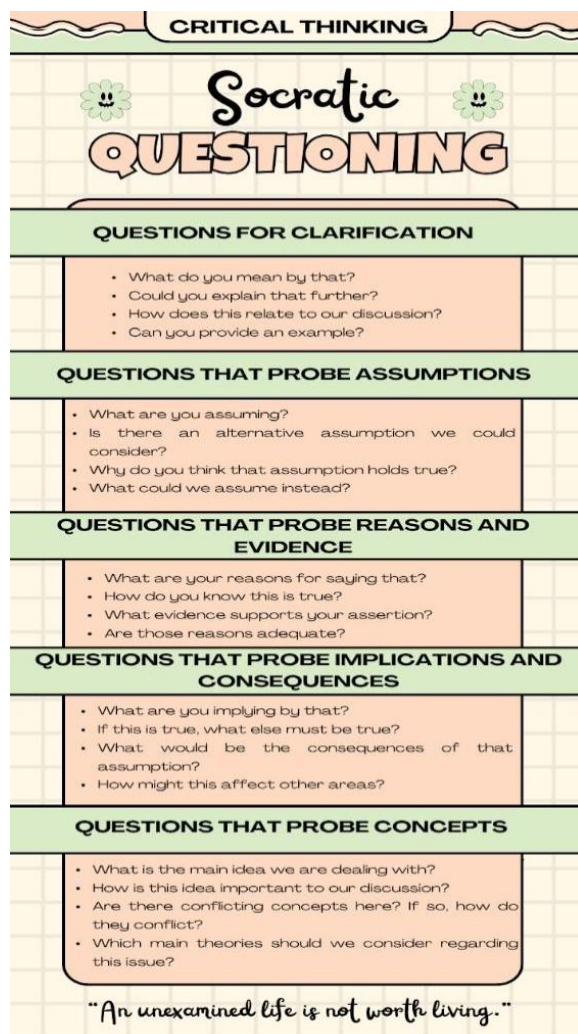
Note: This image shows the workshop guide created by the researchers.

Along with these workshops, the researchers also suggest the incorporation of activities aligned with critical thinking. Some examples of these activities are Socratic questioning, problem-solving activities, and group discussions. These activities not only

promote critical thinking but also foster language production. The professors can implement these activities from the beginning of the oral expression courses and decide if they are just practice or part of the evaluation strategy. For instance, based on the topics under study, the professor can include a Socratic questioning section by coming up with a statement for the students to share their ideas and then ask them questions to further their understanding. Also, the professor can give this question guide at the beginning of the course to the whole class so that they can also ask questions to their classmates. The next is a sample Socratic questioning guide:

Figure 2

Socratic Questioning Guide



Note: This image refers to the Socratic questioning guide created by the researchers.

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Oral Production Skills: A Case Study on the Role of L1 in a University-Level EFL Classroom in the Brunca Region

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Abstract: The presence of the mother tongue (MT) in speaking production skills has been stigmatized for several decades in the EFL teaching and learning field. In light of this stigmatization, its implementation can bring about a series of beneficial and detrimental consequences for both tourism professors and learners in EFL settings. The literature encompasses how important it is to balance L1 and L2 in EFL contexts during oral production tasks, as it contributes to the understanding of the coexistence of L1 and L2 and how it plays out in the production of oral output. Therefore, this study aims to describe the role that the MT plays when developing oral production skills in EFL contexts. More specifically, it addresses how the MT is used in class and what the perceptions of the participants are. The gathering of information was done through in-depth semi-structured interviews and structured class observations. The findings show that the MT may stagnate or maximize the language learning process, that contextualized learning and teaching strategies foster L1 and L2 connections, and that it can cause positive and negative repercussions on learners' emotions. As a result, the MT should be implemented strategically in beginner levels and gradually decreased in advanced groups. Ultimately, the study provides suggestions on how to incorporate the MT without hindering language comprehension and oral proficiency in English for tourism purposes.

Keywords: Case study, EFL, tourism, oral production skills, mother tongue, university level

Introduction

When learning English as a foreign language (EFL), the native language may both assist or impede students' capability to communicate in the target language (L2). This may pose a linguistic dilemma in the EFL classroom as the presence of the mother tongue (MT) may have different speaking outcomes. Richards and Schmidt (2020) defined the mother tongue as a "first language (L1) that is acquired at home" (p. 377), whereas a second or target language as "any language learned after one has learnt one's native language" (p. 514). In the specific case of EFL teaching to tourism students, the main focus is to incorporate the target language into a subject matter relevant to the learners' real world instead of teaching this subject as a separate subject (Simion, 2012, p. 153). The convergence of the L1 and the target language in the EFL classroom serves as a bridge for students to relate prior and new language knowledge (Nazary, 2008, p. 149). This interconnection may hinder mastery of the target language as overdependence on the native language might lead students to face difficulties when developing oral communication in the whole learning process. One such example is the lack of L2 exposure, which might undermine the students' ability to properly speak in the target language. However, the presence of L1 can contribute to a student-friendly environment, boosting not only the students' engagement but also their understanding and speaking production skills of L2. Nonetheless, the use of the mother tongue in the EFL classroom should be rigorously balanced to reach an optimal linguistic level in the target language. Overall, the coexistence of both languages in EFL classrooms is a practice that should shape the students' learning process rather than hinder the development of effective oral production skills.

The use of the mother tongue in an EFL classroom is an ever-present occurrence that might alter the way the lesson is conducted. Some problems stemming from the overuse of L1 in the classroom may be overreliance on it and a consequent lack of L2 development. If students are mostly exposed to L1, they may adopt detrimental linguistic habits which may result in a deficiency in the target language (Çelik & Aydın 2018; Debreli & Oyman, 2016; Dujmović, 2014; Paker & Karağaç, 2015; Sevy-Biloon et. al, 2020). There are diverse perceptions toward the use of L1 in the classroom as professors and students may encounter varied teaching and learning situations that either contribute or affect the development of oral production skills. ESP could be incorporated into EFL classrooms as it focuses on contextualized teaching in fields ranging from technology to tourism (Simion, 2012, p. 153). Whereas some experts in the language education field consider the MT as an ally to achieve proficient learning outcomes, others believe that it is a threat that limits language development (Hasrina et al., 2018; Joyce et. al, 2021; Almohaimeed & Almurshed, 2018). Pertinent research on the topic needs to be done as it serves as a vector to ensure the apt use and understanding of the MT in the EFL classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this case study is to understand in-depth the role of the MT when developing oral production skills in an EFL tourism class.

High English language proficiency has become fundamental for tourism students as L1 is the clearly dominant language in their classes. It is vital for tourism students to develop English skills to communicate, interact, and engage with tourists and immigrants from all parts of the world. Additionally, it is necessary that tourism students develop oral skills to negotiate, conduct transactions with people from other countries, and communicate effectively to succeed in the tourism industry by mastering a foreign language (Lertchalermtipakoon et.al., 2021, p. 59). On the other hand, lack of exposure to the target language might prevent tourism students from developing linguistic skills.

Therefore, investigating the role of the mother tongue in the EFL classroom provides a detailed understanding of the implications of its use (Alshehri, 2017; Ghorbani, 2012; Simion, 2012; Voicu, 2012). This case study deeply acknowledges teaching and learning issues as well as perceptions of EFL professors and students toward the use of the MT when developing oral production skills in the EFL classroom. By researching the role of the MT, EFL language educators and learners might become aware of the repercussions of the use of L1 when developing oral communication in the target language. It is of utmost importance to investigate the use of the MT when developing oral production skills to describe when L1 is used in the classroom. Moreover, EFL professors and learners might comprehend the way in which the implementation of L1 in the classroom may influence either positively or negatively their learning and understanding of the content of the class as well as orally elaborate comprehensible ideas without much complexity. Lastly, the role of the MT influences both teaching and learning skills and its implementation in the EFL classroom.

For this reason, this case study delves into the research questions: What role does the mother tongue play when developing oral production skills in tourism English classes? This is deepened through the subsequent questions: How is the mother tongue used when developing oral production skills in an EFL classroom at a public university? What are the perceptions of tourism students toward the use of L1 in an EFL classroom when developing oral production skills? What are the perceptions of tourism professors toward the use of L1 in an EFL classroom when developing oral production skills?

English Language Teaching in Costa Rica

English language teaching in Costa Rica has had a great development, especially in areas such as tourism. This language has been a means to achieve competitiveness and prepare citizens to be linguistically competent in the workplace. However, a weak emphasis on the English language has been the norm in the tourism curricula, signifying a deficiency in the academic development regarding the target language (Olivares-Garita & Barrantes-Elizondo, 2024; Ruiz-Navarrete, 2014). As a result, the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Costa Rica needs to be reinforced in this area. The aim of ESP is to prepare students for real-life contexts in which English is used. Hence, the presence of ESP

professionals in Costa Rica seeks to provide students with opportunities to learn specialized English properly in accordance with their field. Therefore, ESP should be strictly taught to ensure successful training for tourism students to excel in the labor field (Brand-Fonseca & Segura-Arias, 2024; Gamboa-Agüero & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2021). This limitation plateaus not only the students at a linguistic level but also at an academic and occupational one. Thus, instructing ESP in tourism programs is fundamental to help students be linguistically competent in academic and professional settings.

A public university in Costa Rica offers a tourism major focused on ESP with clear objectives, a well-structured program, and a Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach. The main objective of the major is to help EFL tourism students learn English and consequently, achieve a high level of language proficiency for the future workplace. Each of the courses that students take has specific aims. Nevertheless, a core goal is to encourage students to develop linguistics skills that enable them to effectively communicate with tourists. The major also includes six English courses with a total of 900 hours of English instruction by the end of the major. The nature of these courses is intensive, theoretical and practical as it emphasizes ESP. EFL tourism students are expected to finish the first English course with a high beginner English level and the last course with an advanced level of English. Additionally, these six courses follow a PBL approach that provides learners with specific tasks to develop language skills. The PBL approach is also combined with ESP activities to immerse students in a learning environment that allows them to prepare for real-life situations in the tourism industry (Sede Regional Chorotega de la Universidad Nacional, 2010). Finally, the tourism major with its defined objectives, structured program, and a PBL approach may provide students with a suitable learning environment for ESP.

Exploring the use of L1 in EFL Classrooms

The use of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms might be instrumental in developing oral production skills. Incorporating L1 in EFL lessons facilitates students' understanding of the content and internalization of language structures, which renders students able to develop accuracy and fluency in the target language. Additionally, the MT also plays a fundamental role in clarifying instructions and explaining vocabulary, allowing students to effectively comprehend the language they are learning. Consequently, EFL learners might benefit from the implementation of L1 to successfully retain linguistic information and develop oral production skills (Alshehri, 2017; Joyce et al., 2021; Moqbel, 2022; Tubayqui & Al Tale', 2021). EFL professors may guarantee an overall understanding of the content studied in the class by addressing the students' linguistic needs based on their language deficiencies in the target language. Therefore, the students' learning process may be reinforced owing to the thorough incorporation of L1 in the classroom. Although L1 practice in EFL classrooms might not be considered effective by all educators, it encourages learners to encounter a deeper cognitive connection with the target language. The use of the MT contributes to students' participation in English, which develops their

oral production skills in their second language. Additionally, L1 strengthens learners' cognitive ability and their participation in the classroom as it helps students reduce their stress and cognitive burden due to the MT provides a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar (Moqbel, 2022; Shabir, 2017; Voicu, 2012). Lastly, the appropriate integration of L1 in the EFL classroom not only develops students' oral production skills but also helps retain and comprehend the target language efficiently.

The incorporation of L1 is a practice that EFL professors should approach in an effective way to guide the learners through the lesson. The proper and straightforward obligation of teaching strategies to ensure a satisfactory class can maximize the students' oral production outcome (Debreli & Oyman, 2015; Kayaoğlu, 2012; Navarro & Piñeiro, 2012). For instance, incorporating L1 by providing concise and clear instructions for the task they must fulfill may result in a fruitful learning environment and oral productive skills. Moreover, explaining complex vocabulary may also be achieved using the MT. Devoting some time to the explanation of difficult terms by openly reinforcing the students' linguistic gaps is a strategy that EFL professors should consider meeting the students' needs. The result of the addition of L1 into the EFL classroom may be perceived as a strengthening practice in which the professor may safely approach the lesson, while students can feel a sense of accomplishment. This perception may be perceived not only as a steppingstone in the classroom but also as a debilitating element in the area. All in all, its use is seen to bridge the gap between lack of L2 oral production with proficiency in the target language.

Benefits and Drawbacks of the Use of the Mother Tongue when Developing Oral Production Skills

The use of the MT has proven to have benefits for both professors and students in the EFL classroom as it impacts the development of students' linguistic skills (Debreli & Oyman, 2015; Ghorbani, 2012; Hawa et al., 202; Moqbel, 2022). Language educators can create an environment where everyone feels more confidence and less anxiety when using the L1 (Kruk, 2015; Mahmutoğlu & Kicir, 2013; Mularsih & Satyarini, 2022; Neokleous, 2017). In Neokleous' (2017) study, 54.4% of participants [students] reported that the MT helps to animate the classroom so that a pleasant atmosphere can be created (p. 328). Furthermore, using L1 removes the emotional barriers that EFL students experience while learning a second language as they feel safe and secure to participate in a learning environment where encouragement and motivation prevail (Mahmutoğlu & Kicir, 2013, p. 54). As is evidenced in Jalaluddin's research (2022), the use of the MT is beneficial to bond with learners as it helps tear down a certain barrier of communication (p. 26), which facilitates the interactions and language understanding between professors and students. Reducing this learning barrier is crucial as it may prevent students from suffering confidence issues when they cannot communicate effectively with their professors and classmates. All in all, using the MT might make students feel more confident, calm, and

relaxed in the classroom, which may improve their participation and improve oral production skills and understanding of the second language (Kayaoğlu, 2012, p. 49).

Even though the use of the MT may bring numerous benefits to the EFL classroom, students might struggle to develop oral production skills owing to an overdependence on their L1, limited exposure to the second language, and scarce chances to practice the target language (AL Hosni, 2014; Çelik & Aydın, 2018; Paker & Karaağaç, 2015; Resmi, 2019). If the native language is mostly implemented in the classroom, students may heavily rely on it and wait for a translation each time the MT is used in the lesson. This frequent translation might hinder students from comprehending and producing L2, so they may experience a lack of interest in learning the target language. This overreliance on the native language may lead learners to have minimal exposure to L2. Hence, students might miss the chance to acquire essential skills to succeed in L2-only contexts. Learners need enough input to gradually convert it into output that allows them to share their ideas with other speakers. The overuse of the MT might also narrow the opportunities to practice the target language as students consider it simpler to express their ideas in their MT. Because of the ease of communication in L1, students might overlook indispensable practice to develop oral skills. Consequently, delays in the development of L2 can occur (Bozorgian & Fallahpour, 2015; Hanif, 2020; Hawa et al., 2021; Riadil, 2020). Overall, the overuse of the MT might negatively interfere with the development of oral skills due to overreliance on L1, lack of exposure to L2, and reduced chances to practice the target language.

Research Methodology

The current research showcases a qualitative approach that explored the role of the MT in the EFL classroom when developing oral production skills. According to Creswell (2015), qualitative research collects data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study. Additionally, Fossey et al. (2002) explained that qualitative research encompasses various research methodologies that describe and explain people's experiences, behaviors, interactions, and social contexts without the use of statistical procedures or quantification (p. 717). As a result, a qualitative approach enabled researchers to do a detailed analysis of the connections between L1 and L2 in class by considering participants' behaviors, beliefs, and opinions toward the implementation of L1 in EFL classes. This type of research allowed the researchers to gather information from real-life and contextualized scenarios. As was the case of this study, the administration of research instruments such as in-depth semi-structured interviews and structured class observations in a real-life setting provided researchers with a thorough insight into the role of the mother tongue in EFL lessons when producing oral skills. Lastly, the diversity of perspectives among the participants and professors enabled researchers to obtain a multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon.

This qualitative research followed a case study design, which is defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p.37). The bounded system delimits the specific context and phenomenon while researchers collect information from the topic. A distinguishing characteristic of case studies is that they allow researchers to gather information in their natural setting, which may reflect participants’ real behaviors and perceptions toward the phenomenon being studied (Patten & Newhart, 2017, p. 175). Aligned with this characteristic, this case study focused on collecting information that was used to describe and analyze participants’ insights regarding the phenomenon in its real-life context. The unit of analysis of this case study was students and professors within an EFL tourism class at a public university in the Brunca region.

Context and Participants

The setting of this case study was a regional campus of a public university in the southern region of Costa Rica, more specifically in a tourism major that centers its curricula in ESP in an EFL context. These major aims to enhance the students’ English linguistic skills to effectively communicate with tourists, reaching an advanced English level in the third year of the major. Additionally, the program includes six English courses, which are divided into English for Tourism Purposes and a variety of Oral Expression courses. Hence, all the English courses emphasize oral production as a fundamental skill. These six English courses are implemented during the first three years of the major to prepare students for their final practicum in tourism companies. Therefore, the students are expected to use the language in contextualized situations during the last year of the major. As the curriculum description suggests, the nature of these courses is intensive, theoretical and practical under the ESP and PBL methodology.

The participants in this study included tourism students who were enrolled in the English for Tourism Purposes course that is offered in the first year during the second semester of the major. This English course focuses on constant practice and development of language skills and subskills such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary. The population in this group were four men and 22 women, and their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old. Other participants in this case study included two faculty professors with a master’s degree and specialization in English teaching, applied linguistics, and second languages and culture. The two professors ranged in age from 33 to 42 years old. The years of teaching experience in EFL tourism settings of the professor participants varies from 10 to 16 years.

The purposeful sampling strategy chosen for the development of this case study was critical case sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The researchers sampled a group that had a high repetition rate, which, as per previous communication with the Tourism Department Coordinator, was the case with this group. More specifically, in English for

Tourism 2, only six students were enrolled for the first time while 20 students have taken the course two or even more times. Although these students have retaken the course several times, the syllabus aims to guide them to reach an intermediate English level during this course. However, high repetition rates might be an indicator that they lack knowledge toward the language and struggle with the language learning process. By selecting this sampling technique, it was ensured that participants were familiarized with the language program in the tourism major. Moreover, participants met similar characteristics regarding their linguistic level. As for the professors, both have been immersed in ESP and EFL language teaching at a university level, so they have vast amounts of experience in the field. Therefore, having been involved in a similar environment allowed the participants to provide perspectives on the role of the MT in the EFL classroom. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym throughout this case study so that no identifier was explicitly stated.

Trustworthiness

When conducting qualitative research, researchers must consider a transparent and ethical process. Trustworthiness is a key component when undertaking research as it provides credibility, dependability, and transferability. That is why this research met the aforementioned aspects, presenting a reliable and strong foundation. First, credibility was ensured by a thorough and first-hand exposure to the studied environment by using multiple methods to collect data. More specifically, the researchers resorted to interviews and observations to have a complete understanding of the phenomenon. Second, each of the researchers coded all the information obtained through the instruments, hence achieving inter-rater reliability. Lastly, this paper holds transferability as the ever-present issue of the use of the mother tongue in the EFL classroom for oral production in the tourism major can be transferred into other educational settings. Data from this investigation can guide future researchers through the analysis of similar phenomena.

Data Collection

The instruments used to gather the information for this research included interviews and observations. Each instrument was administered in an EFL classroom at a university level. The interviews were conducted with two EFL professors and four students, lasting thirty minutes each. There were three observations centered on the whole group and lasted three hours and thirty minutes each respectively over a period of three weeks.

Instrument #1: In-depth Semi-structured Interview with Professors

The interview for the professors aimed to analyze their perceptions of using the MT when developing oral production skills in tourism classes. The interview includes eight open-ended questions that allowed EFL tourism professors to openly express their experiences about the use of the MT when developing EFL tourism students' oral

production skills. Two experienced EFL professors in the tourism field were interviewed to gather the required information. This instrument is targeted to identify the possible benefits and drawbacks that EFL professors might experience teaching oral production in tourism classes. Additionally, the participants interviewed provided insights into the strategies that are implemented in class to enhance students' understanding and learning of the target language by making use of the MT. During this interview, the professors had the opportunity to express their perceptions towards the MT in the class. Thus, the information provided by the participants strengthened this case study. Moreover, the interviews were virtually carried out through the videoconferencing platform Zoom, and each of them took from fifteen to twenty-five minutes. The participants also signed consent to participate in the interview and to be recorded.

Instrument #2: In-depth Semi-structured Interview with Students

This instrument aimed to analyze the perceptions of students toward the use of the MT when developing oral production skills in their EFL tourism class. The interview included ten open-ended questions that allowed learners to express their points of view regarding the use of the MT. The interview was in-depth, so some follow-up questions were also asked throughout the interview to obtain more details about each response. The interview was conducted with four first-year students. Because of students' linguistic level, the interview was designed and administered in Spanish to facilitate their understanding of the questions and to help them provide information without language barriers. Additionally, the interviews were virtually carried out through the videoconferencing platform Zoom, and each of them took from fifteen to twenty-five minutes. The participants also signed consent to participate in the interview and to be recorded.

Instrument #3: Structured Class Observation

This instrument aimed to describe the role that the MT plays in EFL tourism classrooms. The observation guide consists of eight prompts that allowed the researchers to record EFL tourism students' behaviors when producing oral skills and the frequency with which the MT is used in the classroom. Moreover, the guide aided the researchers to describe firsthand circumstances under which the MT is used and how both professors and students perceive it. Additionally, the researchers played a non-participant role to avoid possible disruption of class behavior. The observation was carried out for three weeks and involved all the students who attended the observed class.

Findings

This section includes the findings of the data analysis process. It encompassed the information gathered through structured class observations and interviews to address the research questions. Coding and thematic analysis were used to sort and display the gathered information. This section includes three main findings regarding the role that the MT plays

when producing oral skills in EFL classrooms: Benefits and drawbacks of using L1 in EFL classrooms, learning and teaching strategies for L1 and L2 connections, and confidence and language anxiety.

Benefits and Drawbacks of using L1 in EFL Classrooms

EFL tourism students might benefit from the incorporation of the MT in the classroom. Based on the in-depth interviews conducted, students mentioned that the MT allowed them to experience a better understanding of L2, find grammatical similarities between L1 and L2, build meaning associations and internalize under what circumstances they should use a given word. Most of the students pointed out that the MT may be a helpful learning tool when struggling with the comprehension of words. Catalina, Paula, and Tomás highlighted that using examples in L1 facilitates the understanding of unknown words. Tomás mentioned that the comparison of verb tenses between the two languages enabled them to perceive the similarities between the two languages. Paula and Camila also expressed that the MT helps them not only to build meaning associations between L1 and L2 but also internalize vocabulary items. Moreover, Catalina and Paula considered that the incorporation of the MT might be favorable for their language development as it leads to better overall linguistic and academic performance. These students also stated that their language learning process is simplified owing to the clarity of the explanations when EFL tourism professors use the MT to explain complex topics. Paula also emphasized that language educators should use the MT to ensure full understanding of class content without so much complexity. Finally, all the students suggested that the MT should be somewhat integrated in the classroom especially if professors deal with beginner students who mostly have a low understanding of L2.

There were patterns that determined inefficient academic performance, language stagnation, over dependence, and lack of commitment when learning as the main downsides that students experienced when using the MT in EFL classes. Catalina, Camila, and Tomás emphasized that the MT negatively impacted their development of oral production skills because using the MT prevented them from practicing and expressing ideas in the L2. Additionally, learners mentioned that lack of exposure to the L2 delayed their learning process as they translate words into Spanish and avoid making efforts to learn new L2 words. For instance, Catalina and Paula indicated that the MT is directly associated with language stagnation. They remarked that the MT might confuse EFL students as speaking or listening to Spanish might be harmful for their learning process. All the EFL students interviewed also pointed out that they overuse their MT during tourism English courses; therefore, they get accustomed to using their native language to communicate and participate in class. Tourism students experienced not only overdependence but also lack of commitment when developing oral production skills in English for Tourism courses. In fact, Catalina and Paula stated that they faced a lack of interest in practicing and expressing ideas in English. Instead, they preferred using the MT in class to express their ideas. Thus,

this finding suggests that they feel neither committed nor interested in learning the target language. Hence, the use of the MT seems to be interfering with the development of the target language.

Drawbacks and benefits of using the MT in the EFL classroom are not only perceived by students but also by professors. This is why Cristal considered that the MT may be a useful tool for the students' learning process. Nonetheless, the two professors also revealed that the overuse of the MT may bring drawbacks such as lack of commitment when learning L2, overdependence on L1, language stagnation, and inaccurate use of false cognates. Cristal also agreed that the MT might facilitate the explanation of complex concepts to beginner students with a low linguistic level. The two professors also emphasized that using L1 to build rapport is considered an efficient technique to promote a nurturing atmosphere that eases the language learning process. Cristal and Sara mentioned that they "make jokes" to help students to feel "more relaxed when they have to speak in English." Nevertheless, both professors indicated that overusing the mother tongue might affect the language learning process. For instance, the professors expressed that students might lose commitment and interest toward L2 if they know that the MT can be used in class as "they do not force themselves" to learn as much as they can.

The professors also stated that this situation may lead to L1 overreliance since students may over-depend on translations to comprehend a topic or carry out an activity. Another negative effect that these professors pointed out in regard to the use of the MT was the students' lack of practice and understanding of the target language. It was frequently mentioned that because of a high reliance on the MT in the classroom, it tends to overshadow the development of L2. Both professors Cristal and Sara believed that the students' oral skills in L2 may be stagnant, denoting a level inferior to the one the students should have. They specifically commented that if students never make an effort to learn new words or understand the professor's instructions, they are neither practicing their speaking skills in the target language nor advancing as language learners. Additionally, the lack of understanding of L2 is a prominent issue that language educators highlighted as most of the students overuse false cognates during speaking activities in class. The professors explained that learners commonly confuse words in English with words in their MT and use similar grammatical patterns in English and Spanish to produce utterances.

Learning and Teaching Strategies for L1 and L2 Connections

The use and non-use of the MT and the incorporation of translation tools in EFL classrooms help in clarifying L2 vocabulary and concepts, supporting student learning and oral performance. Their presence might be a welcoming agent in the classroom as it helps learners build connections between their L1 and L2. The students reported having used translation tools such as Google Translate and AI-powered apps. These methods boosted the students' overall linguistic performance, mainly in oral production. However, the MT

should be used sparingly so as to not have students overuse it to hold different views about its implementation of the MT in class. The professors involved in the case study did not agree with each other on the implementation of the MT in the class. Whereas professor Sara expressed that the use of the MT is “non-existent,” Professor Cristal said that she “makes use of it for clarification, especially when the students' linguistic needs are unmet.” Overall, the honing of the students’ oral production skills in the L2 are dependent on the proper use of L1 and the implementation of translation tools.

Strategies that connect L1 and L2 enhance language learning engagement and comprehension in EFL settings. Four EFL tourism learners explained that the MT is a tool for understanding the L2. They all considered that using the MT to make connections between L1 and L2 might enhance the linguistic and academic development of L2. The students also believed that the understanding of unknown words and the elaboration of complex utterances in L2 might be efficiently reached in EFL contexts by making connections between the two languages. Indeed, both professors and students mentioned that the understanding of unknown words and the elaboration of complex utterances might be efficiently reached using drawings and pictures, which aids students in making L1 and L2 connections in class. Moreover, according to Professor Cristal, the encouragement of group work is believed to aid students in making L1 and L2 connections as they are likely to help each other during oral production tasks. Camila and Tomás also referred to group work as an efficient learning strategy that renders students connect their learning process with their previous knowledge and experiences to significantly boost scaffolding of knowledge. All in all, the data collected suggests that connecting L1 and L2 through strategies like group work and the use of visual aids significantly enhances language learning in EFL settings.

Confidence and Language Anxiety

According to the data gathered, EFL tourism students experienced feelings of comfort and discomfort when using L1 for oral production skills. In fact, Paula and Camila stated that they feel both comfortable and uncomfortable when incorporating the MT in speaking activities. Data revealed that students feel confident when they clarify doubts in L1; nonetheless, they feel awkward when there is overuse of L1 because they consider L2 should be strictly used during oral activities. Moreover, Tomás mentioned that he feels completely confident when using the L1 for producing oral tasks as it might allow students to check understanding before doing an activity or correcting their mistakes. On the other hand, Catalina remarked that she feels awkward when integrating L1 in oral exercises because she should avoid its use, especially when she is in the process of developing their L2 oral production skills. Lastly, some EFL tourism students feel comfortable when the MT is used to clarify or check understanding, however; they experience discomfort when there is L1 overuse.

EFL professors perceived the emotional impact that tourism students experienced while using their MT in EFL classes in terms of language anxiety and engagement. According to Professor Cristal, the MT can be incorporated to ease the learning environment and reduce language anxiety when students feel nervous during certain speaking activities, specifically when working with beginner levels. The same professor highlighted that beginner students are usually afraid of practicing and using their foreign language because they do not know how to pronounce L2 words accurately. As a result, the language learning process can be affected and delayed if students feel uncomfortable when pronouncing L2 words. Additionally, both professors interviewed stated that using the MT sporadically may increase EFL students' engagement during speaking activities. If the MT is incorporated, learners would fully understand class activities and tasks; moreover, they may feel more confident expressing their ideas when using the target language. Furthermore, Professor Cristal emphasized that implementing some use of the MT not only increases students' confidence but also their participation in oral expression classes. The same professor also noted that experiencing an Only-English policy might be complex for beginner students. Therefore, learners might be more eager to participate if the MT is integrated in class. Overall, there is a strong difference between overusing the students' mother tongue and using it sporadically; furthermore, EFL tourism professors might use the MT to reduce language anxiety and increase the students' confidence and participation in class.

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the most significant conclusions of this case study is that the MT brought benefits and drawbacks to both EFL tourism students and professors. According to the data collected from the participants, the MT was a useful learning tool for the comprehension of L2 in contexts such as the understanding of complex terms, finding grammatical similarities between L1 and L2, and building meaning associations that allowed learners to produce L2 efficiently. Nonetheless, purposeless overuse of the MT interfered with the language learning process as students frequently relied on translations when they lacked understanding of L2, specifically for expressing their ideas in L2 or comprehending complex concepts. Therefore, it is recommended that both students and professors consider under which situations they should consciously and strategically incorporate the MT in the classroom as its meticulous implementation might be an ally for the language learning process. On the contrary, non-strategic overuse of the MT might be a threat for L2 language acquisition because it is likely to become an obstacle in the learning process. Overall, the MT was either a beneficial or disadvantageous tool depending on the use that EFL tourism students and professors placed on it.

Using the MT and translation tools enhanced students' understanding and speaking skills in EFL tourism lessons; however, there should be a balance between L1 and L2 to prevent linguistic stagnation. Whereas some EFL tourism professors limited the MT use in

class through only English approaches, others found it advantageous for breaking linguistic barriers and facilitating the comprehension of the target language. Moreover, the incorporation of the MT into EFL classrooms fostered L1 and L2 connections, which developed linguistic understanding in oral production tasks where complex issues were addressed through L1 support. The implementation of the MT also enabled EFL tourism students and professors to create a meaningful and supportive learning environment where both sides could benefit from L1 use. Therefore, EFL tourism students and professors should acknowledge the central role of the MT in EFL classrooms and understand the implications of incorporating it during speaking production tasks. For optimal language growth, it is advisable to strategically incorporate the MT in EFL classrooms where language knowledge is low and gradually decrease its use as students advance in language acquisition. Furthermore, EFL tourism learners could take advantage of translation tools as they can play the role of a scaffolding resource for independent learning. By using these tools selectively, students can become active participants in the learning process and significantly enhance their oral production skills. EFL tourism professors should advise their students to use translation tools to understand complex terminology and help them prevent over-reliance on them. Hence, their use in the classroom should neither be criticized or praised as it complements striking teaching and learning strategies for L1 and L2 connections.

EFL tourism students revealed a complex emotional connection with the MT during oral production activities, experiencing both comfort and discomfort while using it. Whereas many learners felt confident using L1 to clarify doubts or correct mistakes, others reported discomfort when overusing their MT in class as they considered that L2 should prevail in their oral expression classes. Code switching from English to Spanish present in the EFL class emphasizes the need for a balanced approach to the use of the native language in the classroom. This approach that includes Spanish use in class can enhance engagement, commitment and participation in oral production tasks without overwhelming students by exposing them to an English-only approach. Furthermore, language educators perceived that incorporating the MT might alleviate language anxiety, especially among beginners who felt afraid of making mistakes. One of the recommendations drawn is for EFL professors to use the MT sporadically to foster comprehension and build learners' confidence through not only positive feedback but also pair and group work. If EFL professors progressively motivate students to practice and use their target language, they might reach significant confidence when producing oral skills. The use of relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and mindfulness meditation may positively contribute to decreasing language anxiety in class as learners could release stress and work relaxingly.

Action Plan to Build Language Learners' Confidence

The evidence from this case study suggests that two of the main obstacles that EFL tourism students face are lack of confidence and language anxiety. This stagnates the

students' language learning process. As a result, it is fundamental to create an action plan in the form of a booklet that tackles the previously mentioned issues to help students feel comfortable by strategically incorporating the MT to develop oral production skills. The main objective of the booklet is to integrate the MT without hindering L2 language acquisition to assist learners' emotional burdens. Hence, L1 and L2 are directly associated when building meaningful connections in class through the activities suggested in the booklet. The target audience for the booklet is EFL tourism professors and beginner students from a regional campus in a public university. The professor conveniently uses the booklet to plan and incorporate speaking activities that allow EFL tourism students to produce oral production skills without bringing language anxiety into the classroom. This booklet includes three speaking sections composed of warm-ups, main activities, and wrap ups, which are created by the researchers in line with the main findings of the study. The sections enable EFL tourism professors to use a wide range of adaptable activities that strategically incorporate the MT during speaking production tasks for a period of 4 weeks. More specifically, the warm-ups such as "guessing the place" or "finding someone who" consist of having the students ask questions for clarification by using the MT if they have difficulties using the L2. The use of the MT is to build confidence and contribute to creating a teaching environment where students feel safe, thus helping reduce their language anxiety. On the other hand, main speaking activities like Q&A sessions, role-plays and picture storytelling tasks support group work to decrease learners' language anxiety as they feel less intimidated when working together. These kinds of activities allow students to use L1 before developing their oral skills in the target language. Finally, wrap-ups that include reflections provide students with opportunities to openly express their opinions and make efforts to learn L2 words as they gain confidence without linguistic barriers. This booklet enables EFL tourism professors to help students enhance their linguistic knowledge and oral production skills along with a meaningful and enjoyable language learning process.

Figure 1

First Warm-up Activity of the Booklet



GUESS THE PLACE

The professor asks students to get in small groups and orally guess and describe each place. Students are allowed to clarify questions in L1 if they are unsure how to use certain vocabulary in L2. This way, they would build confidence while accurately producing the target language.



Note. This image corresponds to the digital material designed by researchers.

Figure 2

Main Activity of the Booklet

02

* PICTURE STORYTELLING *

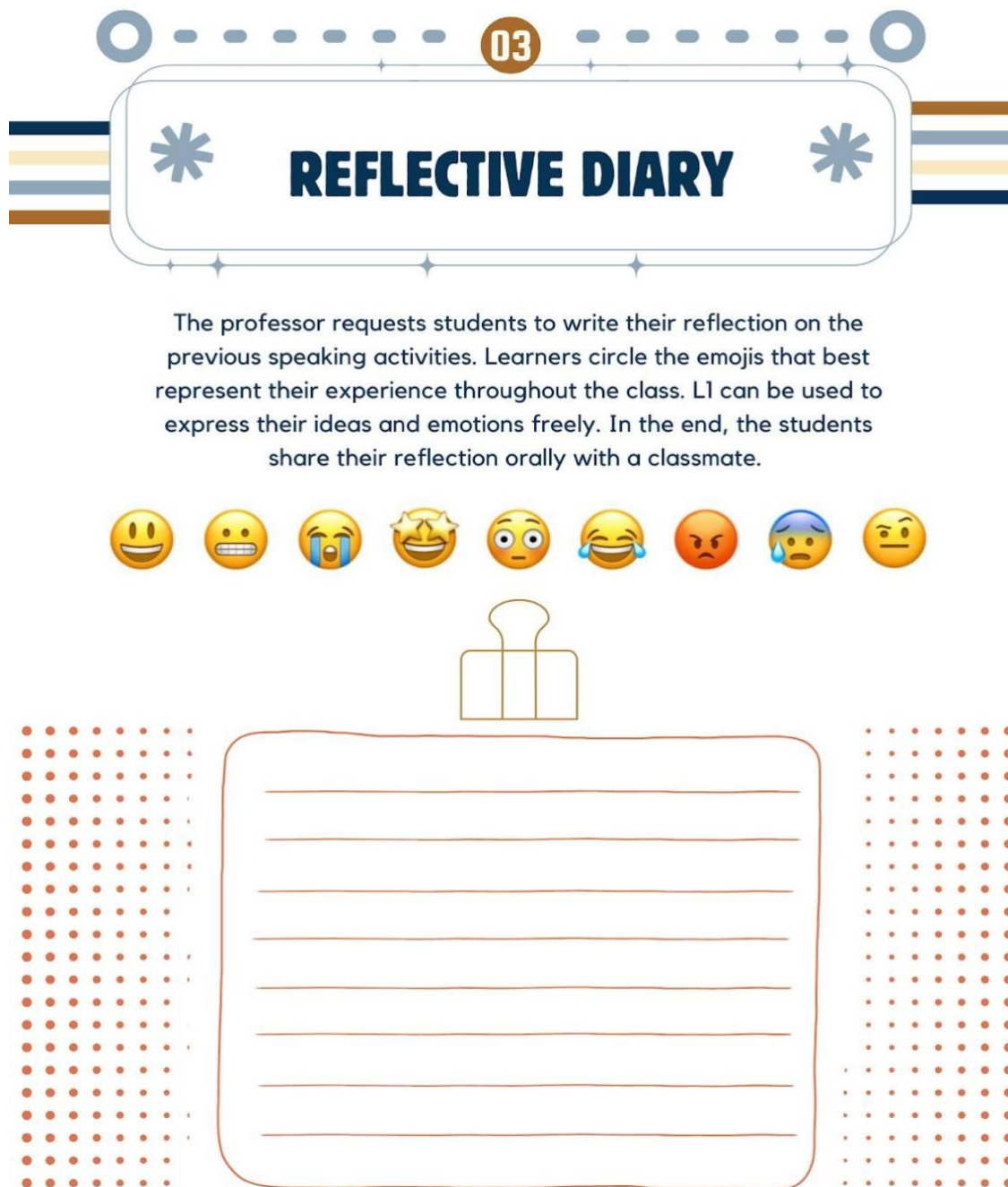
The professor explains the activity to the students in L2. (If the students do not understand, the teacher may switch to L1). Students are allowed to brainstorm ideas in L1 if necessary. The professor guides them through the elaboration of the final description of the picture in the target language if needed.

- 1  **BEACH** ✨
- 2  **ZOO** ✨
- 3  **RESTAURANT**
- 4  **AIRPORT**

Note: This image corresponds to the digital material designed by researchers.

Figure 3

Wrap-up Activity of the Booklet



03

REFLECTIVE DIARY

The professor requests students to write their reflection on the previous speaking activities. Learners circle the emojis that best represent their experience throughout the class. LI can be used to express their ideas and emotions freely. In the end, the students share their reflection orally with a classmate.

😊 😬 😭 🌟 😳 😂 😡 😓 🤔

📎

Note: This image corresponds to the digital material designed by researchers.

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Choosing English Teaching as A Major: A Case Study of First-Year Students in the Brunca Region in Costa Rica

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Abstract: Choosing a major is a tough process for students pursuing higher education. Making this decision is usually influenced by students' backgrounds. This choice defines their academic near future and success; however, there is not enough research on the reasons that drive current students enrolled in higher education in the Brunca Region; for this reason, this study aims to understand students' motives to study English Teaching specifically. This case study explores the socioeconomic, family, and individual reasons that led students to enroll in an English Teaching major at a public university in the Brunca Region. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with first-year students, a social worker from a state university in southern Costa Rica, and two focus groups for first-year students. Findings suggest that students' decisions heavily rely on the role English plays in today's professional world. Other findings include family influence, the role of economic necessities, and life plans along with no budget for long-term dreams. These findings reveal a need for extra support for students who are enrolled in the major. As a suggestion from the social worker, the extra support would be a course syllabus that covers all the basics of the English Teaching major. This course aims to provide students with an overview of what the first semester of the major will be like and ease their adaptation process.

Keywords: English Teaching major, case study, higher education, reasons, choosing a major case study, choosing a major, English Teaching major, higher education, reasons

Introduction

In 2022, Costa Rica was ranked as the second-best English language speaking country in Central America (English First, 2023). This fact might reveal that, for many Costa Ricans, learning this language was an important motivation and goal in their lives. Sometimes selecting an English language program to learn the language tends to be an

arduous process for students because it would represent a reflection on their motivations and reasons that drove them to make that decision. For many, choosing an English Teaching Major is an option to learn this language. Enrolling in a program of this kind conveys making a long-term choice that would establish how people's lives are going to move onward in their upcoming years. Not all people experience choosing what to study similarly, and this may influence their reasons to enroll in a specific major in higher education. As Ayu Fitria (2017) mentioned, the motivations behind choosing a major cannot be ignored and it is a major element in higher education (p. 53). Most research tends to focus on the reasons why students leave their major instead of understanding what drove them in the first place to choose it. Kennett et al (2011) explained that there is a large amount of research on dropouts but not enough on students' decision to enroll in higher education (p. 65). Understanding the reasons why students choose to enroll in higher education is crucial as it greatly impacts their educational journeys. Chan (2016) established that students' aspirations are often more individualized, focused on the short term, and driven by economic considerations (p. 19). By studying these motivations, educators and institutions might provide more effective support for students' success in higher education.

Thus, this case study will inquire the reasons to enter higher education in an English Teaching major. It is a fact that English is used worldwide, and it is considered a tool to face a globalized world (Ayu Fitria, 2017; Nur Fitria et al, 2021). It is important for this case study to understand whether students in Region Brunca are choosing the English teaching major because of the role the English language plays in today's world or not and what other reasons influence their decision. The purpose of this case study is to understand the reasons that drive first-year university students in public universities in the Region Brunca to enroll in an English Teaching Major.

Comprehending the reasons behind students' decisions to enroll in higher education is significant for enhancing educational strategies and support systems. Ayu Fitria (2017) asserts that students' reasons for selecting a major are crucial to their overall educational journey (p. 53). This allows institutions to better align their programs with students' goals and aspirations. Knowing what influences first-year students to choose an English Teaching Major can be beneficial not only for students but also for teachers and the university. Realizing what drives students to make this decision could make the learning process and the adaptation to university life easier (Anwar & Nugroho, 2018; Nur Futria et al., 2021). Moreover, for teachers, this research can guide them to respond to students' questions, attitudes, or struggles about their major. This study can provide suitable information for social coworkers and academic counselors that could result in personalized pieces of advice, activities, and safe spaces for students to continue their studies. To understand what drives students on the decision of choosing this major it is crucial to analyze their reasons.

There are three main reasons that students have to choose a certain major. These reasons are identified as socio-economic reasons, family reasons, and individual reasons (Albert Verdú et al, 2016; Anwar & Nugroho, 2018; Eidimtas & Juceviciene. 2014, Kennett et al., 2011; Nur Fitria et al., 2021; Valenzuela & Yanez, 2022). This information leads to the main question of this study: what reasons drive first-year university students to enroll in an English Teaching major? and the subsequent questions of the case study: What socioeconomic reasons drive first-year university students to enroll in an English Teaching major at a public university in Region Brunca? What family reasons drive first-year university students to enroll at a public university in Region Brunca? What individual reasons drive first-year university students to enroll in the English Teaching major at a public university in Region Brunca?

Literature Review

Based on previous literature, there are socioeconomic, family, and individual reasons that students from rural areas, different contexts, and different countries have mentioned as reasons that led them to choose a major.

Socioeconomic Reasons to Study English Teaching in Rural Areas

Social status, family income, and personal budget are socioeconomic reasons to study English Teaching in rural areas (Connie et al., 2022; López Montero et al., 2014; Solano Campos, 2012; Nur Fitria et al., 2022). Students may be influenced by society when choosing English Teaching as a major because of the prestige and high social status that speaking this language entails. As Solano Campos (2012) pointed out, English is one of the most important languages, and it is associated with a high economic status (p. 52). This idea that people from high social classes speak English might be a motivation for students at the moment of enrolling in the major. A low personal budget is another motivation to enroll in English Teaching in a rural area (Connie et al., 2022 & López Montero et al., 2014). Students tend to search for opportunities like scholarships or educational loans to fit their economic situation. Students often express concerns related to pricing factors and look for the best option at a low cost. Additionally, they show more interest in scholarships than loans to stay on their parents or their own budget. (Connie et al., 2022; Escribano Hervis, 2016; Nur Fitria et al., 2021). Closely related to students' budget is the family income situation. Students from rural areas usually face negative family economic situations early in their lives, which motivate them to complete a professional degree. As López Montero et al. (2014) established, students explained that one reason they had to leave their homes and enroll in higher education was the low economic situation of their families (p. 446). Social-economic status is intrinsic when it comes to choosing English Teaching.

Other reasons such as affordability, social mobility, and empowerment have been identified as factors that influence students' decisions to choose English Teaching as a major. Affordability can be an influential factor in students when enrolling in a public

university. The total cost of the major, the place where the university is located, and even scholarships the institution offers are important when it comes to deciding on a major, and these factors might affect students' affordability (Connie et al., 2022; López Montero et al., 2014; Nur Fitria, 2021). When students learn a second language like English, they gain cultural capital to face this globalized world (López Montero et al., 2014; Nur Fitria, 2021). The possibility of social mobility is a motivational drive for students to choose English Teaching. Students can be driven by the fact of leaving their rural towns to metropolitan cities and changing their family's status (Yonggui, 2019, p. 338). These factors influence students' social-economic reasons to study English Teaching.

Family Reasons to Study English Teaching

There are different family reasons, such as internal situations, high expectations, and fear of disappointment discussed in literature that encourage learners to study English Teaching. Referring to personal reasons, Shan & Abdul Aziz (2022) identified the financial difficulties as family issues that lead learners to study English (p.1960). The influence of parents is recognized as pivotal in the decision of studying English (Anwar & Nugroho, 2018; Shan & Abdul Aziz, 2022). Another major element in choosing what to study is not only parental opinion, but the family expectations. Making their families feel proud and pleased is a factor that persuades students to make the choice of enrolling in higher education (Kennett et al., 2011; Nur Fritia et al., 2021). Kennett et al. (2021) mentioned that the fear of disappointment represents a key reason to choose a specific major. In fact, this fear is a fundamental element not just at the beginning of the process to determine what major to pursue, but throughout it. Students that are afraid of not making their parents proud are likely to have overall high grades during their university years to hide their lack of learning competency (Kennett et al., 2011, p.71). Therefore, these reasons play a crucial part in students' choices when picking majors.

Breaking generational patterns, overcoming adverse situations, and providing better opportunities are additional family reasons that move students to study English Teaching. In most cases, learners tend to enroll in higher education to break generational patterns by educating themselves and looking for better opportunities than the ones they had back home. The role that parents play in students' education is crucial; however, they are unaware of the importance of English language learning because they are not highly educated (Shahnaz & Ghandana, 2021, p. 1960). As a result of this situation, there is an emerging generation of students that want a change of scenario for their lives. Adding to this, students want to overcome adverse situations that they have already faced. Thus, students are encouraged to finish the major to reach better opportunities than the ones their parents had (López Montero et al., 2021, Yonggui, 2019). Amid those better chances, getting a fulfilling job or better employment circumstances hand-by-hand with the improvement of personal potential are some of the goals students show (O'Shea et al.,

2019, p.98). Thus, the role of the desire to make a transformation in the family is key to guiding students when choosing a major.

Individual Reasons to Study English Teaching in Rural Areas

Feelings, hobbies, and personal goals tend to be some of the individual reasons that students have to study English Teaching (Ayu Fitria, 2017). The feelings that students have toward English Teaching can play a major role in the decision to study this major. The desire to know and to learn English- and English-speaking cultures might have influenced the student's decision to study English Teaching. However, a negative feeling for the language will reduce student's motivation (López Montero et.al, 2014, p.446). Students' language aptitude can encourage them to make the decision to enroll in the English Teaching major, which will help them later with the learning process. As implied by Nur Fitria (2021), when choosing a major, talents can ease the learning process and boost learners' motivation to finish their studies (p. 3). Among these individual reasons, students' personal goals might drive them toward the decision to study English. Besides better employment, one major goal is to identify their strengths, which aligns with their desire to be an English teacher (Nur Fitria et.al, 2021; Oshea & Salter, 2019). All these individual aspects are considered by students to make the important decision of what their future will look like.

In addition to the previous reasons, students' abilities, desires, and motivation are elements that drive learners to decide to enroll in an English Teaching major. Abilities such as intelligence, organization, preparedness, and facilities in school are factors that students consider when choosing to study English (Ayu Fitria, 2017; Milovanska-Farrington, 2020). Students desire is another factor regarding English Teaching that plays a significant role for students that decide to choose this major. Considering teaching as an important job and helping children and society to improve are factors that might contribute to the desire of becoming an English teacher (Nur Fitria, 2021; Masbirorotni et al., 2020). Motivation is an aspect that is crucial not only at the time of choosing a major but also when going through it. Regarding English Teaching, students' motivation is commonly related to the willingness to learn a second language, to improve their skills, and to get knowledge and improve their potential (Anwar & Nugroho, 2018; Ayu Fitria, 2017; López Montero et al., 2014). Also, having vocation for teaching in general is one of the most motivating factors for students (Amengual-Pizarro & Garcia-Laborda, 2015, p. 593).

Research Methodology

The nature of this case study was qualitative. Creswell (2015) explained that qualitative research is well-suited for tackling a research problem when the categories are unknown and exploration with participants is needed providing that literature cannot give a deep understanding of the subject matter in the field (p. 16). Because the primary aim of this study was to describe and analyze why students had to enroll in an English teaching

major, qualitative research emerged as the one that fitted the most. This study focused on investigating the socioeconomic, family, and individual determinants. The implementation of different methods, strategies, and instruments led the researchers to conduct sessions to gather data according to the research questions previously established. As qualitative research is focused on understanding rather than measuring, the study aims to comprehend why first-year students wanted to enroll in a public university and specifically what reasons drove these students to choose English Teaching.

This research followed the case study approach which established the study of various issues in a real-life context (Patnaik & Pandey, 2019, p. 163). The real-life context in this case study was reflected in the student participants who had recently chosen an English Teaching major. Students expressed their perspectives on the dilemmas that they faced when choosing the English Teaching Major at a public university in the southern part of Costa Rica. Additionally, a social worker was asked about the reasons that drove first-year students to pick a major as she is closely acquainted with students during the admissions process. The unit of analysis of this case study is a state university in Brunca Region.

Data Collection

The information for this case study was collected through different gathering instruments: a semi-structured interview with students, a semi-structured interview with a social worker, and two focus groups with students. The administration of these instruments was in the participants' institution which was their natural environment. The participants signed a consent form to be part of the process. The three researchers conducted interviews and focus groups. All data was audio recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

Focus Groups with Students

Two focus groups were conducted to get a glimpse of the students' points of view regarding the reasons for choosing English Teaching as a major in a public institution. The focus groups were developed face-to-face and in a quiet and familiar environment. Spanish language was used during the focus group sessions due to the participants' low English level as they were first-year students in an English Teaching major. The participants in each focus group were two women and two men. The procedures for developing the case study included constructing knowledge together by answering a general question at the beginning of the focus group. Then, there were four specific prompts for the participants to elaborate on their answers to the initial question. In this part, students could relate to their experiences and recall other classmates' experiences. Finally, the focus groups finished with a closing question where they were asked to reflect on the moment they decided to study. The student participants listed in this part specific information they would have liked to know before entering the major.

Semi-structured Interview with Students

Based on the answers of the focus groups, the five students who were more willing to participate and showed more comfort with the questions were chosen to participate in a further interview. The interview was semi-structured since it consisted of ten open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their answers based on a specific topic but with flexibility when adding ideas. The researchers took turns carrying out these individual face-to-face interviews. The interviewees signed a consent form that assured confidentiality and asked permission to record the session. These interviews were conducted in Spanish to avoid inconsistencies and obtain clear answers from student participants in the focus groups.

Semi-structured Interview with the Social Worker

Additionally, to the student's interview, there was another interview with one of the social workers on campus. This interview was semi-structured. It consisted of nine open-ended questions that encouraged the interviewee to give extensive and detailed answers about the role of scholarships, individual reasons, and family reasons that drive students to decide on a major in the region. The social worker deals firsthand with students sharing their experiences and reasons for their decision. Therefore, it was essential to hear her perspective on these reasons. The session was carried out virtually due to schedule conflicts and limitations.

Context and Participants

This case study was conducted in a public university in southern Costa Rica. The institution aimed to instruct future professionals to be critical, humanistic, and creative individuals focused on their integral and cooperative development. To be part of this university, applicants must be admitted by passing an admission test to enter the major pursued. For instance, to enroll in the English Teaching major, applicants had to obtain a specific score. The English teaching major curriculum offered for the 2024 period consisted of 141 credits divided into 44 courses as a requisite to graduate. The curriculum was designed to be completed in four years. The types of courses vary: general studies, focused on developing the humanistic perspective of the population; optional/elective classes, to share knowledge, experiences, and points of view based on a specific topic; pedagogies, to instruct future teachers about teaching styles, theories, methods, and approaches; linguistics, to cover topics related to the language and the development of this; and socio-cultural, to engage the students to the historic and contemporary situations regarding society.

The participants of this case study included a group of 32 first-year learners from the English Teaching major and a social worker from the institution. These students typically come from different social, economic, and geographical backgrounds and

contexts. Since the participants were in their first year of the major, they had an English language proficiency level of an average A2 person. As mentioned before, a social worker participated in the inquiry too. This person holds a master's degree in the field and has been working in the institution for more than ten years. During these years, this social worker has seen the evolution of different generations of students from the English teaching major, the different ways in which they endure the process, and the diverse actions carried out by the institution to support them since the beginning of their journey. Because of this, this participant provided meaningful insights to support the basis of the case study.

For this case study, the sampling technique employed was criterion sampling, a qualitative research technique that selects the participants who followed certain characteristics and requirements that are relevant to answer the research questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The criterion to choose the students determined a specific group of participants to gather insights about the feelings, perspectives, and opinions that drove them to select an English Teaching major at a public university. Other criterion to choose the participants was the selection of learners from 18 to 23 years old who had enrolled with a total of 18 credits corresponding to the second semester of the first year of the major. In addition, the criterion used for the social worker was the perspective of this experienced person and her insights into the students of this program.

Trustworthiness

This case study ensured trustworthiness by implementing different actions that promote credibility, dependability, and transferability. Different gathering methods such as focus groups and interviews with the students and a social worker gave credibility to the study by providing data from different perspectives which helped to ensure a deep understanding of the topic being studied. Also, the use of peer-debriefing, an employed technique in qualitative research that allows the reviewing of transcripts from a well-qualified peer investigator to assess if the researcher has missed, repeated, or overused a point (Janesick, 2015, p.1), cooperated to present credible and trustful findings providing that more than one person was reviewing the insights gathered. To provide dependability, a detailed explanation of how data was collected and then analyzed was offered. Besides this, to avoid preconceptions, biases, and predispositions, two professors in the role of supervisors collaborated in assessing the whole research process. Finally, with the support of the information collected, this case study showed the reasons for students to choose an English teaching major, which provided transferability by giving readers and other researchers a wide point of view from real people involved in the process.

Findings

After completing the data analysis process, four main themes were identified: the role of English language in today's professional world, life plans and no budget for long-

term dreams, family influence upon students' decisions, and the role of economic necessities.

English Role in Today's Professional World

The results of the study showed that the English language currently presents a high level of versatility and job opportunities. The versatility and the job opportunities that English provides represents a key factor for the participants to choose a major that includes the learning of this language. As one of the student participants stated, English is a universal language, and as such, Danna and Alana said that it can be found in almost all professional areas, and it is used in a variety of situations in life. This implies that the language is spoken by numerous people from different areas and different parts of the world. Another reason that the participants mentioned served as a guide to choose this major was the large number of opportunities in the labor market that speaking English or being bilingual adds to one's curriculum. Additionally, the social worker shared that it shapes how society perceives bilingual people to be individuals with higher competence. Alejandro, Jose, and Alana agreed on this idea and mentioned that English expands their professional chances in a variety of fields. Nowadays, studying English can be seen as an originator of new opportunities and a versatile tool to boost personal competitiveness.

Another factor that students mention as a cause to study English was their thoughts regarding the major, they wanted to choose. The participants commented that their attitude towards the English language was a significant aspect at the moment of enrolling in an English major. Jose and Alejandro expressed that they truly liked English; their opinion was supported by Danna who said that she has liked the language since a young age. She continued by mentioning that liking English is crucial for any students who wanted to select this major. Alejandro explained that one reason he had to study this major was that English was the option he liked the most. On the other hand, the students claimed that negative opinions against other majors, on the campus they were enrolling for, led them to choose English. Alana expressed her dislike towards other majors that were offered, making English her first option. She also highlighted her dislike for mathematics. This opinion was supported by participants in the second focus group who said that they were not proficient with numbers and mathematics. The participants' feelings towards the English language and towards other majors that were offered on campus were crucial at the moment to choose their major.

Life Plans and No Budget for Long-Term Dreams

No access to long-term dreams was one of the factors that the participants highlighted as fundamental when choosing the English Teaching Major. The majority of participants of the focus groups shared that English Teaching was not their first option. As an example, Jose and Danna explained that they wanted to enroll in a different major and in a different institution in pursuit of their ideal job and future profession. Aligned with this

sentiment, the social worker said that a common discourse that students have is the dream to be enrolled in another major, but they could not, so they took the opportunity of studying English Teaching as an impetus for their future. The participants said one barrier they had to study what they truly wanted was financial challenges. Most of them affirmed that they did not enroll in the major they dreamed of because they could not afford the expenses that this implied. Danna explicitly mentioned that the major she wanted to study was extremely expensive, this drove her to decide for English Teaching instead. Overall, the lack of possibilities to access real-life dreams that students had, made them select English Teaching as their major.

Strong English abilities and prior knowledge were two factors that drove students to select English Teaching as a remedial plan. Students' previous English background knowledge pointed out on several occasions as a determinant for their decision to study English Teaching. Jose, Alana, and Danna explained that their previous experience and well-developed English abilities in high school guided them to enroll in this major. Alana specifically mentioned that she excelled in certain skills such as pronunciation and grammar. The participants also highlighted that having previous experience with the language was a factor that led to their decision. Alana and Jose said that they felt confident to enroll in this major because of all the knowledge about the language they have. Also, the social worker suggested that having basic skills in English when enrolling can ease the process and drive students to choose it. Several participants from the first focus group strongly believed that it is difficult to succeed in the major without prior knowledge in the language. The decision of most participants to enroll in the major was strongly guided by their well-developed abilities in the language and existing knowledge of the basic English skills.

Family Influence Upon Students' Decisions

Data revealed that the support received by their parents was key to guide students to apply for the English Teaching major. According to the social worker, families encourage and promote studying. This portrayed the connection between the process of choosing a major and family support. A main pattern found in the data was that family and relative's positive attitude towards the major was highly considered by the students when choosing what to study. As Alanna put it, her relatives had a positive reaction regarding her decision of majoring in English Teaching. However, she continued by explaining that, although her mother did not fully agree with her decision, other relatives encouraged her to study English Teaching, and that was one of her motivations to study. Likewise, Jose remarked that even though he did not request his parents' opinion to enroll in the program, they demonstrated genuine interest and joy when he was admitted. Overall, during one of the focus group sessions, many participants emphasized that their parents were pleased with the idea of them pursuing an English Teaching major because it aligned with their academic strengths. Another notable outcome was that students were encouraged to study whatever

they wanted to, which means that students enrolled in the major based on their own preferences. An example of this can be seen in Dana's answer, who expressed that her parents' constant approval helped her feel confident to choose the major of her interest. During the focus groups, the students whose parents expressed positive opinions towards their choice, explained that their parents' emotional support was key for them and the ones who did not have support mentioned that it would be empowering if their parents approved of the major.

Other particular results indicated that there were some students who shared that their parents and relatives were not as supportive as they would like them to be. In some cases, the inclinations of the students' families were oriented to other majors instead of English Teaching. As Alanna described, her mother was reluctant to her choice because she preferred Business Administration for her. Alejandro reported a similar case; his family expected him to study a major related to technology. He added that even though he did not fulfill this family expectation, nowadays the topic is irrelevant for his family. Additionally, several interviewees mentioned their families' opposition and apathy towards the English Teaching major. For instance, Alanna's mother expressed to her that this major was useless, so she did not want her to study English. Similarly, other participants mentioned indifference or negative reactions regarding their major choice. They expressed that they were affected emotionally by their relatives' ideas, but they still pursued their own path as it was what they wanted. Alanna explained that a highly significant factor that drove her to make a quick decision to study although part of her family was against her decision was that her father would cut all financial support if she did not enroll in the university and studied a major; thus, Alanna had to make a rapid decision and study the most appealing major for her. She continued by mentioning that before choosing to study English Teaching, she had to lie to her father because she was not enrolled in any major; however, when she entered the major, she could finally say she was studying English. In the case of one participant in the focus groups, he had to rely totally on scholarships because his family did not want him to study at all; consequently, he is on his own and, if there is an unexpected situation that affects his scholarship, he would not be able to study at all. The family's support is fundamental for students to boost their confidence in choosing their major because students care about their family's opinion when enrolling to higher education.

The Role of Economic Necessities

It was evident from the data that low-income backgrounds drove or even forced some students to enroll in the ET major. Most of the participants relied on scholarships to study. During the first focus group, participants mentioned that accessing higher education depended on the approval of a campus dormitory scholarship and socioeconomic scholarship. In Alejandro's case, he did not have a choice. He either obtained a scholarship, or he simply could not study. José was in a similar situation; he did not have the chance to

study in a private university. Therefore, he applied for a public university that offered a scholarship. Likewise, Alanna was not sure if she was going to obtain a scholarship, and it was a relief for her to finally receive it because, otherwise, she would not have enrolled in the major. Participants also mentioned their aspiration to study outside the Brunca region, but their socioeconomic situation forced them to study in the region. For example, Alanna expressed that she did not have the income to pay for a student apartment outside the southern part of Costa Rica. Jose explained that if he moved to the metropolitan area in Costa Rica, his parents would not be able to give him the economic support he needed. Thus, he enrolled in an affordable university near his place of residence. Other participants remarked that they did not have enough money to leave the region, and the expenses this implied were outside their budget.

Most students who participated in the other focus group explained that the reason not to study in another university is that they did not want to leave their comfort zone because of money, so they enrolled in the ET major. Alanna and Jose agreed with this statement by mentioning that life in the metropolitan area is more expensive than in rural areas. Jose continued by explaining that moving to the city would imply expenses that he could not cover and that although he had a scholarship to study the major, he wanted outside the Brunca Region, he did not leave due to the high cost of living in a metropolis. One participant added that he had the opportunity to leave the southern part of Costa Rica and study English Teaching, but in the city; however, he had to return because his scholarship was not enough for the expenses he had. Thus, students from low-income backgrounds are often forced, by their condition, to study the majors that are offered in their towns instead of them having the opportunity to choose the major they want in the place they want because of the expenses this would imply.

The information collected highlighted the possibility of obtaining a competent salary and improving their socioeconomic status in the future led students to choose this major. Pursuing a salary that covers the expenses of an independent adult was a theme mentioned frequently. The social worker explained that studying English teaching provides a level of financial stability to cover their expenses. There was a consensus among the participants of the second focus that established future stable salaries or incomes as a significant factor to apply for English Teaching. Also, Jose stated that he chose English teaching because it represented a source of a stable income. Other findings demonstrated that the participants saw studying English as a ladder to escalate in their socioeconomic status. A common topic throughout the data was the desire to improve their socioeconomic status in the future. During the first focus group, some students expressed that one reason why they enrolled in this major was to improve their lifestyles, get their own place, and not have to depend on others. It was implied in the findings that the potential of a competitive salary and the opportunity to enhance their socioeconomic status significantly motivated students to choose this major.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results indicate that learners perceived studying English as a valuable source that could increase their versatility and enlarge job market opportunities, especially for rural areas. Students' perceptions of the major is that it allows them to pave their way into this globalized world and through their career path. Furthermore, the participants felt that English might help them develop their abilities and help them create an impressive resume, appealing to employers which eventually can open doors in the labor market. Thus, one recommendation for students is to take advantage of the opportunity to study English and develop themselves with transferable skills, such as communication, critical thinking, creativity, cultural competence, and global citizenship. These skills can improve their language proficiency and can be used across other fields apart from education and opening opportunities in diverse areas. Additionally, for universities, some suggestions are to adjust their curriculum to be practical for students to fulfill the needs of today's labor market by updating or integrating into the educational program what employers or companies seek in future employees to remain competitive. Also, public universities could offer full-time English courses in diverse modalities, for instance, face-to-face courses and virtual English courses with the aim of making the programs accessible for students from rural areas who cannot commute to the university. Finally, the institution can invest in professors' professional development with diverse workshops that could help them be a guide for their students to understand this quickly changing world.

This study has shown the significance of students' interests in the process of making a choice about their major. The alignment between personal interests and academic interests is essential to foster an engaging and successful academic experience. When students are genuinely interested in the major, they are likely to be actively engaged and develop a profound commitment to the subject, and the students in this research were aware of it. It is crucial that students consider their personal interests during the process of choosing a major. By doing this, students can align their passions with their academic path, which not only can enhance their academic experience but also create a possible satisfaction about the major. When students take a moment to consider what truly excites them, they are more likely to choose a field of study that aligns with their skills or abilities. One suggestion that can help through this process involves the Department of Student Life at the university. During their visits to high schools, they should illustrate the importance of choosing a major that aligns with their personal interests by bringing current students of the majors to explain how they work and to express their personal experiences for future applicants to understand the cases better. Additionally, they should explain the positive influence this can have on their academic journey and overall career development by showing other students' successful experiences.

One of the most important conclusions was that parent support represented an important aspect for students, providing that family members served as an encouraging and

reinforcing guide during the application process. Additionally, parents and relatives' involvement seemed to be a determinant of the student's final decision when enrolling in the English Teaching major. The support received was significantly important because it could foster students' successful educational outcomes. With this foundation, it is clear that parent's involvement was connected to students' academic journey and their choices. This connection is imperative, even if parents and students seemed to ignore its relevance because, for them, what happened related to any kind of support was just the typical functioning of their families. One of the strategies that can foster awareness of the importance of parent support is that public universities can provide parents with information about their pivotal role in the student's application process. This can be developed through different activities like workshops and informative sessions where the main goal is to explain the positive impact that family support can pose in students' lives. Also, social workers and counselors could promote this idea by disseminating this information through posts on social media and the distribution of informative flyers to increase awareness of the connection between family support and the application process along with the results that this can reflect in students' choices. The empowerment from parents, by providing essential knowledge and basics of the importance of their involvement, can lead to students' satisfaction and success in the pursuing of the English Teaching major in this university. This could be through the advocacy of campaigns for parents to notice their empowering role in the students' decisions in academic processes, which tend to be better with their guidance.

This study has found that, generally, a low-income background drove or even forced students to enroll in the ET major in a public university in the southern region of Costa Rica even though it was not their first choice. This suggests a complex connection between socioeconomic status and academic choices, so that students with limited resources tend to choose majors that align with their necessities and not their preferences. This means that there are a few options as they must decide on one of the careers offered in the region. This situation drove students to choose a major not because it was their life goal, but as a result of an economic limitation. For that reason, they opted for a major focused on the English language to develop a tool that would match with any other goal in their future. Students from low-income backgrounds are sometimes forced to study majors based on their budget because they do not possess the economic stability to study in a city far from their home because of the cost. One possible suggestion for students is the analysis of the factors and situations influencing their decisions when choosing their major, so they would be clear of the reasons that are driving them in this process. Also, to empower students to be self-aware of their choices, they must have the opportunity to access all the available sources of information about the costs of higher education and the economic benefits they can obtain, such as scholarships, loans, and informal economic support. This self-awareness will help them not only make more informed decisions not only on their personal situation but also maximize their opportunities and financial support knowledge.

Action Plan

The social worker in this case study made clear that there is a need for an intensive course of Basic English offered the weeks before the first semester starts. To fulfill the need of an intensive course of basic English evidenced by the social worker, the researchers developed a syllabus that covers all the basic topics of an English major. Therefore, the action plan in this study suggests a syllabus for a 4-week course covering all 4 macro skills and 2 micro skills. Additionally, a purpose of the course is not just teaching the basic English language skills but also providing students with studying techniques to ease their university adaptation process. The course has as an objective to develop macro and micro-English skills in students while also helping them create previous basic knowledge in the language. As a methodology, the course is based on the active learning methodology; thus, it is key to work on and develop oral production, oral comprehension, written production and comprehension skills each week through individual, team, and peer work while the professor will act as a guide who is in charge of planning and organizing the activities. The evaluation in this course is formative students' admission to the major does not depend on it; however, the course does have a final score that consists of five homework assignments, four final exams, and one final oral presentation based on the topics seen in class. This English course will last a month, and it is supposed to be from Monday to Friday and there is a specific skill covered each week. Oral comprehension and production are covered on Mondays, written comprehension and production is covered on Tuesdays, basic grammar on Wednesdays, vocabulary on Thursday, and study techniques on Friday. By the end of the course, students are expected to learn not just strategies to study English but also learn beginners level English skills.

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Concluding Chapter



Lessons Learned

Being the second edition of a book of this type in our regional campus, this compilation of students' research activities represents the continuation of the editors who are also professors of the course of Seminar on Innovation, Field Research, and Educational Design in both Perez Zeledon and Coto campus. We are pleased to complete this project as we believe this compilation is a useful reference for those involved in English teacher education programs in higher education and EFL teaching and learning in general.

The field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Costa Rica has been gradually evolving, highlighting the necessity for deliberate practices that enhance linguistic competence, teaching transformation and bold inquiry. By presenting the research processes and findings of pre-service teachers, we aim to foster students' commitment to knowledge dissemination. In this concluding section, we invited the participating students to reflect on their experiences, insights gained, and key takeaways. Their reflections are categorized into two main areas: the development of skills and knowledge and challenges and opportunities. Additionally, we include two artistic expressions from students that capture their emotions and experiences throughout their research journey in the form of poems.

Skills and Knowledge Gained

Transferal skills and research process knowledge were a continued trademark of the pre-service teachers who attributed their growth to the different learning opportunities received during the span of the course. Transferal skills included critical thinking, problem solving, attention to details, observation, teamwork, time management, and curiosity. In the words of one of the students, critical thinking was determinant in their overall process: *“one skill that I developed was critical thinking, as I had to analyze the influence of the social environment in the learning process, which in its own was the knowledge I developed and made me reflect on what the learning process means”*. Similarly, another student shared *“I was able to develop critical thinking skills by interpreting, categorizing, and prioritizing the information gathered.”* Developing the skill to collaboratively achieve a common goal to complete tasks was revealed as an important lesson learned. Many of the students reported it as key for their success. When asked about memorable experiences, she shared *“communication and teamwork with my colleagues was key to achieving the objective.”* In a similar note another student stated, *“working in teams allows us to improve and learn from each other and understand that each idea or point of view is valuable”*. It is reassuring for professors teaching this course to know that student learning is not limited to disciplinary knowledge. Instead, the activities developed prompted lifelong learning that students can transfer to any future scenario.

Developing research content knowledge was an important outcome derived from students' reports. For instance, students clearly mentioned disciplinary knowledge of

different stages of research. One of the students mentioned that he developed the ability to *“formulate research questions”* while another student recognized that his *“knowledge of research methodologies expanded as I applied theoretical concepts to real-world contexts”*. Regarding the process of writing their literature review, one student shared *“I developed the ability to look for more specific and helpful articles in order to have stronger arguments and support them better”*. Analyzing data, using multiple data gathering methods, and doing exhaustive reading were other cognitive processes in which they engaged. It was evident when reading students' responses that they benefited from completing the tasks assigned in class. In accordance with the main objective of the course, the students were able to develop EFL teaching and learning content knowledge and reality awareness. By being immersed in classroom activities when conducting research, pre-service teachers had a reality check where they were reminded of the state of EFL education in their local communities. Responses indicated that they understand the complexity and responsibility English language teachers have when exercising their profession. In the words of the students, *“Since our topic was related to rapport it helped me to understand its importance and also to realize how little the professionals in our field talk about it, especially at high schools. It was a new term, and learning about it opened a new perspective of what I want to implement in my classes and what change and impact I wanted to make/have with my future students”, “I could expand my knowledge of the use of the mother tongue in an EFL context”, “it makes you aware of the source of the problems under investigation contrary to just having a vague idea of them. As a result, you widen your worldview”*.

Challenges and Opportunities derived from doing Classroom Research

The students identified a range of challenges they faced while conducting classroom research. An initial difficulty was defining a clear and focused research topic, as they struggled to narrow down broad interests into manageable questions. One student recalled that her group struggled to *“find the center of the topic”*. Similarly, another mentioned the difficulty of *“finding a meaningful research topic [and] defining all the research questions”*. Finding reliable and relevant bibliographical resources posed as a challenge for them mostly because of time constraints. To this regard a student mentioned *“finding sources [was a challenge] because it takes time to find and organize ideas”*. Following the time constraint issue, students recalled that it is hard to balance research duties such as coordinating with stakeholders to acquire the necessary permissions, gathering data from participants, and coding and analyzing the data, with their schoolwork and other responsibilities. Some of their comments were that *“since we are full time students, I think one of the hardest parts was to manage our time so that we could focus completely on the research (...) so we had to work late at night or even taking every bit of free time that we had to work on it”*. Another expressed that *“analyzing the data was challenging. Sorting through large amounts of qualitative data and identifying patterns required a lot of focus*

and perseverance". The obstacles identified by the students pointed out that engaging in research projects can be overwhelming for novice researchers. This highlights the need for more structured support and guidance throughout their academic journey.

Engaging in classroom research offered the students the opportunity to develop transferable skills and knowledge that transcends the academic settings. By completing the research project, students developed critical thinking as they analyzed and interpreted classroom dynamics to make informed decisions. Their curiosity as future English teachers was nurtured as they explored the realities faced in the classrooms. This encouraged a deeper understanding of theory and practice in language learning. A student expressed that he had the opportunity *"to analyze the learning environment in different levels [...] and come up with ideas to improve the learning process."* Having a deeper understanding of what is happening in the foreign language classroom taught students to be more flexible in response to the real-world challenges and unexpected developments associated with language learning. As one student mentioned, *"the research context fostered a platform for personal growth. It encouraged us to step out of our comfort zones"*. Engaging in research experiences contributed to their growth as reflective practitioners better prepared to innovate and respond to the evolving needs of language learners.

Next are two poems written by one student from each campus. They represent what they experienced while taking the research class and conducting their case study. Each poem includes an interpretation of each artist.

Hope (2025)

By Yulian Buzo Fonseca

From dusk till dawn

A weary mind must think

Of that which truly matters

Will push us away from the brink

Sit back, turn the page

Breathe in and reflect

What the world still lacks

You shouldn't forget

Though time slips by
Seemingly escaping forever
The efforts you make
Will one day bring us together

Look out the window
The job has been done
As the sun goes up
So will hope in this world

Artist's Interpretation

Conducting research is arduous work. You can feel like it is never going to be completed, especially if the due date is getting closer. That is why sometimes researchers must work overtime, sacrificing hours of sleep to get the job done. However, as overwhelming as it may seem, you must think about the positive outcome it will have on the research field as you are contributing new ideas to broaden its understanding. In the end, if we all make our contributions to any field, the path of life will be lit with limitless possibilities for growth, bringing humanity together.

To you, the one in the mirror

Time does not stop
And life never ends
The flame of determination is something you possess
Embrace perseverance as your oath

Is it fear that makes you waver?
Is it judgement that makes you nervous?
Challenges are part of life's unique flavor

A prelude that announces your upcoming greatness

One by one, surpass each adversity

Step by step, get closer to your perfect self

Some will target you, filled with animosity

For your growth is something that they can't steal for themselves

Look at the doubt, put to silence

Look at the fear, reduced to ashes

Your determination, they will try to breach

But success is something you can reach

Artist's Interpretation

Life is full of obstacles, challenges, and adversities that will mark our path to the better version of ourselves that is waiting in the future. The journey I faced in university marked an inflexion point and the start of a new chapter in my life. I can't go back in time and tell my past self that I will be fine, and that success lies at the end of the line, but I can tell that to the version of me that awaits in the future, the version of myself that will surpass who I am today.

We would like to finish this section by sharing what we considered was the highlight of this process of asking students to reflect on their experiences. We asked students to share some memorable moments, and these are some of their ideas. We believed that as research and teacher trainers we should not overlook the transformation potential research activities hold to pre-service teachers. Consequently, we should intentionally acknowledge all the skills and knowledge that can profoundly impact their teaching practices and professional development. These elements collectively prepare preservice teachers to become effective, adaptive, and reflective practitioners in their future classrooms.

Afterword

Research is an ongoing task that every teacher must undertake; therefore, it is essential that pre-service teachers begin to assume this role early in their careers. By doing so, they not only gain familiarity with the features implied in teaching and learning but also begin to shape their identity as reflective and proactive educators. In the fast-paced and changing times we live in, developing a critical mindset is no longer optional—it is a necessity as it is properly addressed in one of the study cases developed in this book. Consequently, universities must enhance the development of critical thinking into their curriculum, ensuring that future educators are equipped to foster the same skills in their students.

As an English teacher and teacher trainer, it is one of my priority interests to follow up the implementation of MEP Curriculum which promotes critical thinking, and one of the challenges regarding this issue is that English teachers bring these guidelines to life in their classrooms. Implementation, after all, carries more weight than intention. To keep students engaged, teachers must remain observant and flexible, always on the lookout for new strategies that capture attention and inspire learning.

In this context, the role of motivation cannot be ruled out. Interestingly, extrinsic motivation appears to have a stronger impact on students than intrinsic motivation, which gives us a wakeup call on revising how we approach engagement in the classroom. This further reinforces the importance of constant curricular revision in university English programs to maintain high standards in teacher training and adapt to the needs of modern learners.

For years, the role of Mother Tongue (L1) in English Teaching has been subject to good and bad comments in relation to how beneficial it can be when learning a foreign language. In this book, the role of L1 is sufficiently covered when we are dealing with ESP, specifically in the subject area of tourism. The data collected provides great information on the matter and since it is backed up with scientific elements, it is definitely a reliable theory not only with this specific topic but also with the other topics fully described in this book.

One study case that called my attention and that I see very related to my field of work is the one about Choosing a Major. It is not of particular interest for university professors or students to investigate this matter, but I must say that the results described by the pre-service teachers in charge of conducting this study put me on alert of the profile of English teachers that might eventually get into the MEP. As we reflect on the reasons why students choose the English Teaching major, it is concerning to note that many seem to focus only on the language itself, rather than on teaching as a vocation. This conclusion might explain the reported lack of satisfaction with the chosen major, which, in turn, raises important questions about future motivation and professional commitment.

In conclusion, the findings and reflections presented throughout this research highlight the complexities, challenges, and responsibilities of becoming a teacher today. They also serve as a call to action for institutions, educators, and policymakers to continually evolve and respond to the needs of a dynamic educational landscape.

A special recognition to the students involved in creating such a professional and serious book with a variety of interesting topics that no doubt will be a great source of consultation for other English Teaching Major students and English Teachers. Thanks to Universidad Nacional for promoting this kind of project for pre-service English Teachers which enhances their critical thinking and approaches them to the real context that they will have to deal with when being hired as English Teachers in public and private educational systems.

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