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Improving the English language curriculum at the university level using a human rights approach

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Abstract

The curriculum model developed for English language instruction at the Universidad Estatal Amazonica is based on a human rights approach. This curriculum model aims to set contents and strategies so that the learners will develop the linguistic competences that satisfy their needs and objectives, and is an adaptation of the curriculum methods developed by the language educator Jack C. Richards. The success of the curriculum method was analyzed taking into account three criteria: the acquired level, the linguistic competences reached and the didactic resources used in order to evaluate its impacts on the learning process. The research was conducted with the entire learner population of the UEA during a semester using a descriptive statistic to analyze the results. The difference between the two semesters in terms of the number of student who had completed their level is of 17,6% which confirms an improvement of the learning process, but the results of the linguistic competence criterion did not fulfill the expectations at an acceptable rate. An investigation that examines more deeply the issues involved is necessary to determine if the English curriculum model based on a human rights approach will facilitate the development of the UEA students' linguistic competences which are necessary for language proficiency.

Key words: competence, learner, linguistic, language

Resumen

El modelo curricular elaborado para la enseñanza del idioma inglés en la Universidad Estatal Amazónica se basa en un enfoque de derechos humanos. Este modelo curricular tiene por objeto establecer el contenido y las estrategias para que los alumnos desarrollen las competencias lingüísticas que satisfacen sus necesidades y objetivos, y es una adaptación de los métodos curriculares desarrollados por el educador lingüístico Jack C. Richards. El éxito del método curricular se analizó teniendo en cuenta tres criterios: el nivel adquirido, las

competencias lingüísticas alcanzadas y los recursos didácticos utilizados con el fin de evaluar su impacto en el proceso de aprendizaje. La investigación se realizó con la población total estudiantil de la UEA durante un semestre con una estadística descriptiva para analizar los resultados. La diferencia entre los dos semestres en términos del número de estudiantes que habían completado su nivel es de 17,6%, lo que confirma una mejora del proceso de aprendizaje, pero los resultados del criterio de competencia lingüística no cumplieron las expectativas a un nivel aceptable. Una investigación que examina más a fondo las cuestiones planteadas es necesario para determinar si el modelo de curricular de inglés basado en un enfoque de derechos humanos, facilitará el desarrollo de las competencias lingüísticas de los estudiantes de la Universidad Estatal Amazónica a los niveles requeridos.

Palabras claves: competencias, estudiante, lingüística, idioma

Introduction

A university-level curriculum for teaching English as a second language should establish and schedule contents and strategies so that the learners will develop the linguistic communication competences regarding their professional needs and objectives. The main English teaching method tendencies have evolved in recent decades from the traditional methods like grammar translation to the communicative like social constructivism approach (Windschilt, 2002; Richardson, 2003) and other cutting-edge methods, in line with the new linguistic, semantic, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic orientations. During the last decade, the science of language instruction has been oriented toward discourse analysis and its cognitive process applications,

in order to develop new learning methods focusing on constructivism, collaborative and cooperative learning considered eclectic and strengthened by the contemporary theories like Vygotsky's "Historical and Cultural Education" (Roth and Lee, 2007).

The curricular model for English as a second language at the Universidad Estatal Amazónica (UEA) aims to strengthen the teaching process redesigning and applying general purposes, realizing evaluation, selecting and sequencing program contents, methodological strategies and pertinent resources, to be included in the operative, educational and investigative projects, in order to enhance and optimize the teachers' work so that the learners reach the expected linguistic competences. In order to assess objectively the different

impacts of the English language curriculum within the learning process, the investigation described herein was developed

Development and evaluation of the curriculum model for English as a second language

As a consequence of the role that language exerts in the construction of knowledge, language is closely linked to the processes of thought (Gardner, 1983) and to the command over skills not strictly linguistic but also including cognitive skills, motor skills and skills relative to the planning and control of the learning activity itself. The language curriculum involves mainly a process of social construction developed in a frame of frequently diverse traditions and pedagogical thoughts. Language acquisition, through helping learners to acquire an understanding of the culture where they live, is achieved through social interaction. Language is a tool people use for cultural transmission, communication, and reflection on their own thinking (Vygotsky, 1962). The role of the language curriculum is to guide the learners from their needs to their general, specific and linguistic objectives in order to contribute to an enhance the ability of the individual's participation in an increasingly

demanding and complex society that promotes integration from diversity.

In accordance with the framework of the key competences proposed in the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR): the competences that must be developed in language education, belong to two groups: the general and the specific, which are defined in relation to the prior competences of “proficiency of linguistic skills” (Council of Europe, 2009). The CEFR gears the pedagogical process to an action-oriented approach where “tasks” are performed in a meaningful social context in order to develop communicative language competences within basic human competences (Council of Europe, 2009). An adaptation focused on each specific social context with selected contents provides meaningful tasks for the learners, taking into account the rights and the respect of their identities within a globalized society. Besides defining the features of the pedagogical approach and being a guideline, the curriculum must help provide answers to the student regarding the whole learning process including contents, objectives, aims, evaluations, etc.

The “Competence Curricular Model with a Human Rights Approach” has been designed to help

attain an integral educational development of the person through the learning the new language and its associated culture, so that he may interrelate with different human groups and can evolve and thrive in a globalized world in order to update his personal and professional knowledge. The students are considered as a central position constituting the main referent for the professor, and the following considerations are taken into account in the planning and scheduling of the classroom lessons:

a) Improving the learning process through five lexical, phonological, orthographical, sociolinguistical and pragmatical competencies of the English language, based on strategies developed to enhance and interact with the linguistic skills: oral and written comprehension, oral and written expression, and oral interaction (Council of Europe, 2009), to train the students in their specific context and reality.

b) The focus on human rights makes people aware of their responsibilities and rights, dealing with different themes in each unit such as: health, human relationships, ethics and values, environment, biodiversity, identity, pluriculturalism and an education for a peaceful culture.

c) The human being's four scopes -- conceptual, axiological, pragmatic and volitional (Table 1) -- sets the fundamental abilities to develop: creative mind, reflecting, researching and taking decisions respecting values, pointing to an integral and holistic formation, and improving the student's development in his four scopes:

Conceptual contents directly in relation with the knowledge people have regarding things, information, facts, concepts, principles, rules and theories.

Pragmatic contents related with how people execute actions, intellectual and creative abilities including skills, strategies and processes which imply a well-ordered sequence of acts or operations to reach an aim.

Axiological contents directly linked with values, norms, emotions, beliefs and behavior geared to maintain a social and personal balance.

Volitional contents linked with leadership, entrepreneurship, inventiveness, pro-activity, creativeness, etc.

The curriculum design method developed in recent decades by language educator Jack Richards (Richards, 2001) was taken into account to develop a scaffolded

learning process so that from needs analysis, the course aims, goals and objectives were determined before setting the general syllabus orientations. The design process followed the sequence recommend by Richards (2001): Course rationale, entry and exit, scope and sequence, planning the course structure and redaction.

When setting the meso and micro levels, the following considerations were taken into account:

- Purposes: Learning to develop communicative skills in English and foster students competences in a holistic way.
- Evaluation: How the learning process has been, is and will be fulfilled.
- Contents and strategies: They are in relation with the aims, goals and objectives taking into account individual differences, learning styles, multiple intelligences, affective filters, and interesting topics adapted to the learners' world.
- Sequences: Order and continuity between modules, units, chapters and levels were defined in a spiral progress where the new knowledge was included in the previous one once it was acquired, in order to be used as bases to built more competences.
- Didactic resources: They are the available resources used and well-

adapted to the learning process regarding the students' necessities.

The pragmatic competence evaluation gathered proficiency evidences like interactive dialogs, text productions, speeches. The cognitive evidences were collected through learning process and the axiological evaluation through rating scales and rubrics. The volitional competences were evaluated through advance reports of specific projects.

Many theories and methods have been promulgated about developing tests for language assessment; following are some examples used in the process:

- Applicative tests: demand that learners apply previously acquired knowledge, competences, skills, attitude and values.
- Creative tests: make evident the learner competences to invent and provide solutions according to given problems.
- Restitution tests: demand that learners remember and produce previously learnt information evaluating the memorization competence using grammatical, lexical, or phonetical exercises.
- Recognition tests: Demand that learners identify previous learnt information through visual and/or phonetic stimuli.

Table 1. The human being’s four scopes.

Intellectual	Pragmatical	Axiological
Linguistic competences: lexical, phonological, syntactical, ..., knowledge or skill and other language dimensions as a complex system linked with the knowledge extent or quality and also with the cognitive organization and the way they are stored,	Pragmatic competences: They refer to the functional use of linguistic resources and merge, on one hand, speech competences, on an other hand, functional competences regarding the knowledge of linguistic forms and their functions and also the way they interact ones with others.	Sociolinguistic competences: Sociocultural conditions of the language in use like the courtesy and civility norms, the imposed communication rules between generations, genders, classes and social groups; and the cultural dimensions inherent in the language.
Volitional		
Acting in the different pedagogical classroom projects and workshops taking into account the thematic axis: environment, identity, inter-cultural, labor insertion and professionalism		

Besides the evaluation process, the instructor promoted a holistic approach integrating learners in their context considering that the most efficient methodologies allow to reach the agreed objectives regarding the learner's needs and necessities within a social context and its effectiveness depends on the actors' motivation, on the quality of the resources both human and material that can be included in the process (Council of Europe, 2009). As responsible and independent users, the learners must actively involve themselves in the learning process to reach an autonomous learning and be

independent in a social group. The use of technology with an Internet connection helped the process development by enhancing the level of interactivity and motivating and improving the immersion level inside the target language environment.

Once the curriculum was designed and redacted, the data compiled before the curriculum application were stored to be compared with the results of the research and presented as a diagnostic to evaluate its impacts of the curriculum on the learning process.

This study's hypotheses, and the process to test them, were as follows:

General hypothesis: The creation and application of the curriculum to teach and evaluate the English language will permit the development of the student competences which are necessary and indispensable for language proficiency and required for graduation by the Universidad Estatal Amazónica.

Specific hypotheses:

- a). The syllabus framework and the didactic materials fulfill the legal requirements of the UEA for its students' English language proficiency
- b). The selected approach will enable the students at the UEA to acquire the necessary and indispensable competences in language proficiency.
- c). The available resources will help to improve the students' acquisition of the necessary and indispensable competences to the language proficiency.

In this study the English language curriculum at the UEA represented the independent variable and the learning process the dependent variable divided in three categories: "level", "linguistic competences", and "didactic resources". The learners' level

was considered regarding the diagnostic, formative and summative evaluation according to the following percentages:

- a). Formative (30%): The level of accomplishment of the specific objectives of the learning process through the assessment of the student's work regarding his or her self-preparation, oral and written production, attitude, involvement and engagement in group projects, etc.
- b). Summative (30%): The level of accomplishment of the specific performance objective of each didactic unit through a mid-course evaluation and the student's participation in the Virtual Classroom.
- c). Final exam (40%): The level of accomplishment of aims and objectives of the curriculum through oral and written productions such as tests, expositions or works in real professional context.

The learners' competences were considered regarding their response to stimuli that asked them to use their linguistic competences, the didactic resources were considered regarding the students' opinion expressed through a "rubric" as established in Table 2 based on standard criteria and markers (Hamers, 2004).

Table 2. Variable characterization.

Variables	Concept	Categories	Markers	Techniques
Curriculum	Learning program and courses offered to the students	Pedagogic lineaments of the learning process	Learning process	Testing the dependent variables
Learning process	Acquisition process of the knowledge defined as competences, skills and needed learning	Levels	- A2.1 - A2.2 - B1.a.1 - B1.a.2 - B1.b.1 - B1.b.2	Tests
		Linguistic Competences	Excellent proficiency, good proficiency, has to be deepened, to develop	Rubrics
		Didactic Resources	Relevance, Reflective thinking, Interactivity, Tutor support, Peer support, Interpretation	Survey

Implications of the English curriculum model with a human rights approach

In order to test the general hypothesis, the null hypothesis (Ho) and the alternative hypothesis (Ha) were defined as follows:

Ho, the null hypothesis is true if the design and application of the curriculum to teach and evaluate the English language does not facilitate the development of the UEA student's necessary and indispensable competences attain English language proficiency.

Ha, the alternative hypothesis is true if the design and application of the

curriculum to teach and evaluate the English language does facilitate the development of the UEA student's necessary and indispensable competences attain English language proficiency.

To establish the null or the alternative hypothesis, a Boolean vector was defined:

a.) Considering the vector $\theta = (\theta_1, \theta_2, \theta_3)$ with θ_i defined as the categories of the specific hypothesis, $\theta_1 = \text{"level"}$, $\theta_2 = \text{"Linguistic Competences"}$, $\theta_3 = \text{"Didactic Resources"}$;

b). Considering the Boolean function $B [\theta_i = x]$; $x \in \{0;1\}$ with Ho true if $B [\theta_i = 0]$ and Ha true if $B [\theta_i = 1]$;

d). If the result does not verify one of these equations, there is not sufficient evidence to reject or accept either H_0 or H_a .

The analysis was carried out over the total population of the UEA students who studied English. Since the analysis involved the total population and not a sample, the results followed a descriptive statistical model where all the levels were represented in an equal distribution within the population. During the application of

the curriculum an improvement of 17,6% the students who completed the program was observed. They could control their own learning process and clearly refer to their objectives which rose their motivation and made them more self-confident.

The results of each tested category were considered to measure the impact on the learning process: the acquired level, the acquired linguistic competences, and the didactic resources (Figure 1).

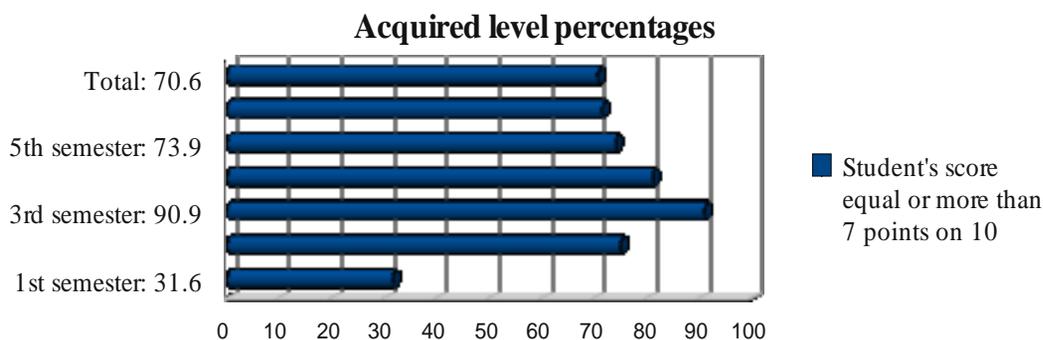


Figure 1. The levels of competence in the English language obtained by UEA students. A score of 7 points out of 10 is the minimum required level to pass the English competence exam.

In the case of the first semester students, 31,6% of the learners reached the required level. A deeper analysis based on previous knowledge reveals that 58% of the learners came from rural high schools where they had very limited contact with English language instruction and with multimedia tools, therefore their adaptation time took longer than was observed with the

other levels. In all the other five semesters, more than 70% of the learners have acquired the required level and, and overall, 70.6% of the entire student population have acquired the required level; therefore the first category of the vector θ can be considered as true.

At total of 68,3% of the linguistic competences were reached

with a better score for sociolinguistic, pragmatic and lexical competences (Figures 2 and 3). Regarding the necessary 70% set to consider the category “true”, the obtained result

68,3% stages the category “false”. The learner population did not obtain the linguistic competences at an acceptable rate.

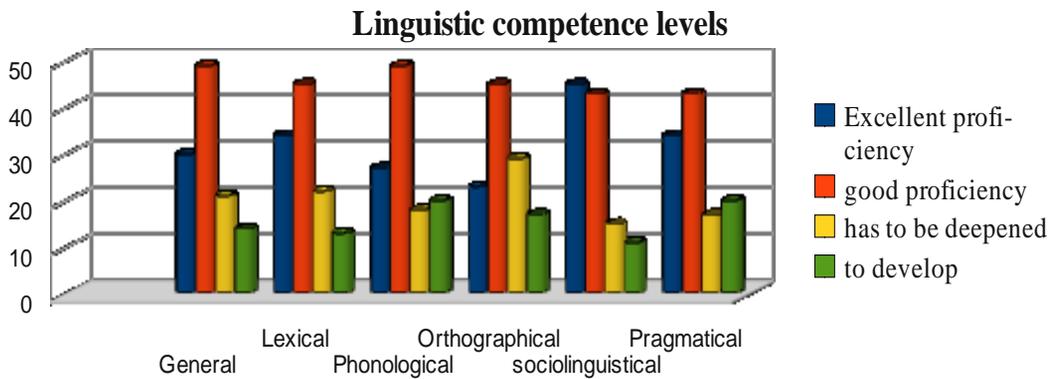


Figure 2. Detail of the 6 linguistic competence percentage reached by the UEA students.

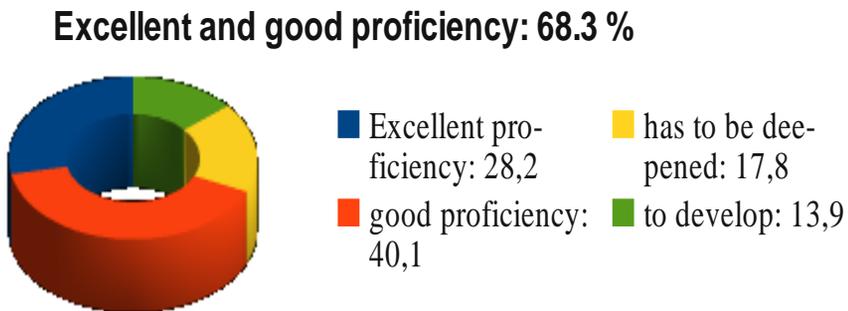


Figure 3. Percentage of excellent and good proficiency reached by the UEA students.

The learners expressed their opinion of the curriculum through two surveys, one at the midterm and the other at the end of the semester (Table 3). The midterm survey had a 60,2% favorable learners' opinion. The students suggested improvements through strategies such as a specific course on the didactic resources used in

order to make the multi-media contents more attractive and accessible for the students. The second survey results show a 71,8% favorable learners' opinion. The improvement in students' opinions was a result of the strategies that were applied, and with this result, the last category of the vector θ is true.

Table 3. Survey comparison.

%	Relevance	Reflective	Interactivity	Tutor support	Peer support	Interpretation	Average
First survey	78	63	44	72	42	62	60,2
Second survey	86	75	63	85	49	73	71,8

The Boolean vector $\theta = (\theta_1, \theta_2, \theta_3)$ presented the following value $\theta = (1,0,1)$ so neither H_0 nor H_a could be considered as true or false and it was necessary to conclude that it did not exist sufficient evidence to reject or accept either H_0 or H_a .

Conclusions

Although the difference between the two semesters in term of numbers of student who had completed their level is of 17,6% which confirms an improvement in the learning process, the results imply a deeper investigation over a longer period (six semesters). A redesign of part of the curriculum program is being carried out in order to determine if the creation and application of the English curriculum model based on human right approach will facilitate the development of the UEA student competences which are necessary and indispensable for the language proficiency.

It is important to ensure the students have the necessary previous knowledge to succeed in the curriculum program as they do not have the time to fill the gaps in their knowledge while they are obtaining new knowledge and competence in English. Therefore it is necessary to apply a placement test in order to diagnose the learner's previous knowledge and, if necessary, have the learner take a preliminary levelling course before entering the curriculum program. In cases where the students must obtain competence in the use of computers while they are gaining linguistic competence, the program could result in failure. The students must be well acquainted with the didactic resources through a levelling course before joining the curriculum of the English language program.

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