

## **An Analysis of the Teaching Methodology Used for the Teaching of English in a Costa Rican Secondary School in the Early 2000s**

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**Abstract:** *The present analysis is focused on the author's experience as a student in the early 2000s in a Costa Rican Secondary School. A practice and evaluation analysis is developed in terms of the implementation in the class and the proposed methodology by educational authorities in the country. Discrepancies between the curriculum design and the practice are presented. As well, weaknesses on the curricular design are discussed.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The analysis took place from the events on a Public Costa Rican Secondary School in the early 2000s. All of the students were native speakers of Spanish between the ages of 12 and 17. Secondary school in Costa Rica means studying five years to later on continue with the university level. Classes were two hours of English every week -which was definitely not enough time-. The number of learners per class were around 25 to 30 students. The school year in Costa Rica consisted of three periods of about three months each. The school year started in February and even though it was supposed to officially end by mid-December, students already had their yearly results by the third week of November. Every period had two exams: one progress test and one achievement test which carried the most important weight in the final mark of the period. The only technological devices available for teachers were recorders where they would hardly ever play an audio from a book or a song.

English teachers in Costa Rica have always been recruited by taking the following aspects into account: degrees, experience, and additional courses. In the year 2008 MEP released the results English tenured-teachers achieved in the standardized test TOEIC -not for recruiting aspects but to know the current state of their language skills- and the results were shocking. 38% of teachers were basic users of English (A1 and A2), 49% were independent users (B1 and B2) and a shy 14% were proficient users (C1). A general characteristic of Secondary English Classes in Costa Rica was the focus on Spanish probably due to the lack of proficiency on the teachers behave. There were very rare occasions where the teacher would speak the target language rather than the L1. It is extremely relevant to understand the context not only between the years 2001 and 2005 but still today of Costa Rica as a developing country. The teaching of English has advanced a lot; however, there is still a lot of room for improvement. During the years to be analysed the teaching of English was far from being considered important to the population. As a result, Barahona, Acuñaand Ceciliano (2010) in *El Estado de La Nación* (The State of Current Affairs) reported that only 10% of the population older than 10 years old were dominant in the English language and that only 1.1% were dominant in another language. Speaking English was considered a luxury rather than a necessity at that moment.

### **II. Analysis**

The focus of this analysis juxtaposes the tenets teachers had at that moment by authorities, theory and my viewpoint of reality as a student.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), a method has certain elements and sub-elements to consider: approach, design and procedure. The emphasis will be on the latter two under the communicative approach which was mentioned as the theoretical basis. In terms of design, the English Syllabus (1996) developed by the Ministry of Public Education (MEP -due to its acronym in Spanish) states that there were two basic needs at that moment: "1. to offer students a second language which will allow them to communicate with people from other countries both in Costa Rica and abroad. 2. to give students a tool for direct access to scientific, technological and humanistic knowledge" (MEP, 1996, p.3). The English Syllabus (1996) indicates that the object of study is written and oral communication with a major focus on the four skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. In this case the objectives were accurate since as indicated by Richards and Rodgers (2014) an objective in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can be related to either general language goals or to specific needs by the learners. In this case the two main objectives match a necessity the population had at that specific moment. Nonetheless, the object of study in reality was not either written and

oral communication but reading comprehension. Furthermore, in classes the skills of listening and speaking were hardly ever practiced.

In terms of the teacher in the class, the English Syllabus (1996) mentions that the teacher was in charge of the organization and guidance of the learning situation by taking into account the background and learning style of the students as well as the curriculum and cultural context. Furthermore, the methodological approach mentioned that its basis was the communicative approach; however, they do not mention any other method to consider. The role of the teacher is not very clear since what the syllabus states differs a lot from theoretical CLT references.

One of the characteristics mentioned about the teacher is the role of facilitator. Nonetheless, Richards and Rodgers (2014) mentioned that the role is of a facilitator of a communicative process. In the analysed context, teachers took the role of facilitator as just handing out materials and indicating what exercises had to be done. They were not facilitators at all. Another characteristic mentioned is that the teacher is not the centre of the process; however, when the class consists of mostly reading comprehension exercises and grammatical exercises without a context provided, the difference between not being the centre of the class -acting independently- and being absent must be acknowledged. Littlewood stated: "While such independent activity is in progress, he may act as consultant or adviser, helping where necessary" (Littlewood, 1982, p.92). Teachers never really had the role of facilitators, consultant or advisors rather than selecting material and stamping their signature once the student had finished the assignments for the class. In-class workload was measured by the amount of assignments a student had finished during the term.

The roles of the learner in the syllabus were difficult to fulfil as being active, participative and creative in a setting where the target language was hardly used was quite difficult. Nonetheless, in a truthful communicative class the role of cooperative with peers, negotiator of meaning and active participant would be more accurate (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). In addition, developing full potential and building on interest was quite difficult in a classroom that followed no structure -which is difficult to place under a methodology-.

In the case of materials, textbooks were not permitted in this secondary school, but teachers could ask for photocopies of textbook parts or handouts they provided. Most materials were grammatical exercises with no context whatsoever and reading comprehension exercises the teacher would assemble from different textbooks. Nunan (1998) highlighted the relevance of not presenting students with isolated grammar sentences. Tasks that allow learners to relate grammar and context help students understand variety and appropriacy. In addition, the syllabus indicated that materials had to be motivating and interesting and a vast majority were not. Nonetheless, *The Tico Times* -a Costa Rican newspaper in the target language- was very appealing at that moment; therefore, teachers would frequently use articles from this newspaper in class. Swan indicated on authentic materials: "Many teachers nowadays feel, in a vague kind of way, that there is something basically unsatisfactory, or even wrong, about using scripted dialogues or specially written teaching texts" (Swan, 1985, p.84). The use of realia-based materials can support communicative exercises (Richards and Rodgers, 2014).

The discussion on learning strategies will enlighten more how classes truly were -worrysome-. There was not a clear structure in any of the five years of English classes in secondary school. The previous references to the syllabus were necessary since there is not a method that would fit this experience. As a consequence, a typical class did not have a warm-up, pre-task, or even a clear main task. It was also impossible -except for one assignment- to identify a weak form of CLT as a proper presentation and production stages were lacking (Littlewood, 1982; Nunan, 1988). The class would usually start with a greeting, followed by Spanish instructions on what copies had to be ready for that session at the end of the class. Students would work individually and would do small self-chosen pair work just to negotiate meaning in their L1 for some of the exercises. The teacher would sometimes explain the grammatical structure of the tense in study but would never go as further as to explain the different uses and contexts. The part of the class that used the target language was when the whole class checked the answers for the day's work. In addition, speaking activities had no role inside these classes as activities such as opinion-sharing, information transfer, reasoning gap, role plays were non-existent (Richards and Rodgers, 2014).

Regarding an oral presentation which had to be prepared once every term for a weight in the final mark, a 'weak form' of CLT was present (Littlewood, 1982; Nunan, 1988). For the presentation section, the teacher handed out a topic to present -which was contextualized-. Most topics were related to Costa Rica and to the different topics of the syllabus like athletes, recipes, national parks, among others. The teacher would explain the structure needed in this oral presentation -in Spanish-. Next, the teacher allowed two hours in the following class for students to prepare a visual aid and practice their oral presentation. Not the best activity for the practice section. Lastly, students would present in front of the class their topic which is considered the production section. Reading was not allowed but a vast majority did. As part of the mark of the oral presentation, students had to bring an activity or game about the topic for the class.

### III. Evaluation of Practice

Even though no clear methodology was present in any of the classes, educational authorities as expressed in the syllabus design promote CLT as their methodology. David Nunan stated: "... the importance of conducting classroom-based research to determine the extent to which theory is realized through classroom practice" (Nunan, 1987, p.144). In this case neither the theory nor the practice was true to CLT. This section will evaluate the strengths found in these classes and the weaknesses.

It is difficult to highlight strengths found in the class itself other than autonomy by the students through almost self-taught basic grammar and reading comprehension. Reading strategies as skimming and scanning would have been useful if implemented by the teacher (Carrell, P. and Grabe, W. in Schmitt, 2010). A role of a more active teacher despite methodological deficiencies would have changed the tone of the class and a lot of students would not have felt frustrated with the use of the target language. Currently, as a trained teacher I would never have any of the classes I was a recipient of in secondary school -in theory and in practice-.

I mention that in theory, since the differences between the theoretical underpinnings of CLT compared to the English Syllabus are alarming. The following table will include information both from MEP's English Syllabus (1996) and Richards and Rodgers (2014) where characteristics about the communicative approach will be compared and contrasted -despite the publishing year differential between one and another-:

**Table 1.** Comparison of Characteristics regarding the Communicative Approach

	MEP's English Syllabus (1996)	Richards and Rodgers (2014)
Teacher	Facilitator, guide. Participates in process with learners. Not the centre of the process. Gains skills and takes responsibility from planners, writers, linguistics. Shows expert role.	Facilitator of the communicative process. Independent participant within the group. Researcher and learner. Needs analyst. Counselor. Group process manager.
Learner	Central, active, creative, participative. Responsible for his/her own learning. Confident, motivated. Develops full potential and builds on interests. Individual/collective roles.	Negotiator. Active participation. Cooperative.
Materials	Authentic. Related to learner's needs, interests and culture. Flexible. Motivating and interesting.	Text-based materials. Task-based materials. Realia-based materials. Technology-supported materials.
Learning Strategies	Memory, inference, imagery, practice, guessing, asking questions, encouraging yourself, lowering your anxiety.	Jig-saw, task-completion activities, opinion-sharing, information transfer, reasoning gap, role plays. Fluency and accuracy activities.

Information taken from the English Syllabus (1996) and Richards and Rodgers (2014).

As shown in Table 1, one of the weaknesses was the theoretical background of the syllabus. Another weakness was the teacher's lack of teaching strategies; as an example, not having a pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activity. In addition, the use of the four English skills was basically reduced to reading since hardly ever listening and speaking were practiced in class.

From my own perspective, a CLT mixed with a Task-based approach would have provided better results with proper teacher training beforehand. Some strengths of these two methods rely on integrating skills (a problem previously mentioned), active communication (even negotiating meaning), and learner-centered (Littlewood, 1982; Nunan, 1988; Richards and Rodgers, 2014). Even though grammatical structures are sacrificed somehow in these two methodologies in the promotion of communication and fluency, I still believe a mixed CLT and task-based methodology is appropriate for the aims Costa Ricans have (Canale and Swain, 1980).

As a conclusion, building on my own experience was difficult to relate since the teaching of English was and is still currently archaic and lacking theoretical background in Costa Rica. Teachers have improved their knowledge on teaching methodology; nonetheless, teacher training is necessary and a control over the quality of preparation English teachers are undergoing at universities.

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