

Analysis of the effectiveness of the Action Oriented Approach in the New English Program proposed by the Ministry of Public Education in the year 2018

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ABSTRACT

The use and understanding of the English language, more than an option, is a necessity. Developing a good proficiency in the English Language is needed since communication is a basic need to express any point of view, to build relationships, to understand ideas, and to convey messages using the language as a means for interaction. English is considered a Lingua Franca, which means that it is the language used for common understanding of international communication. It is also the language for transmission of scientific and academic knowledge, and the main door to cutting- age technology. By giving students this opportunity to learn English opens doors that sooner than later will allow them to speak to other people worldwide. It is for this reason; this new English Program has incorporated the proficiency scale the TOEIC exam uses in order to level and grade students based upon the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR).

Thus, the view of integrating a globalized world is important, but learners must have to understand that maintaining their identity is key to be part of a global society. It is important to prepare students to be part of a society where respect and tolerance function as its basis. Educating students to be aware of their cultural belonging, who defend principles such as freedom of expression and being against of all forms of discrimination, reflect behaviors that allow Costa Ricans to be part of a globalized society.

Keywords: M.E.P, T.O.E.I.C, English curriculum, proficiency, approach

Análisis de la efectividad del Enfoque Orientado a la Acción en el Nuevo Programa de Inglés propuesto por el Ministerio de Educación Pública en el año 2018

RESUMEN

El uso y la comprensión de la lengua inglesa, más que una opción, es una necesidad. Desarrollar un buen dominio de la lengua inglesa es necesario ya que la comunicación es una necesidad básica para expresar cualquier punto de vista, para construir relaciones, para comprender ideas y para transmitir mensajes utilizando el idioma como medio de interacción. El inglés se considera una Lingua Franca, lo que significa que es la lengua utilizada para el entendimiento común de la comunicación internacional. También es la lengua de transmisión del conocimiento científico y académico, y la principal puerta de entrada a la tecnología de vanguardia. Dar a los estudiantes esta oportunidad de aprender inglés les abre las puertas que más pronto que tarde les permitirán hablar con otras personas en todo el mundo. Es por ello que este nuevo Programa de Inglés ha incorporado la escala de competencia que utiliza el examen TOEIC para nivelar y calificar a los alumnos en base al Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las lenguas (MCER).

Así pues, la visión de integrar un mundo globalizado es importante, pero los alumnos deben entender que mantener su identidad es clave para formar parte de una sociedad global. Es importante preparar a los alumnos para que formen parte de una sociedad en la que el respeto y la tolerancia sean su base. Educar a los estudiantes para que sean conscientes de su pertenencia cultural, que defiendan principios como la libertad de expresión y que estén en contra de toda forma de discriminación, reflejan comportamientos que permiten a los costarricenses formar parte de una sociedad globalizada.

Palabras Clave: M.E.P, T.O.E.I.C, Plan de estudios de inglés, competencia, enfoque.

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INTRODUCTION

Within this research, it was intended to explain the reasoning behind curricular changes that had been made by M.E.P into the curriculum of English of the high school program, and the information of the high school institutions where the examination took place. It also explained how the research was conducted with one of the English Region Advisors who is part of the “Comisión Ampliada de Tercer Ciclo y Educación Diversificada”, who participated in the writing of the M.E.P.’s New English Program, the Northern San José English Region Advisor, and the high school English teachers at the Northern San José Region. It is necessary for teachers to keep themselves updated with new information, so that they make use of knowledge in different scenarios depending on the situation that every professional is going to face. Since there has been a proposal of changing the English program in the year 2016, educators must be ready to be trained with the new methodology’s principles and foundations to be applied satisfactorily.

With this new program, the M.E.P. is willing to innovate the English Public Education of Costa Rica, aiming to make students become bilingual. This new program possesses the characteristic of being a learner centered one. This means that the main idea is to give students the opportunity to make use of the language, through purposeful actions and not only accumulate knowledge from it. The main objective of the M.E.P.’s new program, according to the Common European Framework’s descriptors, is to make an improvement in the English Education. The result that the M.E.P. pursues is to upskill students, so that they become proficient enough to reach a minimum of an A2 level as an exit requirement for primary school. Then, after 5 or 6 years of study, high school learners should be able to get a B1 or a B2 level. This, with the aim of letting students do the TOEIC- Bridge test, so that students can obtain a diploma for their English Skills at the end of their academic progress.

Having mentioned what the main reasons were for this research, it began by establishing the problematization question which was *How English acquisition can be more effective due to the usage and implementation of the Action Oriented Approach on the process of teaching, in Public High School institutions of Northern San José Educative Region Bureau?* In addition, it was aimed to prove the effectiveness of the Action Oriented Approach in the New English Programs proposed by the Ministry of Public Education to be used in public high school institutions of the Northern San José Educative Region

Bureau as well the immersion of define the Action Oriented Approach as part of the New English Programs, the evaluation of the lesson plan model promoted by the Action Oriented Approach in the New English Programs, the examination of the most relevant and general mediation principles suggested by the Action Oriented Approach in the New English Programs and the description of the general assessment principles suggested by the Action Oriented Approach in the New English Programs.

Literature Review

By having explained and deepened the main purpose of the research, within the theoretical framework is intended to add a brief description of the high school institutions where the research was conducted, in order to obtain the information from teachers. All these institutions belong to the Northern San José Educative Region Bureau and in all of them, the New English Program is being put into practice since the year 2017. The information this study includes is a brief description of their history, their mission, vision, and some other details that can help readers understand the context where the researcher went to.

The Northern San José Region Office does not have a historical back- up of how, why, and under what conditions the office was made; nonetheless, its vision “*Consolidar durante los próximos cinco años, a la Dirección Regional de Educación de San José Norte, como modelo de excelencia en la gestión educativa y administrativa, a partir del enfoque del mejoramiento continuo en todos sus servicios (Northern San José Educative Region Bureau, 2018).*”; and its mission “*Somos una organización gubernamental responsable de implementar la política educativa vigente, mediante la prestación de servicios de calidad en procura del integral de la comunidad educativa (Northern San José Educative Region Bureau, 2018)*”; were clearly stated as well the schools that were visited in order to perform the research.

In order to run the research, several schools needed to be visited as it is shown in charts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6:

Chart #1: Circuit 01 Guadalupe

High School	Provincia	Cantón	Distrito
Liceo Napoleón Quesada	San José	Goicoechea	Guadalupe
Liceo Nocturno José J. Jiménez	San José	Goicoechea	Guadalupe

Source: Cadenas (2018)

Chart #2: Circuit 02 Guadalupe

High School	Provincia	Cantón	Distrito
Liceo Virgen de la Medalla Milagrosa	San José	Goicoechea	Vista de Mar
Liceo Salvador Umaña	San José	Goicoechea	Ipís

Source: Cadenas (2018)

Chart #3: Circuit 03 Montes de Oca

High School	Provincia	Cantón	Distrito
Liceo de Cedros	San José	Montes de Oca	Sabanilla
Liceo Vargas Calvo	San José	Montes de Oca	San Pedro
CINDEA Montes de Oca	San José	Montes de Oca	San Pedro

Source: Cadenas (2018)

Chart #4: Circuit 04 Tibás

High School	Provincia	Cantón	Distrito
Liceo Mauro Fernández	San José	Tibás	San Juan de Tibás
UP José Rafael Araya	San José	Tibás	La Florida de Tibás
Liceo Nocturno Braulio Carrillo	San José	Tibás	San Juan de Tibás

Source: Cadenas (2018)

Chart #5: Circuit 05 Moravia

High School	Provincia	Cantón	Distrito
CTP Abelardo Bonilla	San José	Moravia	Paracito
Liceo Hernán Zamora	San José	Vásquez de Coronado	Dulce Nombre
Liceo de Moravia	San José	Moravia	San Vicente de Moravia
Liceo Experimental Bilingüe La Trinidad de Moravia	San José	Moravia	La Trinidad de Moravia

Source: Cadenas (2018)

Chart #6:Circuit 06 Coronado

High School	Provincia	Cantón	Distrito
Liceo San Antonio de Coronado	San José	Vásquez de Coronado	Patalillo
Liceo de Coronado	San José	Vásquez de Coronado	San Isidro

Source: Cadenas (2018)

Once it was stated the places where the research was going to be conducted, the theoretical context was given by providing concepts that were required to develop not only the objectives, but also the basis onto the wanted-to-be-proved objectives were based upon. Based on the Common European Framework (CEFR), the Action Oriented Approach focuses on allowing learners to use the English language to build their own knowledge through real life experiences. Teachers foster activities that allow students to recreate language/learning scenarios. In these scenarios, social actions of everyday life take place in order to develop real- world connections, integrating tasks as instruments for learning. This New Syllabus supports the vision of using English for real life situations with a meaningful purpose. The CEFR (2017) defined this approach as follows:

The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents,’ i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning. We speak of ‘tasks’ in so far as the actions are performed by one or more individuals strategically using their own specific competences to achieve a given result. The action-based approach therefore also takes into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent. (p.9)

Teachers’ goal in the Action Oriented Approach is to make students able to convey their messages using real language circumstances within a social context. By providing students with instruction, practice, and overall, opportunities to use the language, students

should get more comfortable with these opportunities to produce their own thoughts as classes go by. During this process, teachers coach students and encourage them to become part of the development of the class. Educators' function in the class as facilitators of knowledge, looking forward to creating unrehearsed language communications. As this approach suggests, students learn best from active uses of language, and they benefit mostly from activities that provide meaningful communication.

In order to use this approach and let facilitators, readers, and other students understand this deeper, the M.E.P. has given a set of principles that the Action Oriented Approach must apply to create effective language lessons.

As it was previously stated, the M.E.P established the set of principles that the applied approach needed to have in order to be implemented within the given syllabus:

- 1. The students are social agents that use the target language to perform specific actions in real life contexts meaningfully.*
- 2. Language performances, in oral or written form, respond to language functions and are carried out in specific scenarios.*
- 3. Enabling and communicative activities are task-based and real-life.*
- 4. Learners use authentic materials as comprehensible input, as much as possible.*
- 5. The (ICT) become an important tool to create meaningful learning experiences.*
- 6. A great degree of autonomy is placed on the learner; therefore, the teacher works in the development of learners' meta-cognitive, meta-affective, and meta-social strategies.*
- 7. Intercultural awareness plays an important role for getting meaning across and facilitating communication among cultures.*
- 8. Vocabulary, syntax, cohesive forms, and phonology are taught with the purpose of facilitating communication.*

Basically, the Action Oriented Approach focuses on the recreation of real-life activities, or situations that allow learners to simulate the social actions of everyday life, in concordance with the role of the tasks. Using tasks as a means for class development is an important part for this English Teaching approach. Through this, teachers execute the aims that the English Syllabus establish. Tasks in the Action Oriented Approach aim to

connect students to real life scenarios where skills and abilities must be put in practice. This new approach looks forward to switching the traditional ideas of learning and teaching in classes.

In addition to roles, there is another important concept that deeply deals with the approach that is being studied: competences. This New English Program has a division of two groups of competences. These are General and Specific competences. For the Action Oriented Approach, all competences are in the same level of importance. Previous approaches put the linguistic competence as the most important one. For instance, the Communicative Approach establishes the emphasis on language functions and two of its principles take into consideration the use of grammar and vocabulary, while using the target language as a means for communication.

In contrast, the MEP's new English Syllabus considers the development of General and Specific competences as a never-ending task for education. Integrating the development of Specific competences at the same time as General competences, is an idea that this syllabus establishes in order to maintain a certain balance throughout the learning cycle, between what can happen in class and real-life contexts.

Actions must be meaningful and must promote social exchanges among students. For this reason, integrating student's general competences in classes is important to enhance specific ones, leading to the completion of goals in the study program.

Several other aspects must be considered as a result of the application of the Action-oriented Approach. The integration of technology also deals with this approach because technology is used as a resource for humans in communication. Some reasons for its importance are trading, commerce, business, entertainment, news reports, and it has been implemented to educational purposes as well.

In the Action-oriented approach, the teacher's role key for the development of this methodology. They are the representation of the "final product" that students must achieve. Students' vision of educators should be as role-models, who support their improvement in class. For that reason, facilitators must be a positive influence in the English environment. They must realize that their performance in the target language leads students' skill demonstrations too; hence, performing the "expert role" in the class is important for the students' further development. On the other hand, the learner's role is seen as the autonomous social agents that develop objectives cooperatively. To do this,

students need to use all the linguistic competences that they have at their disposal (and learn them if they have not done so), in order to think and make appropriate choices that can help them get to a conflict resolution (Piccardo, 2014). They are the ones in charge of performing actions, activities, assessments, and should perform better and better through authentic usage of the language, as the learning period goes by.

For the objective success of this applied approach, the M.E.P. includes the sample lesson plans in this New English Program and in the Teacher's Guide also. Based on Farrell (2002) "*Lesson plans are systematic records of a teacher's thoughts about what will be covered during a lesson*". It is important for teachers to establish a lesson plan before going to teach in classes. Using a lesson plan provides structure to lessons and help facilitators in their time management. In addition, keeping these written "records" make evaluators feel more confident with their actions because planning offers control and exact cues for further follow up of contents, and the corresponding application of meaningful activities that will provide the learners, a great environment to acquire the knowledge, by implementing the corresponding mediation principles and mediation strategies when teaching the English lessons. For instance, it is extremely necessary to consider several strategies to strengthen the linguistic competencies:

- a) The M.E.P.'s Program suggests to providing students with listening opportunities and to implement texts as a tangible instrument to reinforce the usage of this skill. At the beginning it suggests to using conversations, interviews, and short messages. Once students have become more proficient, then they can go further and incorporate films, reports, TV shows, documentaries, and many more.
- b) This program suggests implementing several reading techniques so that students can perform better. These are: perceptive, selective, interactive, and extensive reading. In addition, in the reading skill is where the "Phonemic Awareness Development" starts to be introduced, so that students develop the ability to interpret and recognize the sound of words.
- c) For the speaking Production, the M.E.P.'s Program (2016) describes that it is "the production of an oral text received by an audience of one or more listeners" In High School, oral performances are more complex and look forward to putting students in scenarios where they have to use the language as they would in real life. Some suggestions that the Syllabus gives to teachers, in order to engage students in the

activation of the speaking skill are: through personal exchanges, role- plays, interviews, talk shows, and more.

- d) The M.E.P.'s New English Syllabus suggests to all of the levels to first start with Phonemic Awareness, before allowing students to produce their own written messages. Then, it proposes to spend some time in the "pre- writing phase", where teachers show how to execute the writing techniques through modelling, drilling, writing exercises, and do writing activities with the students.

As it was clearly stated, the Action-oriented approach deals and integrates the four skills English in order to master the real acquisition of the target language, through meaningful mediation and activities, that will lead students' mastering the language in an objective manner and closely to another variable that must be taken into account: the assessment. Assessing students permit optimum corrections before learners get to a real-life context and help them in terms of not making the same mistakes repetitively. When facilitators detect this "learning gaps", upskilling students with guidance and support is not difficult, because "learning gaps" can be understood as "personal learning objectives" where students must work on. Somehow, this feeds the vision of growth that the syllabus is promoting. The New English Program (2016), states that: "Assessment refers to all the strategies used to collect information on a learner's knowledge, skills, and abilities, usually at the classroom level".

For the Action Oriented Approach, assessments are open- ended, which means that its purpose goes beyond the classroom context and can be retaken further in the unit. Assessment looks forward to creating scenarios, situations for social exchanges where general, and specific competences can be put into practice, so students can learn and make reflection.

This is the setting the Action Oriented Teaching is promoting. Considering learners interests, needs, and help teachers to provide opportunities where students work cooperatively (maybe in pairs, small or bigger groups). For this reason, including instruments where students can work all these points, represent a great advance in the English Teaching; because more stimulating contexts create atmospheres where students can develop themselves better.

In addition to that, the three types of assessment that must be considered in the classroom are:

- a) **Diagnostic Assessment:** This one is an observation of the actual condition of students. Through this, teachers determine which are weaknesses and strengths that students have before the learning course continues. In this way, facilitators avoid drawbacks that could affect their students' learning process. "It identifies the starting line to develop the competency. It also identifies students' needs and areas of intervention".
- b) **Formative Assessment.** Students' formative process consist of monitoring students through the learning process. For this, there are instruments that educators can apply (such as quizzes) to check what areas are students struggling with that can determine further instruction. Moreover, this also allow students to self- monitor themselves, making them aware of their weak areas in the process. "It also evaluates students in progress of "forming" their competences and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth process".
- c) **Summative Assessment.** Regularly, summative processes are held when units, or study topics are already taught. Teachers apply this kind of evaluation instruments to assess students' understanding of goals in terms of scores. (Numbered data). "It evaluates student learning at the end of an instructional unit by comparing it against a standard of benchmark".

Having applied those manners of assessing students' performance, M.E.P also considers including assessment by competences, which, basically, means to reflect students' actions within the classroom through tasks resolution, critical thinking, and cooperation among learners. The Action Oriented Approach suggests educators to grow autonomy in pupils, but it is important to understand that this requires teachers' monitoring of learners' performances and practice.

The theoretical antecedents provide a general overview on how the Action-oriented approach can be implemented into the new manner of teaching classes, and make the educational processes being more meaningful to students.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Within this chapter, it is intended to present the information based on theory and field observations done, to experience the reality of a situation where the researcher has no control on it. This project explains the type of research chosen which is going to lead to the data gathering, and it also contains the purpose of the research. In the same way, this study explains the time delimitation it has, the reasons of choosing a specific scope of the

research, the nature of the research, the subjects and sources of information, and the variables that appear in the project as a product of the specific objectives.

It can be stated that the purpose of this study is to describe the new teaching approach that the Ministry of Public Education (M.E.P.), is starting to implement in the Public Educational System, and determine if what the English Syllabus establishes is truly happening in the Northern San José region. For this reason, explaining its elements and methodological phases, lead to the theoretical understanding of the approach and what to expect from it.

Thus, the delimitation of the project that this thesis project has is a “Cross- sectional” one. The reason of choosing this type of delimitation is because “a cross- sectional study is one that produces a ‘snapshot’ of a population at a particular point in time”, whereas the scope is to study the new English Teaching approach that all the Educative Regions in Costa Rica apply, but in a single region (the Northern San José Region) of the Ministry of Public Education. In addition to that, the nature of this research corresponds to be quantitative, because the information this study gathers is quantifiable and descriptive. The subjects and sources of information, it can be said that these are all the participants, places, documents, and materials where the information is retrieved from. These elements are needed to give solid references to the research and are used for the construction of the Theoretical Framework, the Methodological Framework, and for the instruments of evaluation. These are going to provide data for the project and the analysis of results. Once there were a selected population and a selected sample, the techniques and instruments that were used to run the study are the next ones:

- a) The survey.
- b) Questionnaire

Furthermore, the instruments would serve as the based for establishing the operationalization of variables, which, in this research, were conceptual definition, operational definition and instrumental definition.

RESULTS PRESENTATION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Once the information is gathered through the use and application of the technique and instrument, it is necessary to demonstrate results that the researcher obtained from the participants of the sample. This is what gives importance to this section of the study. Describing the data, interpreting the results, and explaining them serve as the basis for providing recommendations and conclusions:

- Regarding to the problem formulation of this thesis project, this conclusion states that through task development, conflict resolution situations, and cooperative work, the M.E.P. proposes to make the English language acquisition more effective and envisions to make different type of learners, who are more conscious of the role they play in society, using authentic materials in order to make use of the English language authentically.
- It is concluded that the Action Oriented Approach is not effective to be used as the New English Program of the Ministry of Public Education. This due to the results obtained from the application of the instrument of data gathering, showing that after two years of working under the Action Oriented Approach, English teachers are not performing their actions in the way they are supposed to be doing them.
- In regards of the specific objectives, it is concluded that advisors and teachers know what the Action Oriented Approach is; nonetheless, English educators do not have a clear definition of it, but they do not know it completely.
- In order to improve educators' proficiency while working with the Action Oriented Approach, it is recommended to the Ministry of Public Education to allow English Region Advisors to deliver a workshop for facilitators at the end of each trimester, to reinforce tutors' skills and solve doubts, because only one training session per year is not enough for facilitators.
- It is recommended to the Ministry of Public Education to check tasks' characteristics because results demonstrate that English Region Advisors and English teachers do not consider these characteristics have enough relevance for their construction.

As a general conclusion, it is clearly stated that mostly all the English teachers from the conducted research were clear on what the Action-oriented approach is yet the advisors; however, the way English has been taught over the years differ in the application of a very and well student-centered methodology where students themselves are their own

knowledge-builders in order to make their educational processes really meaningful in the short- and long-term time.

It can also be recommended to keep on spreading this new methodology to foster its implementation and to change the chip of having learning processes among the educational system in Costa Rica and make them be acquisition and meaningful processes for students who are expecting to get the necessary tools to develop themselves in real life contexts.

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