

A CURRICULAR PROPOSAL TO IMPLEMENT THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT THE “CENTRO INFANTIL LABORATORIO ERMELINDA MORA”, IN STUDENTS FROM 3 TO 5 YEARS OLD

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to describe a project to elaborate and implement an English curriculum for the teachers of third and fourth levels at the Centro Infantil Laboratorio Ermelinda Mora (CILEM) in San Ramón, Alajuela, Costa Rica. In order to determine the type of knowledge that could be expected to be learned during the early stages of approaching a foreign language, the researchers referred to the Multiple Intelligences and Audiolingual Methods, Learning Styles, Learning Strategies, and Listening and Speaking Skills. In addition, the type of research, methodology, data analysis, and conclusions are provided as a tool to guide the reader throughout the research.

Key Words: Curricular proposal, multiple intelligences method, audiolingual method, listening skills, speaking skills, learning styles, learning strategies, lesson plan, observation sheet.

RESUMEN

El propósito del presente artículo es describir un proyecto para elaborar e implementar un currículo de inglés para profesores que imparten tercero y cuarto nivel en el Centro Infantil Laboratorio Ermelinda Mora (CILEM) en San Ramón, Alajuela, Costa Rica. Con el propósito de determinar el tipo de conocimiento que se espera pueda ser absorbido durante las primeras etapas de acercamiento a un idioma extranjero, las investigadoras hacen referencia al Método de las Inteligencias Múltiples, al Método Audiolingual, a los Estilos de Aprendizaje, las Estrategias de Aprendizaje y las Destrezas de Habla y Escucha. Además, se incluye el tipo de investigación, metodología, análisis de la información y conclusiones con el propósito de guiar al lector durante la investigación.

Palabras claves: Propuesta curricular, método de las inteligencias múltiples, método audiolingual, destrezas de la escucha, destrezas del habla, estilos de aprendizaje, estrategias de aprendizaje, plan de lección, instrumento de evaluación.

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During the first step a child takes, learning a new language, adults usually tend to focus their interest on the capacity of kids to reproduce sounds and words, as well as to recognize basic elements or figures of the foreign language. Parents get involved in what their little kids are learning and how such a process of acquisition is developed. In many cases, the instruction of children is shared with teachers because they attend a daycare center, a kindergarten, or any other institution. That is why foreign language teachers at these institutions accept the responsibility of becoming a vital influence on the performance of the child in producing new words, the interest he or she may show later on, or the apathy towards the language that an inaccurate guidance on the subject may generate.

Educational centers are translated into institutions where students, teachers, and parents work together to achieve goals and successful learning methods. Consequently, there should always exist a well-structured program or curriculum, which would benefit all three parts as a result of an interactionable chain.

The Centro Infantil Laboratorio Ermelinda Mora, institution where this study was carried out, does not have an established and organized English curricular program that could take into account the students' educational, social, and economical needs which motivated the main objectives of this project to design and implement an English curricular proposal addressed to little kids.

In order to implement this curriculum at the CILEM, the researchers referred to different important theories in order to establish what kind of knowledge and skills were expected to be learned during the early stages of foreign language learning.

They carried out the investigation under the premises of two teaching-learning methods, the Multiple Intelligence and the Audio-lingual, that consider listening and speaking skills essential during the acquisition of a language. Besides, other approaches were taken into account: learning styles, learning strategies, listening skills, and speaking skills.

Multiple Intelligences Method

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001: 115) "The Multiple Intelligence Method (MI) refers to a learner-based philosophy that characterizes human intelligence as having multiple dimensions that must be acknowledged and developed in education". In this theory, learners are viewed as possessing individual learning styles, preferences, or intelligences, and pedagogy is more successful when these learner differences are acknowledged, analyzed for particular groups of learners, and accommodated to teaching. Christison (1998) agrees that Gardner's MI theory is very important to ESL/EFL teachers given they have to work with very diverse groups. Through MI theory, educators can nurture intelligences in different ways in order to help themselves to create an individualized learning environment.

Richards and Rodgers (2001: 22) describe Gardner's theory of intelligences as a method to be developed according to the linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematics intelligence, spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, body-kinesthetic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence. In the MI theory, language

is integrated with music, bodily activity, interpersonal relationships, and so on. Language is not seen as limited to linguistics perspectives but encompasses all aspects of communication. MI proponents believe there is more to language than what is usually subsumed under the rubric linguistics. "There are aspects of language such as rhythm, tone, volume, and pitch that are more closely linked, say, to a theory of music than to a theory of linguistics" (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 117).

The Audiolingual Method

Richards and Rodgers (2001) assert that the emergence of the Audiolingual Method (ALM) resulted from the increased attention given to foreign language teaching in the United States toward the end of the 1950s. In the development of the audiolingual method "Reinforcement is a vital element in the learning process, because it increases the likelihood that the behavior will occur again and eventually become a habit" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 56). It means the teacher needs to identify the behavior and the stimulus in the learner to obtain a stimulus-response chain. For the authors, foreign language learning is a process of involuntary habit formation, and language skills are learned more successfully if the items to be learned in the foreign language are presented in spoken form before they are introduced in the written one. According to Bailey (2005: 17), "repetition drills are designed to familiarize students with the sounds and structural patterns of the language". Indeed, she asserts that the assumption underpinning the ALM is that students

learn to speak by practicing grammatical structures until the production of those structures has become automatic. As Moulton states (in Nunan, 2003: 54), priority is given to spoken rather than written language; learning is a matter of developing a set of habits through drilling; and avoid teaching grammar rules.

Learning Styles

Some of the basic approaches guiding this investigation deal with the importance of recognizing and differentiating styles of the learning process. According to Kinsella (1995: 171), learning styles concern on "an individual's natural habitual, and preferred ways of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills". Lozano (2001) defines a style as the way in which an individual applies his/her own intellectual abilities in order to fulfill a specific task. (54). Certain learning style can be highlighted within a given culture; yet, not everybody in the same culture will have a tendency towards a specific style. Lozano (2001) asserts that styles are neutral (56). In other words, there are no styles better or worse than others. Each style poses its own value and its own utility for specific activities. The basic learning styles are described by Lozano (2001: 56) into three categories –**cognitive** (field dependent vs. field independent, analytic vs. global, and reflective vs. impulsive), **sensory** (perceptual and environmental), and **personality** (right and left hemisphere dominance and personality factors). These are essential aspects to be included during the elaboration and implementation of this curricular proposal, since human beings are identified with one or several

of the styles in the learning process. Such categories must be seen as connected because learners often have more than one learning style.

Learning strategies

Learning strategies involve, as Oxford (1990: ix) states, “characteristics we want to stimulate in students to enable them to become more proficient language learners”. Based on Nunan’s (2003: 269) examination, “strategies are specific means that learners use to learn or improve their language, depending on the context and tasks”. Weinstein and Mayer (1986 in O’Malley and Chamot 1990: 115) affirm that the main goal of learning strategies is to affect the learner’s motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes, or integrates new knowledge. Learning strategies related to classroom environment represent the following areas: cognitive (summarizing, induction, imagery, auditory representation, using resources, rehearsal, grouping, elaboration, and social/affective strategies); metacognitive (planning, monitoring, and evaluation); and socio-affective (cooperating, clarifying, and self-talk). Such strategies were essential in the proposal for determining the best characteristics and activities that could be approached for excelling the learning styles.

Listening Skills

Listening refers to “an active, purposeful process of making sense of what we hear” (Halliday 1975: 24). It is essential to establish how listening skills must be exploited during the early ages

of individuals since the oral aspect of a language is one of the main objects of study in preschool. A teacher should design different teaching procedures to approach a motivating atmosphere of the skill. According to Lozano (2001), if a teaching process is well structured, students learning a language should be prepared to understand basic speech in different environments, and they should be able to understand speakers with different accents (67). Some useful listening activities that can be applied during the teaching process are the following: distinguishing between sounds, stress, and intonation patterns, answering quick questions, listening to songs, poems, and/or other materials, and following instructions and commands.

Teachers must expose young learners to a considerable amount of meaningful language input by means of listening to explanations, conversations, descriptions, directions, songs, videos, games, and/or any other form of spoken material that might serve as a tool to motivate students. Yet, it is important for the teacher to always take into account the importance of developing and monitoring the level of comprehension in learners by following some of these tips: meet the students’ needs and interests, design activities according to the students’ level, provide the students with constant practice in listening, make use of the background knowledge, be consistent with activities, evaluate the progress of the students, and integrate listening with further speaking skills.

Speaking Skill

According to Florez (in Bailey 2005: 14), speaking is “an interactive process

of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information...It is often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving." And for Bailey & Lance (1994: 48), Speaking consists of "producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning". However, as Nunan (2003) affirms "people don't learn the pieces of the language and then put them together to make conversations. Instead, infants acquiring their first language and people acquiring second languages learn the pieces by interacting with other people" (50).

After considering what to expect from a beginner learner, it was necessary to establish certain obligatory principles for teaching speaking. According to Bailey (2005), it is necessary to provide something for learners to talk about. People need to talk, ideally, about something of interest to them: "Teachers should be open to those topics that the learners want to talk about, and incorporate them to lessons whenever possible" (36). Pictures, games, coins, colored paper, even seeds and leaves can provide the motivation for talking that the teachers and students require.

Moreover, it is important to create opportunities for students to interact by using group work or pair work as an effective way to overcome the reticence that students of lower levels may have. As Pennington (in Bailey, 2005: 75) states, "using pair work and group work can improve learner's motivation and promote choice, independence, creativity, and realism" Such techniques also provide feedback to the learner from sources other than the teacher.

The last applicable principle is to manipulate physical arrangements to promote speaking practice. Changing the traditional physical environment of

the classroom can encourage speaking activities because it alters the traditional English classroom.

Focusing on the project, the authors also considered the following aspects:

- This institution did not have a formal curriculum to enrich the process in the acquisition of a foreign language. Most of the time, the English teacher was an advanced student of the English baccalaureate program at the Universidad de Costa Rica and was paid by the children's parents. The English teacher on duty chose the topics and contents based on the cognitive targets the preschool teacher was working on. Also, according to the director of the CILEM, the English teacher used the activities coming in different English books and improvised the lesson without any curricular sequence to support the learning process.
- Based on a look over of the commercial texts, all textbooks prepared for children, including the ones used by the English teachers at the CILEM, are addressed to children learning English in areas where the speaking skills do not represent the main target of the community, since they focuses on other subjects, such as mathematics, science, and history. Also, other EFL texts intended for developing countries, although cheaper, are not appropriate in content. Some textbooks are structured mainly on vocabulary exercises, which aim is to address communicative aspects of language. Others are graded to ease recognition, retention, and active use of the language. However, the extent of vocabulary and activities is

unachievable for the English teachers at preschools in Costa Rica due to children do not speak English. As a consequence, finding a text able to provide all the aspects needed tends to become a difficult task for teachers at public preschools in Costa Rica, including the ones at the CILEM, who have ended up improvising a curricular program or readapting the content and objectives of a textbook.

- Regarding the methodology, this project was based on Nunan's (1992) principles of mixed forms of research: Exploratory-Qualitative-Statistical. The exploratory research takes place normally when the objective examines a subject or problem little studied or that has not been addressed before (Hernández, 1998), as it is the case of utilizing a curricular plan for the English acquisition process at the CILEM. Furthermore, as Nunan (1992) asserts, "exploratory research allows the investigator to be familiarized with the problem or concept of investigation, and generate a hypothesis to be tested" (56). Goetz and LeCompte (1984) state that qualitative research refers to an interpretative focus on the human activity with the goal of generating realistic descriptions and/or explanations, applying specific data, collection methods, sampling procedures, and analysis styles to create specific designs that are developed throughout the research process (87). The research is considered statistical because it was carried out under an experimental design that included the observation of phenomena in their own setting for further analysis (Hernández, 1998). Subsequently,

the information gathered from the observation process was quantitatively analyzed in order to obtain statistic results that could allow the researchers to improve the curricular proposal.

- The study was carried out with a third-level and fourth-level groups at the CILEM. The students' age ranged from 3 to 5 years old. The current total population was 45 students (17 female and 28 male), 2 internal preschool teachers, and an English student from the Trabajo Comunal Universitario (TCU).

The project was developed by following four basic steps:

- The first step included a review of literature to understand the epistemological basis of teaching English as a foreign language to kids.
- The second step was to perform the workshop "**What I like**" which consisted of giving the students the chance to select the most appealing topics. Fifteen Cognitive Targets were presented through flashcards to each group. These were introduced by asking the students: "¿Qué elementos contiene el dibujo?" Then, the researchers explained to the kids what each picture is about: Partes del Cuerpo, Deportes, Comidas, and so on (see appendix #1).
- In the third step, the investigators structured the lesson plans for each topic based on the multiple intelligences method, the audiolingual method, learning styles and strategies, and listening and speaking skills. The lesson plans included: cognitive targets, objectives, language examples, procedures, evaluation of learning outcomes, and materials (see appendix #2).

There were developed eleven different contents which adopted classroom strategies and methods to develop the English teaching-learning process in order to maximize the language acquisition. Moreover, it offered different tasks and dynamic techniques, such as games, visual arts, and lyrics of songs to make the English language lessons more interesting, varied, and suitable for distinct learning styles. It is worth saying that the lesson plan model, the songs, the stories, flashcards, and printable material were made by the authors, and they have been incorporated as an important aid during the development of the English classes at the CILEM.

- The fourth step was focused on carrying out the cognitive targets and methods in the classroom (thirty-minute, from Monday to Friday, during four months). At the same time, the researchers applied an observation sheet instrument (see appendix #3) to evaluate each meeting class in order to make the necessary changes and implement them as part of the curricular proposal.

As a way to summarize these basic steps, the following figure will guide the reader in order to elaborate an English curriculum design, in students from 3 to 5 years old, for the acquisition of a foreign language:

<i>Curriculum components</i>	Focus	Defining questions
Syllabus design	Content	What content should we teach? , In what order should we teach this content? , What is the justification for selecting this content?
Methodology	Classroom techniques and procedures	What exercises, tasks, and activities should we use in the classroom?, How should we sequence and integrate these?
Evaluation	Learning outcomes	How well have our students done?, How well has our program served our students' needs?

Figure 1 shows how these different elements fit together (Subcomponents of the curriculum, adapted from Nunan 2003, 4)

The following analysis is done based on the aspects included in the observation sheet instrument (see appendix 2):

- **The cognitive target was attractive to the students:** in the workshop, the students had the opportunity to choose ten out of fifteen cognitive targets according to their preferences,
- **There was an open period:** in the execution of the activities, an open period was presented in all of the lessons. It was executed by the "Good morning song" and a greeting from interests, and likes. Most of the planned lessons were attractive to them, while few of the lessons needed further development.

the teacher: “Good morning class!”, “Hello Class!”, or “How are you today?”

- **There was a practice period for the students:** kids had the chance to put into practice what they had learned in the lessons. Students were expected to answer questions while playing games, making collages, painting or drawing.
- **There was a culminating period at the end of each class:** it was carried out by the “Good bye song!” and a farewell such as: “See you!, Bye bye!, or Good bye!.
- **The methods were applied correctly:** following the principles of Multiple Intelligences Method, the planned objectives, procedures, and evaluation strategies were carried out in all lessons. They were considered a guide to improving the musical, spatial, linguistic, mathematic, kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligence in the kid’s brain. Some of the most common activities the students experienced are: singing songs, making puzzles, listening to stories, playing games, and others. Also elements from the Audiolingual Method were incorporated with the desire to reinforce the improvement of the listening and speaking skills by the use of audiovisual aids.
- **Key vocabulary and structure were presented properly:** in all the lessons, the students’ learning process was based on real experiences or on the use of flashcards, songs, games, mimic, and activities. The vocabulary and structures were presented by considering the kids’ learning styles. It was expected to catch the children’s attention and to motivate them to recreate the vocabulary and structures in real life.
- **The English explanations were given to the class clearly:** in the acquisition of as a second language, human beings set a natural process: listening-assimilating-speaking. During the first and second days of teaching English at the CILEM, six students did not follow the teacher’s explanations, instructions, or requests. So, some of the activities needed further development, such as teacher’s use of more gestures and mimic during the presentation period; meanwhile most of the students understood the explanations
- **A logical order in the teaching process was followed:** listening and speaking skills were considered when teaching English to kids. All the lessons followed a logical sequence, it means, an opening activity, a presentation activity, a practice activity, and a closing activity.
- **The activities encouraged active learning:** the use of flashcards, songs, toys, stories, and realia during all the lessons, motivated the students to participate enthusiastically and be energetically immersed in the evolution of most of the lessons; meanwhile few of the activities needed further development, specifically in the opening ones on Fridays where students needed body kinesthetic activities while singing the “Good morning” song.
- **Student’s learning styles and strategies were considered during the class:** the researchers included activities in which students’ learning styles were presented, as well as different strategies to teach English as a foreign language

in all of the meeting classes. The most common strategies combined the use of songs and stories as a way of introducing new vocabulary, repetition to emphasize words pronunciation, mimic to have a better understanding of words, and realia to make kids face real situations where vocabulary and structures could be functional.

- **Students applied cognitive targets in real situations:** it allowed kids to internalize the English vocabulary and structures to create new settings in all the lessons. A clear example of this was presented before and after the English class started, when students continued using English to communicate with the teacher.
- **Student's comprehension was checked:** Pupils' comprehension was assessed through "Direct Evaluation" by checking students' responses, understanding, and participation in the meeting classes.
- **Students could participate actively in the learning process:** English procedures were structured to develop student's listening and speaking skills in a dynamic and enthusiastic manner while repeating, singing, drawing, painting, playing, and observing. Consequently in all of the lessons, they had the chance to be active protagonists in the expansion of activities while the teacher guided the process.
- **All the students were involved:** throughout the performance of the activities, most of the procedures motivated the students to join themselves into the English process. However, few of the activities needed further development due to students'

individual personality factors, such as shyness.

- **There was an opportunity for self and peer correction:** in all of the lessons the teacher applied the use of self evaluation, in order to provide students with the possibility to self monitor before the teacher or classmates did it. Also, the use of peer evaluation, where the students were able to help a classmate who had made a mistake or did not know how to express an idea.
 - **The plan was followed:** regarding the development of the English lesson, most of the classes were followed as they had been planned. However, few of them needed further development, especially for activities aimed to reinforce students' pronunciation of new vocabulary, or for time-consuming activities such as cutting, pasting, and coloring.
 - **The aims were achieved:** in most of the classes the goals were achieved. Meanwhile, few of the lesson plans needed further development, especially the procedures related to the responding of oral and visual stimuli.
 - **There was enough time for each activity:** English classes were planned in order to be carried out in thirty minutes. Most of the plans could fit into that period, while only some of the lessons needed extra time to let students finish activities that included cutting, pasting, coloring, or working with dough.
- This project arrived to the following conclusions:
- The multiple intelligence and the audiolingual methods are important for the implementation of the lesson

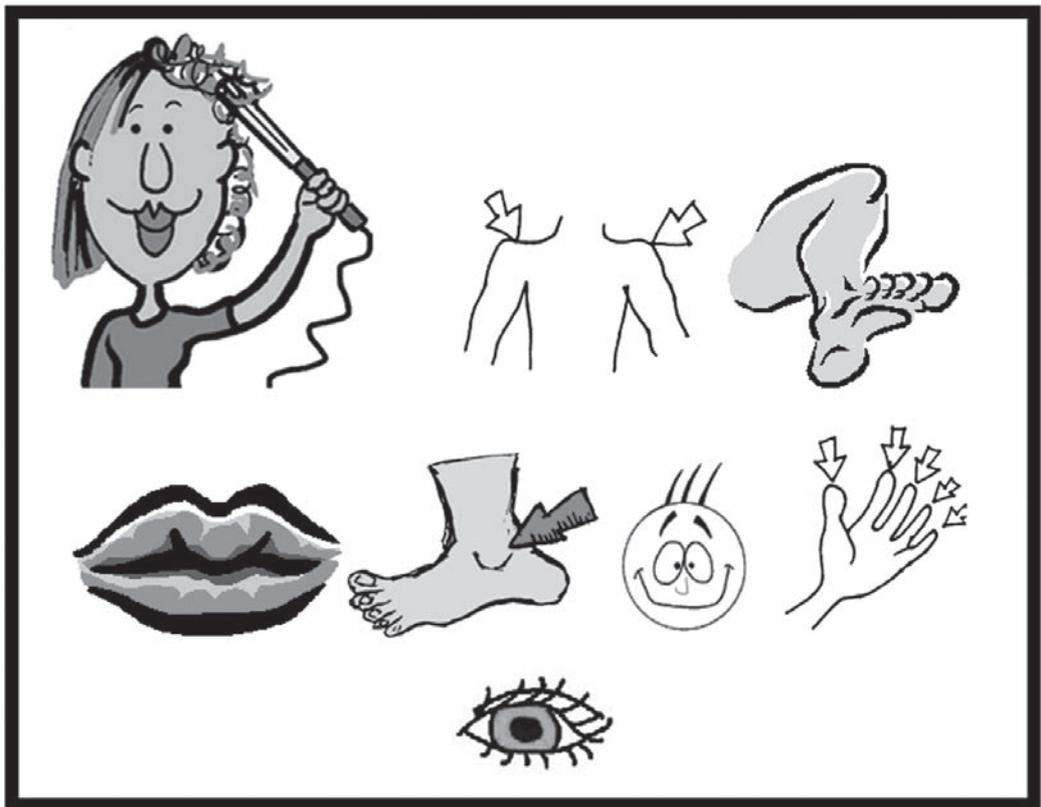
plans in order to follow a sequence of procedures necessary to achieve pre-established goals.

- Students show a better understanding, assimilation, and production of English when the meeting class is completely based on the target language.
- The lesson plan ought to be as flexible as possible, according to the target population' needs and features (age, personality, etc)
- Positive feedback motivates students to display a greater effort because it makes them feel that their goal is attainable.
- Considering students' span of concentration, the English class should be carried out in a length of time of 25 to 30 minutes.
- Use of real material and situations motivate students to gain knowledge of new vocabulary during the teaching process.

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APPENDIX 1
WORKSHOP
BODY PARTS PICTURE



APPENDIX 2

LESSON PLAN MODEL

Institution: _____

Subject matter: _____

Level: _____ Date: _____

Specific Objective	Language examples	Procedures	Evaluation of learning outcomes	Materials

APPENDIX 3

OBSERVATION SHEET INSTRUMENT

Institution name: _____

Date: _____

Subject matter: _____

Method: _____

English teacher's name: _____

Level: _____

Aspects to be considered during the class	Ob-served	Need further develo-pment	Not obser-ved
1. The Cognitive target was attractive for the students.			
2. There was an open period.			
3. There was a practice period for the students.			
4. There was a culminating period at the end of the class.			
5. The method was applied correctly.			
6. Key vocabulary or structure was presented properly.			
7. The English explanations were given to the class clearly.			
8. It was follow a logical order in the teaching process.			
9. The activities encouraged active learning.			
10. Student's learning styles and strategies were considered during the class period.			
11. Students applied cognitive targets in real situations.			
12. Students' comprehension was checked.			
13. Students could participate actively in the learning process.			
14. All the students were involved.			
15. There was opportunity for self-correction and peer correction.			
16. The plan was followed.			
17. Aims were achieved.			
18. There was enough time for each activity.			

Comments: _____

