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Challenges and Possible Solutions for English Teaching and Learning in the Province of
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Challenges and Possible Solutions for English Teaching and Learning in the Province of Guanacaste Province, Costa Rica

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Abstract

This essay explores and presents challenges and possible solutions associated with English teaching and learning in Guanacaste, Costa Rica. It covers the reality of public bilingual education in Guanacaste, single-teacher schools, and the rural university context. The proposed solutions are contextualizing the educational ambiance, communication between the school and the parents, alliances between the public and private sectors, strategies to handle negative emotional factors and to promote motivation among students.

Keywords: bilingual education, challenges, Guanacaste, rural, solutions, vulnerability,

Introduction

Most Costa Rican rural places maintain tourism as their principal economic activity, meaning that in these places, English learning is a must to have better opportunities and benefits for the future. Guanacaste is the main example of this because of its amazing

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attractions, wildlife, culture and beaches. From being a receptionist to being a business administrator, mastering English is essential to apply for a job. However, the reality that people face while learning this language there is not adequate at all.

The main institution for education in the *Pura Vida* country is called *Ministerio de Educacion Publica*² (MEP). It is supposed to provide equal opportunities for Costa Rican students, the same resources and the same content. Nevertheless, the gap for those who live in the metropolitan area is visible if we compare it with the pupils from rural areas. Being originally from Guanacaste, I noticed the gap once I moved to an urban place, around four years ago. I perceived that young adults from the metropolitan area had more knowledge, and they were able to keep a conversation in English, while people the same age from villages were learning the simple present tense. How is that possible if we have the same educational system?

First, educators who work at single-teacher schools have few learners per level. Each teacher is in charge of different subject matters and deals with individuals who might have various disabilities. The same instructor teaches all the levels and sometimes he or she must be in charge of the library, the dining room and the cleaning for the whole school. Cartín (2018) indicated that this type of elementary school originated in 1960. These schools have less than 30 students and are helpful for the population who live in villages. In addition, most of these institutions do not have English in their curricula.

Apart from this, the pupils who live in villages or rural areas have less favorable circumstances. Herrera (2015) established that rural areas are exposed to poverty, exclusion and inequality, and the fact that people who live in the city have more opportunities and access to goods and services. In rural areas, we do not have adequate

² Costa Rica's Ministry of Public Education

technological equipment; we do not have intercultural interchanges with foreigners to train our ears with different accents, and we do not have the ideal resources to teach our apprentices.

Guanacaste is one of the hottest provinces in Costa Rica. A class at one o'clock is literally hell. If that annoys educators, imagine how hard paying attention gets for the children and youngsters! Air conditioning is a meaningful asset in *Guanacastecan* classrooms; I remember that one of my teachers used to bring us under a huge tree because it was not possible to stay in the classroom. Moreover, it is difficult to adapt the class in an appealing way because schools do not provide different resources to the teacher, just some chairs and a board.

The main concern is when trainees from villages or small towns start taking English courses at the university. Most of them do not know how to conjugate the verb to be, and they get disappointed with the level that the class demands, or they start comparing themselves with other classmates. For this reason, some of them believe that the eleven or twelve years spent in both primary school and high school were in vain. Mora (2016) stated that most of the students who come from rural areas face significant challenges related to emotional factors once they register at the university. Thus, this essay intends to show the main challenges of English teaching and learning in Guanacaste, Costa Rica and possible solutions to these, such as strategies to develop a meaningful learning process for *Guanacastecan* population, the importance of contextualization, communication between the school and the parents, how the private sector may support public schools and the way the government should help the rural education system.

Bilingual Job Opportunities in Guanacaste

Guanacaste is one of the provinces which provides many kinds of jobs related to the use of the English language. From call centers to Real estate, it offers bilingual occupations, and, in some way, some wealth is concentrated in this region. The irony is that most *Guanacastecans* are unemployed. Of course, the lack of jobs affects all the provinces in Costa Rica; however, the main requirement for *Guanacastecans* to get a job is to speak English.

One of the most recent examples is the establishment of the company Sykes in Liberia, Guanacaste. They used to hold massive job fairs approximately every 5 months in which they applied English certification tests such as the Business English Language (Test BELT). Last year, *Guanacastecans* had the opportunity to take an online test about grammar, reading and listening from home, or they went to the laboratories at the *Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje (INA)*³ to take the test. The individuals who got a B1, B1+, B2 or B2+ also took a speaking test as a requirement to request a job position. However, last year, the company's director stated the following: "we have 500 positions. But do we have 500 people who speak a high level of English, with a high school diploma or other technical proficiency who are looking for a job? I don't know" (Cisneros, 2021, para. 3). Scenarios such as these are common even for persons who have a university major.

Private and Public Bilingual Education in Guanacaste

Regarding what was described above, it seems that the population in this rural province has not received a bilingual education. However, in the zone, there are public and private educational institutes. Some private institutions such as La Paz Community School are pursued by wealthy foreigners, first because Costa Rica is an ideal destination and second because the institution "reflects the ideals that parents are craving for their kids as

³ Costa Rican public institution that focuses on technical education

well as themselves” (Porter, 2019, p. 2). This school was founded in 2007; it is located in Brasilito and teaches preschool to 12th grade. Their philosophy covers experiential learning and critical thinking, and the learners are considered problem solvers. According to the prior data, Porter stated that

[i]n less than a decade, La Paz has managed to receive national recognition from the Costa Rican presidency, attained Costa Rica and International Baccalaureate (IB) accreditation, and has become an academic model visited by educators from the United States and around the globe. (2019, p. 5)

On the other hand, public institutions belong to MEP which is the main entity in charge of education in Costa Rica. MEP offers specific English programs for kindergarten, primary school and high school, meaning that *Guanacastecan* individuals start taking English classes when they are 6 years old. They take more than three lessons per week; some high schools such as the technical ones offer academic and conversational English courses. For conversational English, the learners take around five lessons per week. In addition, the educationists who work there have licentiate and/or master’s degrees. Apart from that, the institution asks for a C1 level to hire them. By this, I mean that the educators are well prepared to teach English as a foreign language to the pupils. Even so, after considering that *Guanacastecans* have taken English classes since their youth, they are not able to speak English, and foreigners prefer to pay expensive fees to the private system instead of the public system which is free.

The first problem is the lack of resources that public learning centers have. Students in Guanacaste do not have adequate spaces to learn English, starting from the fact that there are more than fifteen learners in a classroom, it does not allow the teacher to provide enough attention to each pupil. Sometimes centers do not have English laboratories or classrooms with basic equipment, such as desks, chairs, markers, whiteboard erasers,

speakers, projectors, and books. Some institutions have a library; however, they do not even have books. According to an investigation from *Estado de la Nación*⁴, from nineteen to twenty-four libraries mentioned in the study count on less than a book per student in the province of Guanacaste (2021). The consequences of not having enough books in the libraries represent a limitation to develop specific tasks in the classroom related to literature.

Another resource which is not tangible but vital in this era is the Internet, especially a Wi-Fi connection. Wi-Fi has become a useful resource for instructors in order to implement online activities for their virtual or face-to-face lessons. Teachers may use Wi-Fi for accessing online dictionaries which are useful for foreign language classes. Nevertheless, for regional supervisions in rural areas such as Sulá, Peninsular, Grande de Térraba, Aguirre, Santa Cruz, Nicoya, Coto, Cañas, Limón, Turrialba, Norte-Norte and Puriscal, there are 751 teachers without Internet connection (Estado de la Nación, 2021).

Regarding the fact that most people have digital devices and know how to use social media, we can infer that students may have a stable Internet connection at home. Guanacaste does seem to show an increase in the percentage of homes with Internet access between 2016 and 2019. In 2019, 82.5% of households had Internet access (Sanabria, 2020, para. 2). Once the pandemic started, the alternative for not stopping the learning process was to teach through online classes. Virtual classes began, and the trouble became evident for the MEP population and higher education since most *Guanacastecans* have Internet issues. At least, 41.7% of the learners get connected from postpaid mobile data, while 13.9% use prepaid mobile data, which shows discouraging digital gaps in respect to the reality that students live (Chanto & Loáiciga, 2021).

⁴ Costa Rican institution in charge of participative investigation to promote sustainable human development

Single-Teacher Schools in *Guanacastecan* Villages

Apart from the limited access to the Internet, villages in Guanacaste also have schools in which just one teacher is in charge of all the subjects and of teaching all the levels. These learning centers are called *single-teacher schools*; they have less than thirty children and are linked to the public education system that Costa Rica has. In addition, during 2012 and 2016, the number of single-teacher schools grew according to the total of I and II cycle public institutions; in 2012, 36.2% of schools were single-teacher schools, meanwhile in 2016, these schools represented 39.5% of the public schools over the country (Cartín, 2018).

The aforementioned shows the fact that this kind of school has become more widespread and common. Day by day, we realize that the rural area population wants to grow, and parents go the extra mile to keep their children studying. Most parents in these areas are farmers and peasants. For this reason, more than 50% of public institutes located in the school districts from Nicoya, Grande de Térraba, Puriscal, Cañas, Peninsular, Los Santos, Turrialba and Aguirre are single-teacher schools (Cartín, 2018).

Moreover, these institutions maintain subject matters such as Mathematics, Social Studies, Spanish and Science. Language classes have been implemented recently, and the only foreign language that single-teacher schools teach is English. However, this foreign language is taught in less than one fourth of single-teacher schools. By this, I mean that not all the pupils from these centers have the opportunity to learn a foreign language such as English, which is a requirement for most jobs in Costa Rica. The situation about English learning is not the only concerning issue; for these schools, social interaction has

become problematic. Violence cases among students inside of these institutes are superior to those which are registered in mainstream public schools (Cartin, 2018), and the coaches who work in these institutions have to deal with this frequently.

Other social problems that pupils from rural areas are exposed to are drugs, alcohol and a low income per household. It is very common to hear that high school students started to work since they needed to pay for their studies. It may be rumored that a person dropped out of school to work, postponing her or his studies. Some other finish high school and put off going college in order to start working; however, Cisneros stated that

[i]n Guanacaste, we have a population of more than 400,000 people. Thirty percent of those people are between the ages of 16 and 35. At least half of those people, we are talking about more than 100,000, have completed high school. And of those, more than 50,000 people with high school completed, many are young people who are unemployed. (2021, para. 12)

Guanacastecan Rural University Context

For those who get a high school diploma and decide to start a major at the university to pursue their dream to become professionals, the reality they find is more complicated than they thought. Most freshmen realize that the knowledge they gained in high school cannot be compared with the content they study at college, especially, with English courses. At Universidad Nacional, Chorotega Branch, this is a common situation for Systems Engineering and Commerce learners. Furthermore, some of them continue their majors with success, yet they get stalled in the complementary English courses and spend more years to graduate, meanwhile other less constant students see their future

truncated because of an inflexible system that ignores the emotional part of their apprentices (Mora, 2016).

The emotional factor plays a vital role in the learning process. If individuals do not feel good, they will not have a satisfactory performance. The interference of emotional factors is a common problem, especially in university classrooms. Speaking in front of an audience may represent an emotional challenge as in oral presentations or production activities. Mora stated that “[a] significant part of the problem derives from affective factors such as: anxiety, lack of motivation, student’s attitude, professor-student and student-student interaction, poor emotional stimuli, evaluation and methodology” (2016, p. 60).

Another situation that affects the emotional part of undergraduates is the treatment they receive from some professors. I agree with the fact that individuals should not be spoiled, but pupils are more than an ID number at college; they are human beings, and ridiculing them is not fair. On the contrary, instructors should motivate the students and encourage them to continue studying.

Besides, a learner may feel a roller-coaster of emotions due to the rest of the students may make fun of them due to his or her basic level, or some partners may not include a person because they consider him or her “silly.” The participants may feel excluded by some classmates when teamwork assignments come up; it is noticeable that some individuals tend to keep out the students who they identify as being less knowledgeable about something. I have experienced this, and it is not a nice feeling, especially if you are doing your best; that makes you feel less capable. This is a common situation for beginners, and for people from rural areas who did not have the knowledge they needed from high school, being rejected by classmates can affect their performance and even their motivation. A motivated learner can progress more effectively towards the adequate use of the language; his or her intrinsic motivation and his or her emotional

status would be strongly overshadowed by external situations such as judgments from classmates (Mora, 2016).

It is important to consider that universities in Costa Rica have central campuses in the metropolitan area and maintain branches in rural areas. This applies to both public and private universities, yet focusing on public universities, Universidad Nacional (UNA) has seven branches in rural areas, Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) has six branches in rural areas, Universidad Técnica Nacional (UTN) has four branches in rural areas, Tecnológico de Costa Rica (TEC) has two branches in rural areas and Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED) has thirty-two branches in rural areas. The *Estado de la Nación* stated that there is evidence that supports that failure is higher in branches out of the central valley; at UCR, the phenomenon is mostly present in the Pacific, Caribbean, Atlantic and Southern branches. At UNED, the institutional average is exceeded by the branches in Talamanca (58%), Los Chiles, Limón, Cañas, Liberia, Santa Cruz and Nicoya with a failure rate varying between 40.1% and 42.8%. (2021). The last four branches are located in Guanacaste.

Furthermore, this was noticeable when the pandemic started, and classes were taken virtually. Most of the freshmen dropped out of their majors in the middle or at the end of the first year. It was common for participants to have a broken voice, a frozen image or a problem with a video chat platform which tends to leave them out of synchronous sessions. Another circumstance was having to travel to relatives' or neighbors' houses for long distances because they did not have access to a stable connection. The Internet connection for most of the students who live in villages was a chaos; some of them did not even have an adequate device to take classes or do assignments.

To elaborate on the disadvantages for this kind of class, I can mention the use our students make of technology. Due to the fact that we live in a technological era, it is easier

for the pupils to use devices, apps, and other technological resources. In general, 68.7% of the student body indicate that they understand just enough according to the level of knowledge of the technological instruments. However, there is always scarcity of digital tools (Chanto & Loáciga, 2021), and we may find more disadvantages that are not related just to Internet connection failures. The main one is the distraction in the houses during class time, which causes a low learning performance. Apart from this, some students believe that because they are taking a virtual class, their responsibility is less important. In my experience, some pupils have told me that they drive in class time, run errands or even go to work; the other day, a student turned on her webcam, and she was straightening her hair in class; some of them do not take virtual learning seriously.

Another disadvantage is the lack of digital skills by most professors. The implementation of platforms for teaching such as Zoom and Google Meet was the pillar to give classes during the pandemic, especially for universities. Teaching online goes beyond those platforms; there are several tools that instructors may add to their classes for different activities with specific purposes. Before, during and after the pandemic, some instructors have been afraid of technology and avoided it. It is vital to train our instructors for the usage of platforms and apps. Chanto and Loáciga stated that Universidad Nacional must expand the resources to innovate the teaching and learning process and guarantee the progress of the curriculum in which professors should become literate in ICT management (2021). Some universities such as Universidad Técnica Nacional promote training related to educational technology. This year, there was a virtual Expo week that contained free presentations and workshops about some apps and virtual methodologies such as collaborative learning. Because of the schedules, it was challenging for most educators to attend a vital and free access event such as this.

Possible Solutions for the Improvement of English Teaching and Learning in Guanacaste

Strategies to Handle Negative Emotional Factors and to Promote Motivation among Students

To face low motivation, low confidence and anxiety in the classroom, the teacher may look for different strategies to implement. It is common for pupils to feel anxious when they are in charge of oral presentations, role plays or impromptu talks. The *mask* is a strategy for language trainees to use during or after the presentation of a topic, when the audience asks questions about it. To wear a mask lets the pupil hide in some way, so he or she will feel less nervous. This strategy was applied at Universidad Nacional Chorotega Branch for English major learners; Dover stated that “during the presentation they wear the mask and they felt more relax, they were not worried because if they were a little lost during the presentation their classmates could not notice them worried because they could not see their face” (2011, p. 184).

Moreover, individuals may feel nervous because they should keep a straight posture while speaking. For this reason, a strategy called *comfortable chair* should be implemented for students to be seated while they give their speech. The students can be focused on their speech without feeling worried about their posture mainly. Some prefer to walk around the class, however; “if they are seated it is not necessary to do that, which at the end helps to the concentration during the activity” (Dover, 2011, p. 184).

Another strategy that may be implemented in the classroom is the *top banana*. It may promote motivation between the pupils to do their best during the course; it shows their monthly improvement. The aim is to clarify to the participants the purpose of this plan

at the beginning of the course and explain that each month, a short ceremony will be developed among the class, the professor and the coordinator of the major; an accolade will be given to a distinguished student. “That will keep them motivated and with a goal of getting it as many times as possible, and this will improve their learning and acquisition process, as well” (Dover, 2011,p. 185). The dynamic may be modified for the instructor in charge; it can be done every two months or at the end of the cycle or trimester. If we teach in high school, the principal should be included in the ceremony.

Contextualizing the Educational Ambiance

To promote motivation and innovation, the teacher may create resources according to the reality that the students face. Most of the time, the resources we manage from our curricula are not adapted to our country or our culture. Generally, the activities, pictures and listening exercises we have as a complement for our classes are associated with North America and Europe because their native language is our target language. The lack of online or tangible materials adjusted to our trainees’ context may create boredom and disinterest. “The type of resources used in online teaching do not always comply with the learner’s cultural background and individual interests, which leads to lack of motivation towards the acquisition and practice of the language” (Mojica, 2021, p. 2). As a solution, we can think outside the box by creating online resources for our students without investing money if the institution we work for has computers, headphones or speakers and a stable Internet connection.

Educators have the possibility to use and to implement free online platforms such as Google Classroom, Strikingly or Weebly as Mojica (2021) did. Mojica (2021) created a website for 8th English students from *Liceo Experimental Bilingue de Santa Cruz* called “Mastering the Beast,” and it was focused on listening skills. The graphic design looked appealing for the pupils, and it included pictures, vocabulary, readings and activities

related to the *Guanacastecan* culture. Mojica stated that “[t]hrough the visualization of the province, its identity, and people; the language functions developed in the learners [would] be related to Guanacaste’s uniqueness” (2021,p. 11).

Something that caught my attention was the name of the website and its logo, which is a bull’s face; both are representative of Santa Cruz’s canton. *Fiestas Típicas* of Santa Cruz are a strong pillar of Santa Cruz’s traditions, and they are popular in Costa Rica as well. In the fiestas, there are bull riders who practice mastering the beast and take a risk. This is a comparison of the learning process that needs risk taking and practice. Regarding this metaphor, Mojica established the following:

Students, like bull riders, need to work on methodologies that can help them “hold on the language” as much time as possible, and the ultimate understanding of the message is the rewarding experience that motivates learners, as much as mastering the beast encourages *Guanacastecos*. (2021, p. 6)

Daocents in Guanacaste must be updated about technological innovative education; this is vital for the learning process in a technological era. During the recent viral event, a common problem was the lack of technological skills that instructors had during the pandemic. Mojica stated that “it was urgent for teachers to have taken over online environments and virtual education, most of them without prior experience in online teaching and not even enough resources or connection in some locations of the country” (2021, p. 4). Virtual classes during the pandemic represented a hard stage for the educators, particularly for the ones who are not accustomed to deal with technology very often.

To attend seminars or conferences may be complicated for our work schedules; but if we have a stable Internet connection we are able to take online training even for free. On a different note, there are various websites offering training or courses about online education focused on English as a foreign language; one of them is Coursera.

Coursera is a platform in which you register, look for courses of your interests and learn in an asynchronous way. If the applicant does not have money, he or she may ask for a scholarship and once he or she completes the course or training, the candidate will get a diploma of the program that was finished. It is important to mention that Coursera works with worldwide universities; I have taken courses there, and it was quite a meaningful experience.

Believe it or not, virtual platforms included in our planning have a meaningful impact on our students; they can be executed in face-to-face classes which enriches the environment, especially now that we are back in the classrooms. To apply ICTs in the pedagogical development as a virtualization tool, in general terms, looks for achieving objectives such as optimizing teaching and as a result and obtaining high and stable academic benefit of the learner; this takes into consideration that, as with every tool, we must be updated in terms of the implementation of ICTs, or we may face the opposite of the objectives already mentioned (Chanto & Loáiciga, 2021).

Materials and resources are not the only alternative to be contextualized; the curriculum should be as well. Again, to contextualize instruction is vital for the pupils' motivation and the awareness of skills for life in general. MEP and university branches should offer to the population a curriculum that promotes knowledge to face the social factors that disturb the learners' reality. A curriculum that really has an impact that is not only educational but also social to be useful for the work area and life (Rugama, 2017).

Communication Between the School and the Parents

Another solution to consider for rural areas' schools is communication. In general, the only contact that the school has is a meeting to inform about the children and teenagers' performance three times per year. However, to offer workshops for parents may be vital to promote skills to the relatives and to improve the communication amidst the

institution and the families. I am pretty sure that teachers are busy planning lessons and helping students, still counselors, psychologists and the English coordinators or supervisors may develop and supervise these kinds of activities.

The Role of Public and Private Sectors in the Improvement of English Teaching and Learning in Guanacaste

The private sector may be part of the improvement of educational institutions, especially with tangible resources and infrastructure. Donations can be asked to private companies by *Juntas Directivas* which are the bodies of directives from MEP in charge of managing each school's assets. If a donation is not possible, actions in return from the institution should be done. For example, we can have agreements with environmental foundations; they may donate resources while the participants help to plant trees or to give environmental lectures. In Osa, there was a similar project related to environmental awareness; according to Selby et al., "[a]fter participating in the program, the students describe environmental leadership as requiring persistence, forethought, and a willingness to care for both the environment and community" (2020, p. 1594).

From conditions to curricula, the main solutions must come from the government. There must be encouragement towards a political and responsible participation in elections from citizens who are experts in education, so the candidates must know and understand the needs in rural areas (Rugama, 2017). If laws and orders are taken by individuals who are ignorant of the educational panorama, they just promote fallacies. We may come up with real politics by leaving behind the interests of few individuals and creating actionable proposals. It is vital to ask for permanent consultations with educators in rural learning centers, and research may result in benefits for these areas (Rugama, 2017).

Conclusions

To implement the English language in Guanacaste is more than a requirement; it is basically an obligation to get a job in this place. However, Guanacaste is one of the most heavily affected provinces in Costa Rica regarding the English teaching and learning process. That includes aspects such as a lack of conditions, resources, equipment, motivation, contextualization, Internet connection, motivation, adequate use of technology from educators and absence of language classes as it happens in most single-teacher schools.

We may have possible solutions such as implementing strategies in the classroom like the mask, comfortable chair and top banana to decrease negative emotional factors from our students. We may try to contextualize the resources to implement in class by taking into consideration the learners' needs and their social background. Besides, communication is a relevant aspect between the school and the parents, especially with workshops or activities to provide specific skills to support children. Sometimes it is complex to coordinate assistance from our public system, so asking for donations or alliances with private organizations may help. In an ideal world, we should get everything we need from the government, yet we will not find alternatives until the mindset regarding politics changes from the elected ministers starting with the fact that they must be well prepared and aware of the educational system's reality to issue rules and decrees.

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DECLARACIÓN JURADA

Yo, Katherine Castro Arias, cédula de identidad 504050551 estudiante de la Universidad Nacional, declaro bajo fe de juramento y consciente de las responsabilidades penales de este acto, que soy autor intelectual del Trabajo Final de Graduación Titulado "Challenges and Possible Solutions for English Teaching and Learning in the Province of Guanacaste, Costa Rica", para optar por el grado de Maestría en Educación con énfasis en Aprendizaje del Inglés.

Nicoya, a los 07 días del mes de setiembre del año 2022.



Refrendo

Los abajo firmantes avalamos el Trabajo de Graduación de la estudiante Katherine Castro Arias, cédula 504050551, que lleva como título **Challenges and Possible Solutions for English Teaching and Learning in the Province of Guanacaste Province, Costa Rica**, dado que cumple con las disposiciones vigentes y la calidad académica requerida por el posgrado.

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Mag. Juan Pablo Zúñiga Vargas
Tutor del énfasis Aprendizaje del Inglés
Maestría en Educación

RITA MARIA
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