An Action Plan to Provide Learners with Balanced Input in EFL Classrooms

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Resumen

A través del tiempo, se han dado opiniones varias relacionadas con la forma en que los estudiantes reciben la información durante las clases de inglés y si esta información es transmitida de tal manera que los alumnos puedan desarrollar las actividades de la clase. En el caso del aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera, es importante reconocer las necesidades lingüísticas de cada estudiante a la hora de realizar las actividades para cada lección. Por lo tanto, tomar en cuenta el conocimiento previo de los estudiantes, su ritmo de aprendizaje, gustos y preferencias (incluyendo la forma en que prefieren recibir la información) es vital a la hora de planear las clases. Es esencial recalcar que existen diversas maneras en las cuales el profesor puede transmitir información incluyendo material auténtico, material educativo y objetos de la vida cotidiana, los cuales sirven como medio para suscitar un ambiente más favorable. Con el propósito de investigar la manera en que los profesores brindan información durante la clase de inglés e identificar las ventajas y desventajas del material utilizado, los investigadores realizaron un estudio de caso basado en el enfoque cualitativo. Dicho estudio tuvo lugar en las secciones 9-5 y 9-6 del Liceo Nocturno de Pérez Zeledón donde información valiosa fue adquirida por medio de observaciones, cuestionarios, entrevistas, y recolección de muestras. Entre los resultados encontrados durante el análisis se destaca el desbalance en los tipos de aprendizaje tomados en cuenta a la hora de diseñar actividades y material y que el enfoque de la clase es únicamente lectura y escritura. Tomando lo anterior en consideración, se diseñó un plan de acción que sugiere actividades y materiales que brindan un balance entre la información auditiva y visual que se transmite en la clase de inglés.

Palabras clave: información trasmitida, lengua extranjera, capacidad lingüística, balance, plan de acción

Abstract

Through time, there have been arguments regarding the way students receive input and whether it is comprehensible enough for them to be able to perform different tasks in English. In the case of foreign language contexts, instructors need to pay careful attention to students' linguistic needs when developing a variety of activities in the classroom. This is why students' background, likes and dislikes, learning pace, and input preferences are the most trustworthy sources for teachers to plan the lessons appropriately. Regarding input, which refers to the auditory and visual language to which the learner is exposed (Gass and Selinker, 2001, p. 200), the stimuli students receive may take the form of authentic material, teaching material, and realia which teachers can use as a means to provide students with the most favorable learning opportunities. The purpose of this research study was to investigate the types of input ninth graders, more specifically groups 9-5 and 9-6, from Pérez Zeledón Night High School receive when learning English as a foreign language. Another aim was to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the materials used to provide input in the language classroom. The investigation was developed by following a qualitative approach in which the problem is described. In order to gather the information for this study, researchers made use of observations, questionnaires, interviews, and documentary evidence. Some of the findings drawn from this study depict that peripheral learning is not enhanced, activities and materials do not keep a balance when it comes to learning styles, and reading and writing are the main focus of the lesson. Based on these findings, an action plan to promote balanced teaching activities and materials for visual and auditory input was suggested.

Keywords: input, foreign language, linguistic competence, balance, action plan

1. Introduction

Language instruction plays a significant role within any society, and to attain fruitful results teachers need to reinforce every important aspect during the process. In Costa Rica, the teaching of English has been treated as a very important event in the last two decades. The Ministry of Public Education (MEP) is in charge of giving proper training to the teachers of English in this country on different aspects, such as evaluation, didactic resources, teaching strategies, designing of materials, and so on.

MEP, thus, emphasizes the importance of implementing and preparing "different materials and activities to develop their students' learning process" (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2005, p. 27). This premise has to do with the input that EFL learners receive in high schools. This input must integrate the different linguistic needs and learning styles of the students so as to provide them with balanced loads of information. Therefore, researchers of this case study, keeping in mind that achieving such balance in the input given to learners is a tough task, proposed some possibly useful materials that could help L2 instructors in their classrooms.

1.1. Participant Selection

The target population that researchers selected as a data source is composed of ninth grade students from public night high schools. The sample population is the learners from groups 9-5 and 9-6 at Pérez Zeledón Night High School. In addition, the sampling method used for this research is the convenience one because of the teachers' and students' availability and principal's disposition as well as the institution's location. These two groups (9-5 and 9-6), as all the groups in the high school, take academic English, which is controlled by the syllabus of the Ministry of Public Education (MEP). MEP's syllabus dictates that English has to be taught within the principles of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method. This method establishes that every process and goal present in a classroom should aim at leading to communicative competence (Savignon, 2002, p. 1). Regarding the learners from groups 9-5 and 9-6, their ages ranged from about 17 to 25 years old in both groups. In regard to the linguistic level of students, it could be noticed through the observations that they followed the instructions as required. This is evident every time the teacher gives a command and students' response is positive; they actually perform what she asks them to. On one hand, in group 9-5, there are approximately 19 students; six of which are females and 13 are males. In group 9-6, on the other hand, there are around 13 students- nine males and four females.

Five teachers of English are also participants in this study; they are four females and one male. First, one of the participants has been a language instructor for seven years; four years working for the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) at Pérez Zeledón Night High School and three years working at Unesco High School as part of those seven years, she has labored five years at Universidad Latina de Costa Rica and she holds a licentiate's degree in English teaching. This teacher has taught students from seventh to tenth grade in academic classes and students from seventh to ninth grade in conversational classes. The second participant is a female who has been a teacher for five years, during which she has worked at four different high schools: Uvita High School, Puerto Jiménez High School, Santiago de San Pedro High School, and Pérez Zeledón Night High School- where she is currently working. This participant's academic level is MT6 and she has taught students from seventh to eleventh grade. Furthermore, the third participant is a female who has worked as a language instructor for eight years, six of which she has been a teacher at Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension, Pérez Zeledón Campus. This teacher has taught students from all levels at different high schools (academic, night, and technical). She holds a master's degree in Applied Linguistics.

The fourth participant is a male who has been a teacher for ten years; he has worked at Asunción High School. Moreover, he is currently teaching at Pérez Zeledón Night High School and at Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension, Pérez Zeledón Campus. He has taught students from all levels, except for seventh grade. This participant holds a master's degree in Second Languages and Cultures. Finally, the fifth participant in this study is the English teacher of groups 9-5 and 9-6 (students participants in this research). She has been teaching for over ten years during which she has taught different levels. She holds a licentiate's degree and is currently working at Pérez Zeledón Night High School and

Platanares High School. The five English teachers who are participants in this investigation provided their insights on the role of input in EFL learning.

1.2. Research Questions

This qualitative study aims at answering the following questions:

1. What types of input do students receive?

2. What are the advantages of the types of input provided?

3. What are the disadvantages of the types of input provided?

4. What type of material and activities can be recommended to teachers that provide effective and balanced input?

2. Literature Review

Many aspects play a significant role in the learning process; going from teaching techniques to how the information is delivered to students (also known as input). Input is a key element in language teaching since it is the basis from which students build the necessary linguistic knowledge to communicate. In Costa Rica, concern for language learning is growing and now almost every educational institution in the country provides students with the opportunity to develop some degree of competence in the English language.

2.1. Costa Rican English Syllabus

Every educational institution must have a program stating relevant aspects related to the teaching-learning process. To do so, a curriculum is designed. Richards and Renandya (2002) stated that curriculum "refers to all aspects of the planning, implementation, and evaluation of an educational program, the why, how and how well together with the what of teaching learning process" (p. 70). During the planning stage, teachers need to focus on students' differences and preferences. After planning the lesson, the processes of implementation and evaluation go through similar scrutiny. Most of the times teachers have to adapt the way they teach in order to meet students' needs. The numerous ways in which teachers can provide input to students play a key role in the planning and implementation stages. Therefore, teachers need to be in constant change, update, modification, and improvement of their lessons.

Another aspect to take into account is the method used, which is generally dictated by the school's policy. One of those methods is the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which is viewed as "a philosophical approach to language teaching covering a range of methodological approaches which share a focus on helping learners communicate meaningfully in the target language" (Nunan, 2011, p. 212). The CLT method is stated in the Costa Rican syllabus, created by the Ministry of Public Education.

2.2. The Role of Input in Language Learning

For teachers to lead students to success along the process of learning English as a foreign language, it is necessary to take into consideration several factors regarding the way instructors convey messages in the target language. A key element in English teaching has to do with the input that students are exposed to. Input is explained as the "constitutes" of "the language to which the learner is exposed" (Gass and Selinker, 2001, p. 200); it can either be spoken or written. Over the years, some of the most remarkable contributions to this field were made by Krashen. His renowned Input Hypothesis establishes that single exposure to input is not sufficient for the learner to master the language; learners need to be exposed to comprehensible input which is defined as "input that they can understand" (Gass and Selinker, 2001, p. 294). To achieve this, teachers can make some adaptations to help students comprehend the input given.

When making adaptations to the lesson plan, there are some relevant aspects to consider. For instance, Krashen (as cited in Ellis, 2012) stated

> [the] condition for language acquisition to occur is that the acquirer understand (via hearing or reading) input language that contains structure 'a bit beyond' his or her current level of competence . . . If an acquirer is at stage or level i, the input he or she understands should contain i+1. (p. 295)

When enabling students with i+1, they start going forward as they learn the different components of the language. Moreover, input data exposed to students need to be far enough beyond their present competence as well as challenging so that progress can take place. The latter means that input data do not have to be too beyond (i+2) or too close (i+0) to the students' existing competence because learners might be overlapped or not demanded at any stage (Ellis, 2012, p. 295). When planning which type of input to use, it is not just the level of comprehensibility that is important but also the different ways in which students can process the data provided.

3. Main Body

The most relevant aspects pertinent to the methodology of this study and the data analysis are presented as follows.

3.1. Data Collection

To conduct this qualitative study, a set of instruments were administered in order to gather the information needed to analyze the problem under study and to provide an answer for the research questions. The instruments designed for such purposes are: observations, questionnaires, interviews, and documentary evidence. The questionnaires and observations are directed to both the collaborative teacher and the students. The instruments are administered to students from groups 9-5 and 9-6 at Pérez Zeledón Night High School within

a period of a month, approximately. These instruments are given to the sample populations during the class development for them to fill them out. Furthermore, the instruments are suitable for the purpose of this research by dint of their contribution to triangulation, which will provide support and trustworthiness to the results.

3.2. Data Analysis

This section aims at analyzing the different ways in which students from groups 9-5 and 9-6 at Pérez Zeledón Night High School receive input during the learning process that takes place in the classroom. Moreover, the researchers identify some of the most relevant disadvantages of the material currently used to teach a foreign language. Throughout the section, researchers provide a careful analysis supported by graphs, tables, and figures used to illustrate the data collected. Furthermore, this section attempts to provide a wider picture of what is happening in the English classroom, especially in night high schools environments, and how this can affect successful language learning.

3.2.1. Types of Input

Even though students from groups 9-5 and 9-6 at Pérez Zeledón Night High School receive both visual and auditory input, the one that prevailed during the research process was the visual input. In the questionnaires administered to students, it was noticeable that the great majority agreed on the fact that the didactic resource used the most by the teacher to provide input was photocopies (See Table 4.1). On the other hand, the questionnaire administered to the teachers of English also showed the prevalence of visual input, but mainly in the form of reading-writing exercises.

Furthermore, researchers identified the lack of auditory input during most of the classes observed since the teacher stuck to the use of copies of the didactic unit compiled by herself. This material was used throughout the development of every class witnessed during the investigation process, except for two games and two listening activities. These aspects show negligence to the other skills and little relationship with the approach promoted by the Ministry of Public Education (MEP), the Communicative Approach, which states that the goal of language instruction in high schools is successful communication in real life situations outside the classroom (2005, p. 14). To achieve a balanced class in terms of input, oral tools such as videos, songs, and educational audio tracks, ought to be used along with the visual material. Reason why, even when photocopies do provide visual input, there are plenty of sources (posters, flashcards, presentations, etc.) that can fulfill such purpose.

3.2.2. Advantages and Disadvantages of the Teaching Material

The material instructors use to provide input has both positive aspects and downsides. One advantage that emerged during the interview performed to the teacher is that "they get new learning which helps them [students] to put into practice in the real life, in different situations" (V. Vargas, personal communication, October 11, 2013). In contrast, one disadvantage expressed by the teacher was that "they [students] need more technological tools to get and improve their input" (V. Vargas, personal communication, October 11, 2013).

The former shows that the instructor had a defined goal when she designed her teaching material, and the latter entails that the teacher is aware of the weaknesses of the material she uses. In the same way, the artifact collection instrument also showed that since exams focus on the reading skill, the teaching is mainly based on reading exercises, which lack dynamism and balance in every stage of the lesson plan. Contrary, thorough the observations, it was noticed that the material was useful whenever students needed to go back and forth as many times as it was necessary to complete the tasks solicited by the teacher. Two disadvantages discovered by means of the observations were that students tended to forget the copies at home and that learners went off-task very frequently because of the aforementioned lack of dynamism.

	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Almost Never	Never	No Answer
Flashcards	16%	12%	34%	19%	16%	3%
Copies	78%	9%	3%	3%	3%	4%
Books	0%	6%	3%	12%	72%	7%
Posters	6%	6%	22%	28%	28%	10%
MP3 Player	9%	19%	22%	19%	25%	6%
Computer	19%	3%	3%	16%	47%	12%
Projector	3%	0%	9%	34%	50%	4%
Dictionaries	16%	12%	25%	16%	28%	3%
Realia	0%	6%	12%	22%	56%	4%
Videos	12%	6%	16%	12%	47%	7%
Songs	22%	19%	25%	6%	28%	0%
Games	6%	16%	37%	22%	12%	7%
Body Language	19%	19%	22%	25%	15%	0%
Power Point/Prezi Presentation	3%	0%	16%	12%	67%	2%

Table 4.1 Students' Opinion on the Frequency of Didactic Resources Usage
Note. Responses gathered from the questionnaire for students in groups 9-5 and 9-6.

Regarding the disadvantages of the material that teachers use in the language classes, the most salient point in the questionnaire administered to high school teachers was face validity (See Figure 4.3) since the quality of the copies did not facilitate students learning process as the photocopies sometimes were blurry and thus difficult to understand, especially the images.

Figure 4.3 Teachers' Opinion on the Disadvantages of their Didactic Material
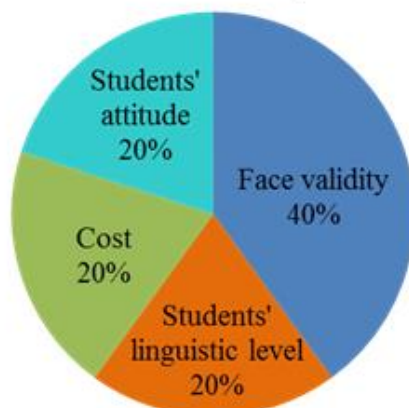
Figure 4.3 Information taken from the questionnaire for teachers.

The opinions of the students in regard to the different disadvantages of the activities used evidenced that for the learners the material is not understandable and complex. These factors reflect the need of constant revision and improvement of the material to satisfy students' needs and interests.

4. Conclusions

After analyzing the data gathered through the instruments chosen, the researchers could draw the next conclusions.

Even though peripheral learning is a great way to provide students with input, it was not present in the classroom observed; there were no posters or flashcards displayed on the walls. In fact, most of the activities developed in the classes that the researchers observed were based on photocopies, which lacked elaboration in their layout. The didactic unit that the teacher and students used was not balanced regarding the level of difficulty of the exercises; some were very hard to solve and others were too simple. The teaching activities did not enhance skills such as listening or speaking; they focused mainly on reading and writing. Moreover, several learners expressed that the way in which input was delivered was monotonous and not proper regarding students' linguistic level and learning styles. The teaching activities used to present the subject matter to students were almost always the same. The teacher based her classes mostly on the exercises included in the didactic unit, leaving aside other activities, such those that can be implemented through games, videos, or songs. However, a positive aspect was the fact that the didactic unit was designed by the teacher herself, thus, she had the opportunity to include activities that met students' linguistic needs. Nonetheless, based on the data gathered through the different instruments, this was not fully achieved. The use of audiovisual resources was not present at all during the classes observed.

Finally, the input given seemed to be comprehensible enough for students to be able to perform all tasks solicited by the teacher.

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Annexes

Natural Resources

Earth — Beach — Palm tree — Sand — Sun

Sea — River — Lake — Ocean — Waterfall

Grass — Cloud — Rainbow — Birds — Woods

Words in Context

You can use some branches to start a fire.
Near Pérez Zeledón, you can find the Nauyaca waterfalls.
When you get to the beach, you can see surfers on the sea.
There is no snow in Costa Rica.

A. Instructions. Read the text "Biodiversity in Costa Rica" and based on it, solve the exercises below.

Biodiversity in Costa Rica

Biodiversity is a resource with enormous potential, both for intellectual and economic purposes and as an instrument for a country's development. The tropical zones of the American continent (Neotropics), where Costa Rica is located, contain a greater diversity of species and ecosystems, as well as a broader range of interactions, compared with other tropical regions of the world. Obviously, this diversity is also much greater than that of temperate and cold regions. With a land area of only 51.100 km2 (0.03% of the planet's surface) and 589.000 km2 of territorial waters, Costa Rica is considered to be one of the 20 countries with greatest biodiversity in the world. Its geographic position, its two coasts and its mountainous system, which provides numerous and varied microclimates, are some of the reasons that explain this natural wealth, both in terms of species and ecosystems. The more than 500,000 species that are found in this small country represent nearly 4% of the total species estimated worldwide. Of these 500,000 species, just over 300,000 are insects. The institution charged with the task of administering Costa Rica's biodiversity is the Ministry of the Environment and Energy (MINAE), and more specifically to the National System of Conservation Areas (SINAC), which is responsible for the conservation and sustainable use of the country's biodiversity. SINAC has 11 Conservation Areas distributed throughout the country and is headed by a Directorate that provides technical support.

B. Instructions. Match the statements on the left with the words on the right. There are two options left. One option can be used twice.

1. It is a resource with enormous potential ( )   a. MINAE
2. This country contains a great diversity of species ( )   b. Biodiversity
3. This institution administers our biodiversity ( )   c. Costa Rica
4. This institution supports 11 Conservation Areas ( )   d. Water
5. It's one of the nations with greatest ( )   e. Cold regions
   biodiversity in the world   f. SINAC

Country: nation

To support: to sustain/maintain

Task: charge/job

C. Instructions: Read the statements below and choose the correct option based on the previous reading.

1 Biodiversity is a/an_____.

a. ( ) country b. ( ) coast c. ( ) resource d. ( ) ecosystem

2 SINAC provides _____ support to the Conservation Areas

a. ( ) technical b. ( ) little c. ( ) waters d. ( ) tropical

3 Costa Rica is located in the _____.

a. ( ) country b. tropical zones c. MINAE d. wealth

D. Instructions. Listen to the conversation and based on it circle the words you listen to.

climate raining

pants

wet

world hiking

act

sunny

wildlife

cloudy thing

problems

bear

funny

E. Instructions. According to what you listened, write a tittle for the track.

squirrel

brown deer

F. Instructions. Taking as reference what you listened to, unscramble the next words.

rhnoepb→ _____

nyuns→ _____

rabe→ _____

gininiar→ _____

ghinki→ _____

nowrb→ _____

nyufu→ _____

santp→ _____

etw→ _____

A-MAZE-ME

G. Instructions. Help the tourist guide find the tourists by drawing a path with your pencil. Trace a line on all the words related to technology and computers in order to reveal his path. You can only travel horizontally or vertically.

nature	river	principle	furniture	flower	roses
brown	lake	air	candy	tulips	apple
break	sea	waterfall	moon	morning	sunflower
paper	handkerchief	land	fat	work	Monday
wood	rose	swamp	island	skin	professor
today	door	yesterday	palm tree	nurse	realize
eggnog	apologize	sin	sunset	dawn	lawn
beetroot	share	rude	lilies	bed	grass

H. Instructions. Now, pick out three words from the maze and write down a sentence with each one.

→ _____

→ _____

→ _____

4 RS

Refuse

Reduce   Recycle

Reuse

Trash

To throw away

Tetra Pak

Cans

Styrofoam

Disposable Cups

Words in Context

Recycle: Save the planet.

Avoiding buying disposable cups for parties helps preserve the planet.

In order to help the environment, people can reduce the use of Styrofoam cups.

Throw out the trash.

A. Instructions. Listen carefully to the description of a paradise and draw every single item you recognize.

Paradise!

B. Instructions. Taking as reference the vocabulary from the previous activity, work with a partner and write down a 15-line dialogue

Writing a Dialogue

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Fauna and Flora around Us

Bear

Dog

Cat

Rat

Squirrel

Hen

Rooster

Worm

Ant

Plant

Tree

Branch

Leaves

Words in Context

My friend has 2 pets; a dog and a cat.
I don't like insects, especially worms.
To help the environment, you have to water the plants.
There are many ants in the tree.
There are rats in my house.

A. Instructions. Read the text "Conservation" and fill in the blanks by using the words represented through the images in the flashcards that are on the board.

Conservation

In the time it takes you to read this page, some 32 hectares of the world's tropical (1)_____ will be destroyed. The statistics defy comprehension. One hundred years ago, rainforests covered two billion hectares, 14% of the (2) _____'s land surface. Now only half remains, and the rate of destruction is increasing: an area larger than the state of Florida is lost every year. If the destruction continues apace, the world's rainforests will vanish within 40 years. By anyone's standards, (3)_____ leads the way in moving Central America away from the soil-leaching (4)_____ that plagues the isthmus. The country has one of the world's best conservation records: about one-quarter of the country is under some form of official protection. In 1992, Costa Rica received the Cantico a Todas Las Criaturas--"Song to all Creatures"--award given by the Franciscan Center for Environmental Studies, based in Rome; was one of three (5)_____ of the first environmental award presented by the American Society of Travel Agents; and was named the most environmentally conscious country in the world by the San Francisco-based News Travel Network: in April 1992, the National Biodiversity Institute was also awarded the Peter Scott Award by the International Union for the Conservation of (6)_____. Despite Costa Rica's achievements in conservation, almost the entire country has been deforested outside the (7)_____ and reserves, where deforestation continues at an alarming rate.

To defy: to resist

Apace: quickly; rapidly

Leaching: to empty; drain

B. Instructions. Based on the previous reading, answer the next questions.

(1) How many hectares did rainforests covered a century ago?

_____

(2) Is the rate of destruction increasing or decreasing?

_____

(3) Who gave Costa Rica the environmental award?

_____

(4) What did the San Francisco-based News Travel Network say about CR?

_____

(5) What happened in 1992?

_____

_____