

Degree on Primary Education

A comprehension or a communicative approach?

A feasible combination

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Abstract: There is certain grade of antagonism between the known comprehension and communicative approaches. The first one supports that to learn a language it is necessary to understand messages and the latter, that it is learned by using it productively as soon as possible. Although the arguments offered by the comprehension approach may be convincing and persuading, some questions and doubts about how its suggestions can be applied, come to my mind. In order to solve them, I carry out an analysis and comparison between comprehension and communicative approaches. Due to they are not enough to answer all my questions, I also need direct observation, teachers' and parents' opinion which I will obtain through questionnaires. Taking everything into consideration, I will try to discover or to elaborate an effective approach to teach English as a foreign language which adjust to the current situation of English education in Spain.

Keywords: communicative approach, comprehension approach, silent period, mother tongue, first and second languages (L1, L2), English as a foreign or as a second language (EFL, ESL), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), assessment, motivation, Total Physical Response (TPR), comprehensible input, notional categories¹, language target.

Resumen: Existe cierto grado de antagonismo entre los conocidos enfoques comprensivo y comunicativo. El primero sostiene que para aprender una lengua es necesario entender mensajes, y el último, que la lengua se aprende si se utiliza tan pronto como sea posible. Aunque los argumentos ofrecidos por el enfoque comprensivo puedan ser convincentes y persuasivos, me surgen algunas preguntas y dudas acerca de cómo aplicar sus aportaciones. Para responderlas, llevo a cabo un análisis y una comparación de los enfoques comprensivo y comunicativo. Debido a que éstos no son suficientes para dar respuesta a todas mis preguntas, también necesito observación directa y la opinión de profesores y padres que obtendré a través de una serie de cuestionarios. Teniendo todo esto en consideración, intentaré descubrir o elaborar un enfoque efectivo para enseñar inglés como lengua extranjera, que se ajuste a la situación actual de la enseñanza del inglés en España.

Palabras clave: enfoque comunicativo, enfoque comprensivo, periodo silencioso, lengua maternal, primera y segunda lengua (L1, L2), inglés como lengua extranjera o segunda lengua (EFL, ESL), método comunicativo (CLT), evaluación, motivación, respuesta física total (TPR), "input" comprensible², categorías nocionales, lengua de llegada.

¹ Time, location, frequency or quantity, are notional categories.

² Por input comprensible entendemos mensajes que se dan a los alumnos en una lengua extranjera, que entienden gracias a gestos, dibujos, sonidos, objetos, etc.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, it is usually claimed both by teachers and students of English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) that one of the best ways to learn a second language (L2) is using it as soon as it is possible. From this communicative perspective, it is believed that students will learn more easily a language if they produce it actively. As a consequence, lots of teachers try to get their students to speak from the first day of class.

However, some researchers, observations and studies of children's second-language acquisition hypothesize that the first phase of the language acquisition process, is a 'silent period' during which comprehension should be more important than production, with the aim of avoiding that students feel forced to speak in the target language and get stressed. Stephen Krashen is one of the most representative researchers of this theory and after having studied his theories I was bombarded with some questions I would like to deep in:

1. Should teachers let children be given a comprehensible input until they feel confident to start to speak?
2. How teachers could assess if their pupils are learning or not? It would be reasonable a written test? Or maybe assess them through "listen and do" tests?
3. How would parents and other members of the school react to the silent period?
4. Can teachers provide an authentic and sufficient input?
5. How should teachers teach grammar? Can students acquire the use of grammar rules through comprehensible input?
6. How can teachers motivate students?

In this paper I will try to answer these questions in order to conclude which the best methods to teach English are. To get this goal, I will focus on two opposite approaches: the communicative and the comprehension approach. I will start by searching through the literature concerning both approaches and then, I will analyse the use of these approaches within the real context of the Spanish School on which I am doing my School Placement.

2. Language teaching methods history

Language teaching methods history shows that there have been a large number of different theories about the acquisition of a second or a foreign language. Each one explains in different ways the process by which the second language is learned, although none of them has been recognized as a complete explanation yet. Therefore, there is an unresolved debate about how a second language is acquired. From my point of view, the revision of foreign language teaching methods history is an important issue to comprehend the current situation.

In middle Ages, Latin grammar was studied in the monasteries of Europe because it was the way people could access to literature, and little by little the use of translations became popular in learning other languages. During the 1600s, a large interest on learning languages, focus on form, grammar structures, repetition and memorization emerged; and at last, in the 18th Century, foreign language teaching was included in the scholar curriculum. The first influential method was the Grammar translation, derived from the mentioned method of teaching Latin and Greek throughout the middle ages. In the early 1900s this method was criticised because it did not promote oral communication, and as a result of this objection appeared the Direct Method, which promoted oral communication and gave grammar a second position. Despite of its advantages, this method was also criticised because students were observed not being capable of using what they learned in class in real communicative situations (Especially soldiers in the context of the Second World War). Consequently, the Audio-lingual methodology emerged in the mid 1900s, which consisted on learning grammar structures through repetition and drilling (Krashen and Terrell, 1983; Martín Sánchez, 2009). During the 1970s there was a communicative movement, since it has been believed that communicative ability is the main objective of foreign language learning, and educators started to question if their way of teaching was the right one to meet that goal. Some realised that students were able to produce sentences suitably in a lesson, but could not use them adequately when communicating outside the classroom (Littlewood, 1981; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In addition, the sociolinguist Hymes (1971) developed the concept of communicative competence as a reaction to Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence, saying that something more than mastering linguistic structures was needed to communicate effectively. As a matter of fact, we need to be able to produce grammatically correct sentences in the right context.

Another influence was the system of foreign language learning adapted to the communicative approach elaborated by the Council of Europe. This system declares that language learners should be taught notional categories. (Varela Méndez, 2003).

As a consequence of all this, during the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a transition from a linguistic structure-centered approach to a communicative approach, also called communicative language teaching (henceforth CLT) which claims that interaction should be the main objective and the principal tool in language learning. (Widdowson, 1990).

3. Communicative approach

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), some would say that CLT is a particular method of the communicative approach, with established classroom practices, but CLT is frequently characterized as an approach to language teaching. “One of the main features of CLT is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view, because its main goal is communicative ability” (Littlewood, 1981, p.1) He also explains that being the most proficient communicator does not always mean controlling the language structures, but being capable of processing the complete situation. It means, taking into account the context, the hearer, the knowledge that is shared between the speaker and the hearer, and being able to select the best ways to transmit the message effectively. So, the learner needs a range of strategies to use the linguistic items they already know in concrete situations. Nunan (1991) established the next five features of CLT:

1. *An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.*
2. *The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.*
3. *The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself.*
4. *An enhancement of the learner’s own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.*
5. *An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom. (p.279)*

Summarizing, language is learned in an environment focused on the learners’ needs and desires through interaction and authentic exposure to language; as well as the connection between the language as it is taught in their class and as it is used outside

the classroom. Its primary goal is to develop communicative competence, which according to Brandl (2007):

Encompasses a wide range of abilities: the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary (linguistic competence); the ability to say the appropriate thing in a certain social situation (sociolinguistic competence); the ability to start, enter, contribute to, and end a conversation, and the ability to do this in a consistent and coherent manner (discourse competence); the ability to communicate effectively and repair problems caused by communication breakdowns (strategic competence). (p. 5)

Similarly, Richards (2006) says that from CLT, language knowledge means:

Knowing how to use language for different purposes and functions; knowing how to vary our language according to the setting and the participants; and knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts; knowing how to maintain communication despite of having limitations. (p.3)

As a consequence, he proposes that the principal characteristics of CLT methodology should be:

- Focus on real communication.
- Learners should be given opportunities to practice what they know.
- Learner's errors should be understood as part of the learning process.
- Both accuracy and fluency have to be developed.
- As it occurs in the real world, the different skills should be connected.
- Grammar rules have to be induced or discovered, but not explicitly taught.

Due to its characteristics, CLT method helps students to build up their confidence and to develop language functions through a kind of activities focused on fluency and involving negotiation and interaction. So, the most used activities are managing authentic materials, scrambled activities, language games, role-play, information gap, pair/ group work, etc. (Larsen-Freeman, 2000)

- ❖ In the role-play, each student is given a situation they will have to perform in the target language. With children, you can propose "The supermarket". One student has a shopping list and he/she has to ask the shop assistant if he has the different things on the shopping list.

- ❖ Language games such as “solving the mystery” involve interaction between the members of a group. Each student has a paragraph or a picture which cannot let anybody see. She/he has to describe the other members of the group her/his card. Then, altogether have to solve a mystery.
- ❖ There are many types of information gap activities. One of them could be giving the students a list with different statements such as “_____ has a dog”, “_____ has two sisters”, etc., on which they will have to write the names of their classmates by asking questions one another.

4. Comprehension approach

During the 70s and 80s, communicative methods were being developed and more clearly defined. Then, a number of alternative methods began to emerge. Some of them are comprehension-based methods such as the Total Physical Response (TPR) or the Natural Approach (Brandl, 2007).

These methods and its ideas are related to the Comprehension approach. It is called the Comprehension Approach because it gives much importance to listening comprehension, instead of asking students to speak from the first day. This approach declares that speaking ability will appear spontaneously when the learner has internalized the way on which the target language works, as it happens with the mother tongue. (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

While some researchers claim that linguists such as Harris Winitz, Stephen Krashen, Tracy D. Terrell and James J. Asher based their work on the communicative approach (see Varela Méndez, 2003; Krashen & Terrel, 1983), others associate them to the comprehension approach (see Wikipedia, online³; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Zyzik, 2010) due to the emphasis they give to understanding.

Total Physical Response (henceforth TPR)

Asher (1969) claims that only one of the four language skills should be taught in the first phase of the learning process due to the short time available on school training, and it should be listening fluency. He founded this method in order to make listening comprehension of a foreign language more similar to the way children seem to learn their first language. So, in TPR students respond physically to given commands in the target language. The learning process begins with one-word commands and then, the

³ In http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comprehension_approach

utterances should become morphologically and syntactically more difficult. He reasons that TPR provide students with the opportunity to improve their ability to understand a second language in a non-stressful environment. It is possible due to the L2 is understood from objects and realistic situations and because students can start speaking when they feel enough confident.

Finally, students learn grammar in context in an inductive way (Varela Méndez, 2003).

Self instructional program and The Comprehension Method

The self instructional program was developed by Winitz and Reeds during the mid 1970s as they claimed that a certain quantity of comprehension must be developed before production. In the self instructional program students have to select the correct picture from some alternatives provided, through listening to words, phrases and sentences. These pictures and audio recording are provided by "*The Learnables*" (Winitz, 1981). He developed the Comprehension method, declaring that only after understanding a language, fluency will be developed. In this method, meanings are explained through actions or pictures and grammar rules are not explicitly explained, but students can become aware of them thanks to exposure to language.

The students are asked to answer in some way, such as pointing to described pictures, showing they understand the language they are listening to, but they are not asked to speak (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Natural approach and Monitor Model Hypothesis

The called natural approach is a language teaching method developed by Krashen and Terrel in 1983. Although the Natural Approach makes use of small group and pair activities, which are usually found in the Communicative Approach, it shares some principles of the Comprehension Approach: 1) Students are given large quantities of input which are understood through realia, pictures, etc. 2) Production is limited in initial phases. 3) Errors are not usually corrected, except when they obstruct comprehension (Zyzik, 2010). Because of this, and due to the first principle of the Natural Approach is that comprehension precedes production, I would say this method is bound to the Comprehension Approach. It rests on the Monitor Model Hypothesis, which is based on the following ideas (in Krashen 1981, 1982, online⁴, and Krashen and Terrel, 1983):

⁴ In <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiTsdURreug>

1- Acquisition is an unconscious process in which the main target is communication; whereas learning is conscious, which means knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them.

2- Language learners will try to control their output if they are aware of language rules and if they are too concerned with editing their output. Depending on this, there are three types of monitor learners: some who do not use their knowledge (underuser), some who use it properly (optimal), and some who are so obsessed with the rules that they can obstruct fluency (overuser).

3- There is a logical order to acquire grammar structures for both L1 and L2 learners. There was a research whose results revealed the presence of a natural order to acquire English as a second language regardless of the first language.

4- We acquire a language when we understand messages with a structure slightly higher level than the level we have. This is possible thanks to gestures, pictures, use of the context, extra-linguistic information and our knowledge of the world. This is called comprehensible input. Therefore the aim of the classes should be to provide a comprehensible input for students, so they can understand the language outside the classroom. Language learners need to pass across a silent period during which they get comprehensible input via listening and they build up competence until they feel prepared to start to speak. Speaking ability emerges when enough competence has been developed and according to the Natural Approach, teachers should let production emerge in the next stages: at the beginning, students give nonverbal answers, then students respond with a single word, in the next stage students combine two or three words making phrases, then they are able to elaborate sentences, and finally, more complex discourse appears.

5- Being motivated, self-confident, self-esteem and low-anxiety are important points to internalize a language and this is called Affective filter hypothesis. To get students are relaxed, teachers should allow them to be silent in class.

Finally, Krashen's ideas are not limited to oral input, but they have been also applied into reading programmes (Zyzik, 2010).

Delayed Oral Response Approach

In this method, Potovsky (1974) proposes the replacement of oral practice for written responses. His experiments with writing as a significant and non-verbal response show

that a better command of the language is acquired if oral practice is not present in the early stages of learning. He argues that in classes where students are producing language, they can hear themselves more than the teacher, even if they are speaking in their mother tongue. Additionally, Postovsky (1982) mentions this method facilitates avoiding interference, which usually occurs when students who are not ready to produce are asked to do it.

Lexical Approach

The lexical approach was developed by Michael Lewis during the 1990s. This method is focused on the quantity of comprehensible input students are exposed to, rather than on students' production. Especially at lower levels, students are exposed to large amounts of language, while they are not required to produce any verbal response. Instead, they do exercises which make them noticing multi-word lexical features of the language, such as "I see what you mean", "From my point of view", etc. which are called lexical phrases (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). The methodological principles are emphasized on receptive skills, vocabulary is learned in context, and teachers should act as a receptive and extensive model (Lewis, 1993).

All in all, I could say that the most common activities within the comprehension approach are "listen and do" activities, pointing the correct option, matching columns, gap-activities, performing actions, miming songs, and watching videos and films.

- ❖ Listen and do activities like "Simon Says". Teachers say some commands and students obey only when preceding the command, the teacher says "Simon says". For example, Simon says "jump", and they jump.
- ❖ Listen and point the correct picture, word, colour, number, etc. Other similar exercises are matching columns depending on what you hear, or fill in the gaps with the pictures/words listened. You can also do the same activities with reading.
- ❖ Performing or miming songs or stories that we are listening or reading.

5. Some criticism to the comprehension approach

During the early 1980s, Krashen's ideas on acquisition were the most considered and trendiest (VanPatten and Benati, 2010). Due to this theory is based on the observation of how children acquire their mother tongue, that is first comprehension and later production, quite a few Second Language teachers and methodologists agree that in

the initial phase of language learning, students should not be required to respond in a target language but should concentrate on comprehension. However, there are some researches who perceive some weaknesses within the comprehension approach.

Verspoor, Lowie and De Bot (2009) claim that the relationship between input and learning may not be as clear as it is sometimes believed, but the input needs to be processed to lead to acquisition or learning. Besides, the same input is not processed in the same way by all learners and these authors also say that language learning is an interactive process. They question the possibility of acquiring effectively a second language only through meaningful input and without being provided with opportunities for output or interaction. In the same line, they also doubt that an approach that only consists on input can be as efficient as one that links input, interaction and output. Summarizing, they claim that interaction, output and feedback may be needed for accuracy in the output. According to McLaughlin, Rossman and McLeod (1983), students are able to process only a part of the whole input they are given. In compensation, they need imitation, repetition and practice to develop the language skills.

VanPatten and Benati (2010) say that any focus on language instruction must consider what we already know about SLA. If as Krashen (1981) proposes, particular linguistic structures are acquired in a particular order, they ask:

What is the purpose of instruction on those same structures? If an instructor believes he or she can get learners to learn something early that is normally acquired later in acquisition, is that instructor making the best use of his or his time? When researchers in instructed SLA choose to examine the effects of formal instruction, how do they select the linguistic features and why do they select the ones they do? (p. 6-7)

Should we teach language structures in the order in which they are acquired? Because these structural elements are acquired in a fixed order anyway, should we forget about teaching them altogether and just let them emerge on their own? (p. 6)

What is more, if all learners needed was exposure to input, why were so many L2 learners non-native-like after so many years of interaction with the language?" (p. 4)

As a result of all this criticism of the Comprehension Approach, during the 1990s some new theories were developed: noticing, the Output Hypothesis and the Interaction Hypothesis (VanPatten and Benati, 2010).

Output Hypothesis

The output hypothesis by Merrill Swain claims that language production, whether oral or written, is also part of the learning process of a second language (Swain, 2000). Constant practice facilitates students to notice the gap between what they should know and what they are capable of transmit, so they can modify their output and learn something new about the language. So this theory adds the necessity of implementing and improving speaking and writing skills to the Input Hypothesis by Krashen and says that they all could be clustered, in order to give students all they need to transmit meaning and to communicate their ideas. This theory also says that students need collaboration and interaction to feel comfortable and relaxed in the second language classroom.

Interaction hypothesis

According to Long (1996) his interaction hypothesis states that face to face interaction facilitates the development of linguistic competence. Similarly to Krashen's input hypothesis, the interaction hypothesis claims that comprehensible input is important for language learning. In addition, it claims that comprehensible input efficiency is greatly enhanced when learners have to negotiate for meaning, which according to Ellis (1997) consists on trying to solve a misunderstood due to a communication problem.

Noticing hypothesis

Schmidt (1990), states that learners cannot learn the grammatical features of a language unless they notice them, and to notice them, they must pay attention to the input in a global sense, including those characteristics about the language system. In this way, learning process is not an unconscious process.

Finally, in the 1990s emerged Sociocultural Theory, which "sites the learner as an active agent in learning within particular social contexts" (VanPatten & Benati, 2010, p. 5)

6. A comprehension or a communicative approach?

After having analysed and compared comprehension and communicative approaches, I recall my preliminary questions in order to give them an answer.

1- Should teachers let children be given a comprehensible input until they feel confident to start to speak?

According to Krashen (1981) influence from the mother tongue is occurred when the learner has not acquired the second language or he has not been given enough comprehensible input yet when he is forced to speak. He also says that real language acquisition develops slowly; speaking skills emerge later than listening ones, and highlight the necessity of the silent period (Krashen, 1982). I believe it is difficult for teachers to apply this knowledge to their classes if they need some kind of assessment for their students. Furthermore, students will be with another teacher the next year who will demand them superior contents. So, should teachers let children be given a comprehensible input until they feel confident to start to speak? According to Winitz (1981), it is unclear how long the receptive training lasts, or how can it be related to production training. In natural environments, children usually start to produce in their mother tongue at approximately one year old and they are exposed to language all day. So how much time would need a child who is exposed to language only three hours a week at school? They would need around four years of receiving input without any production. Can teachers wait such a long time to get students start to produce sounds? Obviously, it is not viable. So, how teachers could apply this knowledge? How long should we wait? Apart from these questions, it is clear that the length of the silent period is determined by quite a few factors such as personality, culture, the mother tongue, motivation, etc. This means teachers also have the difficulty to adjust to all their students, because every student needs a different period of time. I will research on this topic by questioning some English teachers during my school placement.

2- How could teachers assess if their pupils are learning or not? It would be reasonable a written test? Or maybe assess them through “listen and do” tests?

Along this paper we have seen some strategies designed not only to avoid oral practice in initial phases but also to make students demonstrate their comprehension through a variety of non-verbal ways. In the case of Asher's technique, students respond physically, Postovsky proposes writing as a non-verbal response, in the Comprehension Method students choose correct answers by touching the panel; and in the Natural Approach, students can respond physically or by producing simple words

such as names or answering "Yes"/"No" questions, or even in their first language. Each teacher should choose a different technique depending on the class size, time available, students' interests and objectives, etc. This point seems to be the key to success in comprehension techniques instead of exposing students to authentic English without asking them any active response.

3- How would parents and other members of the school react if children did not produce any outcome during a large period of time?

It is supposed that if teachers have a teaching plan based on a consolidated theory their reasons should be respected. Nevertheless, parents, other teachers or headmasters sometimes do not let teachers do their job according to their own ideas. To answer this question, I will interview some parents who have children on primary school.

4- Can teachers provide an authentic and sufficient input?

Krashen (1981) believes that providing comprehensible input is the main point to teach speaking and he also suggests that the classroom should be perceived as an excellent place where students can get the input they need for acquisition and where there is not negative influence of the affective filter. But it may be doubt if English teachers in Spain can provide an authentic comprehensible model with native-like proficiency, so they may need tape-recorders and I believe that bringing native speakers to the classrooms could be a good teaching way. But so, what would be the teacher role? I will answer this question later, using the direct observation and the questionnaires results.

5- How should teachers teach grammar? Can students acquire the use of grammar rules through comprehensible input?

According to Krashen (1981) there is a determined order in which grammar structures are acquired. However, as I mentioned before, VanPatten and Benati (2010) claim that if it is true, maybe teachers should forget about teaching them and let them emerge. In this case, can students acquire the use of grammar rules through comprehensible input or through real conversations with native speakers? To answer this question, I will interview some English teachers.

6- How can teachers motivate students?

As I said before, motivation is an involved factor in the length of the silent period. Children acquiring language in natural settings seem to be strongly motivated because they have the necessity to communicate. However, it can be difficult that students have this necessity or desire to produce in a classroom. So, how can teachers motivate students? It seems obvious that teachers need to create an environment as natural as possible in which students feel the necessity to communicate as they feel when learning their mother tongue. To get this goal, teachers could try to make students believe that they do not understand when they speak their mother tongue. By doing this, they are not forcing students to talk, but they are eliciting them to do that. For example, if a student wants to go to the toilet but he/she is not capable of producing language, it is better he/she asks for permission through gestures than by using the mother tongue. After doing it some times, they may start producing language as it occurs in natural settings.

Sometimes it is difficult to pretend not understanding the target language due to the same teacher teaches different subjects in different languages. So, native assistants are a good resource in this sense.

7. Results of teachers' questionnaires

Due to the analysis and comparison of the two approaches are not enough to answer all my questions, I need direct observation and teachers' and parents' opinion I will obtain through questionnaires. Taking all this into consideration, I will try to discover or to elaborate an effective approach to teaching English as a foreign language which adjust to the current situation of English education in Spain. In Madrid, Spain, seventeen teachers and thirteen parents answered to the questionnaires attached at the end of this document.

The analysis of teachers' questionnaires shows that all the teachers questioned consider communication is an important goal of learning a language. A 76.5% of teachers agree that all the skills have to be worked on by equal and there is a 59% who believe that a determined order must be followed when teaching the different skills.

Regarding to oral comprehension, an 88% of teachers interviewed agree that it should be the first thing to be worked on, to make the second language learning similar to the mother tongue. In addition, a 76.5% agree on waiting the necessary time until the

student feel ready to speak the target language, and giving them a comprehensible input during this period of time. Only one of them disagrees with this statement.

On items six and seven, which are about assessment, a 47% of teachers would say that it is possible to assess a student, despite he/she does not produce any language output. There are only three teachers who disagree with this idea.

Concerning grammar, seven teachers do not think that students can learn grammar rules by having real conversations with native speakers, six of them have an impartial position, and four think they can. There are eight teachers who sustain that grammar is not fundamental and should not be one of the first things to be learned, whereas only two of them think it is.

Turning to teachers' preparation and teacher training in Spain, items 10, 11, 16 and 18 show that seven teachers think they do not have enough and quality information about different theories of languages, whereas five of them think they have it. A 70.5% of them consent that teacher training needs to be improved in the aspects prior mentioned; although a 76.5% consider having enough level of English to practise English teaching. Finally, all teachers questioned trust the importance of learning and practising English lifelong.

Items 12 to 15 reveal that seven teachers think native assistants are a good way of providing students an authentic and comprehensible input, while five think the opposite, and the rest have a neutral opinion. There are eight teachers who consider native assistants can offer individual aid and five teachers who sustain the opposite. There are four teachers with neutral opinion. Therefore, there is a 59% who say that native assistants are a useful resource, and finally, there is a 70.5% who disagree that native assistants have to be more active than teachers during the classroom.

Moreover, there are five teachers who state exams are not a fundamental basis of teaching, six teachers with unbiased opinion, and six of them who declare exams are a fundamental part of teaching.

As diagram 1 shows, there is a 88% who deny using the mother tongue frequently; a 70.5% who accept using it as little as possible, a 41% who agree with the idea that mother tongue can only be used by students, but not by teachers, and a 35% with the idea that mother tongue should never be used neither by teachers nor by students.

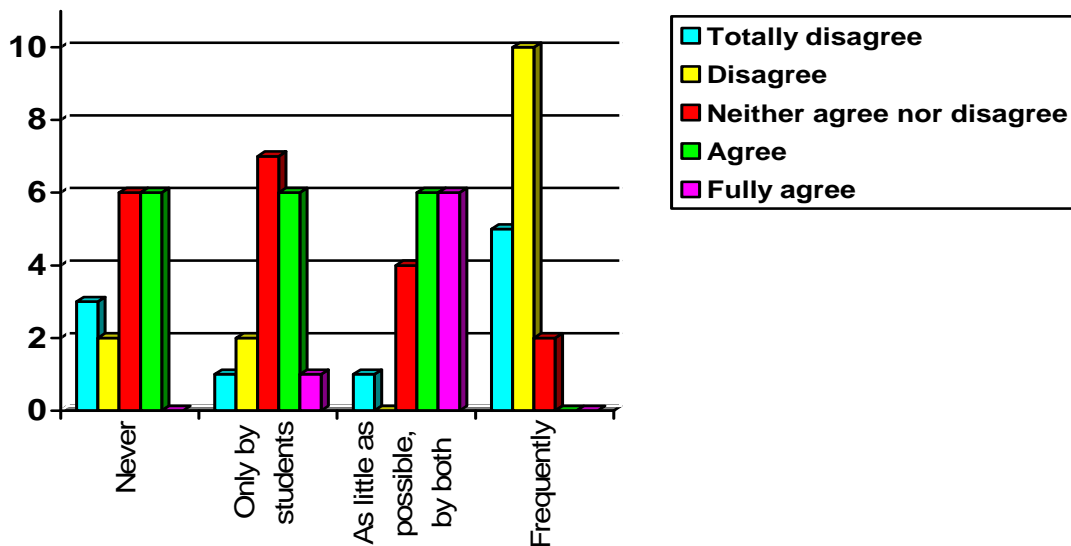


Diagram 1.

This diagram shows the opinion of teachers about the use of the mother tongue in the English classroom.

8. Analysis of teachers' questionnaires and observation

All things considered, I would answer question one⁵ by saying that according to English teachers, although communication is one of the main goals of learning a language, oral comprehension has to be the first thing to be worked on, and students have to be given enough time to feel confident to start to speak. Teachers are able to provide such time because in spite of exams are considered an important part of the teaching process; students can be assessed without producing language. However, teachers agree that all the skills are equally important. So, the silent period cannot be forever. Furthermore, they preserve the moderate use of mother tongue by both, teachers and students, which oppose to the theory that teachers must not use mother tongue in order to expose students to a comprehensible input as long as possible.

Regarding to question four⁶ a 76.5% of the teachers questioned consider they have enough level of English to practise English teaching and some of them doubt if native assistants are a good way of providing students an authentic and comprehensible input. However, I have known some English teachers who are not capable of expressing themselves in English, or giving instructions to students in English. What is more, I have noticed grammar, spelling, vocabulary and pronunciation errors

⁵ Should teachers let children be given a comprehensible input until they feel confident to start to speak?

⁶ Can teachers provide an authentic and sufficient input?

sometimes. Due to these reasons, I do not think all English teachers can provide a good comprehensible input for students. From my point of view, these teachers should use tape-recorders more often than they actually do, or accept native assistants being more active than themselves during the English lessons, instead of using them as individual aid-providers. Besides, as they agree, they should try to improve their English lifelong.

Finally, concerning to question five⁷ the majority of teachers claim that grammar is a fundamental part of the language learning, but there are more teachers who do not think students can learn grammar rules by having real conversations with native speakers, than teachers who think the opposite. Due to these results it seems that teaching grammar is important and it cannot be effective through real conversations. So I propose introducing grammar structures in the “natural” order throughout listening activities and then, work on them as it is usual with vocabulary.

9. Results of parents' questionnaires

The analysis of parents' questionnaires shows that all of them give lot of importance to the fact that their children learn English as a second language at school. The majority of the parents questioned are comprehensive to the assumption that their children were not able of saying a word of English after a month or more of school. An 85% of them would think that their children would have learnt other things such as listening or reading, and they would learn to speak later. There is only one of them who would think their children would not have learnt anything and she would go to talk to the teacher.

Furthermore, if the teacher talked to them about silent period hypothesis⁸ a 54% of parents questioned would feel more confident and would understand and respect teacher's reasons. There are two parents who understand the theory but think there is not enough time at school to practise it and other two parents who are not sure if the theory would work properly. As a consequence, there is a 54% who definitely would not complain the headmaster and a 38.4% who are not likely to complain the headmaster. There is only one of them who would consider the possibility of complaining.

⁷ How should teachers teach grammar? Can students acquire the use of grammar rules through comprehensible input?

⁸ Silent Period hypothesis says that on first place, children should be given a considerable amount of comprehensible input to make the learning process similar to the mother tongue one. After a silent period, children will start to produce language. However, if children are asked to produce before being exposed to enough quantity of comprehensible input, they may get confused and they may not speak the foreign language in a natural way, but transferring the structures of their mother tongue.

Finally, if they were in the opposite situation⁹ a 54% of them would try to calm their children showing that their classmates are in the same situation; two of them would take their children to extra curricular classes; and three of them would go to ask for advice to the teacher.

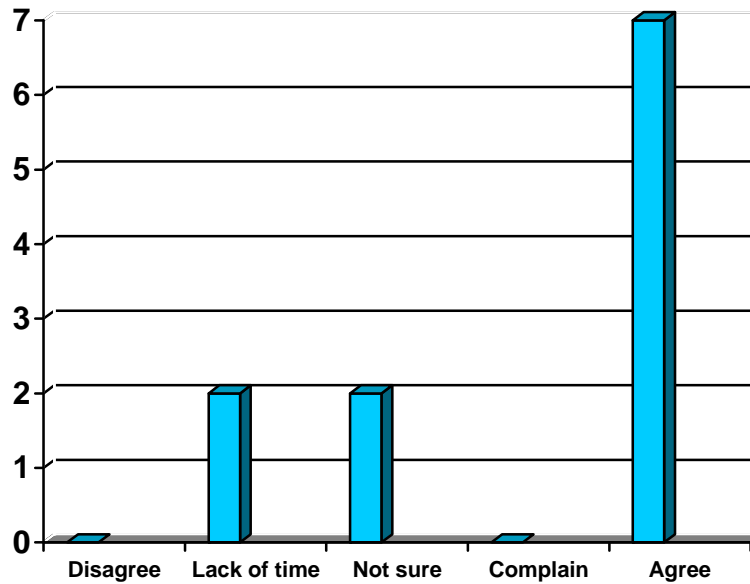


Diagram 2.

This diagram shows that 7 parents agree with silent period hypothesis. Two think that there is not enough time at school to practise it and other two are not sure if it would work.

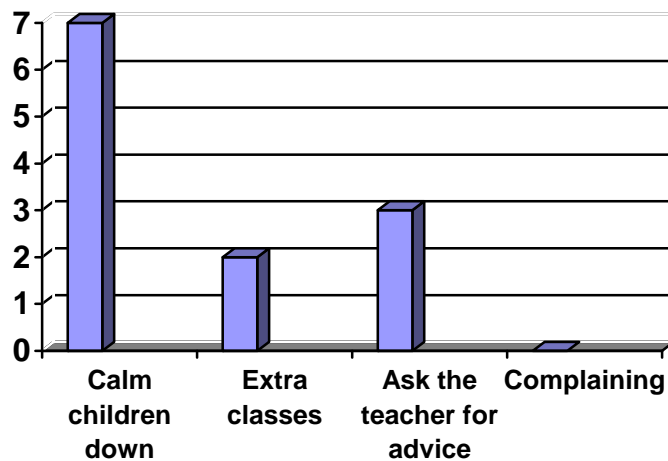


Diagram 3.

This diagram shows that 7 parents would calm their children down if they got stressed each time they were asked to speak the foreign language. Two of them would pay extra curricular classes and other three would go to ask the teacher for advice

⁹ Their children are afraid of speaking English at school, they feel nervous and they are not able of producing any output. They do not want going to English lessons any longer.

10. Analysis of parents' questionnaires

Considering the results, it seems that parents are comprehensive and open-minded to the teacher's methodologies. There is only a parent who would go to talk to the teacher and as diagram 2 shows, after the teacher's explanation the majority of them would calm down. So, answering question three¹⁰ it seems that parents would not combat teachers, giving them the opportunity to carry out a methodology based on the theory mentioned. What is more, there are more parents who would go to talk to the teacher in the opposite situation (if their children were asked to produce early) as diagram 3 shows.

11. A feasible combination

Taking into account the revision of language teaching methods history, the description and analysis of both communicative and comprehension approaches, the criticism of the latter, the real observation and the results of questionnaires to teachers and parents, I suggest a feasible combination, which fix to the reality of schools in Spain.

In my opinion, when children are starting to learn a foreign language, they need to be exposed to a large quantity of comprehensible input. In this period of time, the teacher should use as resources as he/she can such as videos, songs, gestures, native speakers, films, recordings, pictures, games, etc. During this period, assessment has to be focused on comprehension skills. Teachers can evaluate their students through "listen and do" tests, pointing, colouring, drawing or numbering tests, or activities which involve physical movement. The key is to make the input comprehensible for the students and also to choose the optimum mode of non-verbal response according to the age and learning styles of students.

Although production is not assessed during this period, teachers can evaluate it in an implicit way. This means, not forcing students to speak but eliciting and giving them many opportunities to do that and observing and noticing each student's progress. Teachers can do that by pretending not to understand the mother tongue, or using native assistants in this way. When the teacher notices that almost all the students are able to produce some output, he/she can start to propose activities which require or suggest students' production. It does not mean starting by doing oral tests or asking students one by one, but propose activities or games in which they need to speak with

¹⁰ How would parents and other members of the school react if children did not produce any outcome during a large period of time?

their partners. In this context, they will feel much more confident than speaking in front of the entire classroom. Therefore, they will not lose the confidence they have got during the silent period. A representative activity of this could be the next game:

Name of the game: Anything goes!

- **Objective:** Guessing all words as each team can. The team that guesses more words will be the winner.

- **Game development:** Players divide into equal groups or teams. One player of any team takes a card which contains a word. For example: "bird". The player has to give their partners as tips as possible in order they guess the word. He/she can use gestures, sounds, drawings or definitions/ descriptions in the target language. The team that guesses more words in a minute gets a goal.

- **Equipment:** Word cards

- **Rules:** mother tongue cannot be used. Each team has a minute during which they have to guess as much words as they can. Then the other team goes. The first team to get 10 goals wins the game.

The teacher must take notes about each student's progress, and oral skills could be reflected (always as a positive aspect) in the final marks. Later, when the teacher considers that there are no students incapable of produce any language, communicative activities should be proposed more often, including simple questions to concrete students, which are going to complicate little by little and to be evaluated in a more explicit way.

Therefore, teacher starts from a comprehensive approach in order to get, little by little, to a communicative one. Students are going to perceive a comprehensive environment, where they feel relax and motivate, but they are going to be implicitly exposed to the need of communicating in the target language. To get this goal, teachers should avoid using the mother tongue as much as possible. Students have also to be exposed to written materials such as posters or subtitles in videos. In this way, they are going to notice the relationship between the pronunciation and the spelling of words. Later, they will start to write.

Regarding to grammar structures, they can appear implicitly in listening activities according to the "natural order" hypothesis. In this way, students will be exposed to grammar in the same way they are in their mother tongue. Later, when they are capable of speaking and writing, grammar should be studied as it happens with mother tongue at school. There is a large quantity of available material that teachers can use

with this purpose. For example, it can be found at youtube (online)¹¹ a cartoon series called “Gogo’s adventures” that shows the story of Gogo, an extraterrestrial guy who meet some children and learn the language in a natural way. Each chapter is about different grammar and vocabulary items and it includes the previous ones.

Applying this approach, teachers would respect the different stages of language acquisition mentioned by Haynes (2007). The first stage is called preproduction and it refers to the silent period, during which students acquire language but they do not produce or they only repeat. Then, children pass to an early production stage, during which “students will develop both a receptive and an active vocabulary of about 1,000 words”. In this stage students “can usually speak in one or two word phrases”. Then, they pass to the speech emergence, when they can communicate using simple phrases and short sentences. The stage four is called intermediate fluency, and during it, students are supposed to begin using more complex sentences to express their opinions. Finally, they get to the advanced fluency stage.

12. Conclusion

For approaches like the one I have suggested here work, it is necessary that teachers have enough and quality information about different theories on languages. If they had it, each teacher could analyse all the theories previously proclaimed and they could choose the one they agree more with or mixing them to adjust to the reality of their classroom.

However, the results of teachers’ questionnaires show that seven teachers think they do not have enough and quality information about different theories on languages, whereas five of them think they do. It also showed that a 70.5% of them agree that teacher training has to be improved in the aspects prior mentioned; although a 76.5% consider having enough level of English to practise English teaching. This means that the first thing that should be changed to carry on a feasible approach is to improve teachers’ training in Spain. For these reasons, even though this document is not about how to improve teachers’ training, I hope it will inspire language teachers to learn more about acquisition and to reflect on language teaching more generally.

Although these changes were carried on and teachers were much better prepared, there would be another problem. If each teacher chose their ideal approach, students would be exposed to a different approach each year, and in this way, it would not be

¹¹ In http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oo-0Dm4Gokw&list=PLhaEqlaBfANRpWcRju3pOf1NaHhp_5L4T

possible to apply an approach like the one I proposed. For this reason, I consider it would be better if the same teacher teaches the same group of students since they start to learn English until they finish primary education.

Nonetheless, it may be another controversial topic about English education. So, I suggest that all teachers in a school discuss and choose the best approach and keep it throughout time. It is the only way an approach like this one can work.

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14. Appendix

Este cuestionario de carácter IMPERSONAL y VOLUNTARIO sobre la enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua, está destinado únicamente a una investigación sobre la opinión general de maestros y profesores de inglés acerca de diferentes creencias y aspectos relacionados con el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera. Agradezco su participación.

EDAD: _____

Nivel educativo en que enseña inglés actualmente: _____

De las siguientes afirmaciones, rodee del 1 al 5 el grado de acuerdo o desacuerdo, siendo 1 (Totalmente en desacuerdo) y 5 (Totalmente de acuerdo):

1	Lo más importante en el aprendizaje de una lengua es saber comunicarse.	1 2 3 4 5
2	Todos los skills deben trabajarse por igual.	1 2 3 4 5
3	Lo primero que se debe trabajar es la comprensión oral, para que el aprendizaje sea similar al de la lengua materna.	1 2 3 4 5
4	Debemos esperar el tiempo necesario a que el aprendiz se sienta preparado para hablar en la segunda lengua. Durante este tiempo debemos proporcionarle un input comprensible.	1 2 3 4 5
5	No se debe seguir un orden concreto en la enseñanza de los skills.	1 2 3 4 5
6	No es posible evaluar a los alumnos si no producen lenguaje.	1 2 3 4 5
7	Es posible evaluar a los alumnos sin que tengan que producir lenguaje necesariamente.	1 2 3 4 5
8	Los alumnos pueden aprender las reglas gramaticales a través de conversaciones reales con hablantes nativos.	1 2 3 4 5
9	La gramática es fundamental y debe ser una de las primeras cosas en enseñarse.	1 2 3 4 5
10	Los maestros y profesores de inglés tenemos información suficiente y de calidad acerca de las distintas teorías de aprendizaje de la lengua.	1 2 3 4 5
11	La formación del profesorado debe mejorar en cuanto a los aspectos mencionados anteriormente.	1 2 3 4 5

12	Una buena forma de proporcionar a los alumnos un input comprensible y auténtico es con asistentes nativos en las clases.	1 2 3 4 5
13	Cuando disponemos de un asistente nativo su participación debe ser mayor que la nuestra (la del maestro/profesor) en la clase.	1 2 3 4 5
14	Los asistentes nativos son un recurso muy útil en el aula.	1 2 3 4 5
15	Los asistentes nativos pueden ofrecer apoyo individualizado.	1 2 3 4 5
16	Los maestros y profesores de inglés tenemos un nivel suficiente y adecuado para ejercer como tal.	1 2 3 4 5
17	Los exámenes son un pilar fundamental para la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera.	1 2 3 4 5
18	Es importante seguir aprendiendo y ejercitando la lengua que estamos enseñando, a lo largo de toda la vida.	1 2 3 4 5
19	La lengua materna no debe ser nunca utilizada ni por el profesor ni los alumnos.	1 2 3 4 5
20	Los maestros y profesores no deben utilizar la lengua materna, aunque pueden permitir que los alumnos la utilicen.	1 2 3 4 5
21	La lengua materna debe utilizarse lo menos posible en clase, aunque puede ser utilizada tanto por los profesores como por los alumnos.	1 2 3 4 5
22	La lengua materna puede utilizarse frecuentemente en las clases.	1 2 3 4 5

Este cuestionario de carácter IMPERSONAL y VOLUNTARIO sobre la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, está destinado únicamente a una investigación sobre la opinión general de padres y madres de niños/as en la etapa de educación primaria acerca de la enseñanza del inglés de sus hijos/as. Agradezco su participación.

SEXO: _____

EDAD: _____

En las siguientes preguntas, marque con una X la opción que más se ajuste a su opinión, o añada en caso de que sea otra la respuesta.

1. ¿Cree que es importante que su hijo/a aprenda inglés como lengua extranjera en el colegio?

Mucho

Algo

Poco

Nada

2. ¿Qué pensaría si su hijo/a empezase a dar inglés en el colegio y tras un mes o más de clase no supiera decir ninguna palabra en inglés?

No ha aprendido nada, voy a hablar con la maestra.

No ha aprendido nada, pero ya aprenderá.

Habrá aprendido otras cosas (escuchar, leer, etc.), no va a aprender a hablar.

Habrá aprendido otras cosas (escuchar, leer, etc.), ya aprenderá a hablar.

Otros: _____

3. Imagine que tras el supuesto anterior, usted va a hablar con la maestra y ella le explica lo siguiente:

“Hay una teoría que dice que la enseñanza de la lengua extranjera es más efectiva si se hace de modo similar al aprendizaje de la lengua materna. Es decir, lo primero que debe hacerse es exponer al niño/a a una cantidad considerable de lenguaje para que lo empiece a comprender, y para que posteriormente, tras un período silencioso, pueda empezar a hablar. De modo contrario, si exigimos al niño/a que hable antes de haber sido expuesto a una cantidad suficiente de lenguaje, es probable que se bloquee y que no hable la segunda lengua de forma natural, sino utilizando las

estructuras que ya conoce de su lengua materna y tratando de trasladar éstas a la lengua extranjera”.

¿Qué pensaría usted?

- No estoy de acuerdo, así los niños nunca van a empezar a hablar inglés.
- Entiendo esta teoría, pero en el colegio no hay horas suficientes de inglés como para ponerla en práctica.
- En cierto modo me convence, pero no estoy seguro/a de que vaya a funcionar.
- Me da igual lo que digan las teorías, no quiero que experimenten la validez de ninguna teoría con el futuro de mi hijo/a en juego.
- Ahora que conozco los fundamentos de la teoría, estoy mucho más tranquilo/a, y estoy de acuerdo con ella en respetar el momento en que mi hijo/a se sienta cómodo/a para hablar.
- Otros: _____

4. Tras el supuesto anterior, ¿iría usted a reclamar al director del centro?

- Sí, seguro. Casi seguro Puede Poco probable No

5. Imagine ahora, la situación contraria. Su hijo/a le cuenta que cada vez que le obligan a hablar inglés en clase, se pone muy nervioso y se bloquea, y que no quiere volver a clase de inglés ¿qué haría?

- Trataría de tranquilizarlo y hacerle ver que sus compañeros están en la misma situación que él, por lo que no tiene nada que temer.
- Contrataría un profesor particular o llevaría a mi hijo a una academia para que se soltara y perdiera ese miedo.
- Iría a hablar con la maestra para explicarle la situación y pedirle consejo.
- Iría a hablar con la maestra para quejarme de que obligue a mi hijo/a a hablar inglés si no está preparado y le pediría que le evalúe de alguna otra manera.
- Otros: _____