


The natural approach and its influence on basic communicative skills

El enfoque natural y su influencia en las competencias comunicativas básicas

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to demonstrate the effectiveness of the natural approach on the development of the basic communicative skills in the English Language teaching-learning process, in beginner students at the Language Center, Universidad Técnica de Machala, Ecuador (UTMACH). Therefore, a quasi-experimental design has been implemented using a pre and post-test design, and a control group; the sample comprised 54 students divided into two groups: the intervention (29) and the control group (25). A complete cycle was developed in the beginner students of the Language Center using the standardized UTMACH syllabus in the control group and the natural approach in the experimental group. The natural approach minimized the use of grammar and enhances teacher interaction with students as well as the interaction among students. The initial and final phases of the process were evaluated through the use of standardized tests according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The control group showed increase in writing and speaking, as well as in the total performance; the experimental group showed a significant increase in listening and reading comprehension, writing and speaking, also in grammar and vocabulary (even though it was not part of the main study) as well as total performance (Students T for repeated samples). Finally, it was demonstrated that the effectiveness of the natural approach recreated in the English teaching-learning language improved the development speaking and grammar and vocabulary (even though it was not part of the main study), of first level students of the Language Center significantly, a result that is confirmed by multivariate analysis of variant (MANOVA). Based on the results, it is concluded that it is possible to delineate concrete experimental studies that allow the acquisition of English in a certain number of classes so that it can be ensured that the modifications correspond to a randomly selected intervention program.

Keywords: natural approach, speaking, vocabulary.

¹ Method that is based on memorization and translation with behavioral techniques (Author's note).

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es demostrar la efectividad del enfoque natural en el desarrollo de las habilidades comunicativas básicas en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje del idioma inglés, en estudiantes principiantes del Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad Técnica de Machala, Ecuador (UTMACH). Para ello, se ha implementado un diseño cuasi-experimental utilizando un diseño pre y post-test, y un grupo control; la muestra estuvo conformada por 54 estudiantes divididos en dos grupos: el de intervención (29) y el de control (25). Se desarrolló un ciclo completo en los alumnos principiantes del Centro de Idiomas utilizando el programa de estudios estandarizado de la UTMACH en el grupo control y el enfoque natural en el grupo experimental. El enfoque natural minimizó el uso de la gramática y mejora la interacción del profesor con los alumnos, así como la interacción entre los alumnos. Las fases inicial y final del proceso se evaluaron mediante el uso de pruebas estandarizadas según el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas (MCER). El grupo de control mostró un aumento en la expresión escrita y oral, así como en el rendimiento total; el grupo experimental mostró un aumento significativo en la comprensión auditiva y lectora, en la expresión escrita y oral, también en gramática y vocabulario (aunque no formaba parte del estudio principal), así como en el rendimiento total (Students T for repeated samples). Finalmente, se demostró que la efectividad del enfoque natural recreado en la enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés mejoró significativamente el desarrollo oral y la gramática y vocabulario (aunque no formó parte del estudio principal), de los estudiantes de primer nivel del Centro de Idiomas, resultado que se confirma mediante el análisis multivariado de variante (MANOVA). A partir de los resultados, se concluye que es posible delinear estudios experimentales concretos que permitan la adquisición del inglés en un número determinado de clases, de modo que se pueda asegurar que las modificaciones corresponden a un programa de intervención seleccionado al azar.

Palabras clave: enfoque natural, expresión oral, vocabulario.

INTRODUCTION

A natural approach to foreign language instruction dates back to the middle of the 19th century. However, in UTMACH it has hardly been considered a method for teaching a foreign language. The teaching of English at the university level in Ecuador presents a problem: students of the Language Center at UTMACH fail to reach the required language proficiency standards because teaching methods most commonly practiced at the primary and secondary levels do not help students achieve basic communication skills necessary for university-level instruction. The teaching method used in most Ecuadorian classrooms is the traditional method of language instruction¹, not the natural approach.

One of the biggest difficulties a person exhibits when speaking their native language is speaking ability, and especially in public; speaking in public generates a series of anxieties, we have this sensation experienced many throughout our lives, whether in the classroom when doing a exhibition, to the teachers when for the first time we exposed our students to the development of a class, much more speaking a language that is not ours. As regards to listening

comprehension has it ever happened that while talking on the phone, on the other side of the line we hear a series of sounds that cause interruptions that does not allow us to understand the message of the interlocutor, something similar also happens in an apprentice of a foreign language when there is not enough exposure in the target language and instead the combination of L1 and L2 the student will not develop comprehension to its full potential auditory since the use of L1 becomes the psychological barrier to comprehension hearing.

On the other hand, the more you read, the more you develop written expression, the habit of comprehensive reading enriches creativity, increases vocabulary and in turn increases the writing ability. The students of the Language Center of the UTMACH do not meet the required standards because the methods applied in the teaching-learning process does not promote the development of skills on the basic communicative skills at the expected level of achievement.

By introducing the Natural Approach in English beginner learners, we will allow them to start to master the language naturally and advance in language learning without so many barriers such as, translations that slow down the process of thinking; grammar out of context, which make them worry about the way they are speaking or writing rather than giving a message that is understood; and the increase of the levels of anxiety while speaking English, the idea is to create an environment free of stress so that the students feel motivated while using the language, among others.

To solve this problem, the present project has been proposed, which constitutes one of the first studies on the natural method of language instruction from the experimental field in education sciences in the Ecuadorian context. Previous studies carried out in Ecuador that have used the same or similar experimental processes are unknown.

The objective of the study is to verify the effect on the development of basic communication skills using the recreation of the natural approach in teaching-learning of English language in first level students of the Language Center at Universidad Técnica de Machala. With the fulfillment of this objective, the purpose of the study will be achieved, which is: To improve the development of basic communication skills (grammar, vocabulary, use of English, Speaking, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension) of first level students of the Language Center, UTMACH.

In the pedagogical field, the novelty of this work is that its contributions could accelerate the learning process of the English language, exposing students to the target language and creating authentic communication needs. Since the key theory on which it is based is constructivism, it will help the student to fix knowledge in a natural, meaningful, and conscious way. Beneficiaries of the project will be teachers and students from the UTMACH. Teachers, by being able to apply an effective method for the development of these basic skills; and students, by achieving a better performance in the domain of basic skills.

In turn, to ensure that the findings obtained in this study are significant, we worked with an experimental group and a control group, whose members were randomly assigned; in this way, any type of bias in the development of the research was avoided. Likewise, the instrument that was applied has been validated by the Common European Frame of Reference, which ensures its reliability; while the statistical

analysis used parametric tests, which ensured the comparison of the respective performances. If Ecuadorian teachers at the UTMACH Language Center make a decision on adopting the natural approach, their students will have more opportunities to use the English language whenever and wherever is possible and not only for approving a test as a requirement to graduate from the university.

English language instruction in Ecuador

Learning of English in Latin America, according to Cronquist and Fiszbein (2017), is very low. The education system is simply not generating students with the necessary levels of English proficiency. This is due to factors such as lack of policies since only in six of ten Latin American countries investigated there is legislation that establishes the obligation to teach English in schools; only five countries have very well developed plans to improve the teaching of English; seven use a standard of measurement and set mastery goals for students; only two successfully implement English proficiency assessments by students; few countries evaluate the level of English proficiency of their teachers. All this allows us to observe that educational institutions in Latin America and Ecuador are incapable of ensuring the quality of English teaching and proper learning. In Ecuador, for example, the dominant teaching method is behaviorism, while the language skill that the curriculum emphasizes is grammar.

There is a lack of a cohesive approach to learning English at the university level in the region since English is not always compulsory at this level. Latin American universities have the autonomy to choose the languages taught, and the policies that govern their academic programs. However, most have not developed a cohesive strategy to regulate English programs at universities or universities' levels of English proficiency among university students (Miller et al., 2018).

In the case of Ecuador, it is necessary to reach at least a B1 level in English to graduate, although those who graduate from technical programs must reach an A2 level at least (Villafuerte & Mosquera, 2020). Unfortunately, information on compliance with these regulations is scarce. At the public policy level, to counteract this problem, as of 2016 the new Ecuador curriculum places English as a compulsory subject in public schools.

According to studies by the British Consulate (2015), Ecuador public universities also have an exit requirement for their undergraduate students: to graduate, students must demonstrate at least one level of proficiency of B1 in English; however, it is not clear how universities test their students to determine their levels of English proficiency. Some circumstantial evidence suggests that Ecuador public universities allow their students to meet this requirement by taking some classes in English. Teachers have a university degree in teaching English. The purpose of these classes is to help the student reach level B2; for which he will take an average of 8 courses, each with a 120-hour workload, divided into 7 weeks. The workload for learning English is 17 hours per week. It is taught: listening, pronunciation, vocabulary, explanations, descriptions, grammar, and conversation. Teaching methods applied are behaviorism, constructivism, and cognitive (UTMACH, 2020).

In turn, the methods used by university teachers to teach English in the first years are described below:

Ramos's (2011) research has determined that teachers rely on textbooks of repetitive activities, with lists of basic structures and sentence patterns inserted in the context. According to this author, not much work is done with current texts, but texts of the book are used, the purpose of which is to read with the new structures. Teachers seem not to be interested in their students' responses regarding the proposed work. When asking repeatedly without obtaining an answer, they are the ones who provide them and continue with another exercise. They acquire the role of model and propose situations for students to repeat, but they do not participate in class, so they do not receive an adequate correction of the tasks performed.

For its part, Flores, and Cedeño (2016) determined the methods used by teachers of the Institute of Languages of the Technical University of Manabí. A survey was applied to teachers, which revealed that the techniques and principles developed in the process correspond essentially to the grammatical translation method, which includes translation, grammar teaching, dictation, reading analysis, questions and answers, and composition writing.

Finally, Peña (2019), through an analysis of the English Section of the School of Languages of the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador, established that: instructors use a combination of methods that lead to different learning strategies. The cornerstone of his lessons corresponds to the communicative method, which is accompanied by learning strategies, such as using work equipment and brainstorming in his classes. In turn, the most relevant aspects of praxis, such as context, evaluation, and management, among others, are carried out correctly, since they promote the development of linguistic competencies. Students interact in spontaneous situations in their classes.

The Natural Approach

The natural approach arose from the experiences of Tracy Terrel as a Spanish teacher in California in 1977, in conjunction with her prior knowledge of the acquisition of second languages and the reinforcement of Krashen's contributions (Alcaraz et al., 1993). Together they created The Natural Approach in 1983 (Alviárez et al., 2005). Krashen established that explanations of grammar should be forbidden and activities centered more on their meaning than on their form; thus, speech could arise naturally (Abio, 2011). It is based on the communicative approach, which places greater emphasis on "the importance of input (more than production or repetition)" (Pikabea, 2008, p.150); that is, "students first listen before trying to produce language" (Rodríguez et al., 2017, p.20).

The natural approach emphasizes that the learner achieves understanding before producing speech (García et al., 2016). It pays greater attention to the "psychological state of the students" (Pikabea, 2008, p.150), and emphasizes the need for an appropriate learning environment (Escobar & Bernaus, 2001), to extent that the learner develops communication skills through exposure to the new language (Rodríguez, et al., 2017). The natural approach pays less attention to the teacher's monologues, and repetition, and pays more attention to the exposure of learners to language,

and the maximum use of a proper emotional environment for learning (Agudelo, 2011).

Teaching-learning of English as a second language, by natural approach, has these characteristics: i) teacher has a central role; ii) generates a constant flow of linguistic information; iii) provides extra-linguistic supports that facilitate interpretation; iv) develops a relaxed and motivating class environment; v) prepares content adapted to the needs and interests of students; vi) tries to make fewer corrections to students; vii) facilitates to the learners the reception of linguistic uses rich in variety, and quantity; viii) grammatical structure does not need an explicit analysis; ix) practical activities focus on understanding, and meaning; xii) teacher's presentation revolves around class objects, and contents of drawings; xiii) techniques applied are total physical response, use of mimicry, gestures, and the context to produce questions and answers (Moya & Albentosa, 2003, Ruiz, 2011, Agudelo, 2011).

Salopelto (2020) points out the four principles that guide the action of the natural approach: first is that understanding precedes production, that is, listening precedes speech. The second principle is that language production emerges in six phases: (1) responses using non-verbal communication, (2) one-word responses, (3) combinations of two or three words, (4) phrases, (5) sentences, and (6) more complex speech. The third principle is that any teaching program involves communicative objectives. Finally, the fourth principle is that the activities carried out in the classroom should promote the reduction of the affective filter of the students.

With this, the learner experiences a total immersion in the second language, applying strategies such as unique and exclusive use of the target language during classes, prioritization of work in pairs, use of visual media (glossaries, pictures, and photographs), and recreation of situations for the solution of problems: use of word games, dialogues, objects, and activities related to real-life (García et al., p. 63).

The natural approach, unlike the traditional methods, places less emphasis on teacher monologues, direct repetition, and formal questions and answers; it places more emphasis on exposure to the language, rather than practice, and on maximizing emotional readiness for learning.

Research on a natural approach to English language teaching-learning

A review of previous studies allows us to verify the effectiveness of applying the natural method in educational contexts: Praveen's study (2016) carried out in Tamil Nadu, India, concluded by noting that "the natural approach to teaching English is an effective approach, which advocates a natural and more important language of learning" (p.16). Mendoza (2016) conducted a study on the impact of the gesturing technique as a teaching method for the development of a second language, showing that there are effects of teacher's gestures on several words spoken by participant learners. The particularity of this study is that it focuses on a variation of the natural approach: the use of human gestures as communication tools. The investigation that constitutes a precedent to the present study is that of Yilorm & Lizasoain (2018): it showed that 95.8% of students improved their level of listening comprehension thanks to the natural approach.

Lizasoain et al. (2018) pointed out that, "It's my Turn", an ICT tool for self-learning of English as a foreign language

(ILE), is an effective ICT tool for teaching English in Chilean rural context. The limitation of this study is that the results obtained respond exclusively to the rural context where it was carried out; so it would be necessary to verify if the same findings are obtained within other environments. Torres et al. (2017) diagnosed the most used methods in the teaching of the English language in 24 secondary public educational institutions, in Trujillo, Peru, concluding that the grammar-translation method has consequences: demotivation, low level of development of reading skills, and fear of expressing oneself; that constitutes a clear difference with the natural approach.

Instead, Ferro et al. (2017) determined the effectiveness of the program "Speaking in the classroom" in the development of Speaking and comprehension of the English language in the second year of secondary education with application of the natural approach, finding significant differences in variables: expression and oral comprehension, corroborating the effectiveness of the program and demonstrating that participants improved significantly in pronunciation, grammatical and lexical precision, interaction, body expression, and communicative comprehension when communicating in the English language. Similarly, Matamoros et al. (2017) compared four of the most widely used teaching approaches in foreign language contexts: grammar-translation, audiolingual, communicative, and natural. Characteristics of each approach are related to how language is going to be used and on theoretical considerations that frame these approaches. They also emphasize that teachers of foreign languages proclaim themselves as dedicated to a specific approach; however, their teaching practice indicates otherwise. The comparison was limited to describing the particularities of each of these methodological approaches, not pointing out their differences, nor proposing

which is more effective in improving different dimensions of communication.

Research questions

To guide this study, the following research questions are proposed:

- What are the didactic and methodological strategies of the natural approach that best respond to the educational and cognitive needs of the language center students at the Language Center, UTMACH, Ecuador, to improve their basic communication skills?
- What impact does the application of the natural approach have on the development of basic communication skills in the first level students of the Language Center, UTMACH, Ecuador, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, use of English, reading comprehension, listening, written expression, and speaking?

METHODOLOGY

Design

A quasi-experimental design was carried out with a post-test, pretest, and control group, in which subjects were assigned at random (Hernández et al., 2010).

Participants

We worked with a group of 54 first-level students from the Language Center, UTMACH, Ecuador: 29 from the experimental group, and 25 from the control group.

Table 1

Evaluation criteria

| Dimensions | Content | Description | Score | Time |
|------------------------------------|--|---|-----------|------------|
| Grammar | 4 sections / 20 questions | Choose the correct alternative to complete sentences. Complete the dialogues with the correct form of verbs. Order the words to form sentences. Multiple choice: a / b / c | 20 | |
| Vocabulary ² | 4 sections / 20 questions | Identify vocabulary and write it in English. Discriminate the word that does not belong to a group. Read definitions and write the word. Choose the right option. | 20 | 30' |
| Use of English ³ | 1 section / 8 questions | Multiple choice | 8 | |
| Reading comprehension ⁴ | 2 sections / 12 questions | Read 5 paragraphs and assign the right title according to their content. True or false answers. | 12 | 20' |
| Listening | 2 sections / 10 questions | True or false answers. Fill in the blanks. | 10 | 8' |
| Written expression | 1 section / 1 question | Guided writing. Write an article for a website | 10 | 30' |
| Speaking | 2 sections / interview; collaborative task | Interview Conversation in pairs | 10 | 8'- 10' |
| TOTAL | | | 90 | |

² Words of a language, including single items and phrases or chunks of several words which convey a particular meaning, the way individual words do (Author's note).

³ This term refers to the ability to put into practice, lexical and grammatical knowledge of English. It is a clever mix of vocabulary and grammar that

assesses how well the elements of English are used in writing (Author's note).

⁴ Ability to read text, process it and understand its meaning. It relies on two, interconnected abilities: word reading (being able to decode the symbols on the page) and language comprehension (being able to understand the meaning of the words and sentences) (Author's note).

Table 2

Synthesis of natural approach strategies developed in the experimental group

| N° | Objective | Activities |
|----|---|--|
| 1 | To introduce themselves orally in the target language. | The teacher creates a print-rich literacy environment with the names of objects such as board, floor, desk, eraser, window, etc.; phrases such as I love English, Can I go to the bathroom please, slowly please, etc.; posters of class expectations and motivational; and word walls, etc. which invites and expose them to reading. The teacher says her name and asks what's one of the students' name, then the student says his/her name and asks a classmate about his/her name and continues so on until everyone has said his/her name. |
| 2 | To understand a conversation about people's countries and nationalities. | The teacher shows some images of some famous soccer players from different countries using the multimedia projector, asks them who they are, where they are, why they are famous, and names some Ecuador soccer players and what made them famous. The student's role-play was a soccer player and a reporter (they talked about countries, nationalities, and some other information). |
| 3 | To get familiar with a lexical set of personality adjectives by using short texts in conversation. | Play the game 'guess who' by describing the personality of an anonymous student in the class; the rest of the class has to guess who the student is, then, a student chooses someone to be guessed, everyone participates by guessing who the classmate is. Later, in pairs, they will have available images of some famous people to repeat the same procedure of the game. (They can ask for additional information they know about the character) |
| 4 | To tell information about a specific topic by using listening examples to maintain a conversation. | The teacher carries a walkie-talkie to the class. Several groups are assembled, and students in groups should leave the class and call the walkie talkie asking to be enrolled in the English course. |
| 5 | To apply some phrases in a form by reading some printed work to fill out a profile and medical forms. | The teacher asks students if they have been confined in the hospital and what they had to do previously. The teacher then shares an anecdote about her embarrassing moment while living in the USA for not knowing how to fill out a medical form and explains why is it important to know how to fill out a profile and medical form. Then students fill out forms. |
| 6 | To talk about imaginary jobs | Students watch a video in which several people introduce themselves to explain their jobs, then they ask each other about imaginary jobs. |
| 7 | To have a conversation in a pretend cafeteria. | The teacher installs a coffee maker in the classroom. Students must leave their glasses on the table that has been arranged for doing the activity. Then the teacher asks students to listen to a conversation about people talking in a cafeteria. Then they will pretend they are also in a cafeteria and will ask and answer questions about any topic. |
| 8 | To make students use words and phrases by employing an entry form example to write their examples. | The teacher asks students how they could take advantage of learning English in their working life. Most important thing is to find reasons why they should study English, including the need to pass the levels required. |
| 9 | To review what they have learned to receive feedback. | Students point out several aspects they have learned in the unit by playing the Who wants to be millionaire game. |
| 10 | To talk about daily activities. | The teacher tells a day in her life, then helps students to talk about daily activities they make in the morning, afternoon, and night. |
| 11 | To use possessive for asking and answering questions. | The teacher shows a cell phone to students and says, this cellphone is mine after she asks them, Whose cell phone is this? After a few attempts students say it's yours, then the teacher shows another object and tells them: This is my pen, it isn't your pen. Is it your pen? Yes, it is, or No, it isn't. Is it my pen? Is it her pen? Is it his pen? Is it their pen? Is it our pen? After students continue doing the same exercise, the teacher did with their object. |
| 12 | To have a short conversation about familiar topics. | Students have to plan their weekend, and do it with activities that can be rewarding both at the family level and the level of friends and academic activities, students make two itineraries one for Saturday and another for Sunday. |
| 13 | To give information about details of a family event | The teacher starts to tell the students about the last family meeting she had. She tells about all the fun activities she had in this family event with her brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, etc.; it's a meeting that they have agreed to hold every two years. Ask students if someone else has done this type of event, and students will talk about it. |
| 14 | To talk about food and cooking. | Students bring a food item stored in a Ziploc bag to the class. The teacher asks students to use it to indicate to their classmates where they bought it, and what do they cook with it. What are the ingredients to prepare their favorite food? They can also talk about prices. |
| 15 | To identify the different kinds of food by using quantifiers to talk about their preferences in eating. | The teacher plays a video of a summary of MasterChef (US) Season 8, Episode 3. Previously, the teacher guides the activity by reading a text about recipes. Then students make comments and discuss with their classmates about the video. |
| 16 | To ask questions about ordering in a restaurant. | The teacher organizes random groups. Each group has to become an international restaurant. The professor delivers a menu of international dishes and explains the content of the menus. |
| 17 | To talk about difficulties while ordering the menu at a restaurant. | The teacher asks students to explain which menu convinced them most was. Students talk about the main national dishes. Then she asks them to make a list of the main problems or difficulties they encountered at the time of developing their ordering activity with the waiter. Based on the errors that students themselves identified, they proceed to perform activities of listening, speaking, and reading. |
| 18 | To learn how to describe rooms and furniture in a house model. | Students create a model of their own house with all the rooms and the furniture, then they make a description in a paragraph about what their room contains. Additionally, students proceed to make an exhibition of their house model. |
| 19 | To have a conversation about address and directions. | The teacher asks students how to get to some well-known places for example a supermarket; the teacher gives a sketch of Cuenca in photocopies to students. Students can find out information from teachers to be much more surer that the place they indicate is appropriate. |
| 20 | To use vocabulary and phrases about places in a city. | A video of the city, in which several Americans talk about their testimonies living in Cuenca (a city from Ecuador is displayed. Students have to compare their cities and neighborhood with what is said about Cuenca and then decide whether or not they would live in this city. |
| 21 | To use what they have learned in the previous tasks to give feedback | Students present their project (A song, Tik Tok, role play, a video, a storybook, or just a game) from the topics learned before. The teacher adds additional information when needed. |

Continúa

| N° | Objective | Activities |
|----|---|---|
| 22 | To talk about family members by using a family tree to express opinions about them. | Students bring or show a family picture and talk about it, later they must complete a family tree of their family. Under the family tree, they must explain their family kinship. They have to expose even those family members who have already passed away. In the end, they must have built a hierarchical diagram explaining from grandparents to the last descendants they have had. |
| 23 | To use sentences in the past by talking about their childhood. | The teacher tells Selena's childhood, then she tells a story about her childhood, finally, the students are asked to talk about what they used to do when they were children and were in school. The teacher asks them what fascinated them most as children. |
| 24 | To ask questions for someone on the phone to maintain a phone call. | To make the communication seem much more real, students are asked to go to the open campus of the university and place themselves in various spaces in groups. The activity is similar to what was done with a walkie-talkie. Each group should call one another to hold a conversation about their favorite subjects and why do they like them? |
| 25 | To use linking words to connect ideas to write about life stories. | The teacher asks students to choose two important years of their life. They write their stories on a sheet of paper using linking words to make a storybook, then they socialize it with their classmates, and finally, they record themselves reading their own stories. |

Instruments

Instruments were designed using standardized tests according to the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR) for languages that will measure the basic communication skills developed in each consecutive level. Gateway 2nd Edition's "End of Year Test: Standard Level" test was applied, which contains 15 questions, divided into 7 dimensions: grammar, vocabulary, use of English, reading comprehension, listening, written expression, and speaking. The test includes the following activities: To choose the correct alternatives to complete sentences, to complete the sentences with the correct form of verbs given, to put the word in the correct order to make sentences or questions, look at pictures, and write the correct words, to read definitions and write the correct words. This is an open-access test, which was designed by The English Book Education which is an organization that has been conducting ELT Training sessions and conferences since 2007, to supply teachers with complete support by arranging teacher training sessions and conferences, led by highly professional teacher trainers. Text is included in the appendix section. Table 1 summarizes the content, description of the questions, score, and time corresponding to each dimension evaluated.

Procedure

Statistical analysis was performed in the SPSS 22 software; performance results in English were made through medians and standard deviations. Statistical tests to compare the scales of the experimental group with the control group were performed with nonparametric tests that are explained below each table, while parametric tests that compare means were used to compare performance. The level of statistical significance (two-tailed) was established at 0.050*, 0.001** and 0.000***.

Table 2 synthesizes the objectives and strategies of the natural approach that was carried out with students of the experimental group. Regarding didactic and methodological strategies implemented with the control group, another teacher developed these strategies, and limited herself to following a traditional method.

RESULTS

Descriptive

The age of participants is 19.65 years on average, there are no significant differences between the two groups since the experimental group is 19.39 years old and the control group is 20 years old. In gender, there are also many similarities between the two groups, so that the majority is made up of women and a smaller group of men (See Table 3).

Table 3

Age, and Gender

| | | Experimental | Control | Total |
|--------|-----------|--------------|------------|------------|
| Age | Median | 19.39 | 20.00 | 19.65 |
| | Deviation | 4.43 | 1.79 | 3.53 |
| Gender | Female | 20 (40.8%) | 12 (16.3%) | 32 (57.1%) |
| | Male | 8 (24.5%) | 9 (18.4%) | 17 (42.9%) |

Inferential

Next, performance results obtained before and after the intervention are presented in a group of 54 students, 29 from the experimental group and 25 from the control group. To facilitate the presentation of results all values were compared on 100 points (percentage relative frequency), which explains that the total is not the average of recalculated values, but the equivalent of 100 of 40 points (percentage relative frequency).

Table 4 shows the results of the control group. This group shows significant advances in some aspects. These aspects do not refer to grammar, vocabulary, use of English, or listening. However, as far as reading comprehension, written expression, and Speaking are concerned, significant changes are noticed, an increase of 17.89, 14.07, and 15.71 points, respectively ($p < 0.05$). Thus, an improvement is noticed in four of the eight aspects evaluated. These improvements have an impact on the control group's performance overall which increased significantly ($p < 0.05$) from 26.88 to 34.40 points.

Regarding the experimental group (Table 4), several significant changes are noted. The first refers to grammar (10.26 points), the second to vocabulary (18.79 points), the third to the use of English (7.76), listening comprehension (6.90), written expression (11.03 points), and Speaking

(36.38 points). Finally, there is an increase of 5.70 points ($p < 0.05$) in total performance. In short, it was found that the

experimental group increased in six of the eight aspects evaluated.

Table 4

General results

| Dimensions | Control group | | Experimental group | | p |
|-----------------------|---------------|-------|--------------------|-------|----------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | |
| Grammar | 2.80 | 10.21 | 10.26 | 11.94 | 0.017** |
| Vocabulary | 3.60 | 13.03 | 18.79 | 12.98 | 0.000*** |
| Use of English | 1.50 | 20.83 | 7.76 | 22.26 | 0.294 |
| Reading comprehension | 9.33 | 17.89 | 6.61 | 23.61 | 0.639 |
| Listening | 5.00 | 18.48 | 6.90 | 15.61 | 0.684 |
| Written expression | 14.00 | 14.07 | 11.03 | 11.45 | 0.552 |
| Speaking | 16.40 | 15.71 | 36.38 | 21.46 | 0.001** |

Verification of bivariate hypotheses of the study

H₁- Application of the natural approach recreated in teaching-learning of the English language has a significant impact on basic communication skills' development (average aspects evaluated) in the first level students of the Language Center, UTMACH.

H₀- Application of the natural approach recreated in teaching-learning of the English language does not significantly affect the basic communication skills' development (average aspects evaluated) in the first level students of the Language Center, UTMACH.

When evaluating the total percentage increase, it was found that the control group increased 7.52 points, while the experimental group reached 13.96 points, a difference that is considered significant, so the alternative hypothesis is verified and the null hypothesis is rejected.

Based on the foregoing, it is established that the natural approach in the teaching-learning of the English language has a concrete effect on the development of basic communication skills in first level students of the Language Center, UTMACH, Ecuador; these skills correspond to grammar, vocabulary, and speaking.

Table 5

Comparison of the performance improvement in communicative skills of English in the control and experimental group

| Control group | | Experimental group | | P |
|---------------|------|--------------------|------|----------|
| M | SD | M | SD | |
| 7.52 | 6.40 | 13.96 | 5.70 | 0.000*** |

Note. Student's T for independent samples. Sig. means statistical significance.

DISCUSSION

Studies on the factors that affect English proficiency at the university level indicate that adults require some explicit grammatical orientation (Oñate, 2016, p.66). However, the natural approach (Alcaraz et al, 1993; Alviárez et al., 2005; Praveen, 2016) manifests the need to completely replace the teaching of grammar with the teaching of meaning. Grammar is acquired inductively (Morales et al., 2000, Acosta & González, 2007, Mendívil & Horno, 2012), that is, in a process of interaction different from the explanation of the rules (Larsen, 2000). The group that worked with the natural

approach increased 7 points more than the control group. The students of the researched institution, who participated in a natural learning process, in the end, had a better grammatical performance, even without having received training in this area of the language. During the implementation of the natural approach, students have the opportunity to put their incipient grammatical knowledge into practice and to constantly refine it, without having to resort to memorizing grammar rules; rather, the use of these rules in real contexts allows them to identify the appropriate use of each one.

The most important finding was the increase in vocabulary in the group that worked with the natural approach. The students did not receive vocabulary training, but this appeared spontaneously in the work activities with the natural approach. It is considered that students can increase their vocabulary implicitly if they work at learning like children, who naturally acquire the mother tongue (Lizasoain et al., 2018). Consequently, the vocabulary cannot be understood as a list of new words that the student should know; worse still, a list of words with their translation in their mother tongue, but as part of a context through dialogues or readings in which the student strives to understand the meaning in the language they are learning (Cerdas & Ramírez, 2015). Carrillo & Ramírez (2008) maintain that the natural approach generates a very rich spontaneous lexicon. The importance of incorporating new vocabulary occurs when it is handled in an appropriate order, that is, the new concepts are acceptable in the context of student performance (Brown, 2001).

The natural approach suggests that the use of English increases spontaneously (Lebrón, 2009; Ortíz, 2014). However, 6 points that the group that worked with the natural approach has above is not considered a significant increase, so it cannot be emphasized that this variable is decisive (it should be noted that the use of English was 44 points in the experimental group and 50 points in the control group). Indeed, all studies on the natural approach argue that the medium is the use of target language in dialogues, anecdotes, discussion, and reading (language being learned) and do not support the use of mother tongue (Morales et al., 2000, Acosta & González, 2007, Mendívil & Horno, 2012). Consequently, better performance in the use of English is expected, an issue that cannot be confirmed with this study because evidence has not been sufficient.

Another aspect that could not be corroborated is that students would have an advance in reading comprehension.

In the present study, the group using the natural approach barely exceeded the control group by 3 points, a difference that was not considered significant as judged by test statistics. If the reading has not had a positive effect, it is expected that there is no favorable effect on written expression, which in the present case was also 3 points more in the control group. No wonder Arias (2013) argued that writing is a neglected skill in foreign languages. He is not the only one who supports this position. Dominguez (2008), argues that many methods of teaching a second language reject oral activities that the written aspect is irrelevant or secondary. This is based on the premise that writing is not a spontaneous expression of communication, so it requires putting into play reading skills and a wider knowledge of the target language (Ortega & Madrid, 2009).

There was also no significant advance in terms of listening comprehension since the group that used the natural method was only differentiated four points ahead of the control group. This receptive skill allows students to acquire information for better communication (Wallace et al., 2004). Although several studies argue that simultaneous work of hearing and speaking is essential (Córdoba et al., 2005), in the present investigation it was not demonstrated that results are correlated. In learning English as a second language, "listening comprehension in English is to create phonematic hearing in students and continue to develop it through all courses" (Abreus, 2010, p. 20). However, it should be noted that students usually heard a teacher or their classmates, that is, he used his hearing in context and did not give an academic test that involves hearing audio outside his context to decode and understand it.

The Speaking of students was a dimension that increased: those who participated in the natural approach obtained 20 points above those who did not (it should be noted that the use of English was 8 points in the experimental group and 20 in the control group). This has its explanation in that the natural approach tends to develop oral comprehension by resorting to the game, without this implying a distraction in learning processes, but a mechanism to achieve the purpose of speaking in a language that is being learned (Ferro et al. 2017).

In short, speaking increased the most with the natural approach, followed by vocabulary which also had a very significant increase. The third aspect is grammar. These three elements have an impact on the total performance of basic skills of language, which has increased 6 points above the control group (it should be noted that the use of English was 25 points in the experimental group and 27 in the control group). The present study confirms what, Ferro et al. (2017) with its Program "Speaking in the classroom" achieved by using techniques based on a natural approach, which showed an increase of 23.71 points, demonstrating that participants significantly improved in pronunciation, grammatical and lexical precision, interaction, body expression, and communicative comprehension when communicating in the English language. Other studies such as ELL found that the natural Approach, especially with gesturing technique, and Total Physical Response, "are effective and low cost" (Mendoza, 2016, p. 45).

It should be noted as a limitation of the study that it has not randomized the students of participating groups because it is a retest / post-test design in two groups randomly grouped by the administrative, non-pedagogical staff of the Language

Center Universidad Técnica de Machala. Therefore, the equivalence of both groups cannot be guaranteed so that the manipulation of an independent variable using a natural approach can be adequately controlled, therefore, for future studies, it is recommended to use pairing so that the control group is equivalent to the intervention group. Due to the range of age similarity, it is not possible to accurately determine whether age affects the learning of a second language.

CONCLUSION

The level of development of grammar, vocabulary, use of English, and speaking in the control and experimental group, before and after the first level, was evaluated through the use of standardized tests according to CEFR, finding that the experimental group increased significantly more than that control group. The level of vocabulary development increased five times higher in the experimental group than in the control group; development of language use was increased five times more than the control group; while the development of Speaking in the control group was double that of increase in score of the experimental group. However, the level of development of listening, reading comprehension, and written expression in both groups did not increase significantly, without being able to point out differences in scores of groups with the standardized CEFR test. Finally, significant improvements were noted in both the control group and experimental group.

It seems that the intervention process in the experimental group had a greater impact on learning English than non-intervention in the control group. Based on the results, it is possible to outline concrete experimental studies that allow acquisition of English in a certain number of classes, so that it can be assured that modifications correspond to intervention programs selected at random.

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