

***Innovative Strategies for English Language Learning in Ecuador: A Focus on Playful Learning
Estrategias Innovadoras para el Aprendizaje del Idioma Inglés en Ecuador: Un Enfoque en el
Aprendizaje Lúdico***

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Resumen

La educación es un derecho universal que va más allá de las materias fundamentales e incluye contenido interdisciplinario esencial para preparar a los estudiantes para un panorama global competitivo. En este contexto, el inglés se presenta como una herramienta crítica, reconocida como la primera lengua oficial para 370 millones de usuarios y como segunda lengua para 978 millones (Eberhard et al., 2021). A pesar de su importancia global, Ecuador enfrenta desafíos en la competencia del idioma inglés, ocupando un lugar bajo en América Latina debido a metodologías inadecuadas y la falta de docentes calificados (Education First, 2021; Banegas & Sanchez, 2024). Este proyecto tiene como objetivo implementar un programa lúdico dirigido a estudiantes de educación media (5° a 7° grados) en la Escuela de Educación Básica Eugenio Espejo, atendiendo sus necesidades educativas únicas a través del desarrollo de materiales didácticos y la formación de docentes no especializados. Un enfoque cuantitativo descriptivo guiará la metodología, centrada en la competencia comunicativa a través de sesiones de tutoría estructuradas que utilizan recursos educativos reutilizables. El estudio evaluará los conocimientos previos de los estudiantes mediante una prueba inicial, la cual informará la creación de un currículo adaptado diseñado para mejorar el vocabulario y las habilidades lingüísticas generales. Esta iniciativa busca no solo mejorar la competencia en inglés entre los estudiantes, sino también equipar a los docentes con estrategias pedagógicas efectivas, fomentando un ambiente de aprendizaje más propicio en las aulas ecuatorianas.

Palabras clave: educación en inglés, aprendizaje lúdico, formación docente, Ecuador, competencia comunicativa.

Abstract

Education is a universal right that extends beyond core subjects to include cross-curricular content essential for preparing students for a competitive global landscape. In this context, English serves as a critical tool, recognized as both the first official language for 370 million users and a second language for 978 million (Eberhard et al., 2021). Despite its global importance, Ecuador faces challenges in English language proficiency, ranking low in Latin America due to inadequate methodologies and a lack of qualified teachers (Education First, 2021; Banegas & Sanchez, 2024). This project aims to implement a playful program tailored to middle school students (5th to 7th grades) at Eugenio Espejo Basic Education School, addressing their unique educational needs through the development of didactic materials and training for non-specialized teachers. A descriptive quantitative approach will guide the methodology, focusing on communicative competence through structured tutoring sessions that utilize reusable educational resources. The study will assess students' prior knowledge through a pre-test, which will inform the creation of a tailored curriculum designed to enhance vocabulary and overall language skills. This initiative not only seeks to improve English proficiency among students but also aims to equip teachers with effective pedagogical strategies, fostering a more conducive learning environment in Ecuadorian classrooms.

Keywords: English education, playful learning, teacher training, Ecuador, communicative competence

Introduction

Education is a universal right in all educational contexts. In schools, it is essential for students not only to receive core subjects (language, mathematics, natural sciences, and social studies) but also cross-curricular subjects that promote and shape citizens capable of facing an advancing globalized and competitive world. English is the first official language for 370 million users and the second language for 978 million (Eberhard et al., 2021). That is why it is considered the language of business and personal relationships. For this reason, it is taught in schools around the world (Peña, 2019). Teaching this language goes beyond learning grammar rules, as it is clear that we use it daily or see it on social media, and it is becoming part of our communicative context indirectly. Learning vocabulary and comprehension when exposed to a bilingual context is essential to understanding the language studied.

Learning the English language requires well-planned educational programs that allow students to acquire knowledge to then use it in their daily lives. However, the lack of correct methodologies, techniques, and strategies when teaching the subject hinders the learning of this language for those who study it. Many times, students in higher basic cycles (8th, 9th, 10th grades) have difficulty understanding the subject, and this is because they did not receive the correct foundations or there was not an adequate program for them to become familiar with this language. During the year 2016, the Ministry of Education designed a new curriculum for teaching English as a foreign language, which should respond to the educational needs of all students according to their ages (Alvarado, 2022). However, certain educational institutions still fail to have an adequate program for their students to learn the language effectively and be able to use it in their daily lives.

Ministerial Agreement MINEDUC-2022-00010-A issued by the Ministry of Education (2022) decrees that classroom teachers, who do not have linguistic and pedagogical preparation in teaching English, will be in charge of teaching this foreign language (pp.7-8). This makes

learning the language even more complicated since teachers do not have pedagogical skills to teach English. This situation becomes even more concerning when Education First EF (2021) in its fifth edition, shows that Ecuador ranks 18/20 among the countries in Latin America with the English language proficiency index, creating a need to work on the immersion of this language and to plan didactic playful materials adapted to the population in which the program will be implemented, taking into account their needs and particularities, and likewise, to train classroom teachers who are not specialized in teaching this subject and yet are teaching it so that they can correctly use the material created in their classes, since many times, they do not have the knowledge about the methodology and strategies to teach a foreign language. Zavala (2021) emphasizes that quality education is required in zone 5 of the Milagro canton. For this reason, the implementation of this educational project is necessary, where a playful program will be created to help with language learning according to the reality of the population in context, didactic material will be created such as acrylic sheets, which can be reused in subsequent periods, students will be leveled, and teachers who teach the subject will be explained how to strengthen the basic knowledge of the English language in a delimited population of (5th, 6th, 7th) at the Eugenio Espejo Basic Education School. According to Alvarado (2021), the implementation of new educational designs for the development of student learning is essential at this time due to the virtual education experienced during the years 2020-2022 due to the pandemic caused by Covid-19, where many students were unable to obtain sufficient knowledge in many subjects and to this, it is added the lack of teacher strategies who do not have the strategies to teach the subject of English.

In Ecuador, since the academic period 2016-2017 in the highlands cycle and the academic period 2017-2018 in the coastal cycle, ministerial agreement No. MINEDUC-ME-2016-00020-A is in force, which mentions the teaching of the English language from the level of General Basic Education, which must be exercised progressively starting with the Starters. As indicated by the

Ecuadorian curriculum for English as a Foreign Language, students in Middle EGB (5th, 6th, 7th grades) at the end of the tenth grade must reach level A2.1 referred to by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages CEFR (its initials in English). Under this educational policy, students in the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages career in face-to-face modality, in their project of linking with society called "Application of acrylic worksheets to strengthen the lexicon of the English language in middle basic students in the Milagro canton" consider relevant the strengthening of foreign vocabulary as an underlying component for the practice of language skills in the English language. The increase in English words will promote better auditory, reading, oral, and written comprehension in middle-level students at the institution.

English is recognized as a global lingua franca, and its learning is relevant for an integral preparation for a globalized world Zilola, A., & Yoqubjon, M. (2023). It can be stated the relevance of English as a language due to the fact that it is the second or a foreign language for billions, additionally to that, English is the language mostly used in international matters, business, research and Technology.

The impact of teaching English in the educational context goes deeper than just exposing the students to relevant vocabulary and useful grammatical structures but additionally to that, students need to be exposed to quality materials designed specifically to build communicative competences among them. Lütge, C., Merse, T., & Rauschert, P. (2023). The rising visibility of the English language in social media and digital resources, it is a must that students develop the necessary skills in order not only to understand but also communicate effectively in English.

As stated by Songbatumis, A. M. (2017) Even though English is important and necessary, several challenges are relevant and difficult to handle by teachers and other members of the educational community. These challenges are mostly connected to the lack of properly trained teachers, and adequate materials to be found in countries where English is not the native language. In many educational contexts, Teachers with not a formal education in the language or

in the methodology of teaching languages are usually tasked with teaching the subject, leading to several issues in the delivery of the class Adelekea, I. J., & Onyebuchib, C. N. (2023).

Ecuador is ranked low in general English proficiency among the inhabitants of other Latin American countries, this can be the outcome of well-intentioned policies but linked to a poor execution of them Banegas, D. L., & Sanchez, H. S. (2024).

Betancourt, B. L. C., & Ramos, A. D. U. (2024). Established that in order to provide students with the ideal learning experience, teachers need to apply appropriate methodologies and strategies in order to address the individual needs of students. One of the less used approaches implemented in Latin-American Education is Task-based language teaching (TBLT), but we need to take in consideration that in order of guarantee the effectiveness of this approach it must emphasizes in the use of authentic tasks and these must be aligned to real life situations that can engage students in real life language use. Oviedo-Gómez, H., & Jaramillo-Cárdenas, C. (2023). In order that this approach is successfully applied, teachers must be constantly trained and they also need to have access to resources that can be helpful for their classes and to improve the student's engagement rate. Not all teachers in this particular context improve or update their classroom teaching methodologies and this is a problem that directly affects students taking in consideration that grammar-translation method is still the most widely implemented among teachers. Nisha, P. R. (2024).

Integrating technology in a Foreign language Learning class can boost significantly the levels of student engagement and motivation towards students, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) provides learners with opportunities for individualized learning and the improve of their literacy skills Tafazoli, D., & Meihami, H. (2023).

By implementing digital tools in the classroom, such as online exercises, gamification techniques, and learning platforms students can have additional resources, practice and

opportunities for ongoing feedback. Alenezi, M., Wardat, S., & Akour, M. (2023). Mentions that implementing technology in the classroom can be effective if teachers are well qualified in the use of devices and technology in general. Moreover, it can be stated that technology itself can not warrant increased student achievement.

Student centered learning is taken as a crucial approach in order to provide tailored educational setting to students with special needs in the field of teaching English as a foreign language, As highlighted by Tang, K. H. D. (2023) it is important to individualize the educational efforts and practices taking in consideration the cognitive, linguistic and emotional diversity among students. Coady, M. R. (2020) points out that educators can provide adequate assistance if individual abilities and learning styles are taken into account. Encouraging higher levels of progress in language learning and engagement among learners.

Method and materials

The methodology that will be used for the development of this project will be with a descriptive quantitative approach with elements of communicative orientation (Communicative Methodology) based on theory and practice at the Eugenio Espejo General Basic Education School with students from the middle school level of the morning session. As the unit of analysis for this study, 200 students who are in middle basic education in total are considered. For the implementation of this proposal, the project will be applied in face-to-face mode with a duration of 184 hours distributed in two phases (82 hours each) for the development of content planning, the transfer of knowledge from UNEMI students to beneficiaries, creation of virtual didactic resources, preparation, and physical production of educational materials for the execution of tutoring in the English area. Likewise, the collection of signatures and/or delivery of minutes, certificates, or final reports is considered. On the other hand, a contingency plan is considered in case face-to-face classes have a virtual environment given the various current situations in the country.

At the beginning of the project, UNEMI students will work to train them on the general guidelines of the project, such as planning the contents that will be included during the practice time and the internal institutional processes of the mentioned school and university. "This is essential in order to organize coherently what you want to achieve with the students in the classroom..., the conceptual, procedural contents... in what quantity and with what depth" (Carriazo et al., 2020). Furthermore, this will allow UNEMI students to gain experience as future teachers and the application of acquired knowledge in a real educational field. Next, the project will be socialized, and a commitment act will be made with the institution to ensure that the beneficiary students participate actively in the project and to obtain consent for this. The role of the teachers at the institution will be to strengthen the knowledge that their students acquire during the tutoring sessions conducted by UNEMI students in the English area, as the project is focused on the direct beneficiaries. Under this circumstance, it will be very supportive for the institution's teacher to provide some feedback in their classes during the progress of this project.

For the evaluative process and data collection, a pre-test will be applied to the direct beneficiaries, which will allow measuring the knowledge they have of the previous contents in the receptive macro-skills (reading, grammar, vocabulary) in the English language. The indicators for the initial evaluation will be the understanding of contents based on basic themes such as colors, family members, numbers, animals, etc. The pre-test will be applied to all students in middle school in a time of 40 minutes, with a multiple-choice model, correspondence, and/or text association with graphic art. At the end of this part, students with the relevant advice from the teachers who will participate in the project will develop the baseline of the project and determine the initial academic index of the students through statistical charts, results analysis, and detect special educational needs if required by the case. After this assessment, tutoring will be conducted according to the results obtained; these tutoring sessions will be for each school grade and with the complexity of the activities according to the contents previously selected by the UNEMI

teachers. Each school grade will have a group of UNEMI students for the knowledge transfer process, the use of reusable didactic worksheets, and academic support for the English language learning process. The class sessions will have a duration of forty minutes, with a total of eighty-two hours during the first phase.

The study content will have twelve didactic playful units during the project execution. The first four units will be executed by the first group of UNEMI students. This same process is repeated in the second phase with the continuity of the following four didactic units for the strengthening and mastery of the lexicon of the English language. Each unit consists of 5 activities (practical exercises) for their development in a time of four pedagogical class hours, equivalent to two hours of classes per week. It should be noted that after the scheduled visits to the institution, 4 more units will be planned with their respective activities that will be part of the delivery as digital material to the authorities of the beneficiary institution. In face-to-face mode, UNEMI students will be able to apply playful teaching strategies for the acquisition of new terms in the foreign language. Within a communicative methodology and through the phases for language learning (presentation, practice, and production), UNEMI students will implement the use of interactive reusable material to promote active participation, auditory production, and reading comprehension. Under this circumstance, beneficiaries will have the opportunity to recognize what they have learned in the tutoring sessions and demonstrate new knowledge in their daily lives as a practical linguistic process. Participating in playful activities, using didactic reusable worksheets inside and outside formal instruction spaces, allows students to learn new concepts, interact with their peers, stimulate their reasoning, and feel more comfortable and motivated.

As a result, students will improve their performance (Nascimento, 2017, p 3). Likewise, within the proposed activities, the use of mobile technological resources with offline activities will promote a meaningful, modern learning environment, and to determine the progress of learning of the direct beneficiaries, the same baseline test that was used at the beginning of the phase will

be applied in order to compare the cognitive level acquired during the linguistic acquisition process. From the evaluation instrument implemented, quantitative values can be considered to highlight the effectiveness and productivity of the reusable playful material for language learning. The results will be socialized with indirect beneficiaries of the project (educational community). The participation of classroom teachers from the educational unit will be active, as they will have the opportunity to improve their strategies for teaching a language they do not master. This is based on the communication issued by the Ministry of Education (2020), where it indicates that for Ecuador, it is fundamental to teach the English language since when one learns a language, this allows understanding cultural richness, it is important to master the universal languages which in our case are Spanish and English.

Finally, after delivering the results, didactic reusable material and their respective planning will be provided to the educational institution, since this will promote continuous education and their language learning processes. Similarly, a survey using the Likert scale will be applied to know the satisfaction of classroom teachers throughout the immersion process and how was their experience in participating in this project. During the execution of the project, the leader and promoters will monitor and fulfill the activities established in the schedule presented through monthly reports with their evidence. In their practices, the English major students who will take on the role of teachers will be monitored in the development of their pedagogical activities accompanied by the university teacher in charge in order to achieve the established objectives, and progress reports will be made per hour of each of them.

A monthly follow-up will be carried out through the Community Services Projects area to the actors involved. In addition, the Ministry of Education will participate, who will progressively endorse the results obtained in the different stages. Evaluations will be carried out throughout the project process (beginning, course, and end). During the first phase, a pre-test will be applied to determine the level of students' knowledge in the English language subject as a foreign language.

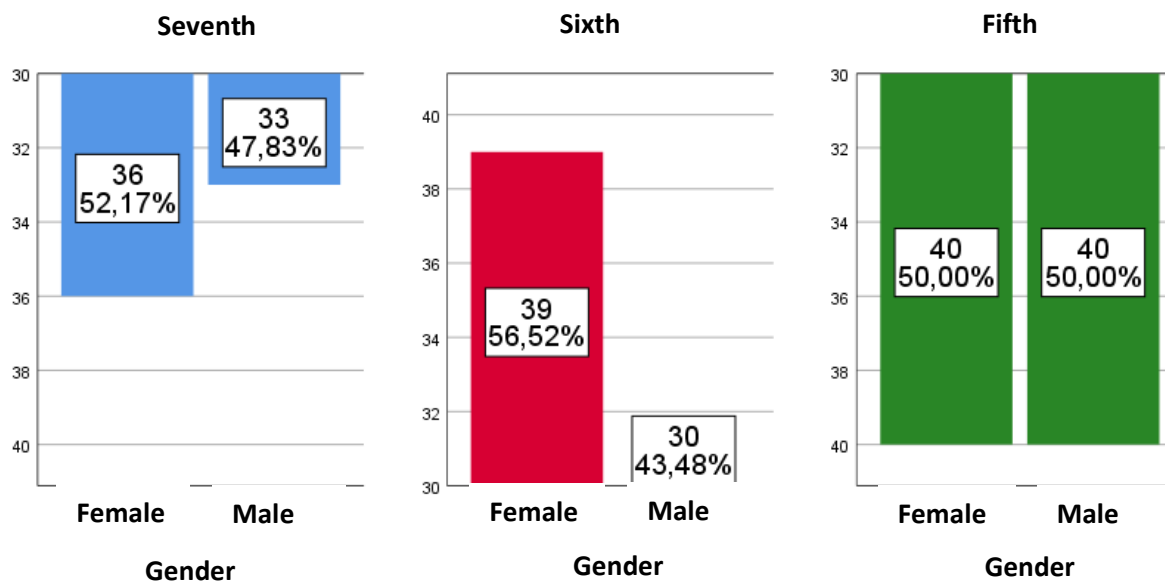
In the course of the project, formative evaluations (previously planned according to advanced content) will be executed to define their progress and possible adaptations to be carried out according to the needs and understanding of the subject by the beneficiaries. At the end of the second phase, a post-test will be carried out to determine how the beneficiaries assimilated the transferred contents. Likewise, an analysis of the students who participate in this project will be carried out to determine the fulfillment of their functions and their satisfaction in being part of this process. Likewise, a general study of the project will be carried out based on indicators to analyze the degree to which these objectives have been achieved. Likewise, a comprehensive study of the project will be conducted based on indicators to analyze the extent to which these stated objectives have been achieved. This will also enable the determination of the improvement of students' receptive skills.

RESULTS

In the present study, a sample of 218 of basic education students were considered. They were distributed as follows: the female gender was 115 students, which represents 52.8%, while the male gender was represented by 103 that equivalent (47, 2%). The sample included three grade levels, each one with two parallels for each level: The fifth year of Basic Education course, participated 80 students: 40 on parallel A, (50%), and 40 students in parallel B (50%). In the sixth-grade level, were a total of 69 student,33 appears in the parallel A (47,8%), 36 in the parallel B (47,8%). Finally, in the seventh year, participated 69 students:33 belong to parallel A (47,8 %) and 36 in the parallel B (52,2%). For this study, a non-probabilistic type of sample was considered, for convenience. Table 1 shows a summary of the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1
Sociodemographic data

Variables	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	103	47,2
	Female	115	52,8
		218	100%
Course/Parallel	Fifth	A	40
		B	40
			100%
	Sixth	A	33
		B	36
			100%
	Seventh	A	33
		B	36
			100%

Graphic1
Distribution according to the course.


For data collection, permission was first obtained from the relevant authorities. The data was then collected through pedagogical tests administered in two stages (pre-test/post-test) to students at all three grade levels.

Data analysis

Initially, a descriptive analysis of the data was conducted, detailing the characteristics of the participants (gender, course/parallel). Subsequently, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to compare the groups, specifically comparing the parallels within each course and then the courses themselves.

Board2

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) between the courses, according to the parallel.

Course	Factor	N	Media	Standard deviation	Min	Max	P value
Fifth	Pre test	A	40	5,4113	1,65957	2,25	9,50
		B	40	4,8213	1,26653	2,75	7,75
	Post-test	A	40	8,9125	1,29044	5,00	10,00
		B	40	8,2975	1,28462	5,25	10,00
Sixth	Pre test	A	33	3,8258	1,42177	,00	6,50
		B	36	4,0694	1,66863	1,00	7,25
	Post- test	A	33	7,5606	2,76478	,00	10,00
		B	36	8,4917	1,32652	4,00	10,00
Seventh	Pre test	A	33	2,5606	1,88542	,00	6,75
		B	36	4,8611	2,11748	,00	9,50
	Post- test	A	33	7,7879	1,85207	3,75	10,00
		B	36	8,2361	1,46500	4,25	10,00

According to the results from table 2, an ANOVA was applied, with the purpose of comparing the groups (parallel courses), by applying evaluations in two moments (pre-test/post-test), carried out in the fifth, sixth and seventh year of education courses. basic. The results are presented below.

Fifth Year: In the pre-test, the significance value between parallels A and B was .078, indicating no statistically significant difference between the groups. In the post-test, the significance value was .036, indicating a statistically significant difference between the groups.

Sixth Year: In the pre-test, the significance value between parallels A and B was .518, indicating no statistically significant difference between the groups. In the post-test, the significance value was .075, indicating no statistically significant difference between the groups.

Seventh Year: In the pre-test, the significance value between parallels A and B was .000, indicating a statistically significant difference between the groups. In the post-test, the significance value was .267, indicating no statistically significant difference between the groups.

Board3

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) between the courses.

		N	Med ia	Dev. Deviati on	95% confidence interval for the mean		Mini mum	Maxi mum	Sig
					Lower limit	Upper limit			
PRE- TEST	Fifth	80	5,11 62	1,49655	4,7832	5,4493	2,25	9,50	,000
	Sixth	69	3,95 29	1,54900	3,5808	4,3250	,00	7,25	
	Seven th	69	3,76 09	2,30665	3,2068	4,3150	,00	9,50	
	Total	218	4,31 90	1,90014	4,0654	4,5727	,00	9,50	
POST TEST	Fifth	80	8,60 50	1,31625	8,3121	8,8979	5,00	10,00	,066
	Sixth	69	8,04 64	2,17310	7,5243	8,5684	,00	10,00	
	Seven th	69	8,02 17	1,66425	7,6219	8,4215	3,75	10,00	
	Total	218	8,24 36	1,74776	8,0103	8,4769	,00	10,00	

According to the results of the pre-test it indicates that there are significant differences between the study groups, this is because the p value is,000, for which <0,05 is given. In the same way, the posttest indicates a value of.066, this indicates that there is no significant difference between the groups.

Conclusions

Having educators who can speak English fluently not only helps the students to learn better and to improve their pronunciation, but it also helps the teachers around who were always listening to the classes in the institution, and as time passed by, they got interested in learning some vocabulary. In addition, the students pronounced better the vocabulary words they learned, and they were always willing to acquire more knowledge. Also, they were interested in continuing to learn the language even though the action research and the classes were finished.

The use of tangible materials helped the students acquire the vocabulary more easily and faster because the visuals that were designed and used to learn the lessons were created according to their ages, context, and educational background in the learning process of a language. Also, as the instruments created were reusable, students of other grades can use them to learn as well. Thus, students feel intrinsically motivated to continue gaining knowledge in the target language.

The creation of a program according to the student's context taking into consideration what they should learn to go to higher grades in which they have English teachers at least three hours a week is crucial because it not only gives proposed topics that the learners must acquire, it also bit to create activities that in which they students learn and have fun at the same time. Thus, the creation of lesson plans in line with the students' realities allowed the teachers who do not know English to have an idea in case they have to teach that subject in the future. The educators also learned some techniques and methods that would help them instruct their students if it is necessary.

Recommendations

It is recommended that future researchers implement educational programs based on learning English as a second language at schools because students need to acquire vocabulary and grammar to continue their education when they grow up. Thus, taking into consideration the context and background the learners have to design appropriate programs according to their necessities and cognitive abilities. Besides this, researchers could adapt material that exists, paying attention that some kids like learning while playing and prefer doing activities that involve movement rather than using technological devices to acquire knowledge.

When creating programs at schools when the teachers who work there have never taught English before and do not manage the methods to it, it is advisable to talk to them and analyze their teaching style and process to create programs that they can manage when they have to do it without guidance. It is also important to consider the age and physical conditions of the teachers to create activities that they can perform with students while learning a second language. However, sometimes it is necessary to translate the lesson plans, so educators who do not manage the language well, but still can produce it can understand all the suggestions and tasks planned.

Limitations

One of the limitations of working with kids was that they were accustomed to learning new vocabulary words by simply repeating and translating them into their native language. Due to this teaching method, they lacked the motivation to learn the English language initially. At the beginning of the program, the learners were hesitant to participate in the planned activities, and they were more focused on the spelling of the words instead of their meanings. However, as they realized that the English facilitators were more interested in their language acquisition than their

grades, they began to feel more confident and performed better. They started using more English words even outside the classroom.

Initially, some of the educators at the schools were hesitant about the methods used to teach English vocabulary and grammar, as well as the reusable materials developed for this purpose. They also expressed concerns about whether the instrument could be used at different levels for different aims and activities. Additionally, some teachers were skeptical about the idea that they could acquire the target language by simply being present in the English classes and observing the methods used, and that they could teach it in the future. However, the program was designed to reflect the reality of the institution and to provide students with a solid foundation for further learning as they progress to higher levels with English teachers. Ultimately, after coaching and implementing the program, the teachers at the school discovered that not only did their students learn English vocabulary and structures, but they themselves also acquired new language skills. They expressed a willingness to continue preparing themselves in case they needed to teach the target language as part of their job.

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