

Curricular integration and linguistic competence from the educational research in the English Pedagogy career

Alina Martínez Hernández^{1*} <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7436-8703>

Andrea Victoria Beltrán Marín¹ <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7834-1817>

Sandra Geoconda Dumes Sánchez¹ <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6105-4328>

¹Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo. Ecuador

*Autor para la correspondencia: amartinez@uteq.edu.ec

ABSTRACT

The study is oriented to the search for continuous improvement in the preparation of students of Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages. Its objective is to support the curricular modification of the subjects of the admission stage and their integration with those of the first semesters of the career as a strategy to strengthen the students' proficiency in English. As a result, a smooth transition from the leveling stage to the specialized subjects is favored. The strategic integration of language skills, academic content and professional competencies is the basis of this proposal.

Keywords: Curriculum redesign; Language skills; Academic content; Professional competencies; English pedagogy

Introduction

The training of English teachers has evolved in correspondence with the growing demands of society and, consequently, the need for the development of linguistic competencies of teachers to meet the challenges of the contemporary school, becomes imperative in the preparation of language professionals.

The present project is part of the educational research aimed at the continuous improvement of English teacher training at the State Technical University of Quevedo, Ecuador, and is oriented to the search for innovative solutions that optimize the development of teaching and linguistic skills of English Pedagogy students. In this search, curricular integration emerges as a viable pedagogical strategy for the achievement of both purposes.

Linguistic competence is seen as an essential component of the language teacher's competence and, therefore, it is at the base of the professional performance standards of English teaching graduates, since it conditions the effectiveness in the conduction of excellent training processes. Hence its relevance and treatment in teacher training strategies, in career plans and curricula, and its centrality in the current scientific debate on the priorities of language teacher training around the world.

Despite its centrality, the development of linguistic competence represents a great challenge for many students entering teacher training programs, especially in the first semesters of their careers, as they face disciplines of high theoretical and linguistic complexity without the necessary preparation in the language. In general, no precedence and succession relationships are established between the subjects of the Admission stage and the career. The lack of connection between the subjects of the preparatory cycle, generally taught in Spanish, and the professional subjects hinders the integration of English with the disciplines of professional practice and the academic performance of the students.

The study is justified in the conception of career training, based on advanced pedagogical and didactic approaches focused on the development of linguistic and communicative skills through practice and interaction in the classroom. These approaches are the basis for the international and Ecuadorian standards of teaching performance in languages. The standards are organized into five domains (Language, Culture, Curriculum Development, Assessment, Professionalism, and Ethical Commitment (MINEDUC, 2012), and establish the competencies needed to teach languages effectively.

Linguistic competence in this research is based on the characterization of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which encompasses knowledge and skills in the different levels of the linguistic system: phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic, as well as in the cognitive organization and storage of that knowledge (Cervantes Institute, 2002).

This project reveals an innovative approach to the place of the Admission stage in establishing a solid foundation for achieving the readiness that comes with improving self-confidence and autonomy in English. Rethinking the transit of students through the career and extending the scope of competency training to the stage prior to its beginning optimizes professional training, singles out this project in the country and justifies its realization.

The integration of the career curriculum with that of the Admission stage proposed by this study also represents the solution to the pedagogical and practical problem of the fragmentation of the training process, providing a more holistic and complex vision. Consequently, this initiative is included among the alternatives of innovative curricular projects, whose main beneficiaries are the teachers in training. Hence its usefulness, relevance and applicability in other universities.

The proposal is supported by evidence derived from educational research. Current trends in the pedagogical field emphasize the importance of research-based approaches to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Curriculum integration is aligned with these approaches, seeking to apply educational research findings to optimize the training of future English teachers. Hence, the main objective of this work is to support the curricular integration of the Admission stage with the career for the strengthening of linguistic competence and preparation to face the Professional Training Unit.

Development

This project is built on the confluence of two structuring concepts: linguistic competence, on the one hand, and curricular integration, on the other. Both concepts have been research priorities in the work of authors such as Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Snow (2007) and Bower *et al.* (2020), with approaches from applied linguistics and curriculum design theory respectively.

Linguistic competence, whose origins go back to the Chomskyian dichotomy competence and performance (Chomsky, 1965), is a fundamental component of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), and an essential objective of English teacher training programs, since it is at the basis of their professional practice. This competence conditions

the management of highly effective teaching and learning processes and their permanent re-evaluation. Likewise, competent linguistic performance contributes to the ongoing academic improvement of graduates and their access to various types of professional development activities, to intercultural exchange and, consequently, to the development of their multilingual competencies.

In this proposal, linguistic competence is assumed from the Hymesian viewpoint, which denotes a speaker's ability to effectively manage the system and structure of the language, showing skills such as oral and written comprehension and expression (Hymes, 1972). This competence includes the mastery of grammatical rules, vocabulary, pronunciation and other linguistic elements applicable in real communication contexts. Language proficiency can be improved over time through ongoing communication practice, the study of the disciplines that support it, and ongoing exposure to the language in and out of the classroom.

Studies on language proficiency since the second half of the 20th century have examined issues relevant to the development of language theory and practice related to mother tongue acquisition, bilingualism, intercultural communication, pragmatics, and other linguistic disciplines.

With the purpose of distinguishing language knowledge from the rest of human competencies, the Ministry of Education in the description of quality and performance standards (MINEDUC, 2012), uses the term linguistic competence as a synonym for communicative competence.

The analysis of curricular integration discovers it as a pedagogical approach, whose purpose is to integrate different areas of knowledge and skills in the construction of meaningful learning experiences for students. This analysis is consistent with the vision of Bower et. al. (2020), they consider the positive impact of curricular integration on student learning.

The aforementioned works systematize the content and language integrated approach (CLIL) and show relevant visions that support curricular integration in language teaching with evidence of previous experiences that ratify the need to integrate the contents of the admission unit with the essential contents of the English Pedagogy career. In addition, these approaches allow relating the results of the diagnosis made to students and teachers and underline the potential benefits of such integration.

The review of the existing literature reveals the importance of rethinking curricular integration for the training of English teaching professionals from a renewed perspective that considers the effectiveness of integrative educational models in improving the linguistic competencies of teachers in training.

Methodology

The research responds to a longitudinal, non-experimental, descriptive design that does not foresee the manipulation of variables and that included an initial exploration through observation and the application of surveys to students and interviews to professors. The preliminary study was applied to the total population (111 students) of the Admissions Unit in the last two semesters and to a sample of 60 students of the career. The professors (2) who taught English in both semesters of Admission were interviewed. A group interview was conducted with the English teachers of the course (7 teachers). The questionnaires applied provided information on the preparation in English received by the students in the Admission stage for the entrance to the career. In addition, documentary research was used to analyze the curriculum of the Admission Unit and the legislation in force.

The research was organized and carried out in several stages. In the first stage, once the problem was determined, the study of the topic was deepened by reviewing the literature related to the subject. In the second stage, the instruments for the collection of information were applied. In the third phase, the results of the preliminary study were analyzed and the fourth phase consisted of the basis of the curricular integration proposal.

The preliminary results show great similarity in the responses of the Admission students and the students of the career. The vast majority of the students in the National and Foreign Languages Pedagogy program come from monolingual public institutions (98.3% Admission and 98.3% in the program). Likewise, the majority of those in Admission (88.3) of those in the career (93.3) do not have diplomas or certifications in English.

In relation to English proficiency upon entering the program, although opinions are divided, the majority of those surveyed consider their level to be between regular and insufficient (Figure 1).

Source: Self elaboration

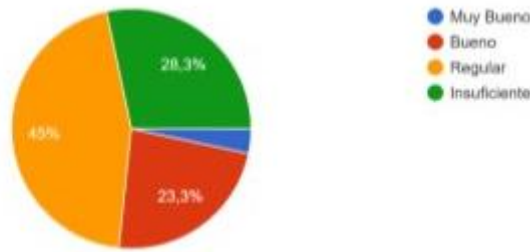


Figure 1. English language proficiency prior to entering the career

Consistent with this perception of their levels of language proficiency, the majority of students (strongly agree 53.3%) (Agree 43.3%) consider it necessary to increase the number of hours of English they receive (Figure 2). Similarly, 47.7% of the Admission students indicate that they strongly agree that the increase in the number of hours of English learning provides greater opportunities to develop the language skills necessary for good performance in the first years of the degree program (Figure 3). This suggests that a considerable proportion of students perceive that more time spent learning English will contribute positively to their language skills in the early years of the degree program.

Source: Self elaboration

13. El incremento del número horas de aprendizaje de inglés ofrece mayores oportunidades para el desarrollo de las competencias lingüísticas neces...uen desempeño en los primeros años de la carrera.
60 respuestas

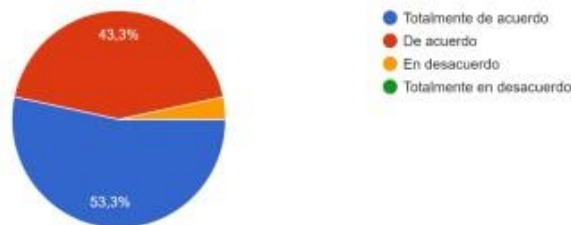


Figure 2. Increase in the number of hours of English language learning in the first years of the degree program

Source: Self elaboration

11. El incremento del número horas de aprendizaje de inglés ofrece mayores oportunidades para el desarrollo de las competencias lingüísticas neces...ente de acuerdo y 5 es totalmente en desacuerdo).
111 respuestas

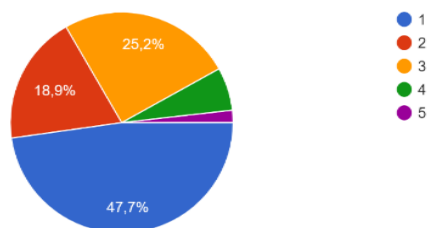


Figure 3. Increasing the number of hours of English language learning

Admission students consider necessary the insertion of new subjects in English in their curriculum, as shown in Figure 4 below.

Source: Self elaboration

13. Consideras necesario incluir otras asignaturas en ingles en la etapa de admisión (Donde 1 es totalmente de acuerdo y 5 es totalmente en desacuerdo).
111 respuestas

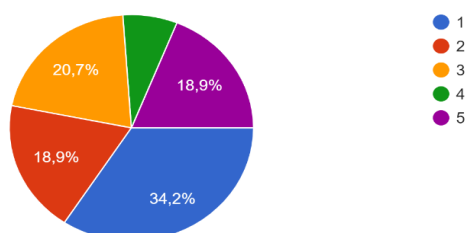


Figure 4. Consideration of the inclusion of other subjects in English at the admission stage

On the other hand, 85% of the students in the program consider that gradual insertion in teaching activities from the first semesters of the program is advisable, which suggests strong student support for the idea that early participation in teaching activities can be beneficial for the learning of English and the development of pedagogical skills (Figure 5).

Source: Self elaboration

14. ¿Consideras recomendable para el aprendizaje del inglés la inserción paulatina en actividades docentes desde los primeros semestres de la carrera?
60 respuestas

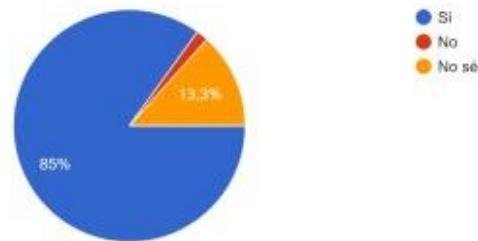


Figure 5. Considerations for learning English (gradual insertion in teaching activities from the first semesters of the course)

Students in the degree program consider it advisable to reorganize some subjects in the first semesters in order to achieve greater exposure to English from the beginning. This result suggests that there is a positive perception that reorganization can be beneficial for improving language skills (Figure 6).

Source: Self elaboration

15. ¿Aconsejarías reordenar algunas asignaturas de los primeros semestres para mayor exposición al idioma y facilitar el aprendizaje de inglés?
60 respuestas

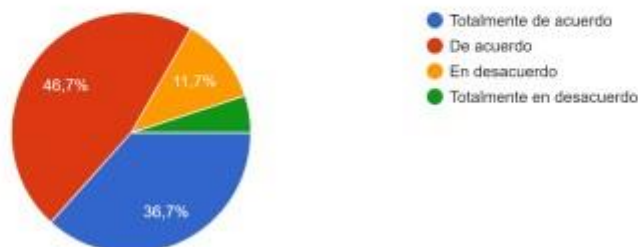


Figure 6. Rearrange some subjects in the first semesters for greater exposure to the language

The questionnaire also provided information on the skills they consider less developed and the subjects that should be included. Both Admission students and undergraduate students mentioned grammar in the first place. They also included phonetics and oral practice of the language. The undergraduate students recommend taking subjects from more advanced semesters to guarantee the development of basic competencies. This is the case of English Composition, which is suggested to be placed as Introduction to Academic Writing in the Admission stage.

The interviews conducted with the 9 teachers were based on the examination of the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference (Cervantes Institute, 2002), for languages and the teaching performance standards of (MINEDUC, 2012). The results show a widespread belief in the need for a comprehensive approach to English teacher education and to understand the career as a holistic process whose initial frontiers predate the Admission stage. Teachers agree that, despite favorable levels of language skill development in a considerable number of students, societal demands for this profession pose new challenges for teachers and innovative curricula.

The results show that the curricular integration of the Admission stage with the career involving the redesign of the curriculum, the increase of subjects in English in the pre-career stage and the reordering of some subjects of the basic cycle of the career can be an effective way to strengthen the linguistic competence of students and close the gap between the two levels of training. This gives the Admission stage relevance not previously granted as part of the career.

The documentary analysis of the Admission stage revealed a disconnection between the linguistic skills formed in the Admission stage and those necessary for career performance and evidenced the discrepancy between the contents taught in this stage, mostly in Spanish, and the real needs of linguistic competence for future English teachers.

Theoretical foundations of the curricular integration proposal

There are two approaches that theoretically support this curricular modification. The first is the theory of meaningful learning (Ausubel, 1963), which holds that learning is more effective when new concepts are related to the student's previous knowledge. The integration of the English subjects of the Admission stage with the exercise subjects allows establishing connections between different areas of knowledge and a skill, which undoubtedly helps students to better understand the concepts and apply them in real life situations.

Secondly, connectivism (Downes, 2005), which promotes the interconnection between different areas of knowledge to generate meaningful and contextualized learning. The connection between the subjects of the Admission stage and those of the professional cycle of English Pedagogy allows contextualizing the theoretical contents with practical applications. By linking theory and practice from the beginning of the training, students

can better understand the relevance of the acquired knowledge in their future pedagogical work.

The concept of development of transversal competencies is assumed, (Sepúlveda *et al.* 2019). Its contribution has significance from the determination of curricular integration in promoting the development of transversal competencies, such as effective communication, critical thinking and problem solving. By working in an interdisciplinary manner, students learn to apply communication skills in different contexts and subjects, strengthening their communicative competence in a holistic manner.

Holistic approach to training: The connective approach proposes a holistic view of learning, (Fuentes, 2008); recognizing that communicative skills are not exclusive to a particular subject, but are intertwined with various areas of knowledge. The integration of contents of the Admission stage with English Pedagogy promotes a comprehensive training that enhances communicative competence in different academic and professional contexts.

Encouragement of reflection and connection of ideas: Curricular integration encourages students to reflect on how concepts and knowledge acquired in different subjects relate to each other, (Ruiz, 2022). This allows them to connect ideas, apply inter- and transdisciplinary learning strategies, and strengthen their ability to communicate and share information effectively.

To preparing for an interconnected world of work: In the professional world, the ability to communicate effectively and understand diverse contexts is essential. By integrating subjects from the Admission stage with English Pedagogy, students are prepared to face multidisciplinary challenges and develop intercultural communication skills in diverse educational environments.

In summary, the curricular integration between the subjects of the Admission stage and those of the professional cycle of English Pedagogy, following the postulates of the connective approach, favors a more meaningful learning and promotes the integral development of the students' communicative competence in an interrelated and dynamic academic environment.

Among the specific approaches to language teaching that support the proposal, in addition to the communicative approach, the CEFR, which establishes the linguistic performance standards to be met by English teachers, and the CLIL approach based on the integration

of language with disciplinary content, stand out as a general methodological platform. The application of the CLIL methodology in the Admission stage will promote the development of linguistic competence based on the disciplinary contents.

ALGORITHM FOR THE ELABORATION OF THE PROPOSAL

The curricular integration between the Admission stage and the main phase of the career suggests a series of steps that address both the structure of the curricula and the coordination between both different stages. The algorithm is developed as described:

1. Analysis of objectives and contents:

- Identification of the learning objectives of the Admission stage and of the main phase of the career.
- Examination of the curricular contents of both stages to identify overlapping and complementary thematic areas.

2. Identification of sequential and relational contents:

- Identification of concepts or topics that act as bridges between the admission stage and the main phase.
- Identification of the relationships between the courses of both stages to establish logical and sequential connections.
- Establishment of conceptual frameworks that allow students to connect prior knowledge with new learning.

3. Design of integrated courses and complementary activities:

- Design of courses or subjects that integrate relevant topics of the admission stage with the main phase of the career.
- Identification of potentialities to offer multidisciplinary courses that address topics in an integrated manner.

4. Reorganization and flexibility of the study plans:

- Reordering of subjects and development of flexible proposals that allow students to take courses from the admission stage simultaneously with courses from the main phase.
- Design of options for students to apply credits from the admission stage towards requirements of the main phase.

5. Implementation and continuous assessment:

- Implementation of the curricular integration plan.
- Systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of integration through analysis of academic results and teacher feedback.

Expected benefits include improved English proficiency through a smoother progression of language skills, which will facilitate better understanding and application of the language. Effective professional preparation based on increased autonomy and confidence; students will be better prepared to apply English in professional subject learning and teaching practice; and disciplinary continuity and coherence that will ensure a more harmonious transition and deeper understanding of content throughout the career.

Conclusions

The curricular integration closes the gap between the Admission stage and the subsequent stages in the English Pedagogy career, improves English proficiency and strengthens the professional preparation of our students, ensuring a more solid formation aligned with the demands of the contemporary university.

The curricular redesign proposal guides a smooth transition from the leveling stage to the specialized subjects as it establishes connections between different areas of knowledge and skills, which positively impact the understanding of concepts and their application in real life situations.

The theoretical foundations of the proposal are built on general pedagogical approaches (constructivist and connectivist) and approaches that particularize language teaching (the communicative approach and the CLIL approach) and take as a general methodological platform the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.