Teacher perspectives on implementing the action-oriented approach in rural settings: Single case study

Perspectivas docentes sobre la implementación del enfoque orientado a la acción en entornos rurales: Estudio de caso único

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Abstract: This case study investigates the implementation of the action-oriented approach (AoA) within rural primary schools in Costa Rica, focusing particularly on its adaptation and challenges in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Using a qualitative case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two English as a foreign language teachers and a rural primary school principal during June and July 2023. Prior to the interviews, informed consent was obtained from the participants. The interviews explored how the AoA helps teachers facilitate the curriculum and the contextual factors affecting its implementation. For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed, and the information was validated with participants. The study identifies significant barriers, including socioeconomic disparities affecting student behavior, limited professional development for teachers, and the limited relationship between parents and the school. These findings are crucial as they highlight the need for specific AoA adaptations and emphasize the necessity for targeted professional development and improved communication strategies with parents. The study contributes to the sparse literature on AoA in Spanish-speaking rural contexts and underscores the need for changes in educational policy for the effective implementation of such educational innovations.

Keywords: rural education, professional development, parental involvement.

Resumen: Este estudio de caso investiga la implementación del enfoque orientado a la acción (EoA) en escuelas primarias rurales en Costa Rica. Se enfocó particularmente en la adaptación y desafíos en áreas desfavorecidas desde el punto de vista socioeconómico. Por medio de un diseño cualitativo basado en el estudio de caso, se les aplicaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a dos maestras de inglés como lengua extranjera y al director de una escuela primaria rural durante junio y julio del 2023. Antes de las entrevistas, se les facilitó un consentimiento informado a las personas participantes. Las entrevistas exploraron cómo el EoA ayuda a las maestras a facilitar el currículo a través de la metodología brindada por este enfoque; y también brindó insumos de cómo los factores contextuales afectan su implementación efectivamente. Para el análisis de los datos, se empleó un análisis temático y se validó la información con el grupo participante. El estudio identificó barreras significativas, tales como las disparidades socioeconómicas que afectan el comportamiento estudiantil, la formación profesional limitada para las maestras y la poca relación entre las personas cuidadoras y la escuela. Estos hallazgos resultan cruciales, pues destacan la necesidad de adaptaciones específicas del EoA y subrayan la necesidad de un desarrollo profesional dirigido y de estrategias mejoradas de comunicación con los padres y madres de familia. El estudio se suma a la escasa literatura sobre el EoA en contextos rurales de habla hispana y subraya la necesidad de cambios en la política educativa, los cuales contribuyan a la implementación efectiva de dichas innovaciones.

Palabras clave: educación rural, formación profesional, participación de los padres.

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1.   Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) promotes dialogue among language professionals to enhance curricula and professional development, providing educational principles within a comprehensive framework of language use and skills development (Birch et al., 2021; Council of Europe, 2020). This framework covers various levels of language proficiency across four linguistic domains—speaking, reading, listening, and writing— and employs the action-oriented approach (AoA) that describes language learning outcomes in terms of the authentic use of language in different settings. Additionally, the CEFR outlines six common reference levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) that are the benchmark to measure the learners' performance outcomes (Council of Europe, 2020). This framework has been integrated into school curricula worldwide, including Costa Rica's updated national English curriculum in early 2017 (Ministerio de Educación Pública [MEP], 2016).

Costa Rica's educational authorities decided to adopt AoA as the country's official foreign language teaching method to prepare students for global socioeconomic and technological challenges, emphasizing the use of English to communicate effectively in authentic real-life contexts (Cadenas and Castro, 2021; MEP, 2016; Vargas Venegas, 2022). For Costa Rica's educational authorities, updates to the national English curriculum aimed to provide English language learners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies for the 21st century (MEP, 2016). These updates targeted shortcomings in English proficiency among students after up to twelve years of instruction from K-11, striving to make the curriculum content more relevant across all educational levels and to enhance students' abilities for effective global communication (Quesada et al., 2023; MEP, 2016; Bonilla Lynch and Rojas Alfaro, 2012).

This curriculum revision was introduced as an opportunity to enhance English language proficiency—a strategy proven effective in other nations such as Turkey, Malaysia, and Canada. However, the literature on the successful implementation of AoA in Spanish-speaking contexts like Costa Rica is limited, making it challenging to predict its success across the country (Vargas Venegas, 2022). Therefore, exploring the implementation of AoA in Costa Rica's school settings, especially in underserved rural areas, where there exist limitations of resources and educational opportunities (Okot and Zúñiga, 2023), is crucial to understanding the implications that this method's implementation has on the expected educational outcomes stated in Costa Rica's educational policy.

In response to the persistent gap between ambitious curricular goals and the actual English language proficiency outcomes of students across K-11, educational authorities launched the Alliance for Bilingualism (ABi) in 2018 (Alianza par el Bilinguismo, 2018). This initiative seeks to broaden English language instruction across all regions, both urban and rural, aiming to improve educational outcomes and provide greater access to opportunities, employment, and economic development (Asociación Coalición Costarricense de Iniciativas de Desarrollo [CINDE], 2018).

Despite these initiatives, significant challenges are still hindering the fulfillment of the expected goals. Specifically, the Programa Estado de la Nación [PEN] (2023) revealed that the majority of students still test at the lower proficiency levels (A1 and A2) within CEFR. According to Quesada et al. (2023), there is a need for differentiated instruction and continuous assessment to align student's learning outcomes with curricular expectations.

To this end, the study addresses key research questions: How does the adopted AoA help rural school English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers facilitate the school curriculum, and how do specific contextual factors influence its implementation? With the objective of exploring the perceptions of two EFL teachers and a school principal in rural Costa Rica into the national English curriculum employing AoA in rural settings, this study contributes to the limited literature on AoA in Spanish-speaking rural contexts and underscores the need for targeted educational policies and professional development initiatives (García Castaño and Henao Henao, 2015; Kozina, 2015; Mirici et al., 2023; Shakerkhoshroudi et al., 2020; Ünlücan Tosun, 2019).

2.   Literature Review

2.1   The action-oriented approach and common European framework of reference for languages in Costa Rica's national English curriculum

The adoption of AoA within the national English curriculum highlights Costa Rica's commitment to quality education, recognized as a crucial element in achieving educational success and societal progress (MEP, 2016). In this case, AoA focuses on integrating students' characteristics, aspirations, economic backgrounds, talents, skills, and learning preferences into the curriculum through a series of teaching and learning principles stemming from the CEFR comprehensive framework (MEP, 2016). This inclusive method ensures that all students, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, have equitable opportunities to succeed in their

language learning development. The emphasis on AoA stresses the importance of real-life use of language skills, preparing students to use English effectively and confidently in their daily interactions and future endeavors (MEP, 2016).

CEFR serves as a foundational element in this curriculum reform, providing a detailed and structured framework for teaching and learning the target language (Council of Europe, 2020). Furthermore, the CEFR's framework emphasizes the concept of learners as *social agents*, where they should be equipped with the necessary skills to navigate and succeed in modern societal dynamics. By incorporating CEFR, the curriculum not only sets clear benchmarks for language proficiency but also encourages a dynamic and interaction-focused approach to learning English. This approach fosters a learning environment where students can actively engage in realistic scenarios, enhancing both their communicative competencies and cultural understanding (Council of Europe, 2020).

Likewise, the integration of CEFR within the national curriculum extends beyond mere language learning; it aligns with broader educational goals such as fostering global citizenship with local roots, promoting digital literacy, and emphasizing sustainable development (MEP, 2016). These pillars are essential in preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century, ensuring that they not only achieve linguistic proficiency but also develop critical thinking skills, cultural awareness, and a sense of responsibility towards their community and the environment. This holistic approach to language education positions Costa Rica's learners to thrive in a rapidly evolving global landscape, armed with the skills necessary to contribute meaningfully to both local and global contexts (MEP, 2016).

2.2 Action-oriented approach across multinational contexts

Existing literature discusses diverse curricular scenarios of implementing CEFR's AoA in school settings, ranging from primary to secondary levels, predominantly in public school systems. Countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea, Japan, Turkey, Netherlands, Kenya, Canada, and Costa Rica have integrated this method within their national curricula to assist foreign language learners in developing language and cultural skills pertinent to their educational outcomes and goals (de Lira e Silva, 2022; Elizondo-Mejías and Calderón-Mora, 2023; Hishamudin and Li, 2023; Khair and Shah, 2021; Mohamad Uri and Abd Aziz, 2018; Nagai and O'Dwyer, 2011; Ngigi and Kiviu, 2018; Sari Yildirim and Mirici, 2023; Sidhu et al., 2018; Vargas Venegas, 2022; Yasin and Yamat, 2021).

The studies discussed in this literature review demonstrate a variety of trends related to AoA implementation globally. One common trend across these studies is the recognition of the potential benefits of AoA in fostering effective communication skills, enhancing students' potential real-life language use, and promoting student engagement (Khair and Shah, 2021; Mohamad Uri and Abd Aziz, 2018; Supunya, 2022). However, challenges in adopting this method consistently emerged due to factors such as inadequate professional development, curriculum adaptation issues, and the need for extensive resources and continuous support from educational authorities (Zúñiga Vargas, 2022).

Table 1 summarizes twenty studies on AoA implementations across various countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas, detailing their educational levels, research methods, and the identified impacts and challenges. These aspects are discussed further in subsequent paragraphs.

Table 1
A Survey of Existing Literature from 2011-2023, their Research Methods, Educational Levels, and their Identified Impacts and Challenges on Implementing AoA within Various Countries.

Surveyed Literature	Country	Research Method			Educational Level		Impacts			Challenges		
		QLR	QTR	MM	PS	SS	CS	RLLU	SE	PD	CA	RS
Supunya (2022)	Thailand	•			•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Hishamudin and Li (2023)	Malaysia		•		•		•			•	•	
Khair and Shah (2021)	Malaysia		•		•				•	•		•
Yasin and Yamat (2021)	Malaysia			•	•					•	•	•
Mohamad Uri and Abd Aziz (2018)	Malaysia			•	•	•	•			•		
Sidhu et al. (2018)	Malaysia			•	•					•	•	
Lee (2020)	South Korea			•	•	•				•	•	•
Nagai and O'Dwyer (2011)	Japan			•	•					•		
Mirici et al. (2023)	Turkey			•	•	•			•	•		•
Sari Yildirim and Mirici (2023)	Turkey	•				•	•		•	•		•
Ünlücan Tosun (2019)	Turkey	•				•	•		•	•	•	
Yüce and Mirici (2019)	Turkey	•				•	•	•		•		•
Yakışık and Gürocak (2018)	Turkey	•				•	•		•	•	•	
Yeni-Palabiyik and Daloglu (2016)	Turkey	•			•					•	•	
Ngigi and Kiviu (2018)	Kenya			•	•	•						•
de Lira e Silva (2022)	Canada	•			•	•	•				•	•
Cadenas and Castro (2021)	Costa Rica			•		•			•	•	•	•
Elizondo-Mejías and Calderón-Mora (2023)	Costa Rica			•	•		•		•	•		•
Vargas Solís et al. (2023)	Costa Rica	•				•	•		•	•		•

Note: Acronyms used: QLR = Qualitative Research; QTR = Quantitative Research; MM = Mixed Methods; PS = Primary School; SS = Secondary School; CS = Communication Skills; RLLU = Real-Life Language Use; SE = Student Engagement; PD = Professional Development; CA = Curriculum Adaptation; RS = Resources and Support.
Source: Own elaboration from twenty surveyed studies, 2024.

The studies primarily employ mixed (n=10), qualitative (n=8), and quantitative (n=2) research methods. Collectively, they demonstrate that AoA can improve communication skills (14 studies), student engagement (n=12), and real-life language use (n=11). However, AoA implementation faces important challenges, with inadequate professional development being the most recurrent (n=17), followed by difficulties in adapting curricula (n=12), and insufficient resources and support (n=12). These obstacles highlight the critical need for comprehensive support in professional development, resources, and curriculum revisions to fully leverage AoA's benefits.

3.   Methodology

Employing a qualitative research approach (Stainton Rogers and Willig, 2017), specifically a case study, based on an exploratory scope, this study collected perceptions into the challenges of employing AoA in a rural school context in Costa Rica's northwestern province of Guanacaste, with two sixth-grade teachers and a school principal. More specifically, this case study explores how AoA functions in rural settings. The research questions addressed are: How does the adopted AoA help rural school EFL teachers facilitate the school curriculum, and how do specific contextual factors influence its implementation?

3.1   Participants and setting

The units of analysis consisted of two cisgender female EFL teachers (Arabel and Esperanza) and a cisgender male school principal (Francisco), selected through purposive and convenience sampling methods (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Participant selection was based on specific criteria, including their teaching and administrative roles, their work in rural and underserved schools, and their over 10 years of experience in the primary school system. Informed consent and confidentiality commitments were obtained from all participants before data collection, which took place between June and July 2023 (Stainton Rogers and Willig, 2017).

In this setting, EFL instruction starts in first grade, with students developing listening, speaking, writing, and reading skills. The EFL teachers follow the national English curriculum based on the CFER framework. Additionally, EFL teachers use different materials to teach content such as textbooks, printed materials, and a TV to show slides. Also, the school is equipped with a computer lab where students receive computer programming lessons. As such,

participant EFL teachers in this school receive optional professional development from their local EFL advisers and sometimes from local university programs offered to school teachers. However, they have not received professional development specific to AoA recently, particularly as they have not been granted paid time off for such programs. To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout this study. Participants were approached initially via email and subsequently in person, where they voluntarily agreed to participate after receiving a detailed explanation of the study and signing informed consent forms.

The school where the investigation took place is in a rural area in Costa Rica's northwestern province of Guanacaste. This community faces a range of economic and social challenges that influence students' learning experiences. Predominantly composed of low-income, single-parent households, the area is also affected by crime and issues related to drug activity. The school serves students in grades 1-6 from generally socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, many of whom rely on the school for meals due to difficult home environments sometimes marked by neglect or violence. The school grapples with student discipline and aggressive behaviors, compounded by the limited parental involvement that poverty can contribute to. These circumstances provide a distinctive backdrop for examining the implementation of educational innovations in less urbanized regions, where resources and strategies may differ substantially from those in urban areas.

In total, there are about 1200 students at the school, with an average class size of 25 to 30 students. Each student receives 45 minutes of EFL instruction every day, with a total of five 45-minute lessons per week. The school has 50 teachers instructing subjects such as Social Sciences, Math, Science, Physical Education, Religion, EFL, Music, and Spanish. Three EFL teachers teach different grades and teach 45 lessons per week.

In the EFL class, teachers follow the instructions stated in the national English curriculum. The class is divided into different stages: pretask, task rehearsal, task completion, and task assessment. During pre-task, students are presented with the vocabulary they will work with during the class, which should take about 5 to 10 minutes. For task rehearsal, students practice the vocabulary and grammatical structures they need to acquire to complete the different activities. In task completion, students work on different exercises or practices on their own where they need to put into practice the learned content. During class assessment, teachers make sure that students have learned the content through different evaluation activities.

3.2 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the selected teachers and principal, designed to explore their daily educational practices and specifically their experiences with AoA in the classroom. Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection technique, allowing for flexibility and depth in exploring participants' experiences and perceptions. An interview guide featuring questions on how AoA supports curriculum facilitation and the contextual factors affecting its implementation was used.

The interviews were conducted in person and in Spanish, participants' native language, during their break times and lasted between 50-60 minutes. Once participants consented, interviews were audio recorded, later transcribed, and translated into English using Microsoft Word Office 365. All files were saved to a password-protected folder in Drive. Interview questions focused on how AoA was integrated into the school's curriculum and its practical implementation, allowing researchers to gather detailed, first-hand accounts of the method's implementation.

3.3 Data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using critical thematic analysis (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Lawless and Chen, 2019) to identify and categorize emerging themes that highlight the challenges of AoA implementation in a rural setting. Critical thematic analysis is a foundational method for qualitative research that provides a flexible and accessible approach to analyzing complex datasets and validating findings with participants to ensure accuracy and reliability (Creswell and Poth, 2016). No specific software besides well-known Word was employed for data analysis.

Researchers convened several times to determine codes, share their analyses, and reach an inter-rater agreement, ensuring consistency and reliability in the analysis process. Key themes, identified and used as emerging categories, included the socioeconomic conditions of students, the influence of extracurricular activities, the professional development needs of EFL teachers, the availability of necessary school resources, parent-school relations and communication, and curriculum adaptations. This analysis helped to pinpoint the contextual factors that either facilitated or hindered effective AoA implementation, providing valuable input into how educational strategies can be adapted to meet the specific needs of rural primary schools.

4.   Results

The following six sections describe eight factors identified in the data, specific to challenges in implementing AoA in rural school settings.

4.1   Household socioeconomic conditions and student aggressive behavior

Findings from the interviews with Arabel and Esperanza highlighted significant influences of household socioeconomic conditions and student aggressive behavior on school experiences within the school. For instance, Arabel noted, "entonces, si el estudiante o el chico vive violencia en la casa, va a venir a reflejar la violencia aquí en la escuela" ("so, if the student experiences violence at home, he will reflect that violence here at school;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation). While this echoes research that finds violence in the home environment can directly translate into student behavior at school, it is important to correctly contextualize and understand this (see discussion below). The main point is the underlying connection between a broader social context influencing student behavior at school, where children can reflect dynamics from that broader world in school.

Arabel further elaborated on the socioeconomic disparities affecting her students, pointing out that "la mayoría son de este barrio, pero, por ejemplo, aquí tenemos chicos que viajan de barrio Lara [pseudonym], chicos que viajan de barrio Poza" [pseudonym] ("most are from this neighborhood, but, for example, here we have kids who travel from Lara, kids who travel from Poza;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), highlighting the diverse origins of the students and the varied backgrounds they come from, which often include challenging socioeconomic conditions.

Regarding student aggression, both educators illustrated the challenges this issue poses in their school. In this case, Arabel described the school environment as sometimes becoming "un poco hostil" ("a bit hostile;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation) due to a lack of respect and tolerance among students, indicating a need for consistent teacher vigilance to maintain order. She detailed specific aggressive incidents, stating, "el lunes hubo tres pleitos aquí en la escuela" ("on Monday, there were three fights here at the school;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), which exemplifies the ongoing challenges with student behavior.

Esperanza, dealing with similarly tough circumstances, emphasized the importance of direct engagement with students, particularly those portraying aggressive behaviors. Reflecting

on her approach to dealing with highly disruptive students, she explained, "Entonces vos tenías que ganárte los chicos. ¿Cómo me los gané? hablando mucho con ellos, dialogando, la problemática, aconsejándolos" ("So you had to win over the kids. How did I win them over? By talking a lot with them, dialoguing, addressing the issues, advising them;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), highlighting the need of direct engagement and personalized attention to reduce aggressive behavior and foster a supportive learning environment.

4.2 Paradox between academic excellence achievement and disruptive extracurricular activities

Findings revealed a significant paradox between the goal of achieving academic excellence and the disruptive nature of excessive extracurricular activities, which hindered regular academic progress. Arabel expressed this conflict, explaining, "entre tanta actividad extracurricular, no da tiempo para cumplir a cabalidad con el programa" ("with so many extracurricular activities, there isn't enough time to fully comply with the program;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation). This sentiment was reflected across the interviews, highlighting a pervasive concern about the practical implementation of educational programs.

Esperanza also voiced frustrations related to the constant interruptions to classroom time, stating, "El MEP quiere abarcar tanto que no nos deja trabajar" ("The Ministry of Education wants to cover so much that it doesn't let us work;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation). This reflects a broader institutional challenge where the educational system's demands conflict with the practical realities of teaching and learning. The array of mandatory activities, as Esperanza described, significantly limits effective teaching time, forcing educators to compress essential educational content into insufficiently brief periods, "20 minutos son 20 minutos" ("20 minutes are 20 minutes;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation).

Both teachers voiced frustration with the expectation to handle academic and non-academic responsibilities simultaneously, which often leads to superficial engagement with both. Francisco, a principal, confirmed the institutional obligation to manage numerous committees alongside academic duties, acknowledging, "es una cosa que quita mucho tiempo, quita mucho, mucho tiempo" ("it's something that takes a lot of time, a lot of time;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation). He outlined the necessity of balancing committee

responsibilities with academic planning, highlighting the challenge of ensuring effective classroom instruction amidst these external demands.

4.3 Professional development and support

Arabel and Esperanza underscored significant gaps in professional development and support within their teaching environments. Arabel highlighted the lack of specific training for dealing with students with special needs. She noted, "más de una vez nosotros pedimos capacitaciones en evaluación para este tipo de chicos con necesidad de sus actividades especiales y no nos las brindan" ("more than once we have requested training in assessment for these types of kids with special needs, and they are not provided;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation). This statement captures a significant concern about the need for professional development opportunities to meet diverse student's needs.

Moreover, Arabel expressed frustration with educational authorities' inconsistent policy implementation, which contributed to a chaotic professional environment. She explained, "a veces nos dan una orden y nos dicen que tenemos que hacer esto de esta y esta manera. Pero a veces yo siento que es como que hacen las cosas sin tener un conocimiento previo y después te las cambian" ("sometimes they give us an order and tell us we have to do things this way and that way. But sometimes I feel like they make these decisions without prior knowledge and then they change them;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation). This reflects a systemic issue where changes are frequently and abruptly implemented without adequate training or preparation for the teachers, leading to professional frustration and discontent.

Esperanza's description further emphasized the lack of targeted professional development, especially for teachers handling students with significant educational needs such as autism. She expressed disappointment over the absence of specific strategies to engage such students effectively: "No, no han dado nada" ("No, they haven't given anything;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), underscoring a critical gap in support and resources for teachers in specialized areas.

Both participants pointed out a need for more consistent and relevant professional development that aligns with the actual challenges they face in the classroom, particularly concerning the evaluation and inclusion of students with special educational needs. Their experiences underline the necessity for educational policymakers to consider the practical

realities of classroom instruction when designing and implementing professional development programs.

4.4 Limited or nonexistent school resources and support

Arabel and Esperanza highlighted substantial concerns regarding *limited or non-existent school resources and support*, impacting both teaching and learning environments. Arabel detailed the technological disparities that hindered effective education, especially during the pandemic. She observed that "de una clase se te conectaban tres" ("from one class, only three would connect;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), highlighting the challenge of engaging students remotely because of inadequate technological resources at their homes. This issue was exacerbated by the fact that many students could not access devices or the internet, further complicating the teaching and learning process.

Arabel also highlighted the problems within the school's infrastructure, noting the unstable internet connectivity and electricity issues that frequently disrupted educational activities. She pointed out, "si están soldando algo, hay algún pabellón que se quedó sin electricidad" ("if they are welding something, there is a hall that loses electricity;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), indicating how external maintenance work could unexpectedly interrupt power supply and internet service, therefore affecting classroom activities. Despite the school having "como 136 computadoras" ("like 136 computers;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), the distribution and maintenance of these resources were insufficient to meet the needs consistently across all of the students.

Moreover, Esperanza's account reinforced the theme of limited support, particularly in adapting educational practices to meet diverse student needs. She mentioned the lack of specialized recovery classes for English, which are crucial for students who fall behind or have learning difficulties. Esperanza stated, "Aquí no hay. PRIN son clases para recuperación. Y aquí no dan PRIN para recuperación de inglés" ("Here there aren't any. PRIN are recovery classes. And here they don't provide PRIN for English recovery;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), underscoring a significant gap in providing resources which affects language learning.

Both participants expressed a feeling of frustration due to the lack of support and resources, which occasionally led to feelings of despair and exhaustion. Arabel captured this sentiment, saying, "más de una vez me he sentido así, que me agarran cuadros de que me

agarra la lloradera y no quiero, y por todo, o sea, por todo" ("more than once I have felt like this, that I get fits of crying and I don't want to, and for everything, that is, for everything;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation). This emotional toll reflects the broader implications of inadequate support and resources on teacher well-being and student outcomes.

4.5   Parent-school relationship and communication

Findings illustrated parent-school communication and relationship dynamics and challenges, underscoring a significant disconnect that impacted the educational process. Arabel, a teacher, shared that parent involvement in the second cycle of education was minimal, which she perceived as a considerable disadvantage. She articulated her struggle with parental involvement, noting, "es muy poco en realidad" ("it's really very little;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), which reflects a broader issue where parents do not engage sufficiently in the academic affairs of their children.

Arabel highlighted the challenges in dealing with disciplinary issues when parents are unresponsive or uninvolved. She observed that despite efforts to communicate and resolve matters amicably, "ya hemos llegado a la conclusión de que eso no está dando resultado" ("we have concluded that this is not yielding results;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation). This lack of effective dialogue has called for stricter disciplinary measures, which often include moving students between groups or escalating to formal disciplinary processes when behavior issues exceed manageable levels. The ineffectiveness of parental involvement in such cases led to the observation, "si no tiene interés el padre de familia, entonces, ¿cómo el estudiante va a cambiar?" ("if the parent is not interested, then how will the student change?;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), pinpointing a causal link between parental disengagement and ongoing student behavioral issues.

Similarly, Esperanza also reflected on the necessity of maintaining open lines of communication with parents, particularly when managing students with behavioral issues or special needs. She emphasized the importance of continuous dialogue, even suggesting unconventional contact times to accommodate parents' schedules, demonstrating a proactive approach to engagement. Despite her efforts, she lamented the frequent lack of parental response or commitment to their children's educational needs, stating, "siempre tiene que haber una tutela de un adulto para guiar a ese pobre pequeño" ("there always needs to be an

adult guardianship to guide that poor little one;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), which highlights the gap in support these children face at home.

Both educators expressed frustration over the limitations imposed by inadequate parental support, noting that it often forced them to take on roles beyond their professional duties to compensate for lack of involvement. The testimony "más de una vez me he sentido así, que me agarran cuadros de que me agarra la lloradera y no quiero, y por todo" ("more than once I have felt like this, that I cry and I don't want to, and for everything;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation) from Arabel underscored the emotional toll on teachers stemming from these challenges.

4.6 Curriculum adaptation and alternative English teaching methods

Findings on curriculum adaptation for the AoA and alternative methods for engaging English teaching revealed perspectives into the challenges and strategies employed to enhance language learning. Arabel noted the complexities of teaching English in grades 4-6, emphasizing the lack of parental support at this educational level which complicates discipline and student responsibility. She mentioned, "No llevan tareas, no presentan exámenes, no estudian" ("They don't do homework, don't take tests, don't study;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation), highlighting the challenges in engaging these students. Despite these challenges, Arabel explained her classes are dynamic and attractive and use technology like classroom screens to enhance learning through videos and auditory exercises, which she believes "a los chiquillos les gusta" ("the kids like it;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation). Esperanza considered her approach to focus on creating an immersive and playful learning environment. She recalled incorporating songs, games, and physical activities to engage her students, particularly the younger ones in grades 1-3, stating, "Primero los canso, ok, jumping" ("First I tire them out, okay, jumping;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation). Her strategy reflects a commitment to making English enjoyable, which she believes is essential for effective learning.

Both teachers also discussed the need to adapt the AoA curriculum to cater to students with special educational needs. Arabel elaborated on the difficulty of implementing individualized accommodations across different educational levels within the same classroom. She described the challenge of delivering the same curriculum content to students who require significant adaptations, stating, "Tengo uno... que está en sexto grado, pero tienes que hacerle

una adecuación a nivel de primer grado" ("I have one... who is in sixth grade, but you have to adapt it to a first-grade level;" personal communication, June 15, 2023, translation).

Furthermore, both teachers highlighted the importance of integrating real-life scenarios and interactive activities into the curriculum to foster a deeper understanding and use of English. They employed various strategies, such as role-plays, discussions, and interactive digital tools, to make lessons more engaging and relevant. For instance, Arabel used real-life scenarios to encourage students to apply language skills actively, while Esperanza used a communicative approach to ensure students are active participants in their learning process.

4.7 Discussion

4.7.1 Contextual factors influencing the implementation of AoA in rural school settings

The present study sought to explore how the adoption of AoA can help EFL teachers in facilitating the school curriculum in rural settings and to understand the influence of specific contextual factors on its implementation. The findings highlight several critical aspects of AoA implementation in a rural school environment, characterized by socioeconomic challenges, limited resources, and varied student behavior dynamics, which align with the broader contextual factors identified in literature regarding AoA implementation in similar settings.

The influence of household socioeconomic conditions on student aggressive behavior and engagement in school activities is an important finding. That violence at home can translate into student behavior at school mirrors existing research (García Castaño and Henao Henao, 2015; Kozina, 2015; Shakerkhoshroudi et al., 2020) highlighting how socioeconomic disparities can affect students' behavior and learning outcomes; indeed, home-life qualities play a major role in student academic success and performance in schools. These findings underscore the need for AoA implementations that are sensitive to the students' home environments and can adapt to the resultant behavioral challenges and affordances. It is undeniable that perceptions and threats of violence are very visible and alarming aspects of schools at times. Understanding these challenges holistically not only brings perspective to these alarming situations but also more creativity in solutions, when we consider the whole range of school behaviors (not just violence). Professional development for teachers, school staff, and administrators is a key strategy for enabling that creativity.

Further, the challenge of balancing academic routines with extracurricular activities is particularly evident in rural settings where resources are limited. This study's findings resonate with global trends where educational systems struggle to balance curriculum demands with the

realities of classroom time (Mohamad Uri and Abd Aziz, 2018; Sidhu et al., 2018; Supunya, 2022; Ünlücan Tosun, 2019; Yasin and Yamat, 2021). This points to the need for curriculum adaptations that allow for a more flexible and contextually appropriate AoA implementation, ensuring that teachers are not overwhelmed by conflicting demands.

In general, the study reveals substantial gaps in teachers' professional development, particularly in handling students with special needs and managing aggressive behaviors effectively. This aligns with international research which consistently cites inadequate professional development as a barrier to effective AoA implementation (Mirici et al., 2023; Hishamudin and Li, 2023; Zuñiga, 2022). The findings suggest an urgent need for targeted professional development programs that equip teachers with the skills necessary to implement AoA in ways that are inclusive and effective for all students, particularly in under-resourced rural environments (Rojas-Alfaro and Montenegro Sánchez, 2024; Cadenas and Castro, 2021).

Last but not least, this study highlights the critical role of parental involvement in the educational process of their children, a contextual factor that is prevalent in AoA literature. The lack of parental involvement in rural areas compounds the challenges schools can face, as noted in the frustrations expressed by teachers in both the current study and broader research (Cadenas and Castro, 2021; Elizondo-Mejías and Calderón-Mora, 2023). Enhancing communication strategies and engaging parents more effectively in the educational process are essential steps toward improving student outcomes in these settings. However, just as it is critical to not overwhelm teachers with additional time demands that cannot be met, simply placing additional responsibilities or time-demands on parents or guardians struggling socioeconomically is neither fair nor reasonable nor effective. Much modern educating involves teachers acting *in loco parentis* ('in the place of parents'), including areas like psychological counseling or character discipline. These are unreasonable demands, but merely 'kicking the can' back to the parents and expecting them to spontaneously begin doing what they already are not will not work. At best, it may serve to convince the school that it has 'done what it can,' such that students who need help receive it neither from the school or the home.

4.7.2 Guiding principles and strategies for implementing AoA in rural school settings

Table 2 outlines key principles of AoA implementation and corresponding strategies derived from the findings and relevant literature in rural school settings across five contextual factors. It provides a structured overview that can be referenced for educational planning and policy making.

Table2
Contextual Factors, Principles, and Strategies for AoA Implementation in Rural School Settings.

Contextual Factors	Principles	Strategies
Socioeconomic Conditions	AoA should be sensitive to the socioeconomic conditions that shape student behaviors and learning environments.	• Direct engagement and personalized attention to manage behaviors, integrating strategies like open dialogues and consistent advising (García Castaño & Henao Henao, 2015; Kozina, 2015; Shakerkhoshroudi et al., 2020). • Incorporating local culture into learning materials, ensuring materials reflect the community's socioeconomic context (García Castaño & Henao Henao, 2015; Kozina, 2015; Shakerkhoshroudi et al., 2020).
Curriculum Adaptation	Curriculum adaptations are essential to accommodate the unique challenges of rural settings.	• Making extracurricular activities educational and related to the curriculum to optimize learning time (Lee, 2020). • Implementing independent modular elements for flexibility, allowing for adaptation to varying educational needs and time constraints (Vargas Solís et al., 2023).
Professional Development	Effective AoA implementation requires ongoing professional development tailored to rural educators.	• Programs focusing on diverse classrooms and AoA principles, addressing specific needs such as behavioral management and student engagement (García Castaño & Henao Henao, 2015; Kozina, 2015; Mirici et al., 2023; Shakerkhoshroudi et al., 2020). • Peer-led workshops and collaborative planning sessions to share experiences and effective strategies (Hishamudin & Li, 2023).
Parental Involvement	Active parental involvement is crucial for improving educational outcomes.	• Using various means to reach parents, including digital platforms and community meetings, to increase involvement (Cadenas & Castro, 2021) • Workshops to educate parents on supporting education at home, providing tools and strategies for involvement (Elizondo-Mejías & Calderón-Mora, 2023).
Resources and Support	Effective use and improvement of available resources are critical.	• Leveraging technology to facilitate learning, using available digital tools to improve instructional delivery (Mirici et al., 2023). • Engaging local businesses and community for support, sourcing materials and expertise to support educational activities (Hishamudin & Li, 2023).

Source: Own elaboration from study results, 2024.

4.7.3 Implications

The study suggests an inclusive approach that brings together policy, community engagement, and professional development to strengthen the implementation of AoA in rural areas, resulting in improved educational outcomes. In first place, the study highlights the need for implementing extensive, context-specific professional development programs tailored for rural educators. These programs should focus on preparing teachers with strategies to address socioeconomic diversity and behavioral challenges properly (Rojas-Alfaro and Montenegro Sánchez, 2024). In addition, these programs should focus on integrating AoA into their teaching practices seamlessly (Mirici et al., 2023; Hishamudin and Li, 2023). This approach is critical given the direct impact of household socioeconomic conditions on student behavior and the unique challenges these conditions pose in rural educational settings (García Castaño and Henao Henao, 2015; Kozina, 2015; Mirici et al., 2023; Shakerkhoshroudi et al., 2020).

Furthermore, educational policies must be revisited to reflect the realities of EFL teaching across different school settings and be flexible enough to cater the needs of rural schools (Rojas-Alfaro and Montenegro Sánchez, 2024), particularly in managing the balance between academic demands and extracurricular activities (Lee, 2020; Vargas Solís et al., 2023). This includes the development of adaptive curriculum frameworks that could be tailored to local conditions without compromising educational quality or the objectives of AoA.

Equally, the study underscores the crucial role of improving parental involvement in rural education systems. Strategies need to be developed that facilitate more profound parental involvement, not just in academic monitoring but also in participatory roles that foster community ties and support educational outcomes (Cadenas and Castro, 2021; Elizondo-Mejías and Calderón-Mora, 2023). Improving communication and building trust with parents could contribute to mitigating the challenges presented by limited resources and support in rural schools.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by outlining the specific challenges and adaptive strategies of implementing AoA in rural school settings, a context less frequently explored in current literature. The findings reveal the profound impact of socioeconomic disparities on student behavior and learning, emphasizing the need for contextually sensitive AoA adaptations that can effectively address these challenges. Likewise,

this research offers perspectives on the practical implementation of language education strategies in complex environments by documenting how rural educators strive to integrate AoA amidst significant resource limitations and diverse student needs.

On the other hand, the study presents limitations that need to be addressed in the future. For example, the study focused on a specific rural area, which limits the generalizability of findings since rural areas differ in terms of socioeconomic conditions, educational infrastructure, and cultural factors. As a result, the strategies and challenges identified in this study might not apply to all rural (or urban) settings. Furthermore, it is important to note that relying on qualitative data from a small sample requires caution when applying these results more broadly. While a small purposive sample can provide valuable perspectives, it may not capture the full range of experiences among the wider population of rural educators and students.

Using qualitative data provides great insight into different phenomena, but it also has its limitations. These limitations include personal biases and the potential for introducing prejudice. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of AoA implementation processes, future research could combine quantitative measures with qualitative data. It is important to note that the study results do not offer data on the long-term outcomes of AoA implementation; similarly, longer-term classroom observation would afford greater and potentially more in-depth insights from collected data. Specifically, to better understand AoA's educational impact, it is crucial to explore how it affects student performance throughout the school year, while also taking into account their levels of motivation and engagement over time.

Another limitation involves having restricted access to a larger number of EFL teachers. This is primarily due to their full-time work commitments, which makes it difficult for them to find time for extensive interviews or follow-up discussions. Coordinating interviews with EFL teachers requires several attempts as their schedules and diverse school commitments can heavily impact their involvement.

Further research should also explore more in-depth the role of parental involvement in AoA implementation, particularly in rural settings where parental involvement is often low. Investigating strategies to improve this involvement could provide crucial perspectives on how to better support rural students' educational journeys. Such studies would be instrumental in developing more effective, comprehensive strategies for implementing AoA that are tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities of rural education.

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