Teachers' Perception of the English Curriculum Change in Costa Rica: The Action-Oriented Approach

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Teachers' Perception of the English Curriculum Change in Costa Rica: The Action-Oriented Approach

Percepción de los profesores sobre el cambio curricular en inglés en Costa Rica: el Enfoque Orientado a la Acción

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ABSTRACT:

This qualitative study explores the perception of eight seventh-grade teachers from academic schools in the western region of Costa Rica about implementing the action-oriented approach (AOA). As the main objective, the researchers sought to assess the professors' perception of the execution of this approach in order to explore its precision regarding its principles and the guidelines of the Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica. The data were collected through a semi-structured interview and then coded considering three primary constructs: the participants' definition of AOA, its strengths and weaknesses, and the continuities, variations, and innovations that arose with the change from the CLT to the AOA. Regarding the coding, the researchers carried it out under the principles of grounded theory to identify commonalities among participants. The results show a favorable perception of the approach, yet the individuals could not clearly define the AOA for they perceived the materials, the student, and the teacher's roles as strengths; and tests, materials, and planning as weaknesses. The continuities and variations were not tied to the approach and the most salient innovations were the teacher's guide and the mini-project. The researchers concluded that there exist discrepancies between the participants' understanding of the AOA and the actual tenets of the approach.

KEYWORDS: Action-Oriented Approach, English Curriculum, Foreign Language, Language Instruction, Perception.

RESUMEN:

El presente estudio cualitativo explora la percepción de ocho docentes de sétimo grado de colegios académicos de la región de educación de Occidente de Costa Rica sobre la implementación del Enfoque orientado a la acción. El objetivo principal fue valorar la percepción de docentes sobre la implementación de dicho enfoque para explorar su precisión con respecto a los principios del enfoque y las pautas del Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de una entrevista semiestructurada y luego codificados considerando tres constructos principales: la definición del enfoque según las personas participantes, sus fortalezas y debilidades, y las continuidades, variaciones e innovaciones que surgieron con el cambio del enfoque. La codificación se llevó a cabo bajo los principios de la teoría fundamentada para identificar los puntos en común entre las personas participantes. Los resultados muestran una percepción favorable del enfoque, pero las personas participantes no lo pudieron definir claramente, ya que percibieron los materiales, los roles del estudiante y del docente como fortalezas; y las pruebas, los materiales y la planeación de clases como debilidades. Las continuidades y variaciones no estaban ligadas al enfoque y las innovaciones más destacadas fueron la guía del profesorado y el mini proyecto. Las personas investigadoras concluyeron que existen discrepancias entre la comprensión del grupo de participantes sobre el enfoque orientado a la acción y los principios reales de este.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Enfoque orientado a la acción, Plan de estudios de inglés, Idioma extranjero, Enseñanza de un idioma, Percepción.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica (MEP) launched the English Curriculum Transformation with the Action-Oriented Approach (AOA) as an effort to improve the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in all primary and secondary public schools. MEP saw the need of providing students with an English curriculum that reflected the knowledge and skills needed to communicate successfully in the 21st century in different real-life contexts and situations (Presidencia de la República de Costa Rica, 2016). The previous curriculum was based on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

The MEP (2017) based the curriculum change on the following reasons:

1. Learners need an updated curriculum that reflects the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to succeed in the information age as 21st century learners. 2. Pre-school, elementary, and secondary school's curriculum required an update to have more pertinent target content. 3. Learners who receive English lessons in elementary and high schools are not reaching the expected English proficiency levels after eleven or twelve years of instruction. 4. Citizens need to possess several competences to communicate effectively in the global context and to face the challenges of an interconnected world. (p. 6)

Based on the above, the change from the CLT to the AOA was made to address several challenges. Challenges related to the language itself and others related to the skills and competencies students need to live in a globalized world. It is believed that the AOA provides students with greater cognitive and emotional

resources as opposed to the CLT and helps them acquire abilities and perform in English as members of the society (Council of Europe, 2001).

The need for improvement made education authorities choose the AOA to change what has been done for many years. Therefore, by adopting this approach, it is expected that students reach a higher proficiency level than the one they reached with the CLT. In addition, considering Costa Rica's changing needs, MEP (2016) had to update the content because it had lost relevance in the life of the students who are growing up in the 21st century.

Besides that, although the AOA is new in the Costa Rican educational context, this approach has been used in other countries to teach French to Spanish, Turkish and Iranian students (Conseil et al., 2014; Günday & Atmaca, 2016; Moradian & Rahmatian, 2016), and also by Turkish teachers to teach English (Yeni-palabiyik & Daloglu, 2016). However, there is not a lot of scientific data about the use of the AOA to teach English to Spanish speakers in a foreign language setting.

Then it is relevant to explore to what extent the perception of the secondary school English teachers, in Costa Rica, concurs with the literature about this approach and the guidelines provided by MEP for its implementation. As teachers continue to work with this approach, they gain personal and academic experiences that would yield valuable data, examples of good practices, suggestions for improvement, and the appropriate implementation of this approach.

With all of this in mind, the main objective of this study was to value the perception of eight seventh-grade public day-academic English teachers from the Western Education Region concerning the implementation of the AOA to explore its accuracy with the approach tenets and MEP's guidelines. These teachers hold a bachelor's degree in English teaching and attended professional development AOA training sessions.

With the specific objectives, the researchers aimed at identifying the English teachers' definition of the AOA, to determine its concordance with the approach, including the view of language and how it is learned. Then they delved into the strengths and weaknesses of this approach based on the experiences of the teachers and described the teaching practice continuities, variations, and innovations according to the participants' reality.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Generalities about curriculum

The curriculum is a guide teachers use to manage the learning process, and it helps them know what contents, activities, assessment strategies, didactic materials, and topics need to be used while teaching. Stabback (2016) believes the curriculum is a description of what, why, how, and when students should learn. Therefore, teachers need to read the curriculum to understand the reasoning behind it and how teaching is meant to be.

As well as that, Richards (2001) emphasizes that in the process of developing a curriculum, stakeholders direct their attention to the aims. The aims should reflect the needs and ideologies of learners, teachers, schools, and society, which provide the foundations for the creation of language teaching programs. In addition, Richards (2013) believes that at times, the aims of a curriculum are based on standards. These standards are "descriptions of the outcomes students should be able to reach in different domains of the curriculum" (p. 25). They also use observable behaviors or competencies, which are a starting point for designing a curriculum.

Apart from that, according to Richards (2013), a language curriculum has three main interrelated characteristics: input, process, and output. In language teaching, input refers to linguistic contents; the process deals with the language teaching methodology (learning activities, teaching resources, procedures,

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techniques, roles of teachers, learners, and instructional materials,) and, the output has to do with the learning outcomes (what learners can do with the language as a result of a period of instruction.)

Richards (2001) points out that language teaching curricula have been mainly influenced by the different language teaching methods that have emerged over the 21st century. One of them is Task-Based. Task-Based curricula focus on learning a language through purposeful activities in which learners are expected to engage in real-life situations. The Task-Based curriculum is mainly student-centered and its main objective is to use the language as a means of communication. Along with this, one of the basic principles of the AOA is that "enabling and communicative activities are task-based and real-life." (MEP, 2017, p. 15).

With the CLT, students were not working with real-life scenarios, so among other reasons, MEP decided to introduce a curriculum change in the English class. A curriculum change "means making the curriculum different in some way… This often means alteration to its philosophy by way of its aims and objectives, reviewing the content included, revising its methods, and re-thinking its evaluator procedure." (Mondal and Chandra, 2021, p.261). In this case, MEP decided to change all of the above. This means the curriculum was restructured (McNeil, 2009).

Likewise, educational institutions choose a curriculum based on their goals and aspirations. Kotska and Bunning (2018) identify two types of curricula. They can be product-oriented or process-oriented. In the latter, the goals are determined beforehand. In the former, both teachers and learners have a say in what needs, and preferences are addressed.

With the curricular transformation and the AOA, MEP decided to use a product-oriented curriculum to teach English and saw this approach as a suitable alternative. Its rationale seems to be based on recognizing students as contributors to their learning along with the current demands of language learning. These are oriented toward sustainable development and digital and global citizenship. In addition, this approach offers a broader scope as to how to envision classes more holistically by following UNESCO's types of learning— to know, to do, and to be and live in a community (MEP, 2016). Moreover, regarding assessment, students can choose the project that appeals to them the most, and this eases the process of learning a language and increases their motivation. All this helps the English class to feel more realistic and, consequently, more engaged.

2.2 Generalities of the Action-Oriented Approach

This approach emerged as a different way of teaching, taking advantage of real-life situations and tasks. As expressed by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2015), the AOA is an extension of the CLT, and it involves students in the context of meaningful tasks to solve a problem, fulfill an obligation, or reach a goal.

According to the Council of Europe (2001), the AOA originated under the premise that learners of a language are "social agents; that is, members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action." (p. 9). Additionally, for the Alberta Education Board (2008), many of these tasks are collective tasks in which actions are focused on the negotiation of decisions, opinions, and perspectives that need to be gathered, shared, and evaluated. In other words, the AOA has students face real-life situations in which they are expected to use the target language in an authentic communicative setting.

2.2.1 Definition of the Action-Oriented Approach

The AOA is not a teaching language method but an approach. An approach is more flexible than a method and represents a set of assumptions about the nature of language and language learning. Specifically, the AOA "views communication as a social activity designed to accomplish specific tasks" (Ontario Ministry of

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Education, 2015, p.3), and the teacher decides what is the best path to follow. This gives teacher the freedom to decide how to teach the content assigned to each level, but under the principles of the AOA.

2.2.2 The Teacher's Role

As a guide, the teacher helps students accomplish their goals, and as a facilitator, the teacher helps to empower students in their learning process. In this sense, Kaliska (2016) notes that within the AOA, "Teachers can design activities to increase the motivation of learners to encourage them to work independently or collaboratively and to show real language uses." (p. 35). Overall, teachers help students develop the language needed to handle a task by themselves.

2.2.3 The Student's Role

The students learn by experiencing real-life situations. Piccardo (2014) points out that students build their knowledge and competencies through the feedback they receive by sharing the language through social actions. The students are not perceived as empty containers.

According to the Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica (2016), students have "values, beliefs, an identity, and language or languages. She/he possesses knowledge and experience that can be used to face the challenge of learning a language." (p. 32). Therefore, students play an important role in the development of their linguistic mastery through the application of their capabilities in tasks that represent real-life situations.

2.2.4 The Role of Activities

The activities are designed to guide students to learn how to respond to a real-life situation. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2015) states that "action-oriented tasks are set in a range of authentic situations to engage students in achieving various learning goals" (p.8). Piccardo (2014) states that to accomplish the goals in such activities, students should not only communicate, but they should also make use of their critical thinking, strategies, and reflection. Moreover, the author states that tasks consist of a set of purposeful actions performed by students to achieve a well-defined goal.

Regarding projects the Ministerio de Educación Pública (2016) explains:

> Project work is an important element in a task or action-oriented approach because it is a learner-centered, process-oriented, and collaborative task. It offers students the opportunity to take responsibility for their learning, set their learning objectives, go step-by-step, and demonstrate what has been learned by creating an end product. (p.30)

By working on a project, students become critical thinkers and use the language to communicate. At the same time, they are trying to achieve the goal of the activity that resembles a real-life situation. In this sense, learners oversee their learning.

2.2.5 The Role of Assessment

The Ministerio de Educación Pública (2016) defines assessment as "all the strategies used to collect information on a learner's knowledge, skills, and abilities, usually at the classroom level." (p. 53). It is also a "purposeful, continuous, contextualized, authentic, reflective, investigative, systematic, and multiphase process." (p.50).

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In the approach itself, assessment is performance-based. This type of assessment can take various forms and can be carried out at different stages of the learning process. This means students are assessed based on how they perform tasks inspired by real-life situations.

3. Method

3.1 Research approach

This study followed a qualitative approach to research. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) point out that the objective of qualitative research is to analyze a given phenomenon based on qualities or features that are not readily depicted in numbers. It also followed a non-experimental design because researchers did not manipulate or change the conditions of the phenomenon under study (Belli, 2009) since; in this case, the researchers did not train the participants concerning the AOA.

At the same time, this study is also cross-sectional. Belli (2009) defines cross-sectional research as one in which only a specific occasion is enough for the collection of the data, and in this case, it refers to the interview. Moreover, it is descriptive as researchers gathered the data as the object of study occurred (Gall, Gall, & Borg, as cited in Nassaji, 2015). In addition, as expressed by Lambert and Lambert (2012), the information derives from the codes that were later summarized and organized logically.

Besides, the study used a closed and convenient sample because all the participants belonged to the Western Education Region and were under relatively easy access for the researchers.

Finally, to analyze the data, the interpretive paradigm was used to understand the phenomenon by considering the participants' experiences and points of view (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). In this sense, the researchers tried to recognize the meaning of the phenomenon by entwining its understanding with the theory and the data (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

3.2 Context

The study chose to use day-academic public secondary schools of the Western Education Region because they were the first to teach with the AOA. Also, the region has nine school cohorts, and one school per cohort was randomly chosen to have a balanced representation.

3.3 Participants

Eight EFL teachers participated in this study. Their teaching experience ranged from five to more than twenty years. They shared a similar setting since all of them were teaching daily with the AOA.

To participate in this research, participants needed to meet the following criteria:

· At least one year of experience teaching EFL using the AOA. (Participants needed to have some basic familiarity in teaching with this approach)
· At least one year of experience teaching in a day-academic secondary school
· At least one year of experience teaching in the Western Education Region
· At least 4 hours of training regarding the use of the AOA

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3.4 Instrument

An open-ended interview was used to collect data since it serves as an investigation of perceptions or attitudes (Mackey and Gass, 2016). For reliability and validity, the instrument was evaluated by experts and then piloted with other English teachers who were not considered in this study.

The instrument had open-ended questions directly related to the objectives of the study, and the following constructs: definition of the AOA, strengths, and weaknesses of the approach, and how the implementation of the approach had varied, sustained, or innovated their teaching practice.

3.5 True-value and consistency

The researchers considered validity and reliability to provide accurate results and objective conclusions. However, they chose Noble and Smith's (2015) alternative terminology: truth-value and consistency. According to these authors, truth-value takes into account the diversity of realities and the contribution of the researchers' experience to the investigation's problem. Consistency means the study has to be clear and transparent to all parties involved.

Because perception is an unobservable phenomenon, this study ensured truth-value through the interview. The researchers designed an open-ended interview because this technique suits the investigation of perceptions or attitudes (Mackey and Gass, 2016). At the same time, the interviews allowed the researchers to gather data from the participants who shared their perspectives based on their experience as the ones in charge of implementing the AOA.

Also, as a way to ensure credibility for the analysis, the researchers followed four recommendations from Noble and Smith (2015): 1. Accounting for personal biases, 2. meticulous record keeping 3. inviting to comment on the interview transcript, and 4. data triangulation.

For the first recommendation, the researchers carried out two analyses of the data, first individual and then in a group. After that, a written memo of the codes was kept with possible explanations. Then the transcripts of the interviews were shared with the participants, and they were asked to make any amendments if needed. Finally, the codes were analyzed based on the theory of the AOA and MEP's guidelines.

3.6 Procedure

To collect the data for the study, researchers first contacted the principal to verify the school type and find teachers willing to participate in the research. After finding a group of possible participants, researchers followed Trotter II's (2012) model to choose the sample.

Once the eight participants were selected, a day and time were set to carry out the interview. Before the interview, the participants signed the informed consent and were asked permission to record the interview. Each interview lasted for about 20 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Spanish because the level of English proficiency of the participants was unknown to the researchers.

Afterward, all audios were transcribed, sent to the participants, and then printed to be manually coded. The coding was carried out under the principles of the Grounded Theory. This theory refers to the process of identifying and integrating categories of meaning from the data collected that aims to obtain a final product. It also guides researchers on how to identify the constructs needed during the process of analysis and how to link and establish relationships among them Willig (2013).

For the data analysis stage of the study, researchers followed a triangulation process in which the codes representing the participants' perceptions were compared to the theory of the AOA, the MEP's English Curriculum, and the MEP's Teacher's Guide for seventh grade.

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4. Results and Discussion

The following section discusses the salient data gathered from the interviews and interprets their findings, regarding the main objective of the study: To value the perception of eight seventh-grade public day-academic secondary school English teachers from the Western Education Region concerning the implementation of the AOA to explore its accuracy with the approach tenets and MEP's guidelines.

The researchers assigned a letter to each participant to maintain their anonymity. In addition, this section is divided into four sections: the definition of the AOA, strengths, and weaknesses of the approach, and continuities, variations, and innovations of the AOA, all according to the participants' perceptions.

4.1 Participant's definition of the Action-Oriented Approach

As users of the AOA, the teachers had a personalized definition of this approach. In that respect, the first part of the study intended to show if the personal definition of the participants' coincidence with the one provided in the literature review. Figure 1 shows the constructs mentioned by the participants regarding their concept of the AOA.

FIGURE 1.
Constructs used by the participants to define the Action-Oriented Approach
Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained from the participants, 2019.

Regarding their definition of the AOA, the participants showed some degree of familiarity with salient theoretical aspects of the approach. However, they tended to focus on features of the approach (such as its origin, its relation to the task-based method, and the English curriculum) instead of providing a specific definition that encompassed the view of language and how it is learned, under the AOA. On this subject, the participants resorted to describing methodological aspects of the AOA like the teachers' and the students' roles, planning, and tasks.

When the participants did refer to the AOA as an oriented-learning process, one of them stated, "The teacher is no longer the center of the process but an observer of how learners develop their knowledge" (Teacher H, personal communication, October 16, 2018). This probably refers to the fact that the students are the ones in charge of constructing their knowledge by performing tasks with the guidance of the teacher. This perception shows similarity with Kaliska's (2016) view that under the AOA, language is learned when the students adopt an active role in the class.

Teacher A, who said that the AOA involves "tasks that mirror the use of the language in a social context," hinted at the view of the language. This type of answer coincides with the Council of Europe (2001) which mentions that students fulfilling their role as social agents when they develop their abilities in social contexts. Likewise, the teachers also emphasized that students are encouraged to develop their language skills by facing real-life situations agreeing with the theory of how a language is learned and the view of the learner.

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4.2. Strengths of the Action-Oriented Approach

As for the strengths of the approach (see Figure 2), the teachers' responses were related to the methodology of the AOA. Also, based on the analysis of the transcripts, the researchers believe the teachers mixed the strong aspects of AOA with the ones of the new curriculum.
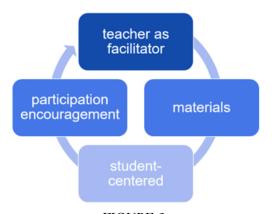
FIGURE 2.
Strengths of the Action-Oriented Approach according to the participants
Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained from the participants, 2019

4.2.1. Teacher as a facilitator

One of the strengths of the AOA reported by the participants had to do with the role of the teacher. They reinforced the idea that the teacher who works within this approach is seen as a facilitator because the class is student-centered. Therefore, the students are the protagonists of their learning experience. In line with this idea, Teacher B said, "The teacher is simply a facilitator and not the center or axis of learning. The teacher facilitates and gives students instruments and strategies." (Personal communication, October 10, 2018).

Similarly, teacher H expressed that "teachers are guides, guiding students little by little." (Personal communication, October 16, 2018). In this respect, it was acknowledged that the learning process is gradual and that the students need support from the teacher and their peers.

On the other hand, considering the theoretical aspects of the AOA regarding the teachers' role, they are depicted as models, advisors, analysts of the needs and interests of the learners, organizers of activities in the classroom, and co-communicators (Germain, as cited in Yarka, nd.). Nonetheless, these other roles were scarcely mentioned by the participants. This could mean that although participants value the positive role of the teacher as a facilitator, they need to appreciate the other roles as important and incorporate them into their teaching practice.

4.2.2 Materials

It was also reported, as a strength of the AOA, the variety, and accessibility of teaching materials. In this sense, participants considered that the MEP offered a valuable resource to support the content taught in class. Teacher C stated, "We have a lot of materials within the guide." (Personal communication, October 11, 2018).

With the implementation of the AOA in seventh grade, MEP provided a teacher's guide that allows teachers to have easy access to materials, links, activities, and examples that go along with the curriculum. Therefore, MEP helped the teachers cope with their new classroom demands as the guide includes suggestions

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to make use of authentic material such as YouTube videos, news articles, and TV shows. Although teachers may have already used some of these resources to teach, they needed to be used meaningfully. This fact may have led the teachers to disregard them as authentic.

On the other hand, participants' positive view of the materials seems to be limited to the guide. Additionally, according to their answers, they seem to mix the idea of current or up-to-date with authentic materials. This suggests that the construct of authentic materials is not clear. As stated by Gilmore (as cited in Guo, 2012), authentic materials are those created by native speakers for native speakers, and the importance of using them relies on the principle that students will be exposed to native speakers in real-life situations and contexts.

The importance of using authentic materials while implementing AOA relies on the principle that students need to be exposed to native speakers in real-life situations and contexts, which will help them to better develop their language skills.

4.2.3 Student-centered

According to the participants, another strength of the AOA is related to the view of the learner. They recognized this approach as student-centered. In other words, students are expected to be active learners, autonomous, and critical. In agreement, Teacher E stated, "The students are the center [of the approach], they are the ones who perform actions, and we just guide them." (Personal communication, October 13, 2018).

This perception coincides with the expectation of Ministerio de Educación Pública (2017) not only because the approach is student-centered, but also because the role of the students relates to the role of the teacher as facilitator and guide. This could mean that the participants have internalized the theoretical view of the students as the focus of the teaching and learning process.

4.2.4 Participation encouragement

Another strength mentioned by the participants is that this approach allows them to encourage students to participate. For instance, Teacher A said, "We [teachers] seek that all students participate in one way or another." (Personal communication, October 9, 2018). This view coincides with Kaliska (2016) who points out that the AOA allows teachers to enhance students' motivation and encourage them to participate, both individually and collaboratively.

4.3 Weaknesses of the Action-Oriented Approach

As in the strengths, the teachers' responses related to the weaknesses had to do with the methodology of the AOA. Figure 3. shows what the participants believe are the three main weaknesses of the approach.

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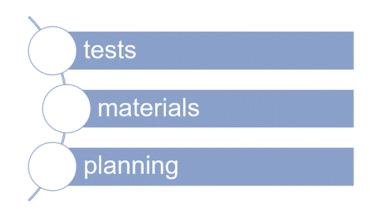Proyecto académico sin fines de lucro, desarrollado bajo la iniciativa de acceso abierto

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FIGURE 3.
Weaknesses of the Action-Oriented Approach according to the participants
Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained from the participants, 2019.

4.3.1 Tests

Participants claimed that they use written tests to assess students, but this technique is not congruent with the AOA tasks and does not measure students' real proficiency levels. They considered that the in-class tasks and topics are not suitable to be assessed with a written test.

According to MEP (2016), assessment tasks should promote real-life situations that go beyond the classroom setting, where the learner faces linguistic, socio-cognitive, affective, and cultural demands that replicate the ones of a speaker in a target language setting. However, participants expressed that there is a sense of discrepancy in this topic. Education authorities expect them to provide communicative tasks to the students, but at the same time, assess them with written tests.

Also, assessment under this English curriculum is performance-based. That requires learners to develop the skills, abilities, attitudes, and specific knowledge as established in the goals and Can do performance descriptors (MEP, 2016). Therefore, the participants believe there is a gap between how students are been taught and assessed. In this sense, Teacher H expressed, "Although the new curriculum seeks a new orientation of the classes..., in the end, the exams are still written." (Personal communication, October 16, 2018).

Although assessment should allow students to demonstrate their real competency level and replicate the dynamics of the classroom (Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica, 2016), this is not happening. However, the issue is not directly related to the AOA, but the MEP's assessment policy.

Furthermore, participants failed to see beyond summative assessment. They claimed that although written tests can measure students' knowledge of the language in terms of grammar and vocabulary, the lack of oral assessment has a negative backwash effect on students. By having only written tests, students might not see the value of working on their speaking skills. However, AOA encourages different forms of assessment such as diagnostic and formative (MEP, 2016). The participants can find information about the latter in the curriculum and probably a way to integrate the oral component into one of those alternative forms.

Similarly, participants perceive test administration as another weakness. They think they lack knowledge or the appropriate conditions to administer an oral or aural test. "Many teachers do not give an oral test. They do not know how to assess phonetics or listening. Also, at the time of the exam, they cannot be in each classroom with a tape recorder." (Teacher C, personal communication, October 11, 2018).

Regarding the statement, individual testing is needed to assess the students' speaking skills, and it is a habit, in Costa Rican public secondary schools, to assess students from the same level at the same time. Therefore, it may be extremely difficult to administer a test that is not written.

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4.3.2 Materials

Participants perceive the materials as a weakness of the AOA. However, they did not comment on the materials suggested by the approach. For instance, Teacher A said, "There is a video that lasts fifteen minutes, but one only has three lessons to teach, and ... no internet access at school." (Personal communication, October 9, 2018). Here two issues arise. Students may lose interest in the video because of its length, and teachers would need to download the videos outside of their work hours.

Also, Teacher D said "Some materials are not appropriate or useful." (Personal communication, October 12, 2018). This perception can be caused because the teacher's guide is the same for all academic secondary schools, and there is a need to contextualize it.

Regarding the approach, the Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica (2016) suggests the use of realia, web sources, and other digital or physical materials, so that students can have contact with the native-like language. However, they did not take into account that some schools lack the technological devices needed to use these resources.

4.3.3 Planning

Participants mentioned that planning is now more detailed, complicated, and time-consuming, as weekly plans are needed as opposed to monthly. For instance, Teacher G pointed out, "My previous plans are now useless... Planning a unit means you are going to be very busy." (Personal communication, October 15, 2018).

Nevertheless, in the seventh-grade teacher's guide, MEP provided detailed weekly lesson plans to ease the teacher's workload, but providing the plans has caused the opposite effect. This may be happening because the teachers do not know how to contextualize the weekly plans, participants are not using them, the guide is difficult to understand, or there is a lack of training concerning planning.

4.4 Continuities, Variations, and Innovations in the Implementation of the AOA
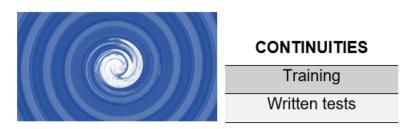
Continuities, variations, and innovations refer to teaching practices that did not change, varied, or were improved when the participants stopped teaching with the CLT and started teaching with the AOA. The participants provided their perceptions of these constructs during the interviews and more information is provided in the following subsections

4.4.1 Continuities

This term refers to teaching practices that did not change when the MEP adopted the AOA. Teachers kept these practices after the CLT was no longer used. In other words, practices that are used in both the CLT and the AOA. Figure 4 shows what the participants believe are those continuities.

FIGURE 4.
Teaching Practice Continuities from the CLT to the AOA according to the participants' perception
Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained from the participants, 2019.

4.4.1.1 Training

Lack of teacher training is a continuity that was also mentioned as a weakness of the AOA, and it seems to be an issue that arose before the MEP adopted the AOA. Participants were probably not thinking about the commonalities between the CLT and the AOA. They may have referred to the lack of training about how to teach under the MEP standards. AQUI

4.4.1.2 Written tests

On this matter, participants had previously pointed to them as a salient weakness of the AOA. They also mentioned that this technique continues to be used as part of the summative assessment. Teacher H expressed, "Tests are still written, and [to graduate] students still have to take an English reading comprehension test." (Personal communication, October 16, 2018).

This form of assessment seems to prevent a more efficient implementation of the approach as it may not reflect communicative purposes. Furthermore, it does not mirror the dynamics of the classroom activities. However, the English curriculum itself explains that the goal is to switch the current English reading test to the TOEIC-Bridge test (Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica, 2016) which may demonstrate teachers' lack of knowledge of the new curriculum.

Although it is disappointing that no participants highlighted MEP's intention to administer the TOEIC, even if they were aware of it, the TOEIC is also a written exam.

4.4.2 Variations

This term refers to practices that were part of the participants' previous teaching practices but were modified or adapted because of the implementation of the new approach. Figure 5 shows what the participants believe are those variations from the CLT to the AOA.

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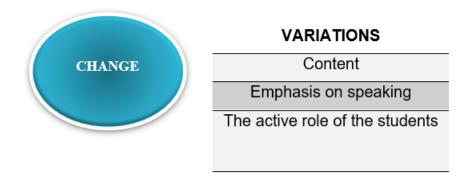Proyecto académico sin fines de lucro, desarrollado bajo la iniciativa de acceso abierto

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FIGURE 5.
Teaching Practice Variations from the CLT to the AOA according to the participants
Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained from the participants, 2019.

4.4.2.1 Content

When analyzing the variations from the CLT to the AOA, it is expected to see changes associated with the implementation of the new approach in the English classrooms. In this sense, Perrot (as cited in Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica, 2016) considers that one of the changes refers to providing students with meaningful content and participants agreed.

They considered that the content is more useful and relates to the student's daily life. Teacher H said, "Students can relate to what they are studying." (Personal communication, October 16, 2018) and this may be related to the fact that students are working on comprehending and producing the English language in scenarios related to love, the Earth, recipes, and a wide range of topics. Topics that students face in life at school and out of it.

In addition, another variation related to content has to do with quantity. Although MEP reduced the number of units in the 7th-grade curriculum, from 10 to 6, participants claimed that the English curriculum is overloaded. Teacher B stated, "The approach is fine, but it needs to reduce the amount of content." (Personal communication, October 10, 2018). Since each unit includes four different themes and each theme has different grammatical, phonological, and lexical content, there is a lot to go over in a short period.

In this case, participants may be overwhelmed with the number of topics and tasks students have to perform in class. It is going to take time for the administrators and teachers to decipher how long it takes to cover everything in the curriculum.

4.4.2.2 Emphasis on speaking

The participants talked about having to give fewer grammatical explanations and putting more emphasis on speaking. For instance, Teacher B expressed that with the AOA, "The class is very dynamic; there is more speaking, and little reading and writing." (Personal communication, October 10, 2018).

However, participants missed the goal of the CLT. This language teaching method aims at providing students with the ability to communicate in the target language, but because the assessment has been written, teachers were focusing on grammar (Teacher G, personal communication, October 15, 2018).

Interestingly, as opposed to Teacher B, Teacher G highlighted that the new curriculum emphasizes the development of the four language skills. This latter participant stated, "The program is very innovative,

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and students do learn English because it combines the four basic skills: listening, speaking, writing, and reading." (Personal communication, October 15, 2018).

Therefore, although the participants tend to see speaking as a prominent language skill in the AOA, they do not realize it fosters the acquisition of all other skills. In the AOA, the teacher has the chance to develop an integrated-skill methodology by combining oral or written production with oral and written comprehension depending on the stage of the lesson (MEP, 2016).
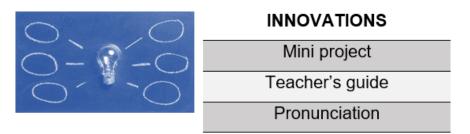
4.4.2.3 Active role of the students

The active role of the students was also perceived as a variation in the teaching practice. Participants considered that students participate more in class as opposed to being passive. For example, Teacher H expressed, "The student has to be more active." (Personal communication, October 16, 2018).

However, this may have been misinterpreted as a variation because students also have an active role in the CLT. Therefore, in both the CLT and the AOA, students are expected to engage in communication activities during the lessons; but with the CLT, the curriculum was not as friendly to understand as the tasks in the AOA, so participants could have been misled because of it.

4.4.3 Innovations

This term refers to aspects that did not exist in the participants' previous teaching practice and that were integrated with the implementation of the AOA. Figure 6 shows what the participants believe are these innovations.

FIGURE 6.
Teaching Practice Innovations of the AOA
Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained from the participants, 2019.

4.4.3.1 Mini project

Participants mentioned the mini-project as a new tool to assess the students' performance, and this consequently implies adopting new teaching strategies depending on the type of project. Teacher E described the mini-project as a task "in which students need to apply what they have learned throughout the unit, do something, and present it to the rest of their classmates." (Personal communication, October 1, 2018).

This statement coincides with MEP's (2016) characterization of the integrated mini-project as a task that is part of the formative assessment, which integrates one or more skills through a series of actions involving planning, creating, rehearsing, and displaying a product. This new task may represent a positive challenge for students and teachers because it demands them to expand their knowledge and explore new fields of action to accomplish MEP's goals. It is also an innovative assessment technique to measure students' performance.

4.4.3.2 Teacher's Guide

Participants referred to the guide as a new and helpful tool that responds to the content of the English curriculum. It provides easy access to materials, activities, and examples; and according to Teacher H "[it] helps plan every class." (Personal communication, October 16, 2018).

Said guide contains sample weekly plans for units 1-6 that can be used as-is or can be contextualized. It also includes links for videos and songs, texts and dialogues, examples of warm-ups, and activities that promote oral and written production and comprehension (MEP, 2017). In addition, it has a resource and a phonology section that teachers can use to ease the planning.

Having a teacher's guide can be beneficial to all teachers since it has a summary of the syllabus' theoretical framework. In this matter, they can consult it often to have a better understanding of the reasoning behind the curriculum change. In addition, teachers, who are unsure about how to teach a theme, can get ideas on how to approach it.

4.4.3.3 Pronunciation

The participants believe that as opposed to the CLT, the AOA is more structured and detailed in terms of pronunciation. Teacher H stated, "MEP wants us to work on pronunciation by giving us the phonemes to work with." (Personal communication, October 16, 2018).

The English curriculum provides specific information, in terms of phonology, that needs to be taught every week (Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica, 2016), and therefore teachers may feel they are devoting more time to teaching pronunciation. Because of this, the participants perceived a significant emphasis on the speaking skill.

However, emphasis on pronunciation and the speaking skill is a misconception for various reasons. One, teaching phonetics is different from teaching phonology; and two, teaching pronunciation is a responsibility of any language teacher, independently of the approach.

5. Conclusions

Based on the findings, researchers concluded that participants are not fully aware of the tenets of the AOA and MEP expectations. They are also misinterpreting the theory of the approach. They seem to miss the connection between the approach itself and the MEP's guides. Therefore, the participants have difficulty elaborating on a definition of the approach beyond the enunciation of its most salient characteristics, which most of the time are associated with the English curriculum and not the approach per se.

There is a need to work with the teachers to make sure they effectively learn about the view of the language and how it is learned within the principles of the AOA since this could positively affect their teaching practice and students' overall learning process.

Researchers also determined teachers could pinpoint more strengths of the AOA than weaknesses, that is: the teacher is a facilitator, participation encouragement, the approach is student-centered, and the use of authentic materials. However, although the latter is true, there is a misconception about the true meaning of authentic materials. This shows a need of educating teachers on the foundations of the AOA. Also, although access to materials (thinking of the teacher's guide) is viewed as a strength, this is not a part of the approach itself.

Added to this, the participants have a clear understanding of the role of the students in the AOA. They also coincide with the theory of the AOA in several aspects: the students should have an active role in the classroom tasks, the curriculum is student-centered, and they recognize their role as facilitators.

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In this sense, the participants' perceptions concur with the roles students and teachers have in the AOA. However, the participants also need to view themselves as advisors, and analysts of the needs and interests of the learners, and students as social agents to incorporate these roles into their teaching practice.

Considering the weaknesses of the approach, the participants seemed to correlate MEP's guidelines with the AOA, as if they were the same. This led them to mention written tests, materials, test administration, and planning as downsides of the approach when they indeed meant the guidelines. Not having identified the weaknesses of the approach as such suggests a lack of familiarity with the tenets of the AOA. Researchers could not determine if this happened because participants are not acquainted with teaching according to the theory of the AOA.

Along the same lines, the lack of teacher training is a weakness of the education system and not of the AOA. However, effective teacher training is critical to the achievement of the goals of any curriculum restructuration. Sadly, based on the data, many participants lack training on how to teach with the AOA, and there was no ongoing training during its implementation. Besides that, when there was training, there was not enough time to ask questions and get or receive constructive feedback on their teaching experiences with the AOA.

Concerning the continuities from the CLT to the AOA used by the participants, none were identified by the researchers. Participants did not mention commonalities in the teaching practice between the two approaches. Participants mentioned a lack of training and written tests, but these are not related to the approach.

Regarding the latter, MEP regulations do not seem to meet the teachers' expectations. The tasks provided in the class are intended to allow students to work on reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, written tests cause students to be unable to demonstrate how they have developed their speaking skills. This issue causes a gap between what students do in the classroom and how they are assessed. The participants assess students on writing and reading because written tests are required, and external factors such as time and group size do not allow for an adequate implementation of oral assessment.

Regarding the variations, the perception of the participants varied in terms of whether the AOA places equal emphasis on the four English macro-skills. There is a misconception about the emphasis on speaking since the AOA does not emphasize speaking, but all skills. Within the current English curriculum, teachers are expected to teach phonology, which might make some participants believe the curriculum emphasizes the development of the students' speaking skill.

Another inaccurate variation is to say that within the AOA, the student role varied and now has an active role as if it had a passive role in the CLT. This perception may be based on unfamiliarity with the principles of the CLT.

Additionally, the participants acknowledged the relevance of the contents in the English curriculum given their similarity with real-life situations as one of the strengths of AOA. This evidences that the teachers appreciate this key change, which attempts to provide students with meaningful learning experiences. However, concerning the content reduction, although it changed from 10 to 6 units, each unit is broken down very specifically with linguistic, sociologistic, and pragmatic components. Therefore, despite the reduction of units in this curriculum, the participants feel overwhelmed and perceive units as overloaded.

Regarding the innovations, participants pinpointed the mini-project and the teacher's guide. Although the latter was created by MEP and not the AOA, it is still an innovation from what teachers had before. However, it is difficult for teachers to follow, understand, and contextualize it to their teaching reality and amount of teaching time.

Also, teaching with the AOA is perceived as a difficult task because planning seems to be a hassle for some participants, either because of the perceived complexity of the plans provided in the teacher's guide, or the participants' lack of training and knowledge on the approach. Then planning a lesson is a time-consuming task. Moreover, many of the suggested materials provided by MEP in the teacher's guide do not fit

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within Gilmore's definition of authentic materials (as cited in Guo, 2012.) Therefore, there is a contradiction between MEP's suggestions and the principles of AOA.

Concerning the mini-project, participants seem to appreciate its addition to the curriculum. It represents a new formative assessment tool that allows teachers to integrate the language skills, which gives the teachers the necessary data to provide feedback to the students.

Finally, yet importantly, the teaching of pronunciation is seen as an innovation probably because specific sounds are to be taught, according to the teacher's guide. However, with the AOA, the teachers teach what the students need to communicate, and with the CLT the learner is expected to have comprehensible pronunciation. This means both approaches have similar views regarding pronunciation expectations. Therefore, pronunciation is viewed as an innovation because of the lack of specificity in the previous curriculum, but not because it was supposed to be absent in the teaching of English with the CLT.

In a nutshell, participants have a positive but inaccurate perception of the tenets of the AOA, and the drawbacks are related to the MEP guidelines which are not tailored to accommodate the teaching and assessment of a foreign language.

Finally, as this research was based on the western region of Costa Rica, it is important that future research consider the perceptions of English teachers from other regions and in a larger sample. It will also be necessary to consider the perspective that teachers of other languages taught in the country have concerning this approach. This will provide a more comprehensive view of the effectiveness of the Action-Oriented Approach as a national methodological tool in language classrooms in Costa Rica, especially considering the goal of turning the country a bilingual one in the following decades.

It is also important to carry out research considering the students' perspective on the Action-Oriented Approach. They are vital to the language teaching and learning process, and their voices need to be heard to offer them a more enjoyable and effective experience.

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Información adicional

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