Más allá de la Gramática: Impacto de las Actividades Comunicativas en las Aulas de Inglés en Nivel Secundaria
Beyond Grammar: The Impact of Communicative Activities in Secondary School EFL classrooms

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the use of communicative activities to enhance English language motivation and proficiency in first year EFL classrooms in a public secondary school in Chihuahua, Mexico. Despite government initiatives to improve English proficiency, research shows that students are not reaching the expected B1 level of English that the SEP requires when finishing basic education. This mixed-methods study follows an action research approach to explore the impact of integrating communicative activities into English classes with the traditional grammar-based teaching approach. Data collection involves pre- and post-tests, an interview, focus groups and observation sheets, which were analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method. Initial observations showed students' low motivation, ineffective teaching methods, and lack of interest in English classes. The overreliance on machine translators and minimal participation emphasizes the challenges faced. Changing the teaching methods and classroom organization, involving English as the primary language of instruction, leads to intrinsic motivation and engagement in the learning process, significantly improving the English learning of the students. Strategies such as interactive games and collaborative group activities were used to stimulate participation and communication skills, departing from the traditional focus on grammar. This research highlights the interdependent nature of motivation, participation, and learning in education. Encouraging intrinsic motivation, promoting active participation, and creating engaging learning environments emerge as vital strategies to enhance English language education in Mexico. The study demonstrates the positive impact of these strategies, offering valuable insights into English language education within a challenging educational context.

Keywords:

Interactive activities. Motivation. English as a Foreign Language. Public secondary schools.

Resumen:

El presente estudio se centra en el uso de actividades comunicativas para mejorar la motivación y la competencia del inglés en estudiantes de primer año de una secundaria pública en Chihuahua, México. A pesar de las iniciativas gubernamentales para mejorar el nivel de inglés, estudios demuestran que los estudiantes no alcanzan el nivel B1 de inglés que la SEP requiere al finalizar la educación básica. Esta investigación mixta emplea la investigación-acción para explorar el impacto en la motivación y el aprendizaje de inglés que tienen las actividades comunicativas como complemento a la enseñanza de gramática. Para la recolección de datos se utilizaron pre y post-tests, una entrevista, grupos focales y observaciones que se analizaron utilizando el Método Comparativo Constante. Al inicio de la intervención se observó baja motivación e interés de los estudiantes y métodos de enseñanza ineficaces, así como un uso excesivo del traductor y del español. Durante la intervención, se utilizaron actividades comunicativas e interactivas, así como el inglés como el idioma principal de instrucción, lo que llevó a una motivación intrínseca e involucramiento en el proceso de aprendizaje. Se emplearon estrategias como juegos interactivos y actividades colaborativas para fomentar la participación y las habilidades comunicativas, alejándose del enfoque tradicional en la gramática. Fomentar la motivación intrínseca, promover la participación y crear entornos de aprendizaje atractivos emergen como estrategias para mejorar la educación en inglés en México. El estudio demuestra el impacto positivo de estas estrategias, ofreciendo valiosas perspectivas sobre la enseñanza de inglés en un contexto desafiante.

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Introduction

Due to the globalized world where we live, the learning of English has been included in the educational systems of different countries around the world, Mexico being one of them. Nevertheless, researchers claim that language education in Mexico is considered deficient due to a series of problems that this system presents. One issue is the training and experience of English teachers, as many of them do not meet the profile required by the Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico (SEP in Spanish) (Davies, 2007, Davies, 2020). The SEP requires English teachers to certify that they have a C1 level of English proficiency (advanced level according to the Common European Framework of References) as well as to hold an accreditation of teaching skills to pass the first stage to become tenured teachers. However, as not all teachers have this level, only a few of them get permanently employed in full-time jobs and consequently, many schools have the need to temporarily hire teachers who do not always have the appropriate proficiency or teaching skills (Davies, 2020). This is intensified in rural areas, where schools struggle to hire English specialists and end up hiring *generalist teachers*, that is, those who teach multiple subjects but are not experts or competent in English (Izquierdo et al., 2021)

According to Davies (2020), Herrera-Ruano (2022), and Ramirez Romero et al. (2014), another problem falls on the conditions in which English teachers work: the lack of motivation, temporary contracts, no benefits or medical service, and no stability and security at work. This also includes the lack of resources and materials provided to teach effective classes. The government provides books to the students in public schools, but one of the issues is that they are not appropriate for the level of the students. Moreover, in our teaching experience we have observed that these books are supposed to cover topics aimed at students who already have a certain level of English, but, unfortunately, the actual level of the students is usually lower than the one they should have. Moreover, many schools do not even have appropriate facilities and resources such as internet, projectors, videos, or other materials according to the students' needs.

Society tends to blame the system, the government, and the teachers for the lack of English proficiency of students. However, the lack of progress in the educational field in Mexico is due to several factors. According to Davies (2007), Herrera-Ruano (2022), and Millan and Basurto (2020), the government is at fault for not providing language teachers with the necessary support and materials. However, the system also plays a role, as it is designed to align with international standards rather than addressing the needs of local children and developing a curriculum based on their real contexts. Teachers also share some responsibility, as some lack the vocation, patience, and dedication needed to plan meaningful lessons that foster student learning. Additionally, parents play a role, as not all are actively involved in their children's education. Finally, to some extent, students themselves are also accountable when they lack motivation to learn, study, and pursue professional growth (Davies, 2007; Davies 2020).

Despite policy changes introduced a decade ago, there is not enough research on the effectiveness of English education in Mexico at the basic educational levels. Previous studies exploring curriculum changes leave a gap in understanding the overall state of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Mexico, showing the need for further exploration by the research community. In Mexico, traditional methods, primarily centred around teaching grammar, writing, and reading, as well as the use of Spanish translation to teach, prevail (Andrade de Herrara, 1996; Davies, 2020; Izquierdo et al., 2021). The consequence of avoiding the development of communicative skills is evident in the declining academic achievement and motivation levels among students.

Therefore, this mixed-methods study aimed to explore the impact of communicative and interactive activities on the motivation and English proficiency of first year students in a low-income public secondary school in Chihuahua, México. It attempted to answer the following research questions: What impact do communicative activities have on the engagement and English proficiency of secondary school students? What methods can a teacher use to increase or improve students' motivation and engagement in the class? Why do teachers mostly teach grammar instead of practicing communicative skills in middle school?

Thus, an action-research intervention was conducted using a set of activities that involved the teaching of contextualized grammar through games and communicative activities in a classroom of 31 students. The activities and strategies were designed based on the class syllabus. Moreover, an interview, focus groups, and observations were carried out to know what kind of methods and approaches the English teacher used and the perspective and engagement of the students before and after the intervention.

English Learning in Mexico

Mexico has been a leader in promoting mandatory English language education in secondary schools and high schools since 1993, demonstrating a commitment to enhancing language skills early in students' academic

journeys (Andrade de Herrera, 1996; Herrera-Ruano, 2022; Millán & Basurto, 2020). However, Ramirez Romero et al. (2014) mention the need of shaping policies, improving the curriculum, and developing better teaching methods if English education is to succeed in Mexico.

Moreover, Santana-Villegas, et al. (2016), identify a significant correlation between socioeconomic status and English proficiency levels. In public schools, only 7% of students exhibited higher English proficiency skills, compared to 41% in private schools. This disparity shows the differences in educational resources and opportunities between public and private institutions. Davies (2020) and Izquierdo et al. (2021) further elaborates on the disproportionate access to quality education between urban and rural areas, with rural areas often lacking adequate resources and trained teachers.

The quality of education is also affected by the lack of professional development for English teachers and insufficient educational resources. Studies show that there are still many English teachers in Mexico that do not have a background on language acquisition, foreign language teaching or similar areas (Davies, 2020; Izquierdo et al., 2021; Ramírez-Romero et al., 2014).

Ramirez Romero et al. (2012) mention the characteristics of teachers as a main issue in English education. Many schools in Mexico lack qualified teachers, and there is a high rate of teacher attrition and rotation in different institutions, both public and private, due to a lack of job stability and low salary. Some states even report having hired individuals teaching English without a teaching background and without fluently speaking the language (Herrera-Ruano, 2022; Izquierdo et al., 2021; Ramírez Romero et al., 2012). Additionally, the training provided by institutions and the government is often insufficient, especially for teachers in remote areas.

Therefore, while Mexico has made efforts in promoting mandatory English language education, significant challenges remain in ensuring access to quality instruction for all students. The disparities in socioeconomic status, teacher qualifications, and access to resources emphasize the need for reforms in the education system. Addressing these issues through targeted policy changes, improved teacher training, and more equitable distribution of resources could enhance the effectiveness of English language education, particularly in public schools and rural areas.

Traditional vs Communicative Approaches in Language Teaching

The debate between traditional and communicative approaches in language teaching has long been a relevant topic. Traditional methods, which focus on grammar instruction and rote memorization, have been predominant for centuries. However, the communicative approach has gained prominence, emphasizing real-life communication and interaction.

On the other hand, traditional language teaching methods often focus on grammatical translation. Jin and Cortazzi (2011) argue that they can lead to word-for-word translations, which limit natural language acquisition. Despite these disadvantages, translation remains widely used, especially for students lacking fluency, as it helps in comprehension and clarification, particularly with complex linguistic concepts (Izquierdo et al., 2021; Millán & Basurto, 2020).

Conversely, the communicative approach focuses on meaningful interactions and real-life communication. Sharifirad et al. (2012) emphasize that communication involves establishing connections between individuals and ideas, fostering a deep understanding beyond mere information transfer. Moreover, according to Richards (2006), communicative language teaching (CLT) refers to "a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classrooms activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom" (p. 2). It also aims at teaching communicative competence, that is, the knowledge of using language effectively for different purposes and functions, varying the use of language according to context, producing and understanding different types of texts, and maintaining communication despite limitations (Richards, 2006).

Therefore, CLT involves more than the mere production of sentences in a foreign language. To achieve communicative competence, teachers must use different strategies. According to Johnson and Morrow (as cited in Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), communicative activities share three characteristics: information gap, choice, and feedback.

An information gap occurs when one person has knowledge that the other lacks, requiring genuine communication to exchange information. Choice allows learners to decide what and how to communicate, making interactions more authentic and meaningful. Feedback guarantess interaction by making learners change their language based on their partner's reactions (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). These characteristics, thus, make communicative activities replicate real-life interactions, improving fluency and communicative competence.

Moreover, effective classroom communication includes non-verbal cues like facial expressions and gestures, which enrich the learning experience (Rao, 2019; Sharifirad et al., 2012; Toro et al., 2019). Researchers have also highlighted the importance of the development of listening skills in teaching, which had previously been undervalued in traditional methods. Studies show that

listening should be both a developed skill and a primary goal in language teaching, especially through the use of interactive activities and multimedia such as songs, videos and other strategies that are appealing to younger students and which will allow them to engage in real-life communication (Afriyuninda and Oktaviani, 2021; Amanov, 2023). This aligns with the communicative approach's emphasis on real-life language use and sociolinguistic competence.

However, studies have also shown that the learning of English can be best achieved when the two approaches are integrated (Myat, 2019; Renau, 2016; Walia, 2012; Wu et al., 2023; Zhou & Phakamach, 2024). Walia (2012) argues that instead of seeking a singular "best" method, educators should combine different approaches to suit specific teaching objectives. This flexibility allows for a more comprehensive teaching strategy that addresses diverse learning needs. Similarly, Wu et al. (2023) claim that a mixed approach is more effective as teachers can use strategies and tasks from both methods. They claimed that students enjoyed translation exercises when using materials that they liked such as movies and newspapers, but that oral presentations, related to the communicative approach, were more appreciated than grammar exercises. Moreover, Renau (2016) mentions the importance of teaching English with an emphasis on its practical use within various contexts, encouraging students to adapt their language skills to real-life situations. This aligns with the goal of the communicative approach of fostering communicative competence through meaningful interaction and practical language use.

Therefore, both traditional and communicative approaches have advantages that could be applied in the English classroom. While traditional methods provide a strong grammatical foundation, the communicative approach emphasizes practical language use in real-life contexts. By integrating elements from both approaches, educators can create a more balanced and effective language learning experience that enhances comprehensive language proficiency.

Although a balanced approach is recommended, research shows that basic education in Mexico, specifically in public schools, continue to rely mainly on a traditional, grammar-based approach (Davies, 2020; Izquierdo et al., 2021; Ramírez-Romero et al., 2014). Thus, this study aims at addressing this gap by demonstrating how the integration of CLT with the current approach could be beneficial for students of public schools.

Motivation in Language Learning

An important aspect to consider in this study, was the motivation of students. Motivation is one of the main factors in the successful learning of a foreign language as it impacts both engagement and achievement (Dörnyei &

Ryan, 2015). According to Hayikaleng, Nair, and Krishnasamy (2016), motivation determines the direction of action, influencing whether a person wants to engage in or repeat an activity. In language learning, motivation helps students overcome challenges such as grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary related issues, ensuring persistence despite difficulties. Alizadeh (2016) emphasizes that motivation research in second language acquisition (SLA) often appears limited, addressing language learning at observable levels like time spent on tasks or engagement. However, understanding the relationship between motivation and internal psycholinguistic processes remains underexplored. Investigating this deeper level can offer educators insights into how motivation impacts language learning outcomes, informing more effective teaching strategies to tackle challenges related to grammar and vocabulary learning.

Moreover, motivation and engagement are closely related but different concepts in language learning. Motivation refers to the underlying drive that initiates, supports, and mantains learning behavior, including why learners choose to learn a language, the effort they invest, and their level of persistence (Dörnyei, 2019; Dörney & Ryan, 2015; Dörney & Ushioda, 2021). Engagement, on the other hand, requires the active participation of the student in their learning processes; it involves behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects and refers to how learners interact with the classroom tasks (Dörnyei, 2019; Dörney & Ryan, 2015; Dörney & Ushioda, 2021). Thus, engagement is crucial for long-term motivation because, while motivation can vary, engagement will keep the learners involved.

Ushioda (2016) mentions teachers' uncertainties about the impact of their motivational strategies on students, showing concerns about the validity of motivational research. Many studies lack detailed descriptions of classroom environments, focusing only on general terms like cultural background or curriculum. Ushioda (2016) also emphasizes the complexity of language learning, involving cognitive, motivational, behavioral, and affective factors.

Similarly, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) explore the role of demotivation in language teaching and learning. They argue that a demotivated learner is "someone who was once motivated but has lost his or her commitment/interest for some reason" (p.138). They claim that demotivation is the result of a strong negative component that has arisen, but that it is not necessarily caused by a loss of the positive influences that originally constructed the motivation of learners. It is important, thus, to identify the factors that demotivate our students to approach them effectively and try to diminish or eliminate them.

Exploring different types of motivation can provide valuable insights regarding the interaction and

engagement of students in the classroom. Motivation in language learning generally falls into two categories: Integrative Motivation and Instrumental Motivation (Dörnyei, 2019). Alizadeh (2016) defines Integrative Motivation as the desire to learn a language to understand and integrate with the culture and people who speak it, and Instrumental Motivation as the practical desire to learn a language for specific goals, such as career advancement or educational requirements.

Several studies explore why students are motivated to learn English. Purnama et al. (2019), found that 8th-grade students in Indonesia showed high levels of motivation to learn English, influenced by both their intrinsic (internal desire to learn) and extrinsic (based on external rewards) motivations. Borjian (2015) suggests that cultural affinity with English-speaking communities and the influence of globalization, motivate students in Mexico to learn English for potential financial benefits. He also discussed that parental support also significantly aids in English language acquisition.

In this study, some of the students are motivated by the prospect of traveling to or living in English-speaking countries, reflecting both integrative and instrumental motivations. Others aim to learn English for basic communication or understanding specific content, though some participants claimed that they were not interested in learning English at all.

Gardner (1988) emphasizes that motivation is crucial in language learning, encouraging persistence, goal achievement, and enjoyment. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are effective in maintaining interest and engagement in language learning. However, students' proficiency can be limited by a lack of real-world application outside the classroom and a lack of exposure to the target language inside the classroom. Instrumentally motivated students, driven by specific goals, might struggle to connect their learning to real-life situations, hindering progress and proficiency.

Liu and Huang (2011) argue that students' performance in English is often hindered by the limited use of the language outside the classroom. Despite being motivated, students may struggle with proficiency due to the lack of immersion or practical application. Instrumentally motivated students might focus on achieving specific objectives like passing exams, without engaging with the language in real-life contexts, limiting their exposure and practice. This is a factor that affected the participants of this study, as their English classes were taught in Spanish, thus, they were not exposed to the language in the classroom.

In addition to the personal motivation of students, the teachers also play a role in keeping the students' interest in the class. Several studies have highlighted that teaching practices can impact students' motivation (Filgona et al.,

2020; Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2023; Lowman 1990; Ma, Duan & Liu, 2020). For example, teachers who overemphasize exams may induce anxiety and narrow focus on memorization. Thus, instead of complaining about unmotivated students, teachers should strengthen practices that encourage intrinsic motivation by incorporating activities according to their English level and age and more communicative tasks.

Understanding these factors emphasizes the complexities of student motivation in language learning and the importance of teachers' roles in encouraging intrinsic motivation. Teachers should create positive environments that encourage students to engage with the language beyond the classroom through interactive, communictive activities and real-life usage. By reevaluating teaching practices, educators can reinforce intrinsic motivation, enhancing students' language learning outcomes.

Methodology

This study was carried out in a public secondary school in the south of Chihuahua, Mexico. This area is characterized by socioeconomic challenges, including limited access to basic amenities such as water and frequent power outages. The study was conducted with 33 first year, 13 to 14 year old students of the afternoon shift who were taking a mandatory English class.

The students had a 50-minutes English class three days a week, and the study was carried out between February and June, 2023. First, there was an observation stage, where the English teacher was interviewed and the class was observed once every two weeks to take notes on the class dynamics and the interactions between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves, and then, an intervention was conducted by a teacher-researcher between April and June, 2023. In this study, the term *English teacher* refers to the regular instructor who works at the school, while *teacher-researcher* to the external instructor responsible for gathering data and conducting the intervention. It is important to note that the school only authorized the intervention to take place once a week; therefore, it was conducted over seven sessions.

The group of participants was selected based on convenience sampling (Sedgwick, 2013). The criteria was based on the number of students, the English teacher's recommendation, and the importance of analyzing if the students already had a certain level of English, as the English book they used in the secondary school is designed for students with at least A2 level according to the CEFR.

The methodology followed in this study was an exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), this approach facilitates the integration of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. The exploratory design allows for the

exploration of complex phenomena, providing an understanding of the underlying dynamics and processes that occur, in this case, in the English classroom. In contrast, the sequential nature of the approach ensures a systematic progression from initial data collection to subsequent phases of inquiry, facilitating a deeper exploration of emerging themes and patterns.

By using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study sought to triangulate findings and gain a holistic understanding of the research topic. Qualitative data collection methods, such as observations, interviews, and focus groups, provided rich insights into students' experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. These qualitative findings were complemented by quantitative data obtained through pre and post-tests, which served to support the qualitative data through the measurement of the impact of the action research intervention in the learning of the students.

As mentioned, the study was carried out through an action research intervention. Mertler (2017) describes action research as a structured investigation that can be carried out by educators or people in the teaching and learning field. Its goal is to collect information about the functioning of schools, instructional methods, and students' learning processes. Therefore, action research is a common type of research that teachers do, as they are trying to solve classroom issues as fast as possible.

The participants in the study were the first-year students and their English teacher. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and their authorization to use the data collected, provided that their anonymity was guaranteed. Since the students were minors, both they and their parents were required to sign the consent form. It included a description of the study, the intended use of the information, the process of anonymization, and a declaration ensuring that the data gathered would not affect the participants' grades. Aditionally, it included a statement informing participants that they could abandon the study at any moment if they wished. For the anonymization process, participants were assigned a random number for their identification and the English teacher was referred to as their *regular English teacher*.

A variety of instruments was used to collect data. Pre- and post-tests were used to compare the grades of the students before and after the intervention and to corroborate if there had been changes in their English proficiency or in the development of their skills. The British Council Teens English Proficiency test was used both as a pre-test and post-test. This test was selected because it had already been validated by the British Council. The original version included 30 questions; however, nine were removed as they covered topics not included in the class

syllabus. Moreover, British English structures were adapted to American English, such as replacing *have got* with *have*. The test evaluated the following structures: verb to be, there is/there are/there was/there were, simple present tense, simple past tense, personal pronouns, possessive pronouns and adjectives, object pronouns, prepositions of place, prepositions of time, adjectives of physical appearance, comparative and superlative forms, demonstratives, WH questions, countable and uncountable nouns, and intensifiers.

Based on the observations and pre-test results, an action-research intervention, which included communicative and interactive activities, was subsequently designed and implemented. The intervention concluded with a post-test to evaluate its impact. We used the same test for both the pre-test and post-test to ensure consistency and reliability in measuring the effect of the intervention. Even though this practice could risk testing bias in other contexts, some steps were taken to mitigate this issue. The students did not receive feedback on their pre-test performance; they were unaware of which questions they had answered correctly or incorrectly, and they did not know that they would be taking the same test again. Additionally, the pre-test was administered in February, and the post-test in June, allowing sufficient time between the two, further reducing the potential for bias.

Moreover, observation reports offered insights into classroom dynamics, student engagement, and teacher-student interactions, serving as a valuable source of qualitative data. During the initial observation phase, we did not use a specific instrument in the first two sessions, as we aimed to approach the classroom with an open mind. However, we took notes on key aspects such as types of activities, use of Spanish, and student attitudes, engagement, and motivation, as these were our primary areas of interest.

For the subsequent sessions, we used an adapted version of the *Motivational Orientation of Language Teaching (MOLT) Part A* by Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008). This instrument focuses on teacher-student interactions, general teaching practices, and learner behavior; it analyses how teacher's behaviors influence students' motivation. While the original instrument consists of 39 items, we modified it to fit our context and research objectives, keeping only 21 items: seven on participant organization, four on teacher discourse, five on activity design, three on encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation, and all nine items on learner behavior.

We used the instrument qualitatively, as a guiding framework rather than a strict measurement tool, as our primary focus was communication rather than motivation. The results were coded following the process described

later in this paper. We used the instrument again at the end of the intervention to compare the results.

An interview with the teacher and focus groups with the students provided in-depth perspectives on instructional practices, learning experiences, and challenges faced in the classroom. Focus groups facilitated discussions among students, allowing them to express their opinions, experiences, and feedback on the intervention.

The teacher's perspectives and insights were crucial for the understanding of the classroom dynamics, instructional practices, and student and teacher interactions. Thus, a semi-structured interview of the teacher was carried out during the observation stage. Here, the teacher was asked about the class dynamics, materials, student's assessment, and use of English and Spanish. Moreover, two focus groups were conducted with the group of students. The first took place during the observation stage, where students were asked similar questions to those asked to the teacher regarding class dynamics, materials, assessment, and the use of English and Spanish. Additionally, they were asked about their attitudes toward the class. The second focus group took place after the intervention, and it focused on students' attitudes and perceptions of the class. By incorporating the perspectives of both students and teachers, the study intended to capture a detailed overview of the teaching and learning process within the school context.

Moreover, for the intervention phase, activities were designed following curriculum requirements and topics, and the needs of the students. The purpose of the activities and strategies designed for the intervention was to engage students actively in the learning process, using the target language more frequently, and encouraging the development of communicative skills while fostering interactions and language use in authentic contexts.

Data was analyzed following the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) by Glaser and Straus (2017). It involves constant coding and comparison of data to identify patterns, themes, and relationships that emerged from the qualitative data collected from observations, interviews, and focus groups.

For the coding process, qualitative data were first labeled as motivation, participation, Spanish, negative comments, and positive comments. This initial codes were then grouped into four general categories: relationship between motivation, participation and learning, communicative activities in language learning, strategies for engagement, and grammar in the classroom. The categories were afterwards compared and analyzed in relation to each other, allowing for a more detailed development and refinment. This process helped organize the results section to ensure a more structured presentation of the findings.

Additionally, quantitative data from pre and post-tests were analyzed to measure changes in students' English proficiency levels before and after the intervention.

The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the class was observed to analyze the classroom dynamics and an English proficiency pre-test was applied to the students to assess their initial level of English. The second phase consisted on the intervention, which was developed base on the results of phase 1.

Findings and Discussion

During the observation phase, it was found that the classroom environment presented significant challenges. The students frequently showed disruptive behavior and were noisy both in the presence and absence of the teacher. While approximately 10 students seemed to pay attention during lessons, the majority showed little interest in the class. The teaching approach relied heavily on grammar and reading-focused activities, which the teacher often read aloud. Guilloteaux and Dörnyei's *MOLT* instrument (2008) showed that student participation was minimal, and there was a lack of engagement and interest in the lesson. It also showed a lack of scaffolding, effective praise, and tangible rewards, so these elements were considered for the development of the intervention.

The seating arrangement also contributed to the lack of interaction. Students were seated in vertical rows based on their last names, all facing the whiteboard, which limited collaborative or interactive work. The classroom looked disorganized, with students frequently talking, ignoring instructions, refusing to complete the assignments, and often approaching the teacher to engage in off-topic conversations as a means to avoid participating in class.

The school faced additional structural and administrative challenges, including a shortage of English teachers. There was only one English teacher for each shift: one teaching all morning groups and another teaching all afternoon groups.

Moreover, most students came from low-income socioeconomic backgrounds, which likely influenced their access to learning resources and exposure to English outside of the classroom. As a result, many students did not perceive learning English as important, and some participants in the focus groups mentioned that their parents shared this view. The lack of resources and limited exposure contributed to the students' lower motivation to engage in class activities. Additionally, the English teacher expressed a negative attitude towards the class and the students, which may have further impacted their engagement.

The regular English teacher usually gave instructions in Spanish and encouraged students to use machine translators to complete their tasks. Although the use of mobile phones was forbidden in the school, the teacher

allowed them in class to facilitate the completion of assignments and exams. Speaking and listening activities were absent, as the teacher believed that students struggled to understand English and that, consequently, in her own words, it was pointless to include them.

Classroom activities mainly focused on writing the answers of the exercises and, occasionally, reading, with no emphasis on active language use through interaction, engagement or the use of communicative skills. Moreover, students showed reluctance to participate, as they argued that there was a mocking environment created by both peers and the teacher, which hindered their confidence and willingness to engage.

These observations align with the challenges mentioned by Harrison et al. (2012), who emphasize the complexities of adolescence. Teenagers experience a combination of social, emotional, and hormonal changes, often without adequate guidance, which can lead to confusion and self-doubt. Therefore, creating a safe and supportive classroom environment is essential to improve students' confidence and encourage participation, regardless of their proficiency level. By addressing these emotional and social factors, teachers can create a more conducive atmosphere for learning and engagement through the motivation of the students.

The motivation-participation-learning cycle

At the beginning of the study, during the observation stage, the students seemed to lack motivation and there was no engagement in the class due to a lack of organization in the classroom, characterized by teacher tardiness, repetitive disciplinary actions, and general apathy from both the students and the teacher. Students reported feelings of disinterest, frustration, lack of enthusiasm, and disengagement, primarily due to a lack of understanding, perceptions of boring teaching methods, and frustration with the learning process as they did not understand English.

The classroom dynamics were monotonous with limited audio-visual media, minimal teacher-student interaction, lack of use of English as Spanish was used as the means of instruction, the use of a machine translator to do the activities, and a teacher who openly claimed to be uninterested in the students' learning. All these elements created a negative atmosphere, lacking enthusiasm and meaningful engagement.

Therefore, a strategic intervention was developed to improve engagement and motivation. This shifted the approach from passive observation to targeted action research. The strategies designed for the intervention included changing class dynamics, introducing interactive activities, using English as a means of instruction as much as possible, and using positive reinforcement techniques. These strategies aimed to create a positive environment that encouraged active participation and both extrinsic, as the students participated to get a sticker, and intrinsic motivation in the students, as they claimed during the focus groups that they started to like English and had a sense of fulfillment as they saw they were making progress (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021).

However, changing the class dynamics, mainly by adding communicative activities using Engish to teach, came with challenges that demanded a careful balance of new approaches and adapting to students' needs. For example, the students felt anxious and refused to participate in English, as they felt ashamed. English was a new language for them, thus, the students needed more patience and time to complete the activities and gain confidence. Some of the strategies used included dynamic activities such as students writing on the board and using games such as *hangman*, *pictionary*, memory game, letter soup and crosswords to develop fluency and pratice the topics covered in class. We also added role-plays and used the games as communicative activities; for example, with the *Pictionary* game, students had to describe a picture drawn by their partners, which covers the *information gap* element by Johnson and Morrow (as cited in Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). We could not add more complex activities as the English vocabulary of the students was limited.

Moreover, positive feedback and comments from their classmates, that is, both teacher and peer evaluation, were crucial in creating a positive atmosphere conducive to learning. It was forbidden to make fun of the participation of students or be rude with other people. The key to develop the students' confidence, improve their language skills, and encourage participation was to be motivated as a teacher to motivate the students through active participation.

The results of the study showed a link between motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. Before the intervention, students refused to participate in class as they felt ashamed of their lack of knowledge, and they did not want to be mocked by their teacher and classmates: *"I don't like the class because I don't understand anything" (S23)*; *"I feel very uncomfortable when the teacher asks me something because I know that I don't understand and I don't want her to say something to me in front of my classmates"* (S30).

There was also a negative atmosphere as the teacher called students names when they were unable to pronounce a word correctly or when they made a mistake, which resulted in laughter by the rest of the class and, consequently, mocking of the students by their peers. The negative attitudes of the teacher towards the students created a negative atmosphere that had to be changed during the intervention. This is why, an emphasis on

respect was made with the purpose of making students comfortable in the class so that they felt confident to actively participate and get engaged in the activities.

After the intervention, it was noticed that a cycle emerged where motivation acted as the catalyst, leading to active participation, which in turn led to valuable feedback that impacted the learning of the students (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1 Motivation - Participation - Learning cycle
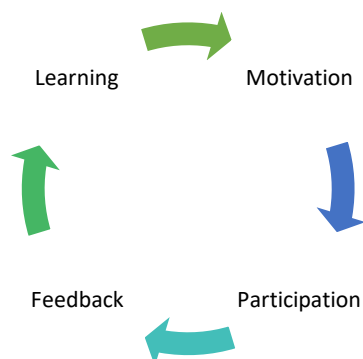
Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1 shows a cycle where, when students were motivated, their participation increased and, consequently, their interaction with the teacher-researcher and with their peers also increased resulting in an improvement of their communicative skills. Then, as students were able to participate more, the teacher-researcher was able to give them positive feedback which developed the students' confidence and resulted in their learning. Finally, as the students realized they were learning, they became more motivated and the cycle was repeated.

Motivation

According to Ushioda (2016) and Dörnyei (2019), motivation is a key element of education and learning for students, as it leads to improved performance. Findings showed that students who were motivated were more engaged in the class and participated and interacted among them when speaking English. Before the intervention, the students were noisy, they did not pay attention, they liked to shout and not work, they were afraid to participate in class, they openly mentioned and showed that they were not interested in the class by doing homework from another subject in the English class, and some did not even attend the class. The atmosphere was tense between the teacher and the students, but above all students claimed that they felt neglected.

Then, during the intervention, as students were now engaged in the lesson, that is, they became active instead of passive learners, they began receiving feedback. Positive feedback boosts students' confidence, encouraging them to participate more, which facilitates learning. According to Binu (2020) feedback is a great reinforcer for learning and achievement. It has a major influence on students' academic success. Positive

feedback has the power to initiate further action and it improves both teaching and learning. Therefore, feedback and instruction are intertwined, and this is as important as instruction because it gives new information about students' understanding of a fact or achievement of a skill (Binu, 2020). As students learn and understand more, they feel more motivated to participate and speak English in class. Findings showed that this cycle repeated itself and, therefore, emphasizes the importance of designing activities and planning lessons that motivate the students to learn.

Additionally, setting clear goals and expectations, incorporating key learning elements, and offering personalized instruction further boosted student engagement. Creating a positive classroom environment where students felt valued, respected, and supported in their learning journey motivated them to participate actively and improve their English skills. These strategies worked together to create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that encourages students to be more engaged and motivated (Dörnyei, 2019).

To create this positive atmosphere, students were told at the beginning of the intervention that it was important that they tried to speak in English, and that it did not matter if they made mistakes or not. Therefore, some of them started to participate, answering as best they could, and they began feeling proud of themselves: "*Today we are bilingual, teacher*" (S18). As can be seen, this atmosphere increased the motivation of the students in the class.

During the intervention, students showed motivation through different actions and attitudes. They began to participate more, to be more curious about the language, and they tried to communicate in English. They were also quieter in class and paid more attention, and they were engaged and competitive in the games, and supported each other when asked questions about the class.

With the help of stickers and positive feedback, students felt that they were capable of learning English and that it was not something impossible. To increase their confidence, students were given prompts of sentences to participate in class and use English such as "*May I go to the restroom?", "How do you say… in English?*" Students claimed that they felt excited to hear themselves speak like that in front of their classmates.

Results also showed that the change of activities and the atmosphere of the class impacted the students' learning. This was reflected in their class grades, that is, in the evaluation instruments applied by their English teacher as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Comparison of students' grades

Participant	Second trimester	Third trimester
S1	5	10

|		
S2	10	10
S3	10	10
S4	6	5
S5	6	10
S6	10	5
S7	5	10
S8	6	6
S9	10	6
S10	5	6
S11	10	8
S12	5	6
S13	5	10
S14	6	10
S15	10	10
S16	5	10
S17	10	6
S18	8	8
S19	8	8
S20	8	6
S21	8	6
S22	5	8
S23	8	9
S24	7	5
S25	6	7
S26	6	8
S27	6	7
S28	5	8
S29	9	7
S30	8	5
S31	8	8
S32	9	9
S33	7	8

Source: Own elaboration

The second trimester shows the students' grades of the period where the observation stage of the study was conducted. As can be seen in Table 1, many students had failing grades. However, after the intervention during the third trimester, the students' grades generally improved as they were involved in classwork, activities, tests, and participation. Moreover, the use of the translator was reduced as students were encouraged to use a dictionary instead, which increased their interest in using English in class, as expressed by Participant S04: "*Don't talk to me in Spanish anymore, teacher, now only English*".

To corroborate the English improvement of the students due to the intervention, the pre-test, which was applied during the observation stage of the study, was re-aplied as

a post test at the end of the intervention. The grades of the students can be seen in Chart 1 below.

Chart 1 Pre- and post-test grades
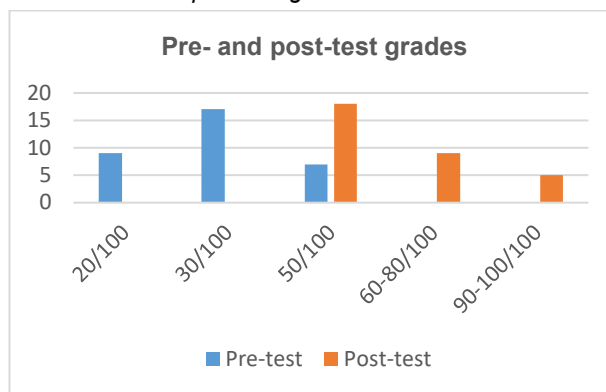
Source: Own elaboration

As shown in the chart, the pre-test was failed by all the students. 9 students (27%) got a grade of 20 out of 100, 17 of them (52%) got a grade of 30, and 7 of them (21%) got a 50. During the pre-test, the students were not allowed to use a translator which caused frustration among them as they were used to taking the class in Spanish and using the translator whenever they needed it.

Nevertheless, after being exposed to English and having a more active participation in class due to the intervention, there was a notable improvement in their grades in the post-test. Although 18 students (55%) still failed the exam, 45% of them obtained a passing grade. The post-test, again, was answered without using a translator and it shows that, regardless of the students getting a passing or failing grade, they all improved their language skills because the lowest score was a 50, which was the highest one during the pre-test.

To continue with the motivation strategy, and following Guilloteaux & Dörnyei MOLT instrument, all the students were congratulated for their efforts and they expressed feeling proud of their achievements, even those who failed: "*I feel very happy because I didn't think I could get a 50 on my own, without using the translator. Thank you for recognizing my effort, I appreciate it*" (S10).

Although most students still failed the test, it can be said that the intervention was successful because one of its purposes was to increase the students' motivation and, based on the results, it did. The *MOLT* instrument was used again at the end of the intervention, and we found improvements in weak areas during the observation phase as the teacher-researcher focused more on effective praise, and the elicitation of self and peer correction, as well as on using more the L2, tangible rewards, and scaffolding. Consequently, the students responded to the positive atmosphere created by the teacher-researcher by having higher participation and levels of volunteering.

There are still several factors that hinder the learning of the students, such as context, the situation of the school, parents, teachers, and the lack of time as the intervention lasted two months, among others, but the changes made throughout the study were key to develop more interest in the students to speak and understand the language.

Participation

The cycle showed another positive change during the intervention: students' participation. Participation reflects the visible expression of motivation. When students are motivated, they are more willing to actively engage in learning activities, which creates a more interactive and stimulating environment. Effective participation not only improves understanding and retention of information, but also fosters student engagement in the learning process.

At first, the students were reluctant when they needed to participate since, before the intervention, they were forced to answer questions knowing that their regular English teacher's feedback could be negative or that they could receive no feedback that would motivate them to continue participating. From the second day of the study and thanks to the use of positive feedback and encouragement words such as *Very good!, Well done!*, *See? You can do it!,* among others, the students seemed calmer, and a few began to raise their hands to participate.

When they realized that there was no negative feedback, they became more confident to participate; even if they made mistakes when participating, they had the satisfaction of having been recognized by the teacher-researcher and were motivated to participate again. Participation is the beginning of a change in student behavior.

To encourage participation and good behavior, a chart was created to record their engagement in the class (see figure 2 below):

The chart included the numbers of each participant (the number used to protect their identities), and every day attendance was taken, and color stickers were given depending on their behavior. For example, a red sticker represented lack of participation, a yellow one incomplete or little participation, a green sticker meant good participation, the blue meant excellent, and the purple meant extraordinary participation which showed that the student had not only participated, but had helped their classmates clear their doubts or understood the instructions and helped others to understand better.

Thanks to this strategy, students developed respect, a sense of belonging to a group, and self-confidence. This was one of the most helpful tools of the study because when students were involved, they developed autonomy, improved their reasoning skills, learned values, helped their peers to have initiative, and increased their self-

esteem. According to Ahlström (2010), if students are given more freedom in their day-to-day work, they will be able to participate in discussions and make decisions on their own or with their teachers.

Figure 2 Participation chart

Source: Own elaboration

Additionally, research has shown that engagement has a significant correlation with psychosocial well-being. In other words, participation reflects a well-stimulated student, that will feel confident to express their ideas in class provided that they receive positive feedback. Students should also be made aware when they are wrong and of the aspects they need to improve, thus, constructive feedback is also a good incentive to motivate the student to do it better next time (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008; Santana-Villegas et al., 2016).

Learning

Finally, the cycle described above also includes a learning element. Learning is the result of strong motivation and active participation. When students are intrinsically motivated and engaged in their education, they are more likely to assimilate and retain knowledge effectively. Furthermore, learning takes on deeper meaning when it is supported by personal motivation and active participation, which are fundamental in students' lives, and their quality and effectiveness can have a significant impact on their academic and personal development. According to Borjian (2015):

a) Learning is not only limited to the acquisition of knowledge, but also contributes to personal development,

promotes self-reflection, self-knowledge, and the formation of opinions and values in students.

b) Learning allows the students to understand the context around them and participate actively and effectively in the classroom.

c) Learning can provide students with a sense of achievement, satisfaction and fulfillment by allowing them to explore their interests, passions and curiosities.

After analyzing the three main elements of the cycle that emerged from the results, now we can answer the research questions.

Communicative activities in language learning

The first research question that this study attempted to answer was: What impact do communicative activities have on the engagement and English proficiency of secondary school students?

Findings show that communicative activities notably improved engagement and learning in secondary school students. These activities involve students in discussions, group tasks, and problem-solving, encouraging active participation. By taking part in these activities, students enhanced their language skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing, by using them in everyday situations, which improves their overall language ability.

These activities also helped students develop critical thinking skills. They learn to analyze information, form opinions, and consider different viewpoints, which sharpens their problem-solving skills. Additionally, communication activities increase cultural understanding and empathy. By discussing various cultures and interacting with different perspectives, students gain more respect for other traditions.

Moreover, these activities promote teamwork and social skills as students work in groups, improving their ability to collaborate. Overall, communicative activities not only strengthen language skills but also promote critical thinking, cultural awareness, and social competence, making the educational experience more enriching for high school students.

During the intervention, we attempted to adapt book activities into communicative activities using games such as *the Hangman, Pictionary*, memory games, and role plays to review vocabulary and grammar and use the words they had learned. Moreover, the teacher-researcher encouraged participation by interacting with the students so that they could practice their English. For example, one of the lessons was about the parts of a story (climax, rising action, etc.) and the teacher-researcher used analogies to exemplify them and then asked questions to the students:

Table 1 Teacher-student interaction

> **Teacher-researcher:** In a story the ascending action was associated with rise, which means to grow, the action that grows, that is, when the problem began to grow until reaching the climax, the parts of the story were also seen as a roller coaster, up and down and so on. So, why is it like a rollercoaster?
>
> **S17**: Because it goes up and down?
>
> **Teacher-researcher:** *Exactly! Good job!*
>
> **S17**: The way you explain it makes it look easy!

Source: Own elaboration

It is important to note that, although the teacher-researcher provided the explanation in English, the student's response was in *Spanglish*, that is, a mix of English and Spanish. Although participant S17 only said the words *because, up and down,* and *easy* in English, it was an improvement because they were now active participants of the lesson, which was a change from the passive role they had before the intervention.

Moreover, it was found that although students still were unable to produce full sentences in English, they were trying to understand what the teacher-researcher said due to her use of mimics, images, and the whiteboard during her explanations. Therefore, the implementation or adaptation of activities to communicative ones and the encouragement of students' participation, lead to their increased motivation and a more active role in their own learning, which, as previously mentioned, created the motivation-participation-cycle. This aligns with the findings of Myat (2019), Wu et al. (2023) and Zhou and Phakamarch (2024), who claim that a mixed approach between grammar an CLT can have a positive impact on students' learning and attitudes towards the class.

Teaching methods to improve engagement in the classroom

As was seen before, the activities developed in the intervention positively impacted the motivation, participation and learning of the students. The second research question of the study aimed at exploring the methodology and strategies used by the teacher, therefore, this section provides an answer to the question: What methods can a teacher use to increase or improve students' motivation and engagement in the class?

Before the intervention, it can be said that the regular English teacher followed the grammar-translation method, as the class was taught in Spanish and the students constantly used the translator to do the activities. According to Benati (2018), the grammar-translation

method was created to help people learning a second language read, study, and translate texts in that language.

However, this method is often considered ineffective for teaching a second or foreign language because it does not focus on communication. It emphasizes reading and writing more than speaking and listening, which are important for real-life use. This method focuses on learning grammar rules and vocabulary, making the process boring and monotonous for the students.

Moreover, constant translation between languages can prevent students from thinking in the new language, slowing down their fluency. This approach was being used by the regular English teacher before the intervention and, as the literature suggests, it was proven ineffective as students felt demotivated to learn English.

Due to this, it was decided to change the teaching method to a communicative one, where teaching and learning were more interactive, dynamic, and found. Thus, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was followed. This method aims to develop communicative competence through engagement (Quaserras, 2023; Savignon, 1987).

Nevertheless, for the development of this study, more than a teaching method, it was required a change in perspective on the side of the teacher as well as a change of attitudes from both the regular English teacher and the students. We understood that language learning involves more than learning rules, as students need to learn to express themselves and, thus, the activities of the intervention were focused on getting the attention of the students to motivate them and make them engage in the lesson. In the case of this study, engagement occur through a change in attitudes towards the class and a change of activities. An important addition to the activities was gamification.

According to Aparicio et al. (2012), *gamification* involves the use of elements from games in situations that are not games, in this case, to teach English. It helps make tasks more interesting, innovating and motivates people to participate as the contents are presented in an interactive and appealing way (Aparicio et al., 2012; De la Cruz et al., 2023; Ojeda & Lara, 2023).

In this study, these two methods combined aided in the development of the English proficiency of the students because, as they are teenagers, they were looking for fun classes where English was learned without having to formally study it. Due to contextual reasons, many participants of this study did not perceive school as a priority, so through this study, we were looking to change their mindset so that they changed their attitudes towards English and were open to learn.

Results show, therefore, that this was achieved, as the mix of communication and games increased students' participation, engagement, and attitudes toward the class. Consequently, while students still relied on Spanish and struggled to produce complete sentences, they demonstrated a greater willingness to use English, leading to a modest but noticeable improvement in their language proficiency.

Teaching grammar in the classroom

After analyzing the different strategies and methods that impacted the motivation, participation, and learning of the students, we can now answer the third research question: Why do teachers mostly teach grammar instead of practicing communicative skills in middle school? Findings show that in this context, this was due to the curriculum and the lack of interest of the teacher. However, as all teachers are different, we are unable to generalize, thus, we would focus on answering the question based on this specific case.

The curriculum of the course is aligned with the topics of other classes, for example, *The human body systems*, as English is supposed to be taught in context. However, the teacher focused on the translation of the words to teach vocabulary and the teaching of grammar.

This approach was ineffective for the students, as previously mentioned, they considered the classes boring, and this lack of motivation was reflected in their grades. If grammar is taught in isolation, without relating it to real life, students might get bored and stop paying attention as they did in the English class, also, they might also feel nervous about making mistakes and not want to speak up. Findings show that strategies implemented with an emphasis on language use proved to be more effective as students responded to them and to the positive atmosphere created by the teacher-researcher by engaging more in the class and making positive comments themselves. This aligns with Purnama et al. (2019), Harrison et al. (2012), and Hannebry-Leung and Xiao (2023) as they claim that the teacher, classroom activities, and learning atmosphere impact students' motivation.

Moreover, the teacher only taught grammar and forgot about other important elements of language like vocabulary and communicative skills. Students were not learning how to use the language in everyday situations.

Results show that it is better to teach grammar in fun and interactive ways, along with other skills, so students can learn better and enjoy the process. Therefore, even though the teaching of grammar might seem like a convenient, easy approach to the language for the teacher, communication should be encouraged to avoid having negative effects such as boredom, lack of motivation and participation and, therefore, of learning.

Conclusions

This mixed-methods study explored the development of communicative skills in secondary school students through

dynamic, interactive, and communicative activities. By using both quantitative and qualitative instruments, the findings showed a clear relationship between communicative tasks and improvements in students' proficiency, motivation, and attitudes.

Three interconnected findings emerged as central to the learning process: the cyclical relationship between motivation, active engagement, and positive feedback. This dynamic encourages meaningful interaction, where motivation drives participation, engagement encourages learning, and constructive feedback reinforces progress. Together, these elements create a supportive learning environment that promotes effective language learning and acquisition.

Future research could replicate this study with a bigger sample of participants in both resource-challenged contexts and more privileged settings to examine whether the motivation-participation-learning cycle functions similarly across different environments. A bigger sample would also allow to identify tendencies and generalize the results. Additionally, extending the intervention to an entire school year could provide further insights into students' ability to progress from basic interaction and the production of isolated words to producing complete sentences in the target language.

The findings emphasize the importance of using engaging activities, such as games, to motivate students, building trust to encourage self-confidence through positive feedback, and fostering authentic language use to prevent frustration and disinterest. A positive and dynamic classroom environment significantly transformed students' attitudes toward learning, increasing both their participation and engagement. Interactive methods such as group work, discussions, and hands-on projects proved instrumental in encouraging the active involvement of the students in the lesson.

Incorporating diverse teaching methods and using visual aids, technology, and real-world examples, appeals to different learning styles and keeps students' interest. Offering choices in learning activities, creating connections, and providing consistent positive feedback can help create a safe and stimulating environment where students feel confident and motivated to learn.

Such strategies not only engage students but also develop their autonomy, critical thinking, and self-esteem. Active participation transforms behavior by encouraging autonomy, initiative, and values, while decision-making opportunities further enhance engagement and well-being. Moreover, a participatory cycle builds students' confidence in expressing ideas, viewing mistakes as learning opportunities, and seeking constructive feedback to grow.

Although English grammar teaching remains an important element of secondary education, emphasized in traditional curricula and standardized assessments, it often overshadows communication skills. Teachers' preferences and training, therefore, play a role in perpetuating this focus as it is up to them to adapt the syllabus to the students' needs and adding activities that appeal to their interests to encourage learning.

Yet, the findings of this study highlight the need for a more balanced approach that integrates communicative activities, fostering the development of complex language skills alongside grammatical competence. Aiming for this balance is crucial for giving students the tools they need to become confident and effective English speakers.

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