Students' Needs Reflected in the EFL Program:
A Small-Scale Evaluation of the Methodologies Proposed in an English Program [*]

Reflejo de las necesidades de los estudiantes en el programa de inglés como
lengua extranjera: Una evaluación a pequeña escala
de las metodologías propuestas en un programa de inglés

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In order to evaluate if there were discrepancies or not among the methodology proposed in the English program, students' needs and what the teacher was actually doing in her classes, 13 ninth graders were asked to answer two questionnaires and they were also observed while they were in their English classes at the Institución Educativa Departamental El Vino (Cundinamarca, Colombia). The English teacher was also interviewed and a self- assessment questionnaire was given to her. The analysis of data showed that there were matches and mismatches among those three aspects.

Key words: English-Teaching-Methods, English-Teaching-Programs-Evaluation, Second Language Acquisition-Teaching-Programs, Students-Teaching-Evaluation, Self-evaluation-Methodology

Con el propósito de evaluar si existía o no concordancia entre las metodologías propuestas en el programa de inglés, las necesidades de los estudiantes y lo que la profesora realizaba en clase, trece estudiantes de noveno grado respondieron dos cuestionarios y fueron observados mientras estaban en su clases de inglés en la Institución Educativa Departamental El Vino (Cundinamarca, Colombia). De la misma forma, la profesora fue entrevistada y respondió un cuestionario de auto evaluación.

El análisis de la información recogida mostró que había discrepancias y concordancias entre los tres aspectos anteriormente mencionados.

Palabras clave: Inglés-Enseñanza-Métodos, Inglés-Enseñanza-Programas-Evaluación, Adquisición de segundo lenguaje-Enseñanza-Programas, Estudiantes-Enseñanza-Evaluación, Auto evaluación-Metodología

INTRODUCTION

Students' needs have been a big concern for teachers. However, we tend to forget them when planning our classes. As the objective of this project was to establish if there were any discrepancies or not among the methodology proposed in the English program, students' needs and what the teacher was actually doing in her classes, this article presents the evaluation of the methodology proposed in the English program at the Institución Educativa Departamental El Vino (IEDEV), which is located in Inspección El Vino, La Vega (Cundinamarca, Colombia).

1. RESEARCH METHOD

We focused on an educational aspect of the English program at the said school and one which had not been analyzed. This aspect was the English program, and more specifically, the methodology for the classes proposed in it. Thus, we looked at students needs' regarding language and methodology.

This evaluation was carried out in a 9th grade class. The group was composed of 13 students, aged between thirteen and eighteen years old. Students were observed while they were in their English classes.

The students belong to rural areas close to the school and they take three hours of English per week. The English teacher has been working there for three years, during which time she has been in charge of teaching English to the whole school.

Firstly, we designed two questionnaires. In the first one, we looked for the language needs students had (see annex 1). In the second one, students' needs regarding methodology were investigated (see annex 2). Also, during a month, we video and audio recorded English classes with 9th graders to see the methodology used by the teacher. After that, the teacher was interviewed to clarify some aspects of the class and to discover some of her perceptions related to methodology. As well as this, a self assessment questionnaire was given to her for fostering awareness and making-decisions (see annex 3). Finally, we looked at the methodologies proposed in the English program.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Evaluation is a topic that has been defined and studied by many different authors over a vast period of time because of its implications in education, particularly in the teaching/learning process. According to Lynch (1996, pp. 3) evaluation is a systematic attempt to gather information in order to make judgments or decisions. Brown (1989, pp. 223) points out that evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum and assess its effectiveness within the context of the particular institutions

involved. However, for the improvement of the curriculum, aspects such as materials, activities, projects and programs among others must be taken into account and as the English program at IEDEV had not been evaluated for a long period of time; it was the focus of this project.

2.1 Defining Programs

Lynch (1999) argues that the word program tends to evoke the image of a series of courses linked with some common goal or end product. He also suggests that a language education program generally consists of a slate of courses designed to prepare students for some language-related endeavor. This might mean preparing them to pass a language proficiency exam, to function in a second language culture or to be effective when communicating in English.
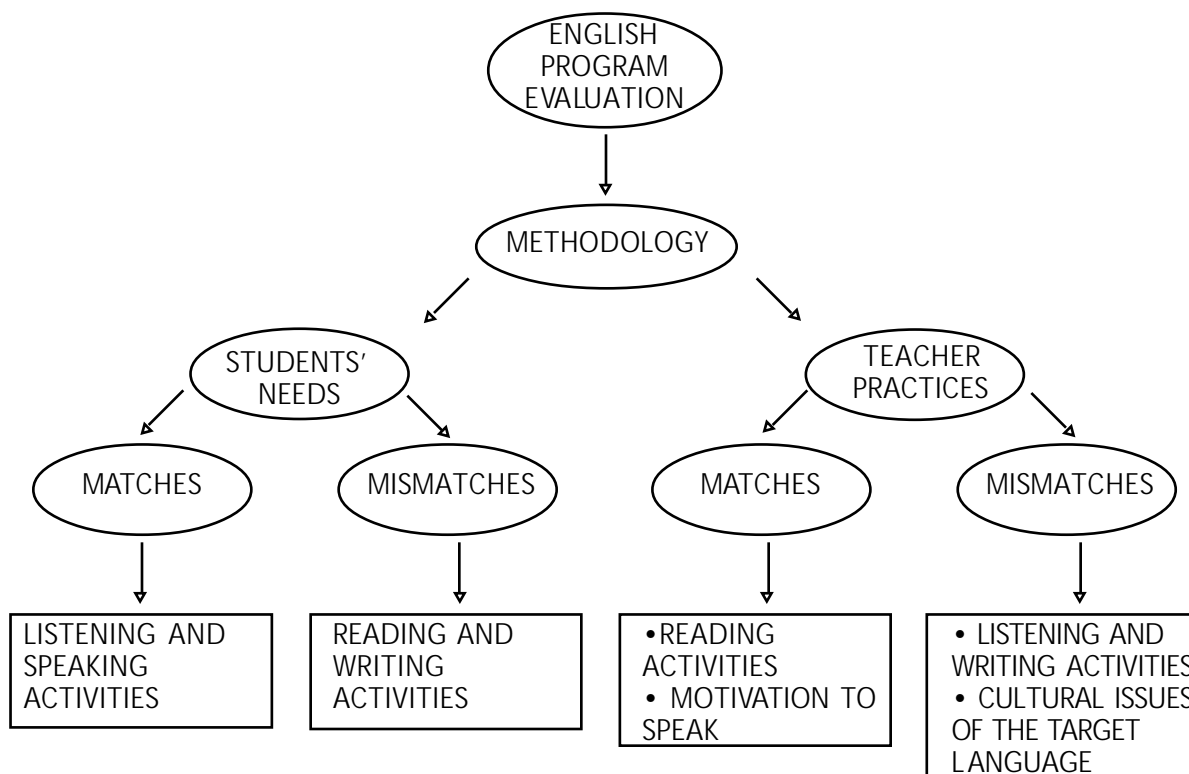
However, when dealing with foreign language programs, Ashworth (1985), proposes that the objectives of the EFL programs may vary according to the age, ability and aims of the students, and the short and long - term goals of the community or nation. For example, the goals may be to give students a basic knowledge of spoken English, some simple reading and writing skills, and a little understanding of the culture of the English language so that they can read literature and research reports in English, conduct business transactions, or take part in the international conferences carried on in English.

In relation to program evaluation, Brown (1989) states that it is the process of (1) defining program standards; (2) determining whether a discrepancy exists between some aspect of program performance and the standards governing that aspect of the program; and (3) using discrepancy information either to change performance or to change program standards.

This project focused on determining the discrepancies among students' needs, the methodology proposed in the English Program and the current practices of the English teacher. For our specific purpose the term methodology is seen as the procedures, principles, and beliefs themselves that are seen when teaching and learning a language (Richards and Rodgers, 1985, pp. 177).

Many authors, such as Nunan (1989, pp. 25) and Richards (1990, pp. 54), among others, have been struck by the discrepancy between the prescriptive statements by methodologists about what ought to go in the classroom, and what actually went on in the classrooms. Nunan (1991, pp. 10) suggests that teachers must not only plan the programs but also put them into action considering the realities of each classroom. He proposes that methodology needs to be based not on ideology or dogma, as it is often the case, but on evidence and insight into what constitutes students' necessities and meaningful learning.

In addition, it should be noted that as this project was carried out with the English teacher as a participant, she made a self assessment, which is defined as the "…self-awareness that the EFL teacher should experience when reflecting upon their own teaching" (Quintero, 1996, pp. 7); "…the ability for teachers to judge their own teaching honestly and to see clearly how much learning is taking place in the class" (Doff, 1988, pp. 278 in Quintero, 1996, pp. 7). Those definitions state clearly that for self-assessment we need to make the teacher aware about his/her own teaching practices in order for him/her to judge them critically and make decisions about them. Reynolds & Salters (1998) claim that reflection is the departure point for changing teacher's practices. They state that "reflection provides a means of

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              │   PROGRAM   │
              │ EVALUATION  │
              └──────┬──────┘
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              │ METHODOLOGY │
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    ┌─────▼─────┐          ┌─────▼─────┐
    │ STUDENTS' │          │  TEACHER  │
    │   NEEDS   │          │ PRACTICES │
    └───┬───┬───┘          └───┬───┬───┘
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| MATCHES | MISMATCHES | MATCHES | MISMATCHES |

| LISTENING AND SPEAKING ACTIVITIES | READING AND WRITING ACTIVITIES | •READING ACTIVITIES • MOTIVATION TO SPEAK | • LISTENING AND WRITING ACTIVITIES • CULTURAL ISSUES OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE |

evaluating goals, purposes and methods, thereby clarifying the values which lie at the root of successful practice" (pp. 199).

3. FINDINGS

As it was mentioned previously, the data was collected through questionnaires, a self-assessment questionnaire, an interview with the teacher, the printed English Program (EP) and video and audio recordings of the classes. The following diagram summarizes the findings in relation to the matches and mismatches among students' needs, the E.P. and the teacher practices.

We analyzed the methodologies stated in the program using the definition that Richards and Rodgers (1985) state for methodology. In light of this definition we found that the EP does not establish clearly the methodologies to be used.

In general, there was a match in terms of methodology between students' needs and some activities proposed in the English Program (EP), such as listening and speaking practices. Also, some of the English teacher's practices (reading and speaking activities) were in accordance with what was stated in the E.P.:

"Teacher: OK. Today, we are going to read some texts…please make groups of three and then we are going to discuss and… make questions…

Students: In Spanish. (they raise their voice)

T: OK. Groups of three and read this (Teacher shows the reading)".

However, we found many mismatches in terms of methodology among students' needs, the E.P. and English teacher practices, since the teacher did not take into account what students proposed in their classes to develop the E.P. at the beginning of the year and in that way, she was not doing what was relevant to the students.

Defining methodologies as procedures, principles and beliefs about teaching and learning, it was clear that:

· Procedures are seen when the program presents texts, exercises, oral practices, games, readings, listening and writing activities, role plays, dialogues, use of computer labs, and materials such as dictionaries and English books. Procedures are also evidenced in workshops, and guides such as tools for the teaching and learning of English. The previous aspects are considered in the program where it refers to "Estructura General del Área de inglés (General Structure of the English Area GSEA): "*…en las clases se desarrollarán las habilidades básicas … por medio de textos, ejercicios, practicas orales, juegos.*" Those aspects are also seen in "Los componentes del Proyecto de inglés (English Project Components EPC)": "*Se prevé que los estudiantes utilicen el aula de sistemas para desarrollar algunos temas*".

· Principles are stated as the contextualization, communication and the learning of grammar and cultural issues of the target language in the GSEA: "*…en las clases se desarrollarán las habilidades básicas … teniendo en cuenta el aprendizaje gramatical, contextual, comunicativo, y cultural del idioma, …*"

· Beliefs are present in the program when it relates to the usefulness of knowledge by arguing that it is not separated. On the contrary, knowledge and the human being are seen as a whole: "*…el estudiante estará en contacto con todas las áreas del conocimiento separadamente y juntas a la vez, partiendo del principio de que el conocimiento y la persona no son segmentados, sino que son parte de un todo.*" (In Correlación e integración por áreas, English Program).

Having stated the methodologies in the E.P., we analyzed them in light of what Brown (1989) states for program evaluation in relation to determining whether a discrepancy exists among some of the aspects of the program and the change that can be applied when analyzing that information. That analysis led us to the following findings:

3.1 E.P. - Students' Needs

MATCHES: Through the two questionnaires given to students, we noticed that what they preferred for their English classes were listening activities (see questions 2, 5, 19 in Annex 1 and 2). Also, they gave some importance to speaking and both skills were mentioned in the English program (see questions 4, 9, 17 in Annex 1 and 2).

MISMATCHES: The E.P. proposed mainly reading activities for the teaching of English in the classroom. This part did not fit the student's needs since they expressed a dislike of them in the questionnaires (see questions 6, 10, 22 in Annex 1 and 2). Another mismatch seen between students' needs and the E.P. is that in it, it is stated that the use of English outside the classroom would be encouraged and in the questionnaires, students' preferences in relation to the use of English were focused on its use only in the classroom, since in questions 14, 21, 22, 23, 24 of Annex 1 and 2, the answers given by students were mostly negative.

3.2 E.P. – Teacher Practices

MATCHES: As we have said, we audio recorded during the course of a month 9th grade English classes and we also interviewed the English teacher. Looking at the data gathered from these instruments, we could find that there was coherence between what was stated in the program in terms of reading activities and what

was done in the classroom. Also, the teacher tried to implement some speaking activities as role plays and she encouraged students to talk in English.

MISMATCHES: Although one part of the methodologies proposed in the E.P. had already been implemented in the classroom, there were many aspects missed in the English teacher's practices, for example listening and writing activities. Moreover, cultural issues about the target language were not taught.

3.3 Teacher Decision - Making

Because one of the most significant aspects when evaluating is decision-making, the teacher involved in this project decided to make changes in order to improve her teaching practices and to see to what extent what was stated in the program, what students asked for and her teaching were focusing on the same aspects in relation to methodology. Then, having considered the results of the English program evaluation, the teacher made some decisions in relation to the way she was teaching her English classes. She decided to have a lesson plan in which she is going to write the objectives of the class as well as the activities that are going to take place so that she can be conscious about the activities she is carrying out in the classroom. She has also decided to design more listening and speaking activities as well as to include some aspects related to the English culture. At the same time, she is going to tape record her classes to see if what she has planned is what actually takes place in the classroom.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Small scale projects can be carried out in order to evaluate specific aspects of our teaching practices so that we can make decisions and improve our practices. As we are all the time faced with having to make decisions, it is important for us to promote a change in the way evaluation has been seen in the institutions where we work. In the case of our project, it was clear that the evaluation we carried out helped the teacher to reflect upon her teaching practices and so she wanted to improve it.

Seeking the improvement and the growth of the teaching and learning processes, it is important to mention that reflective teaching can be seen as an approach to teacher education to empower teachers to manage their own professional development (Wallace, 1991). By means of this reflective teaching, teachers surely would have enough tools to raise their standards of teaching, not only the improvement of their skills, but also in their ability and motivation to better their practices. In the project, after observing, analyzing and evaluating her teaching practices the teacher decided to change the way she was teaching so that she could improve. Also, this reflective teaching can be seen by means of self-assessment which helps teachers to design which aspects of their teaching must be improved and then, make decisions.

In terms of the program itself, the evaluation has useful implications because one of the decisions the teacher implemented was to consider her students' needs when writing the program for the next school year.

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ANNEX 1: STUDENTS' NEEDS (SKILLS)

Colegio Departamental El Vino
Encuesta N° 1

NOMBRE: <u>Carlos Andres Mora Llanos</u>　　　　　EDAD: <u>15</u>
¿HACE CUANTO QUE ESTUDIA INGLES? <u>9 años</u>　　　GRADO: <u>9</u>

INSTRUCCIONES:
Este cuestionario ha sido diseñado para ayudarle a identificar las competencias que usted prefiere desarrollar durante su clase de Inglés y la forma en la que le gusta aprender.

Por favor responda a cada pregunta de manera rápida sin pensarlo mucho. Trate de no cambiar sus respuestas después de que las haya escogido. Por favor use un esfero para marcar su elección.

1. En la clase de Inglés me gusta aprender leyendo
No　<u>Un poco</u>　Mucho　es lo mejor

2. En clase, me gusta escuchar y usar cassettes
No　Un poco　<u>Mucho</u>　es lo mejor

3. En la clase de Inglés, yo aprendo por medio de juegos
No　Un poco　<u>Mucho</u>　es lo mejor

4. En la clase, yo aprendo por medio de conversaciones
No　Un poco　<u>Mucho</u>　es lo mejor

5. En la clase me gusta aprender por medio de dibujos, videos y películas
No　Un poco　Mucho　<u>Es lo mejor</u>

6. Yo quiero escribir todo en mi cuaderno
No　Un poco　<u>Mucho</u>　es lo mejor

7. Me gusta que la profesora nos explique todo
No　Un poco　Mucho　<u>es lo mejor</u>

8. Me gusta que la profesora nos de problemas para resolver
No　<u>Un poco</u>　Mucho　es lo mejor

9. Me gusta que la profesora me ayude a hablar sobre lo que me interesa
No　Un poco　<u>Mucho</u>　Es lo mejor

10. Me gusta que la profesora me diga todos mis errores
No　Un poco　Mucho　<u>es lo mejor</u>

11. Me gusta que la profesora me deje encontrar mis errores
No   Un poco   Mucho es lo mejor

12. Me gusta estudiar Inglés por mí mismo
No   Un poco   Mucho es lo mejor

13. Me gusta aprender hablando con mis compañeros
No   Un poco   Mucho es lo mejor

14. Me gusta salir con mis compañeros y practicar Inglés
No   Un poco   Mucho es lo mejor

15. Me gusta estudiar gramática
No   Un poco   Mucho es lo mejor

16. Me gusta aprender nuevas palabras
No   Un poco   Mucho es lo mejor

17. Me gusta practicar sonidos y pronunciación
No   Un poco   Mucho es lo mejor

18. Me gusta aprender palabras en Inglés mirándolas
No   Un poco   Mucho es lo mejor

19. Me gusta aprender palabras en Inglés escuchándolas
No   Un poco   Mucho es lo mejor

20. Me gusta aprender palabras en Inglés haciendo algo con ellas
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

21. En la casa me gusta aprender leyendo periódicos
No   Un poco   Mucho es lo mejor

22. En la casa me gusta aprender viendo T. V en Inglés
No   Un poco   Mucho   es lo mejor

23. En la casa me gusta aprender usando cassettes
No   Un poco   Mucho   es lo mejor

24. En la casa me gusta aprender estudiando en los libros de Inglés
No   Un poco   Mucho Es lo mejor

25. En la casa me gusta aprender hablando con mis amigos en Inglés
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

ANNEX 2: STUDENTS' NEEDS (LEARNING STYLES)

Colegio Departamental El Vino
Encuesta N° 2

NOMBRE: Edwin Alonso Amortegui Perilla   EDAD: 15
¿HACE CUANTO QUE ESTUDIA INGLES? 6 años   GRADO: 9

INSTRUCCIONES:
Este cuestionario ha sido diseñado para ayudarle a identificar las competencias que usted prefiere desarrollar durante su clase de Inglés y la forma en la que le gusta aprender.

Por favor responda a cada pregunta de manera rápida sin pensarlo mucho. Trate de no cambiar sus respuestas después de que las haya escogido. Por favor use un esfero para marcar su elección.

1.   Cuando el profesor me da instrucciones, aprendo mejor.
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

2.   Prefiero aprender haciendo algo en clase.
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

3.   Trabajo más cuando trabajo con otros.
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

4.   Aprendo más cuando estudio en grupo.
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

5.   En clase, yo aprendo mejor cuando trabajo con otros.
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

6.   Yo aprendo mejor cuando leo que cuando el profesor explica en el tablero.
No   Un poco Mucho   Es lo mejor

7.   Cuando alguien me dice cómo hacer cosas en clase, aprendo mejor.
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

8.   Cuando hago cosas en clase aprendo mejor.
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

9.   Recuerdo cosas que he escuchado en clase mejor que las cosas que he leído.
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

10.   Cuando leo instrucciones, las recuerdo mejor.
No   Un poco   Mucho   Es lo mejor

11.   Aprendo más cuando puedo hacer un modelo de algo.
No   <u>Un poco</u>   Mucho   Es lo mejor

12.   Entiendo mejor cuando leo instrucciones.
No   Un poco   <u>Mucho</u>   Es lo mejor

13.   Cuando estudio solo, recuerdo mejor.
No   Un poco   <u>Mucho</u>   Es lo mejor

14.   Aprendo más cuando hago un proyecto en clase.
No   <u>Un poco</u>   Mucho   Es lo mejor

15.   Disfruto aprendiendo cuando hago experimentos.
No   Un poco   <u>Mucho</u>   Es lo mejor

16.   Aprendo mejor cuando hago dibujos mientras estudio.
No   Un poco   <u>Mucho</u>   Es lo mejor

17.   Aprendo mejor en clase que cuando el profesor nos da una lectura.
No   <u>Un poco</u>   Mucho   Es lo mejor

18.   Cuando trabajo solo, aprendo mejor.
No   <u>Un poco</u>   Mucho   Es lo mejor

19.   Entiendo mejor cuando participo en representaciones.
No   <u>Un poco</u>   Mucho   Es lo mejor

20.   Aprendo mejor cuando en clase escucho a alguien.
No   Un poco   <u>Mucho</u>   Es lo mejor

21.   Disfruto trabajando con dos o tres compañeros.
No   Un poco   <u>Mucho</u>   Es lo mejor

22.   Aprendo más leyendo que escuchando a alguien.
No   <u>Un poco</u>   Mucho   Es lo mejor

23.   Disfruto haciendo un proyecto en la clase.
No   <u>Un poco</u>   Mucho   Es lo mejor

24.   Aprendo mejor cuando en la clase puedo participar en diferentes actividades.
No   Un poco   Mucho   <u>Es lo mejor</u>

25.   En clase trabajo mejor que cuando trabajo solo.
No   Un poco   <u>Mucho</u>   Es lo mejor

26.   Prefiero hacer todo yo mismo.
No   <u>Un poco</u>   Mucho   Es lo mejor

ANNEX 3: TEACHERS' SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Survey No.: <u>1</u>

This questionnaire has been designed to help you to reflect on your daily practice and to improve it. Answer the questions as sincerely as possible.

1. What do you take into account to prepare your classes?

The topic, materials that I'm going to use, activities (they need to be in sequence), time.

2. Are those aspects included in your English program?

Yes. Only the time was not taken into account.

3. What information did you use to design your English program?

I used the previous program, some table of contents that a colleague gave me and my experience in the school.

4. Write the aspects stated in the program that are used the most in your classes.

Readings, group work (it is not stated in the program) writing activities, sometimes speaking act and games. (Role plays, expositions).

5. How can you include in your classes the other elements of the program?

By distributing in a better way the time and having more materials; giving… space to implement activities to develop all skills.

SIMBOLS AND MEANINGS USED IN THE TRANSCRIPTION

T: Teacher
… :   Short pause
( ) :   To explain what it is going on in the class