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## La mediación pedagógica en la clase de conciencia fonética del inglés en los grados primero a tercero de la educación pública costarricense

Pedagogical Mediation in the English Phonemic Awareness Class in First through Third Grades of Costa Rican Public Education

La médiation pédagogique dans la classe de conscience phonétique d'anglais dans les cours de CE1 à CM1 de l'éducation publique costaricienne

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### Resumen

Según el programa de estudios de inglés para primaria (I y II Ciclos), el enfoque pedagógico que prevalece es el «Action Oriented Approach». El Ministerio de Educación Pública (MEP) orienta la labor docente y fundamenta el desarrollo de las habilidades de lectura y escritura a través de la conciencia fonémica. Este estudio se llevó a cabo en dos Direcciones Regionales de Educación: San José Central y San José Norte. Se analizó la efectividad de la metodología utilizada por los docentes de inglés de primero a tercer grado (I Ciclo) y se diseñaron tres talleres para potenciar la mediación pedagógica de la conciencia fonémica. El principal hallazgo fue la brecha entre el enfoque planteado en el programa de estudios de inglés, en términos de conciencia fonémica y el desarrollo de actividades didácticas, «Task Cycle», para fortalecer los procesos de lectura y escritura en los primeros años de la educación formal.

**Palabras clave:** Desarrollo del lenguaje, Enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, Fonología, Formación de profesionales, Métodos de enseñanza.

### Abstract

According to the Ministry of Public Education's (MEP) English teaching syllabus for elementary school (first cycle grades 1 to 3 and second cycle grades 4 to 6), the pedagogical approach that is prevalent to achieve the national goal is the Action-Oriented Approach. In concordance to MEP's theoretical support, it is through the phonemic awareness development that English teachers must introduce the reading and writing skills. This study took place in two Educational Regions: San José Central and San José Norte. The researchers analyzed the effectiveness of the methodology used by first through third grade (First Cycle) English teachers and designed three workshops to enhance their pedagogical mediation of phonemic awareness. The main finding was a gap between the approach stated in the new English program in terms of the phonological awareness and the development of best practices in the didactic plan, «Task Cycle», to scaffold young learners' process of reading and writing.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Instruction, Language Development, Phonology, Professional Training, Teaching Methods.

### Résumé

D'après le programme d'études d'anglais pour l'école primaire (Ier et IIème cycles), la Perspective actionnelle est l'approche qui s'impose. Le Ministère de l'Éducation Publique (MEP) guide le travail de l'enseignant et fournit comme base la conscience phonémique pour le développement des habiletés de lecture. Cette recherche a été réalisée dans deux Directions Régionales de l'Éducation: San José Central et San José Norte. L'étude a analysé l'effectivité de la méthodologie employée par les enseignants d'anglais de CE1 à CM1 (Ier cycle) et on a conçu trois ateliers pour renforcer la médiation pédagogique de la conscience phonémique. La principale découverte a été l'écart existant entre l'approche privilégiée dans le programme d'études, en ce qui concerne la conscience phonémique, et le développement des activités didactiques (le «cycle de la tâche») pour renforcer les processus de lecture et d'écriture dans les premières années de l'enseignement formel.

**Mots clés:** Développement du langage, Enseignement des langues étrangères, Formation des professionnelles, Méthodes d'enseignement.

## Introduction

English was implemented in the Costa Rican national curriculum at an elementary school level in July 1994. Consequently, the idea of becoming a multilingual country has been one of the most important goals. As pointed out by Quesada,

In Costa Rica, English is learned as a foreign language. The environment that surrounds the learner is not an English-speaking environment. Thus, students, when learning English, can only experience it in classroom settings. When they leave school, they spend most of their time using their native language (Spanish). In order to accomplish the goals of the Ministry of Education, new and innovative methodologies have to be implemented to facilitate the practice of English for the growth and development of our country.<sup>1</sup>

In the last two decades, there have been multiple attempts to help children achieve an acceptable level of proficiency in the English language; proof of such statement is reflected in the implementation of three different English curricula over the years.

Based on the need Costa Rica has of educating bilingual people, the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) developed a new curriculum which was finally implemented in 2017. According to MEP, this reform responds to four main concerns: first the need to communicate in a range of contexts and to succeed in the information era as 21st century learners. The second reason is the fact that learners receive six years of English instruction at least two hours per week and are not reaching the desired level of proficiency. Thirdly, MEP authorities became aware that any educational program must help individuals achieve competences that are required in the globalized world, and speaking a foreign language (L2) is one of those key competences. As stated by James, «to succeed in this environment, L2 users must demonstrate that they have the skills needed to process information, reason from evidence, make decisions, solve problems, self-regulate, collaborate, and learn –and they need to do this in their L2»<sup>2</sup>. Finally, there is the idea that «learners must integrate proactively in a globalized world while strengthening their national and global identity»<sup>3</sup>.

The national curriculum is based on the 21st century skills and contextualized in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by incorporating three big dimensions of the New Citizenship model: global citizenship with local roots, digital citizenship, and sustainable development. Besides, the whole program, from elementary school to high school, is sequenced in a way that aims at students reaching the different levels of language proficiency proposed by the CEFR. Furthermore, the implementation of such program took place gradually; this means that in 2017, as the beginning year, only students from first and seventh grades were exposed to the new curriculum; this implementation continued in such a way that by 2022, every grade from first to eleventh had started working with the new English curriculum.

As mentioned earlier, the levels proposed by the CEFR are the ones aimed at the new reform. At this point, it is key to mention that, as shown in Figure 1, students in primary school are intended to reach from levels A1 to A2, while those in high school, will reach up to B1+.

## Pre-school to Secondary School

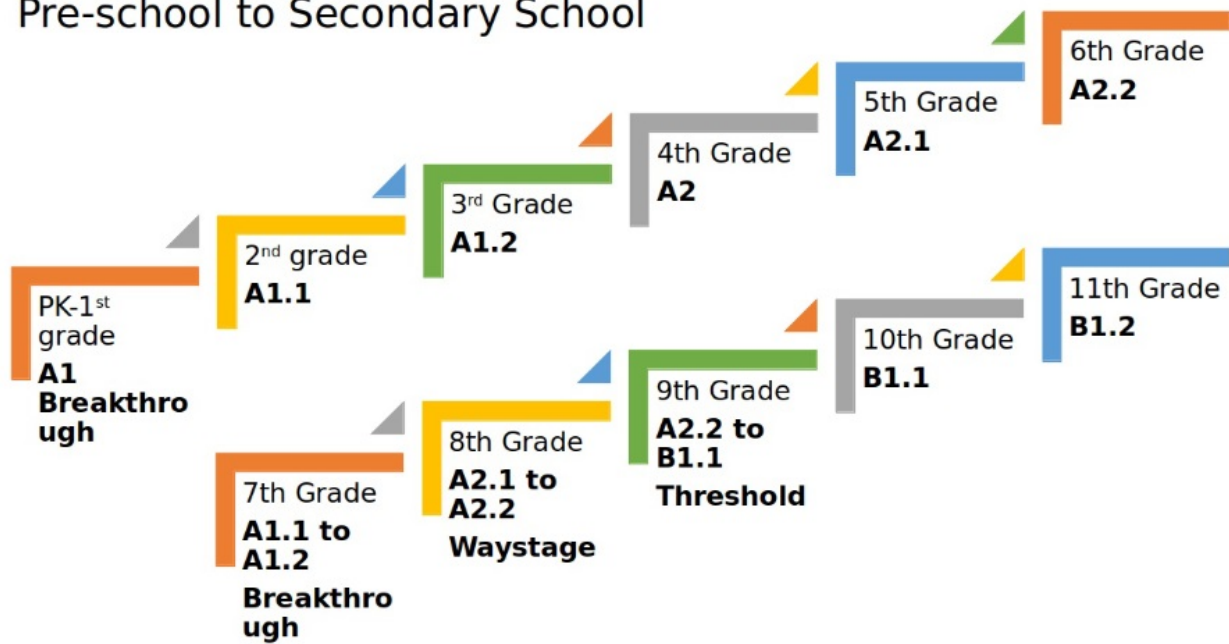


Figure 1.

Projection of proficiency levels according to the National English Curriculum

Source: Researchers' design, 2022.

### Context of the Study

According to MEP's English teaching syllabus, the Action-Oriented approach is the prevalent pedagogical approach to achieve the national goal, which requires the design and implementation of concrete, meaningful and relevant real-life situations for students to demonstrate their English language abilities through tasks.

There is a special interest to study the role of first, second and third grade English teachers in the development of phonemic awareness in the EFL classes. Since it has recognized by the American National Reading Panel (2000) as one of the five essential components of reading instruction, it is through phonemic awareness development that English teachers must introduce reading and writing skills because it «is the strongest independent predictor of early reading outcomes»<sup>4</sup>.

Reading is a complex process that requires more than one ability to be successfully accomplished; some of these abilities are related to the identification of both written and oral symbols, also known as graphemes and phonemes respectively. As pointed out by Kenner<sup>5</sup>,

The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) (...) identified six key beginning reading precursors that were highly predictive of future literacy outcomes: Alphabet Knowledge, Phonological Awareness, Rapid Automatic Naming (RAN) of Letters or Digits, RAN of objects or colors, Writing or Name Writing, and Phonological Memory.

Phonological awareness is understanding that a language is formed by sounds, which put together form syllables, words, utterances, sentences, and text. Semingson points out that phonological awareness is the ability to use rhyming, alliteration, chanting, and understanding that every word is formed by syllables<sup>6</sup>. Even though this skill has been implemented in the educational field for a long time with the purpose of developing English as a first language around the world (L1), in the Costa Rican public education system, it was not officially incorporated until 2017.

From this perspective, as part of the Costa Rican curricular reform, and with the intention of helping students in the development of the four macro skills in an integrated manner, some strategies for teaching the linguistic competences are pointed out. At primary school, students continue developing sound and word identification skills to progressively decode phrases, sentences, and short readings.

Reading and prewriting are introduced first through the development of phonemic awareness,

There are specific strategies that are presented in a sequential order from the simplest to the more complex to develop phonemic awareness in children. These include phoneme isolation, phoneme identity, rhyming, phoneme categorization, sentence segmentation, phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation, phoneme deletion, phoneme addition, [and] phoneme substitution.<sup>7</sup>

The new MEP's English syllabus aims to improve the students' proficiency profile; to reach this goal, teachers' training is required. As stated by the University of Cambridge, «The CEFR can provide a straightforward tool for enhancing teaching and learning, but many teachers and other language professionals find the document difficult to use without further guidance»<sup>8</sup>. Educators need to understand how to apply the different teaching strategies proposed in the current syllabus, to take advantage of the forty weekly minutes used to develop reading and writing skills through the implementation of phonemic awareness.

With this context in mind, the current research project aimed to analyze the pedagogical mediation used by first, second and third grade English teachers for the development of phonemic awareness of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class in the educational regions of San José Norte and San José Central. These regions are representative of the urban and rural conditions and socio-economical contexts of Costa Rican students. Also, in these regions there are small and big schools where the number of English lessons per week varies depending on the schools' facilities. For the study, only first cycle (first to third grade) is considered because the English program in II cycle (fourth to sixth grade) had not been fully implemented by the time the study was conducted.

Thus, this article provides an overview of the pedagogical mediation implemented by first cycle EFL teachers in the development of their phonemic awareness classes. Furthermore, a glance of the methodology used in the implementation of the research project carried out in 2020-2021 is provided together with the presentation of data collected and analyzed from a quantitative perspective. Finally, a set of conclusions and recommendations states elements for future improvement and possible pathways for further research and professional training.

## Methodology

The present study was developed following a cross-sectional quantitative survey approach which, according to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun is a «type of research that obtains data to determine specific characteristics of a group»<sup>9</sup>. The main purpose was to analyze the pedagogical mediation in the phonemic awareness lessons by describing the context in which first, second and third grade English teachers develop their classes at public Costa Rican schools.

To achieve its purpose, first the researchers identified teachers' knowledge and perspectives regarding the teaching of phonemic awareness in first cycle EFL classes; then, they described the methodological practices implemented by first cycle English teachers at MEP regarding phonemic awareness; and finally identified the areas of improvement of English teachers at the methodological level in phonemic awareness classes.

Concerning the participants, they were chosen through purposive sampling. According to Gay et al., researchers «use their judgement to select a sample that they believe, based on prior information, will provide the data they need»<sup>10</sup>. From this perspective, the chosen participants were teachers who had the knowledge and context that enabled researchers draw conclusions. The sampling incorporated 25 participants who besides being first-cycle teachers, were in-service English teachers at MEP working in the Educational Regions of San José Central and San José Norte. Furthermore, the selection guaranteed the continuity of the study which besides collecting information in different teaching moments incorporated the development of workshops to support the teachers training process as part of the contribution to the population's professional development. The selected teachers had to be implementing the new English curriculum and teaching the phonemic class at least once a week. The study guaranteed the participation of both, men, and women.

As data collection instruments, two questionnaires were applied; both included open-ended and closed-ended questions. One questionnaire was administered to 25 English teachers and another one to the pedagogical advisors in charge of the Educational Regions where the study took place. Besides, the researchers implemented an instrument to analyze the unit plan of each of the participants to identify the stated activities according to the linguistic goals of the grade.

The findings of this study encountered some limitations, in terms of limited access to data. Due to the pandemic emergency of COVID-19, researchers could not apply observation checklists. As a strategy to minimize its impact, the researcher examined the lesson plans; however, only 15 out of 25 participants shared them, besides most of them were lesson plan templates provided by MEP, which might not fix the context of every single class.

From the applied instruments, the pedagogical mediation was analyzed and the areas for improvement were determined which helped design three professional development workshops to support the pedagogical mediation for the development of phonemic awareness.

Finally, these results are valid and suitable for teachers who share the main feature which is teaching phonemic awareness in first cycle at MEP; as well as, for any English teacher introducing reading and writing to enhance young learners' language competence. The study's analysis uses descriptive statistics through the Jamovi software version 1.6<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, to offer confidentiality to the sample population the researchers used specific alphanumeric codes to refer to the participants of the study and the type of instrument being analyzed (Table 1).

Table 1.

Variable	Dimension	Indicators		
		Teachers' Questionnaire	Advisors' Questionnaire	Lesson Plan Checklist
Pedagogical Mediation	Phonemic awareness	1, 2, 6	1, 2, 3	1
	Language acquisition	3, 4, 9,	-	4
	Methodology	5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12	4, 5, 6	2, 3, 5, 6

Distribution of the indicators according to the dimensions

Source: Ministry of Public Education, 2016.<sup>12</sup>

## Findings and Discussion

The researchers based the investigation on pedagogical mediation as the main variable of analysis. It refers to the teaching methodology and the implementing of the phonemic awareness in the EFL language classroom to enhance the acquisition of the reading and writing processes in first cycle students. This variable analyzed the effectiveness of the role of the English teacher through three dimensions which gave the detailed aspects the researchers considered to elaborate the data collection instruments. The first dimension studied the common phonemic awareness sub-skills developed in young EFL learners: phoneme identification, phoneme isolation, phoneme blending, and phoneme manipulation. A second dimension is language acquisition that focuses on the exposition of the language and its patterns to contribute to the development of the sub-skills. Finally, the third dimension was methodology which enables the learners to carry out the task, it implies the operationalization of the teaching activities and the resources employed by the teacher to present and practice sounds and words to achieve the linguistic objectives.

### Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness focuses on the learners' awareness of string of sounds, which is developed in young EFL learners: phoneme identification, phoneme isolation, phoneme blending, and phoneme manipulation. From this perspective, Armbruster and Osborn (2001) state, «Phonemic awareness refers

to the ability of children to hear, identify, think about, and manipulate sounds (phonemes) in spoken language»<sup>13</sup>.

Participants defined phonemic awareness using key words such as «an ability to hear and identify sounds» and «understanding of words». Most of the answers provided relate the concept to the smallest unit of sound (phonemes). Nevertheless, there were six definitions out of the 16 provided that referred to phonics: word-formation and relation between letters and sounds. As stated by The College of Education from University of Oregon, phonics involves the relation between sounds to printed symbols; hence, phonics is the ability to relate a sound to a grapheme or its written representation<sup>14</sup>. Participants definitions were a possible indicator of a misconception of the concepts of phonemic awareness and phonics.

Even though literature shows a difference between both terms, and MEP’s English Program clearly states that teachers must focus on phonemic awareness, it is a fact that in the process of literacy development both processes are combined. Through a personal communication, an English National Advisor from the I and II Cycle Department at MEP, recognized that in the praxis teachers are advised not to work phonemic awareness in isolation; they are rather encouraged to combine it with phonics, keeping an emphasis on phonemic awareness in the beginning levels<sup>15</sup>.

When requesting information about the invested time per week to develop the phonemic awareness skills in first, second and third grade, eight teachers reported teaching phonemic awareness once a week. This result was coherent with MEP’s proposal that «Teachers can take one lesson (40 minutes) per week for phonemic awareness development when it is possible»<sup>16</sup>. There are still three teachers who reported teaching phonemic awareness twice a week, and two participants indicated they develop these lessons once every two weeks.

To support the teachers’ responses, 15 monthly lesson plans were collected, and the phonemic awareness sections were analyzed. These lesson plans showed that half of the teachers had not specified the time planned and the others stated 40 minutes which, at MEP, means one lesson a week. It is essential to point out that even though some teachers did not specify the time in their lesson plan, there was evidence of activities related to the development of phonemic awareness weekly.

Teachers in elementary school implement classroom activities to develop children’s capacity to manipulate the smaller units of sound through phoneme isolation, phoneme segmentation and phoneme manipulation. Teachers were asked to mark the school grade in which they consider sub-skills should be developed according to the program (Table 2).

Table 2.

	I grade	II grade	III grade
Phoneme Isolation	10	7	5
Phoneme Segmentation	4	5	4
Phoneme Blending	2	6	6
Phoneme Manipulation	0	4	8

Teachers’ opinion on the development of sub-skills  
Source: Researchers’ design, 2022.

The 15 teachers participating in the study, consider that the skill of manipulation should not be taught in first grade, a considerable number of teachers pointed out that isolation needs to be implemented in the three grades; and phoneme blending and manipulation are believed to be mostly developed in second and third grades.

These results are coherent with MEP’s proposal. From the analysis, the researchers were able to determine that students in first grade begin by learning sounds in initial position which represent isolation and segmentation; in second grade, students learn sounds, especially those of short vowels, in middle and final position combining isolation, segmentation, and blending; finally, in third grade students learn word families and see the rhyming of the language through blending and manipulation<sup>17</sup>.

The responses on the development of sub-skills were triangulated with the activities proposed in the monthly lesson plans provided by the teachers; these lesson plans, were mostly the so called «teachers' guides» provided by the National Advisory department at MEP. From the lesson plans analyzed, only two of the sub-skills were addressed: phoneme isolation and phoneme blending. Furthermore, there were multiple activities related to the development of phonics (the relation between sounds and printed symbols) which, in theory, is not part of the phonemic awareness skill (Table 3).

Table 3.

Level	Total of Activities	Isolation / identification	Blending	Phonics
First	144	98	0	46
Second	144	69	1	74
Third	18	4	8	6

Activities addressing skills in the monthly lesson plans  
Source: Researchers' design, 2022.

The planning of activities used to teach phonics instead of phonemic awareness, might be resulting from teachers using the goals stated in the English program; for instance, unit 1 for first grade indicates that students should be able to «identify sounds of letters /m/ /e/ /s/ /a/ /t/ /l/ of the alphabet in order with a concrete item or picture representing the sound»<sup>18</sup> (bold letters are not from the original text).

When analyzed by grade and skill, the mean of activities found regarding phoneme identification and isolation in first grade is 12 and nearly six activities in average corresponded to phonics. However, in second grade, more than half of the activities present in the phonemic awareness lessons corresponded to the development of phonics instead of the development of phoneme identification, and isolation in mid and final position. Even though the lesson plans analyzed in third grade were only two, evidence shows that more than half of the activities planned corresponded to the development of phonemic awareness.

## Language Acquisition

Language acquisition, as a dimension of analysis in the study, refers to exposition of the language and its patterns to contribute to the development of the language sub-skills. Teachers were asked whether they had noticed any improvement in the students' acquisition of vocabulary and its use in context as a result to the implementation of the phonemic awareness class. Ten out of 13 teachers expressed that the implementation of phonemic awareness enhances the acquisition of vocabulary. In terms of language proficiency, most teachers expressed that the teaching of phonemic awareness allows students to improve the production of new words, pronunciation, and prediction of sounds. TQ-9 mentioned, «When there is a new word using the sounds, we have already studied [sic] they [students] predict how the new word is pronounced». Additionally, TQ-5 added, «I have seen that students identify the sounds in new words, so they are able to read and pronounce the new words by blending sounds». Finally, it seems that students feel comfortable, as TQ-6 expressed, «Most of students feel motivated to say a new word in English even if they don't know it».

The questionnaire also referred to the incorporation of reading and writing in the English class since first, second and third grades. Most teachers referred to the improvement of the macro skills as well as the micro skills, mainly vocabulary. TQ-1 stated, «Students improve vocabulary, reading and writing skills». Also, TQ-2 considered that students «can link the oral words we study with the written ones, so they know how a word is spelled and pronounced». For some teachers, the practice of reading aloud influences positively on the listening skills; TQ-10 pointed out, «Students develop the way to pronounce correctly, and they can hear themselves».

## Teaching Methodology

The third dimension refers to methodology which enables the learners to achieve the tasks. This implies the implementation of didactic activities and the use of resources to develop language competence through the acquisition of sounds and words.

From the theoretical support of the Action Oriented Approach each lesson must be developed following the task cycle (Figure 2); it implies a pre-task, task rehearsal, task completion, and task assessment [19]. Teachers were asked whether they were able to complete the task cycle during the implementation of a phonemic awareness class.

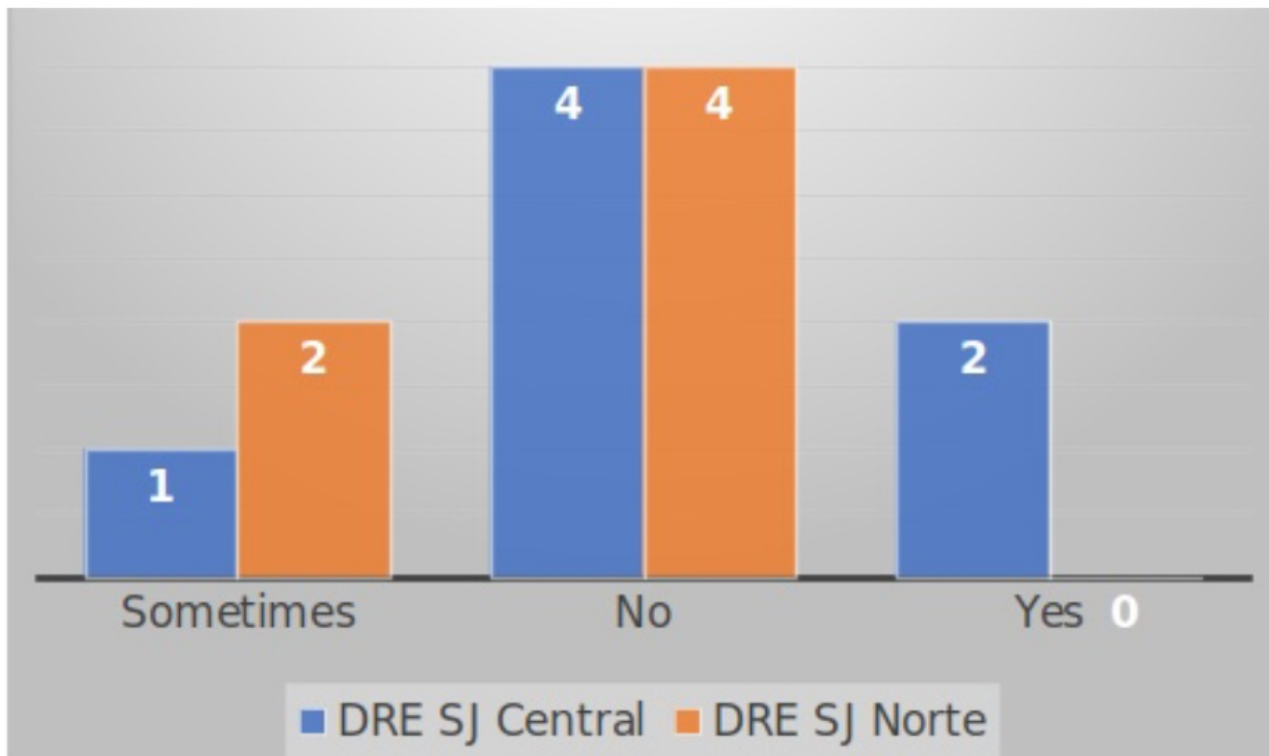


Figure 2.  
Teachers' Report on Task Cycle Completion  
Source: Researchers' design, 2022.

When asked about the accomplishment of the task cycle, only two teachers from DRE San José Central answered positively. Likewise, TQ-5 pointed out, «To complete what I planned with videos, worksheets, games and practices, I need 2 lessons to complete the cycle». Figure 2 illustrates that most teachers report being unable to complete the cycle.

The 11 teachers who reported being unable to finish the cycle coincided on the fact that time is not enough to accomplish it. However, it is MEP's policy to develop phonemic awareness classes in just a 40-minute lesson per week. On the same line of thought, TQ-7 stated, «No, I don't. Because of the time we have per lesson. However, I always try to do more than two tasks». The completion of a whole cycle in task-based learning provides the scaffold students require to go from a teacher-controlled task to a task that students develop in a freer manner to demonstrate the mastery of the target sounds. TQ-9 indicated, «The steps of the cycle get a little messy or maybe the students get the idea before the teacher finishes the activity». It seems that teachers do not achieve the cycle because of the lack of practice and theoretical knowledge.

Teachers were also asked how they could complete a task cycle in a phonemic awareness lesson in first, second, or third grade; all of them agreed that it is a matter of selecting the appropriate activities according to the available time. However, not all teachers followed the process as it is indicated in the MEP's English program. TQ-5 pointed out that «If I only have 1 lesson of 40 minutes, I usually have to plan a unique video, a little practice and maybe, no games at all». As well, TQ-12 referred to the steps to accomplish the

cycle by stating, «First, I call their attention by a physical activity, then singing a song when they are about to get messy».

As part of the methodology dimension, teachers were asked to rank six of the most implemented didactic resources to develop phonemic awareness from one to six; one being the least used and six the one they use the most. As shown in Table 4, teachers ranked videos as the most implemented resource in their phonemic awareness class with a mean of almost five, which was obtained by using the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), followed by worksheets and flashcards respectively. The least used didactic resources are realia and board. These data are concise with the analysis of the lesson plans, which shed light on the number of resources planned to be used in a month of phonemic awareness classes. Even though teachers reported using worksheets as number two didactic resource (Table 4), this is number three in the lesson plans preceded by flashcards. It is relevant to point out that both the teachers' perspective and data from the lesson plans analyzed show that the board is rarely used for the phonemic awareness classes. This might be since phonemic awareness is a skill more related to oral comprehension and oral production.

Table 4.

Resources	Mean	Median
Videos	4,69	5
Worksheets	4,23	5
Flashcards	3,85	4
Software	2,85	3
Realia	2,77	2
Board	2,62	2

Teachers implemented didactic resources  
Source: Researchers' design, 2022.

The lesson plans were analyzed in terms of the type of activities teachers included for the phonemic awareness classes (Table 5), the numbers obtained were consistent with teachers' response in the questionnaire since the most frequent activities are maintained with only a change of order between sound identification and repetition; singing is still located in third place. There is an inconsistency in the activity of writing, teachers placed this activity at last, but it ranked in fourth place when it came to the analyzed lesson plans.

Table 5.

	singing	spelling	writing	forming words	sound identification	choral reading	repetition	tracing
<b>Mean</b>	4.40	0.267	1.40	0.267	6.40	1.33	5.00	1.33
<b>Sum</b>	66	4	21	4	96	20	75	20
<b>Standard deviation</b>	3.44	0.458	1.84	1.03	4.17	0.900	4.21	1.84

Type of Activities Identified in the Lesson Plan  
 Source: Researchers' design, 2022.

Table 5 shows the activities identified in the 15 lesson plans analyzed. While the sum represents the total times an activity was planned, the mean represents the average of times that activity was planned by each teacher.

From the activities identified in the monthly lesson plans (Table 5), it is relevant to point out the three more frequent activities aimed to develop the skill of phonemic awareness. Even though, the four activities that ranked lower are not frequently used in the development of phonemic awareness, they are still present a considerable number of times in the lesson plans. It is essential to highlight that in the questionnaire the activity forming words was not identified as an oral or a written activity, which would make a difference on the skill enhanced.

Monthly lesson plans were also analyzed in terms of the presence of scaffolding or progression from controlled to freer practice in the tasks proposed. It was clear, that the activities proposed by teachers followed a sequence that moved from some being more controlled by teachers to the ones in which students were more independent by carrying them out on their own. Whereas three lesson plans did not have the process, it is also important to point out that the lesson plans that did not show the appropriate scaffolding did not follow the template provided by MEP's authorities.

To determine the frequency in which phonemic awareness was addressed in each lesson plan, researchers added up the number of activities that were identified as aiming at the development of phonemic awareness and the ones that focused on phonics. Researchers decided beforehand the criteria to determine the percentage of the activities and the frequencies: always, often, sometimes, and rarely (Table 6).

Table 6.

Frequency	DRE San José Central	DRE San José Norte
N/A	2	1
Often (75%-99%)	0	1
Sometimes (41%-74%)	6	4
Rarely (1%-40%)	0	1

Frequency of Presence of Phonemic Awareness  
Source: Researchers' design, 2022.

As presented in Table 6, most of the lesson plans analyzed disclosed that the planned activities which addressed the skill of phonemic awareness were within the section of sometimes which means that only between 41% and 74% of the planned activities fully aimed at developing such skill. Three of the plans analyzed did not incorporate phonemic awareness classes, and in one of the lesson plans, activities to foster phonemic awareness were rarely identified.

Regarding the amount of time in which the skill of phonemic awareness should be developed, MEP suggests teachers to devote a 40-minute lesson weekly<sup>20</sup>. In the analysis of the lesson plans, all the stages of the task cycle were present, which could be inferred as one lesson; however, only six out of the 15 lesson plans analyzed explicitly stated the intended time for phonemic awareness development.

Since phonemic awareness has proven to enhance the development of reading and writing, regional advisors were asked about the biggest challenge teachers experience when incorporating phonemic awareness as a pedagogical strategy. They agreed that there are many students in a room, so time becomes an important constraint. Besides, one advisor stated that many teachers «do not understand the importance of PA [phonemic awareness]. And third, we still have teachers who do not know how to work with phonemes. It is kind of confusing for many of them» (AQ-02).

Training plays a key role to improve teachers' pedagogical mediation. Advisors were asked about the type of training that they considered teachers require to improve their pedagogical mediation while developing phonemic awareness in first, second and third grades. Both agreed on the importance of a deep understanding of the phonemic awareness theory and the mediation in terms of teaching and learning strategies. AQ-01 pointed out, «They need to reinforce their background knowledge on phonology. Some do not know the right sound of phonemes. Then, effective strategies on how to teach PA». In the same

way AQ-02 expressed, «Teachers need training on how to create and develop varied activities when developing phonemic awareness. A review of principles and technical concepts is required».

When teachers were asked the same question, they agreed that they need to know about the color chart approach and the subskills as well as the activities and strategies to develop the phonemic awareness lessons. TQ-03 reported that she «would love to learn about phonemic tasks and the way to use them. (Dictation/ addition/ deletion/ blending etc.)». This thought is consistent with TQ-12 who stated, «Training on phonemes specifically on sub-skills and also tools to improve my work». TQ-13 when referring to training to improve the pedagogical mediation pointed out «Activities, learn better the distribution of task cycle». These ideas match the recommendations provided by the regional advisors. Hence, as a way of improving the pedagogical mediation of phonemic awareness, attending to professional development workshops play an important role for teachers. Hanushek supported the importance of Professional Development Programs by stating that students tend to learn three times faster with high performance teachers<sup>21</sup>.

## Conclusions

In the Costa Rican education system, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is part of the national curriculum. It aims at providing students with tools to become globalized citizens who are both socially and linguistically competent. Gutiérrez and Prieto (2004), cited in Delgado<sup>22</sup> and León<sup>23</sup>, argue that teachers who want to carry out the most effective pedagogical mediation should not focus on products, but processes, where students learning speeds and styles are highly considered by the teacher. This will allow students to gain deeper understanding of the culture and the target language, as well as the implications that learning a foreign language has in their lives.

The current English pedagogical approach is the Action-Oriented; as an integral part of its pedagogical mediation, teachers are encouraged to introduce reading and writing by enhancing phonemic awareness and phonics. The study revealed that most teachers agreed on the role of phonemic awareness in terms of language proficiency. They stated that it enhances the acquisition of vocabulary and allows students to improve the production of new words, pronunciation, and prediction of sounds.

Teachers wondered which way they ought to go before they enter a classroom, the study displayed that most participants plan their daily lesson following the teachers' guide or template provided by MEP, it is a best practice because it provides the necessary steps for the required scaffolding; however, it seems that teachers are not contextualizing the teachers' guide which might not be beneficial for the students' individual needs. As an example, three of the analyzed lesson plans neither followed the template provided by MEP's authorities nor had the complete task cycle which may affect the scaffolding learning process to introduce the reading and writing skills accomplishing the following stages that guide students to demonstrate their performance.

Teachers are incorporating the use of technology in their phonemic awareness classes; they are moving away from traditional resources such as board to more technological ones such as the use of videos and audios to support the pedagogical mediation. Certainly, the use of technological tools enables students to become active learners. This innovation responds to the dimension of ways of integrating to the world from the curricular transformation; which is evident when teachers selected videos, worksheets, and flashcards as the didactic resources to support the pedagogical mediation.

According to MEP's approach, phonemic awareness is an ability taught in four main categories: isolation, segmentation, blending, and manipulation. To enhance it, English teachers must plan activities to accomplish each category and subskill through each school level. From the lesson plans analyzed, only two of the sub-skills were addressed: phoneme isolation and phoneme blending. On the other hand, there were multiple activities related to the development of phonics (the relation between sounds and printed symbols) which is not part of the phonemic awareness skill. The research pointed out that teachers are implementing activities that integrate both, phonemic awareness, and phonics, which according to experts

could be beneficial in terms of language acquisition<sup>24</sup>, considering that students whose ages range between 7 and 10 are expected to read and write in both their native and foreign language.

Finally, teachers require professional development to implement the best practices that require a scaffolding process which begins with the understanding of the theoretical framework and principles to develop the skill, in this case, phonemic awareness. Teachers must clearly understand the teaching and learning principles and main concepts involved in the process to implement phonemic awareness in the language classroom; they need clarification in terms of the activities and the level to develop the four main categories: isolation, segmentation, blending, and manipulation. Furthermore, teachers need clarification concerning the strategies to successfully complete the entire task-cycle within the expected time.

## Recommendations

The analysis of the data collected and the design of the professional development workshops, shed light on a series of recommendations aimed at MEP's authorities, English advisors, and English teachers.

First, MEP's authorities should communicate to English teachers their position referring literacy development. It implies a conceptual clarification of the approach in terms of the phonological awareness. Encouraging teachers to understand the theories and principles behind their teaching strategies is a tool to guarantee students' language competence. This research shows that there is a gap between the theory stated in MEP's English programs and the teachers' guides provided by MEP. It is essential for elementary school teachers to be clear about the distinction between the concepts of phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics<sup>25</sup> because they are interrelated, but different from one another.

Since the current English Program was implemented six years ago, MEP's authorities ought to supervise the effective implementation of the AOA; subsequently, teachers should be engaged in training programs oriented to the understanding and accomplishment of the phonological awareness approach stated in the new English program. To contribute, with first, second and third grade English teachers' professional development, the researchers designed and developed a set of workshops based on the findings obtained through a systematic process.

Thirdly, regional English advisors should monitor and encourage English teachers to incorporate phonemic awareness in their lesson plans to enhance the reading and writing process in young learners. Those weekly lessons must follow the teaching task cycle to provide students with the scaffolding process to achieve the language goals. In fact, to accomplish language objectives, teachers' lesson plans must consider MEP's templates and teaching guides stating the task cycle keeping in mind the students' background and previous knowledge.

Finally, further research is required in the field of teaching phonemic awareness. Some studies might include a qualitative study to describe students' perceptions on their phonemic awareness classes; also, a study that includes class observations with the intention of analyzing teachers' mediation and students' attitudes towards the target skill. Finally, a longitudinal study will be a suitable option to measure the benefits of the implementation of a timely developed and scaffolded task cycle in the development of reading and writing in the English language.

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## Notas

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## Información adicional

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## Enlace alternativo

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