

The Importance of English for the Costa Rican Economy and Curriculum¹

(La importancia del inglés para la economía y el currículo de Costa Rica)

*Kevin Armando Brand Fonseca*²

Universidad Nacional, Heredia, Costa Rica

*Roger Segura Arias*³

Universidad Nacional, Heredia, Costa Rica

RESUMEN

Este estudio de caso analiza el papel que del idioma inglés en la economía y el currículo costarricense. El análisis se hace basado en un marco referencial sobre la adquisición y aprendizaje de segundas lenguas con respecto a las teorías sociocultural y sociocognitiva, identidad y entidad, y la motivación. Participaron diferentes actores en el currículo tales como los estudiantes, profesores, padres de familia, empleadores, y encargados de diferentes programas para la enseñanza del inglés a nivel nacional. Las conclusiones resaltan la importancia del inglés para el sistema económico. Además, la identidad y la agencia parecen ser factores cruciales para entender el aprendizaje de idiomas como un proceso complejo.

ABSTRACT

This case study analyzes the role of English in the Costa Rican economy and curriculum. It is grounded on a second language acquisition and

1 Recibido: 29 de junio de 2019; 17 de febrero de 2022.

2 Maestría en Lingüística Aplicada.  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1573-2389>. Correo electrónico: kevin.brand.fonseca@una.ac.cr

3 Maestría en Lingüística Aplicada.  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1553-3953>. Correo electrónico: roger.segura.arias@una.ac.cr

learning framework related to socio-cultural and socio-cognitive theories, identity and agency, and motivation. The stakeholders that took part in the study were students, instructors, parents, employers, and heads of English teaching programs at the national level. The conclusions highlight the importance of the English language for the economic system. Also, identity and agency appear to be crucial factors to understand language learning as a complex process.

Palabras clave: economía, currículo, inglés, adquisición, aprendizaje, lenguas extranjeras

Keywords: economy, curriculum, English, acquisition, learning, foreign languages.

Introduction

Costa Rica has a history of over a century of English teaching. Marín Arroyo developed a comprehensive account of the inclusion and prevalence of the language in the national curriculum. English teaching in Costa Rica dates back to the beginning of the 20th century as a response to the influence of European and North American markets and their connections with the country's economic growth. In the following decades, language teachers obtained training from several exchange programs with the United States. In the 1950s, the Universidad de Costa Rica started a program to prepare English teachers, which is considered a milestone toward the widespread use of English in Costa Rica. Soon after this, the country founded other institutions to meet the linguistic demands arising from economic exchanges between Costa Rica and the United States in the 1960s.⁴

Marín Arroyo adds that by the late 1980s and early 1990s, new methodological trends arrived, promoting the creation of contextualized textbooks, a new curriculum, and the implementation of the communicative approach in the English language classrooms. Due to

4 Edwin Marín Arroyo, "Cronología de la enseñanza del inglés en Costa Rica durante el Siglo xx," *Revista Comunicación* 21, 1 (2012): 4-15.

the latest international economic, political, social and cultural order, Costa Rica began to compete in the global markets, and the educational system experienced more reforms. The new socioeconomic system demanded a more skilled workforce with technological knowledge, computational abilities, and English language skills.⁵ In the case of language skills, the “proliferation of foreign investment, the result of global neoliberal tendencies, along with a growing and thriving tourist industry also influenced the emergence of great numbers of private ‘bilingual’ schools, language institutions, and higher education English courses offerings.”⁶ This review illustrates how economic changes have influenced English teaching in Costa Rica, and how the curricular policies have been adapted accordingly to respond to the linguistic needs of the market. The present study explores some of the reasons why the English language is part of the national education system by explaining the role of the language in the economy and the curriculum according to different stakeholders.

Theoretical Considerations

This section highlights critical theory that sheds light on the role of English in the Costa Rican economy and of English teaching and learning in Costa Rica.

Sociocultural Views

Learning either a first or second language is triggered by the need to achieve a goal; it may be survival as for young children and immigrants, or it can respond to more complex needs prompted by social and economic demands. A sociocultural approach to second language learning focuses on how individuals interact with their contexts to create meaning. Tarone (as quoted in Lantolf) reckons that “a central mechanism of mental development is the mediation available

5 Marín Arroyo, 7-12.

6 Ana Solano Campos, “Teaching and Learning English in Costa Rica: A Critical Approach,” *Letras* 52 (2012): 163-178.

in different sociocultural environments.”⁷ Lantolf adds that “because mediation is different in different sociocultural domains, development in these domains is expected to be psychologically different.”⁸ The sociocultural setting where individuals dwell may present linguistic demands which require people to learn a second language to function successfully in their immediate environment.

Mediation must appraise sociocultural factors because learning a language is affected by external factors such as the Zone of Proximal Development,⁹ the difference between what an individual can do with or without appropriate mediation from someone else. The relevance of this theory lies in the fact that, as stated in Lantolf, language “development does not depend solely on internal mechanisms but on the quality and quantity of external forms of social interaction.”¹⁰ Lantolf also claims that “the structure of language tells us little about its power to mediate our social/communicative and mental lives. Language’s power resides instead in its use value—its meaning-making capacity.”¹¹ The Ministry of Public Education’s curricular policy emphasizes the power of language by highlighting that “Learners should be able to reach their full potential and contribute to the development of the country.”¹² This policy connects education with production and economic developments and supports the notion that pedagogic mediation also plays a role in helping individuals effectively learn a language needed for their successful inclusion in the country’s productive and labor forces.

7 James P. Lantolf, “The Sociocultural Approach to Second Language Acquisition: Sociocultural Theory, Second Language Acquisition, and Artificial L2 Development,” *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* (London: Routledge, 2011) 24-47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2013.775885>.

8 Lantolf (2011) 47.

9 Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) 86. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4>.

10 James P. Lantolf, “Sociocultural Theory: A Dialectical Approach to L2 Research,” *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition* (London: Routledge, 2012) 57-72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203808184>.

11 Lantolf (2011) 25.

12 Ministerio de Educación Pública, *Programa de estudios inglés: Tercer ciclo de la educación general básica y educación diversificada* (San José, Costa Rica: Imprenta Nacional, 2016) 15.

Lantolf also stresses early exposure to language to generate sociocultural connections. “Children’s early appropriation of language is implicit (i.e., beyond awareness) since the main function of interaction is not usually language learning, but learning something else, including how to participate appropriately in social activities.”¹³ At such an early age, several processes such as mediation and regulation are essential for the learners’ development. In this respect, Gass explains that the most relevant of these processes is mediation because sociocultural theory assumes that human activity is mediated by higher-level cultural tools such as those symbolic artifacts represented in literacy.¹⁴ Thus, through proper mediation and early exposure to language, learners can adapt to their environments successfully and respond appropriately to the language needs, from their social milieus to address social and economic demands.

Sociocognitive Theories

Similar to sociocultural views of second language acquisition, socio-cognitive theory sustains that acquisition occurs under a synergic process of the individual’s mind, body, and soul because “SLA is an adaptive process, so that what is being adapted to—environmental conditions—should also be included in conceptualizing.”¹⁵ Understanding learners as ecological organisms entails a dependence on the environment to survive; “humans are adaptive organisms—they survive by continuously and dynamically adapting to their environment.”¹⁶ Today, knowing English in a developing country can be a powerful tool to integrate individuals into the global economic and work-related requirements. In the same vein, Ortega explained that learning other

13 Lantolf (2011) 25.

14 Susan Gass, *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course* (New York: Routledge, 2013) 283. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203137093>.

15 Dwight Atkinson, “A Sociocognitive Approach to Second Language Acquisition: How Mind, Body, and World Work Together in Learning Additional Languages,” *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* (London: Routledge, 2011) 143-166. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203830932>.

16 Atkinson, 143.

languages entails a search for power as much as language learning.¹⁷ In this sense, the social environment exerts pressure on the citizens, and knowing English becomes a necessity and a sign of power over others.

Furthermore, social contexts dictate the immediate needs of the learners. For Atkinson, “From a socio-cognitive perspective, the best way to promote SLA is to place learners in situations where the L2 is necessary for social action—where they need it to survive and prosper.”¹⁸ There are strong curricular and economic demands in many countries; the citizens are expected to be proficient in a second language to increase their chances to adapt to requests from a globalized citizenship. Atkinson stressed that human cognition is adaptive; as individuals try to endure and thrive, they try to adapt to an eco-social environment. Such adaptability to their milieus is the only way they can survive.¹⁹ Readily responding to linguistic requirements of the social and economic context can be an ability that people must develop to cope with modern demands. As a matter of fact, “Language in use must be nimble and quick to effect social action—it must be dynamically adaptive vis-à-vis its environment.”²⁰

Ortega also provides insights on the importance of socio-cognitive theories by asserting that their contribution consists of “extending useful bridges between social approaches and the latest trends in cognitive science that SLA cognitivists may increasingly be willing to cross in the future.”²¹ The implementation of standardized language curricular teaching policies does not guarantee success in language learning, nor does the study of cognitive sciences mediate the learning of the language per se; the learner’s identity and agency may have important implications to achieve the goal as well.

17 Lourdes Ortega, “SLA after the Social Turn: Where Cognitivism and Its Alternatives Stand,” *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* (London: Routledge, 2011) 167-180. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203830932>.

18 Atkinson, 144.

19 Atkinson, 144.

20 Atkinson, 146.

21 Ortega, 171.

Identity and Agency in L2 Acquisition

Each scenario where language users develop differs. Traits such as ethnicity, traditions, and linguistic background can present advantages or challenges to the process of language acquisition. Duff²² explained the role of identity and agency in language acquisition. *Identity* is defined as a process of organization concerning social identity, comparison, and distinctiveness.²³ *Agency* deals with abilities to make choices and take control to pursue goals.²⁴ She added that the agency to choose the type of language a person learns might be connected to prestige and high-status varieties; additionally, a learner may decide not to respond to the requirements; that is also part of their identity and agency.²⁵ Learning and using a language is largely a choice and, at the same time, a demand derived from internal and external pressures resulting from their identity; they are closely linked to the curriculum and the social and economic needs.

When a foreign language becomes part of a national curriculum, students' agency becomes limited, given that language learning is rendered as a compulsory issue. Duff analyzed case studies of students learning a second language abroad and concluded that the students' expectations, linguistic backgrounds, identities, and desires had been constrained by external factors such as their classmates, teachers, and the curriculum.²⁶ Besides these external factors, Duff and Talmy have “acknowledged some degree of agency, contingency, unpredictability, and multidirectionality in terms of learners and their language learning trajectories—that is, learners are agents who may contest or transform as well as accommodate practices into which

22 Patricia A. Duff, “Identity, Agency, and Second Language Acquisition,” *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition* (London: Routledge, 2012) 410-441. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203808184>.

23 Duff, 415.

24 Duff, 417.

25 Duff, 411.

26 Duff, 410-441.

others attempt to induct them.”²⁷ In this regard, learners seem to have major responsibility for their choice of learning languages, which also involves motivation.

Considerations on Motivation

Under current socio-dynamic accounts, motivation in L2 acquisition and learning has a more complex nature. This phase “is characterized by a focus on the situated complexity of the L2 motivation process and its organic development in interaction with a multiplicity of internal, social and contextual factors.”²⁸ Motivation here is viewed as part of the modern globalized world’s complexities by framing motivation in current theoretical perspectives. Henry proposes that “motivational systems of the learner’s different languages need to be conceptualized as interrelated systems that are simultaneously constituents within a higher-level multilingual motivational system.”²⁹ The author also considers motivation as part of a complex and emergent process.

Dörnyei presented a comprehensive account of motivation and its subscales as categorized in Noels, Pelletier, Clément, and Val-lerand’s³⁰ Language Learning Orientations Scale (2000), where they listed seven subscales to motivation. First, they presented *amotivation*: a lack of motivation due to the realization that there is no need to learn; *external regulation*: a weak form of intrinsic motivation coming from external sources; *introjected regulation*: externally imposed norms accepted by students; *identified regulation*: engaging in the activity

27 Patricia A. Duff and Steven Talmy, “Language Socialization Approaches to Second Language Acquisition: Social, Cultural, and Linguistic Development in Additional Languages,” *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* (London: Routledge, 2011) 95-116. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203830932>.

28 Ema Ushioda and Zoltán Dörnyei, “Motivation,” *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition* (London: Routledge, 2012) 396-409. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203808184>.

29 Alastair Henry, “L2 Motivation and Multilingual Identities,” *Modern Language Journal* 101, 3 (2017): 548-565. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12412>.

30 Zoltán Dörnyei, *The Psychology of the Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005) 105-106. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410613349>.

because one can see value in the activity. It is also possible to find *intrinsic motivation knowledge*: being part of the activity due to the exploration of new ideas which generates positive feelings; *intrinsic motivation accomplishment*: motivation generated by sensations of achieving a goal; and finally, *intrinsic motivation simulation*: “sensations stimulated by performing the task, motivation is in accord with the complex nature of motivation, and especially of how learners deal with their eco-social context.”³¹

In addition to the previous classification of motivation in language acquisition, Ushioda and Dörnyei addressed traditional views of motivation; they present integrative/instrumental motivation concerning why and how people decide to learn a language. Nonetheless, given the status of English as a global language and its understanding as a necessary educational skill in many educational curricula, integrative motivation is questioned in this case. Attention is turned to the internal understanding of oneself in a global community of language users.³² Dörnyei explains the vision of *self* in motivation in his *L2 Motivational Self System*. He presents three dimensions:

- (1) *Ideal L2 Self*, referring to the L2-specific facet of one’s ideal self: If the person we would like to become speaks an L2, *the Ideal L2 Self* is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves [...].
- (2) *Ought-to L2 Self*, referring to the attributes that one believes one ought to possess (i.e., various duties, obligations, or responsibilities) in order to avoid possible negative outcomes [...].
- (3) *L2 Learning Experience*, which concerns situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience.³³

These dimensions can be considered with their connections of a more complex nature to motivation. Along the same lines, Henry

31 Dörnyei, 78.

32 Ushioda and Dörnyei, 400.

33 Dörnyei, 78; 105-106.

claimed that “the motivational systems of different languages can be understood as functioning not only within ecologies of other motivational systems, but also within other psychological, psycholinguistic, and social systems.”³⁴ The various categorizations to motivation highlight the essential role of the environment and the globalized social context where English plays a central role in educational and economic development.

Additionally, a study by Ennser-Kananen, Fallas Escobar, and Bigelow explores some of the motivations of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Costa Rica. They found that English was considered a tool that could open job opportunities, well-paid jobs, scholarships, and professional development, among others.³⁵ The authors concluded that “when the students attributed to English the power to affect their personal, professional, and academic lives in such profound ways, they implicitly drew on neoliberal ideologies that position English as the key to wealth, job security, power, and social prestige.”³⁶ The authors assert that English learners see the language as a professional requirement, more than just as an asset. Hence, learning the language is motivated by the feeling of not “falling behind” and shows clear pressure to become proficient language users.³⁷ Their findings seem to connect with the ideas of *ought-to-self* presented by Dörnyei, where motivation is associated with obligations and responsibilities.

Research Questions

Grounded on the above theoretical considerations, the following questions will be answered through the results and analysis of this study.

34 Henry, 561.

35 Johanna Ennser-Kananen, Christian Fallas Escobar and Martha Bigelow, “‘It’s practically a must’: Neoliberal reasons for foreign language learning,” *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language* 5, 1 (2017): 15-28.

36 Ennser-Kananen, Fallas Escobar, and Bigelow, 22.

37 Ennser-Kananen, Fallas Escobar, and Bigelow, 24.

1. How is English important for the Costa Rican *economy* from the participants' perspective?
2. How is English important for the Costa Rican *curricula* from the participants' perspective?

Method

This research is a qualitative and descriptive case study. As stated by Duff, “because of its diverse disciplinary origin and the research traditions found across them..., case studies may involve different units of analysis (a country, a city, a child, the testing of an innovation).”³⁸ The research focuses on English teaching in the Costa Rican curriculum and its implications for the economy from the perspective of the participants of the study: students, teachers, parents, managers and curricula developers.

Five representative sample groups participated in this study. Each group consisted of five participants from five different contexts: public high schools, private high schools, public universities, private universities, and private institutes. The only exception to the previous contexts is the managers, who represent sectors such as tourism, contact centers, small entrepreneurships, financial institutions, and migration offices. Criterion sampling was considered to select the participants of this study.³⁹ To be part of the study, the participants needed to belong to the groups mentioned above and be interested in the role of the language in the country.

The instrument used was a survey which varied slightly depending on every group's needs and knowledge of curricular language policies. Out of the five surveys, four were designed in Spanish, whereas only the one for teachers was in English. The idea of using Spanish with

38 Patricia A. Duff, “How to Carry Out Case Studies,” *Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition: A Practical Guide* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012a) 95-116. DOI: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781444347340>.

39 M. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1990) 169-186.

most of the participants was to obtain insights by making sure that all the participants could respond in detail by using their mother language. The questions aim to collect data about the informants' ethnographic information necessary for the study, their impressions on the role of English for the country's economy, and their perceptions about the implementation of English in the curriculum. The survey was an effective, valid, and suitable instrument for this study because it facilitated reaching different participants in the representative sample groups, answered the previously stated research questions, and allowed for a more complete analysis of the problem. Twenty-five informants took the survey using the platform *Google Forms*; this made the data collection process more efficient and simplified the report on the results.

In the following section, the researchers will first describe the results of the answers gathered from the instruments in written form and then use figures and tables that simplify the understanding of quantitative information. The data will be analyzed in a qualitative fashion by making connections between the theoretical considerations and the findings that arose when the data were being described. Moreover, it was necessary to create several headings to answer the research questions through a thematic analysis. The themes in this analysis were deductively arranged based on the theory reviewed for this research.

Caveats to the Research Methodology

This case study emerged from conversations held between the researchers, who reflected on the research questions posed for the purposes of this study, and who selected case study research as a qualitative design to answer them. Their positionality regarding the topic developed while they were taking the course Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in the Master's Program in Applied Linguistics at Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica. Under the guidance of their professor, they became interested in SLA theories and their role in

the learning of English as a foreign language. Most of the literature reviewed referred to contexts where second language learners acquire the language in English-speaking countries. As part of their reflections on SLA theories, they concluded that it was essential to make connections between the literature studied in the course and the reality of second language learners in Costa Rica due to the relative lack of prior work on the topic.

Moreover, given that the nature of this case study is qualitative, the researchers are not aiming at achieving statistical generalizations in their conclusions. They are well-aware of the fact that some readers might wish to find *methods triangulation* in this study. Nonetheless, the study does adhere to validity and reliability principles in qualitative research through the use of *data source triangulation*⁴⁰ and appropriate methods to display the results obtained in the instruments.

Finally, the participants involved in this study do not necessarily have expertise in applied linguistics or curriculum development of EFL programs. Nevertheless, their perceptions should be taken into account because these groups are important stakeholders and their insights point to needs to be addressed through the implementation of the curriculum. The analysis conducted by the researchers is not intended to support or contradict the participants' claims, but rather voice their thoughts and provide a deeper understanding of the situation encountered in the case study.

Results

This section reports on the results obtained from the surveys conducted with the different groups of participants. The results serve as a basis to answer the research questions guiding this study.

40 Florian G. Kern, "The Trials and Tribulations of Applied Triangulation: Weighing Different Data Sources," *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 12, 2 (2018): 166-181. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689816651032>.

Role of English in the national economy

Concerning the importance of English for the national economy, the participants were asked about the extent to which the language is important for the economy. All 25 informants from the different groups participating in the study sustained that English is very important for the economy. Their justifications for that assertion can be found in table 1.

Table 1. Justifications to Consider English Important for the Economy

Justifications	Participants in the Survey				
	Teachers	Students	Parents	Policy Makers	Employers
Job opportunities	2	2	1	3	2
Commerce	1	3	4		4
Business	1	1		2	2
Tourism industry	2			1	3
General culture					
Cultural contact				1	
Travel				1	
Migration					1
Communication					1
Language learning		1			
Studies		1			

Source: This information is taken from the surveys applied. The numbers in each column show how important English is for each one of the aspects in the left-hand column.

The results in table 1 display the following findings. First, commerce and job opportunities seem to be the most salient factors to account for the relevance of the language in the Costa Rican economy due to the number of participants who resorted to those justifications to explain the importance of the language. “*Es la lengua franca para comercializar, turismo y Comunicaciones*” [it is the lingua franca for commerce, tourism, and communication (our translation)],” stated one of the curriculum developers to further elaborate on his perception.

The open-ended questions included in the different surveys elicited responses that hint at the role of each group of participants in the economy as a possible explanation for the participants' answers. For example, students are the only ones who give justifications related to learning. Employers point to those related to commerce, business, migration, and tourism as they are linked to the activity of the sector that they represent. In the instrument, participants were also asked to indicate the areas for which English is useful for the country's economic activities. By and large, their answers coincided with the previous justifications. A few responses also included using technology and entertainment as aspects that give a sense of usefulness to the language in different economic activities.

In addition, the participants indicated for whom the language is of relevance in Costa Rica. Table 2 displays the panorama for this case.

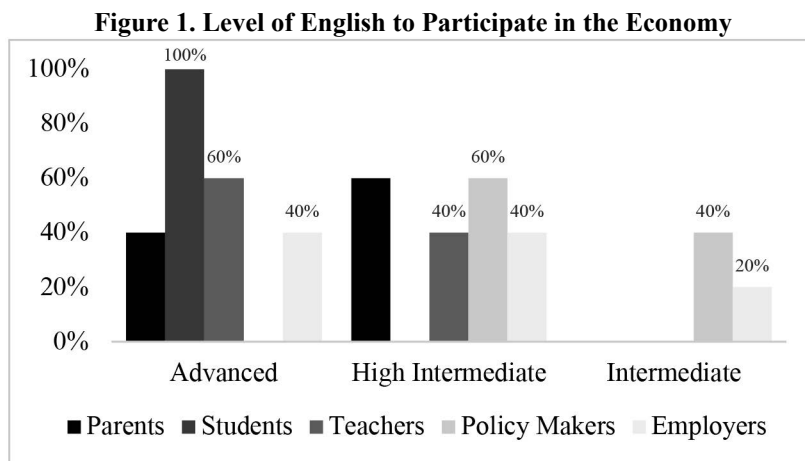
Table 2. Groups for Whom English Is Important in the Economy

Group	Study Participants				
	Teachers	Students	Parents	Policy Makers	Employers
Professionals in the private sector	100%	60%	80%	100%	100%
Professionals in the public sector	100%	60%	60%	100%	80%
Non-professionals in the private sector	100%	20%	40%	100%	80%
Non-professionals in the public sector	100%	40%	40%	60%	60%
Entrepreneurs at PYMES	100%	60%	60%	80%	100%
Businesspeople at large in national companies	100%	40%	60%	20%	80%
Businesspeople in transnational companies	100%	60%	60%	60%	80%

Source: This information is taken from all the surveys applied. The percentages in each column represent the percentage of responses obtained for each group of people.

Concerning the information in table 2, it is evident that the stakeholders surveyed for the study associate their response with the need for the language in their field, or in the case of students and parents, with what the future workforce is expected to do with the language. Teachers, on the contrary, acknowledge that English is essential for all the groups included in the table; this might indicate that teachers understand how the knowledge of the English language can affect the country's economy.

Equally important, the participants assessed the expected linguistic level required for people to participate actively in the economy. Figure 1 offers a statistical overview of their responses.



Source: The information of this graph is taken from all the surveys applied.

According to figure 1, most participants affirm that people require an advanced or high intermediate level of English to take part in an economic activity. One of the teachers expressed as follows the belief sustained by most participants on this topic: "Mastery of the language is necessary to get a good position." The only ones who appear not to agree with this are policy makers, who concur that people should

have either an intermediate or high intermediate level to be part of the economy. In the end, the participants agree on the role of English, the justifications for its importance, and its utility for the economy; this might have implications for the high levels of English expected from the participants.

Role of English in the national curriculum

The participants also coincide with the relevance given to the English language in the national curriculum. Only one participant of 25 indicated that English is moderately important in the educational system for the present and future workforce. The rest consider that English is significant in the curriculum for the reasons displayed in table 3.

Table 3. Justifications of the Importance of English for the Costa Rican Curriculum

Justification	Participants in the Study				
	Teachers	Students	Parents	Policy Makers	Employers
Job opportunities	4	2	3	3	2
Business			2	3	
Commerce	2				4
Communication		1			
Selfgrowth					1
Interpersonal Skills					1

Source: This information is taken from all the surveys applied. The numbers in each column show how important English is for each one of the aspects on the left-hand column.

The results of table 3 show a slight degree of difference with respect to the importance given to the language in table 1. Job opportunities, commerce and business are again the main justifications for including English in the curriculum. This indicates that the language should respond to the demands of the economy. That is, people with good communicative competence in English have more chances to participate successfully in economic activities.

Following this premise, one parent commented, “*La mayoría de las empresas lo piden y es importante que se eduquen en el área en que se van a desempeñar en sus trabajos*” [most companies ask for it, and it is important for people to be trained in the area they will work in (our translation)].

However, one aspect that differs significantly from table 1 is the fact that two responses from the employers emphasized that personal growth and interpersonal skills must be justifications for the inclusion of English in the curriculum. These answers are not necessarily economic motivations to include the language in the curriculum.

Just as table 2 analyzed the role of English in the economy, table 4 aims to portray for whom the English language is important in the educational system, according to the participants in this study.

Table 4. Groups for Whom the English Language Is Important in the Curriculum

Group	Study Participants				
	Teachers	Students	Parents	Policy Makers	Employers
Preschoolers	80%	80%	80%	80%	60%
Elementary school students	100%	80%	80%	80%	80%
High school students	100%	100%	100%	100%	80%
Undergraduate students	100%	100%	100%	100%	80%
Postgraduate students	100%	60%	60%	60%	60%
English teachers	100%	40%	80%	80%	60%
Teachers in other subjects	80%	60%	60%	20%	40%

Source: This information is taken from all the surveys applied. The percentages in each column correspond to the responses obtained from each group of participants.

Regarding the educational system, the different stakeholders who took part in the study acknowledged the importance of the subject matter for most of the people who teach and study in an educational institution. However, English seems to be less relevant to teachers of other subjects and to graduate students, and the groups that should master the language are mainly related to job opportunities and commerce.

Two answers also refer to age to justify the teaching of the language since childhood because according to these participants the younger people are, the better the results they will obtain. The following phrase expresses the feelings expressed by these participants: “*si queremos competir a nivel mundial, tenemos que incorporar el inglés desde los niños de preescolar porque ellos aprenden muy fácil*” [if we want to compete worldwide, we must incorporate English when children are in preschool because they learn very fast (our translation)].

Finally, the researchers elicited the participants’ impressions on whether the educational policies are aligned with the demands of the economy. Table 5 reflects the answers given on this issue.

Table 5. Perceptions on Whether Educational Policies Are Aligned with Demands of the Economy

Answer	Study Participants				
	Teachers	Students	Parents	Policy Makers	Employers
Yes	3	5	0	5	1
No	2	0	4	0	4

Source: This information is taken from all the surveys applied. The numbers in each column represent the frequency in which each answer was given.

Most of the teachers added that the educational policies do respond to the demands of the economy. For example, one of them wrote, “Yes, I think so. The way I’m teaching English my students prepares them to fulfill future job requirements,” but other teachers thought otherwise. In addition, students and policy makers agree, according to their responses. “*Porque eso ayuda a que el país sea más competitivo y atrae a los inversionistas y al turismo*” [because that helps the country to be more competitive and attracts investments and tourism (our translation)], affirmed one of the students. Similarly, policymakers agree on this fact, and to exemplify their position, one of them pointed out that “*creamos estudiantes bilingües*” [we—referring to the language program—create bilingual students (our translation)].

On the other hand, two of the groups of participants seem to disagree with the position of teachers, students and policy makers. As a matter of fact, none of the parents believe that the educational policies correspond to the needs of the economy. They emphasized that in situations where English must be spoken the children will not be able to communicate in the language. Employers support this by adding that the level is still unsatisfactory, but that it is improving.

Qualitative Data Analysis

This section outlines the extent to which the role of language for the economy and for the curriculum of the country has implications in its learning. These issues are analyzed grounded on the theories presented in the framework for the study and the results outlined above.

Sociocultural Considerations in SLA in the Costa Rican Context

The data can be analyzed considering its connection with Sociocultural Theory. First, the Ministry of Public Education stipulates that English can be a medium to help students develop their full potential to contribute to the economic system as part of their cultural and social development⁴¹; in the surveys, all the participants considered English to be very important for the economy, and most of the those surveyed in the students', teachers' and parents' groups selected justifications related to economic elements, such as job opportunities, commerce, and business. This can also be connected to Lantolf's claim that mediation "is most effective when it is sensitive to learners' ZPD and as such, they represent one type of mediation."⁴² Thus, considering teachers' and parents' answers about the importance of English in the curriculum, they appear to perceive English as an essential element in the national curriculum for the students to be able to perform a job- and business-related tasks. This suggests that students should

41 Ministerio de Educación Pública, 15.

42 Lantolf (2012), 60.

first receive proper mediation to achieve their linguistic goals to later become active agents in the country's economy.

When analyzing the responses regarding the significance of English for the national curriculum, Gass's and Lantoff's viewpoints on how language enables learners to connect to their environment and people since early ages to participate in society can be verified in the results of the study.⁴³ Two participants stressed the need of early language exposure to increase the students' opportunities to achieve higher linguistic levels in connection to the country's global competitiveness. These two participants indicate that exposure to English from early ages can result in greater personal and national gain, as higher proficiency is expected from today's language learners.

Socio-Cognitive Considerations to Learn a Language

Atkinson suggests that language learning is adaptive according to the environment,⁴⁴ so the fact that commerce and job opportunities are—for the participants—the most important reasons to speak English in Costa Rica makes it possible to understand that the cognitive approaches to second language acquisition are influenced by what occurs in the ecology of learning. Learning takes place because it becomes meaningful to the learner; it is clear that the students and the other participants in this study coincided on the fact that the language is essential because the globalized economy, in general, makes it a valuable way to prosper in the system due to its usefulness. Ortega and Atkinson emphasize that learning a language provides power and leads to prosperity. The reasons given (see table 1) by the participants along with the use of technology and entertainment trigger the learning of a language through useful experiences for learners when they, as Atkinson suggests, try to adapt to an eco-social environment to relate their cognitive efforts to their reality. Costa Rican curriculum developers exert pressure on knowing the language to be able to participate

43 Gass (2013) 283; Lantoff (2011), 25.

44 Atkinson, 18.

and gain power in the economy through occupations as professionals in the public and private sector (table 2).

Society is also working as a force to increase learners' linguistic competence to participate in different economic activities, for most stakeholders surveyed affirm that people need an advanced or high intermediate level of English. In this same vein, a high number of participants indicated that it is very important to incorporate English into the curriculum. This points to the need for improvements related to learning and teaching a foreign language. Following Atkinson's suggestion, learners must be placed in situations where the L2 is necessary for social action.⁴⁵ This can be achieved by having the curriculum aligned with the needs of the system. Teachers, policy makers, and curriculum developers believe that this is currently being accomplished. Nevertheless, parents and employers expressed that they consider that the efforts made in the curricular policies do not yield the results required to comply with the economic demands. Therefore, reality facilitates the interconnection between language learning and socio-cognitive theories, yet it is unclear whether the policies followed by the different curricula satisfy all the needs of the economy.

Identity and Agency in Language Learning

Concerning these topics, it is imperative to analyze Swain and Deters' premise in regard to L2 learning: "[it] is a highly complex and socially situated process that is dynamic and involves the negotiation of access, participation, and above all, identity."⁴⁶ The learner's identity and agency are shaped by society and the economy, yet each learner seems to display differences in terms of how accountable the language learning experience is.

All 25 stakeholders who participated in the study justified the importance of English for the economy with a strong sense of

⁴⁵ Atkinson, 144.

⁴⁶ Merrill Swain and Ping Deters, "New Mainstream SLA Theory: Expanded and Enriched," *Modern Language Journal* 91, 5 (2007): 820-836. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00671.x>.

bilingualism to serve the needs of the economic system. This situation could have negative implications in terms of the pressure exerted on the learner, which may limit students' identity and agency when learning a language. Learners will have less power to control their own learning because the only choice that they have if they want to prosper is to accommodate themselves to the requirements of the economy. When referring to this issue, Duff ensures that a learner could make the decision to reject certain requirements demanded by society or the internal language systems.⁴⁷ However, under the circumstances reported on here, not complying with these demands would lead to exclusion in terms of job opportunities and competitiveness in a globalized society.

As proposed by Ennser-Kananen, Fallas Escobar and Bigelow, the reasons why most people learn English respond to the neoliberal system, but one of the employers stressed that the learning of the language is vital for personal growth and interpersonal relationships. This answer softens the participants' neoliberal discourse and acknowledges learners as true agents of their learning of the language.

Motivation to Learn English in Costa Rica

The importance of the English language can be analyzed from the perspective of motivational implications. Consideration is given to Ushioda and Dörnyei's conception of motivation as a result of "the relationship between individuals and context."⁴⁸ and to Henry's reference to the learner as an ecological being connected to "psychological, psycholinguistic, and social systems."⁴⁹ There may be a relation between the informants' perceptions that learning English is very important for the economy and the curriculum, especially regarding commerce and job opportunities. These results also appear to align with Ennser-Kananen, Fallas Escobar, and Bigelow given that they

47 Duff (2012b) 411.

48 Ushioda and Dörnyei, 398.

49 Henry, 561.

discovered that some of the motivations of EFL students in Costa Rica are related to job opportunities and finding well-paying jobs. The informants in the present study also gave reasons such as commerce, business, migration, and tourism as important motivations to learn English, which may be linked to motivation as a complex and emergent course in multilingual processes.⁵⁰ Dörnyei also sees motivation as an “Ought-to L2 Self, referring to the attributes that one believes one ought to possess.”⁵¹ In this sense, the informants categorized people for whom the English language is essential in the economy, and their answers may support the notion that English learning is motivated by ideas of what one should perform in the language as a response to the country’s economic demands.

As explained by Dörnyei, motivations may come from extrinsic sources—external regulations— or externally exposed rules—introjected regulations.⁵² After a closer look at the data obtained from the subjects concerning people for whom the English language is vital in the curriculum (table 2), it can be suggested that both external and introjected regulations are essential motivations for learners in the Costa Rican educational system. Most groups surveyed received a high percentage of choice; only the group related to teachers of other subjects seemed to have received less attention. There appears to be a high level of acceptance to offer external pressures to citizens when it comes to English language learning included in the curriculum.

Furthermore, Ushioda and Dörnyei considered that the constitution of English as part of a global community subtracts relevance from the traditional vision of integrative motivation and places a more substantial burden on internal forces.⁵³ The data obtained is aligned with this argument; when asked about perceptions on whether the English educational policies are associated with the demands of the

50 Henry, 549.

51 Dörnyei, 105.

52 Dörnyei, 78.

53 Ushioda and Dörnyei, 400.

economy, employers and parents seem to be very critical about the educational system and its deficiencies. Nonetheless, students agreed upon the positive results of curricular policies and the economic needs and were the only population in favor of an advanced level of English as a need.

Final Remarks

The participants in the study appear to highlight the importance of the English language for the economic system. This fact has implications on all the theories that account for SLA by considering external factors that go beyond the cognitive level. First, with respect to socio-cultural theories, parents and other curriculum stakeholders advocate for better English language instruction due to the sociocultural reality that requires good language proficiency to participate actively in the system. Second, with respect to motivation, students agree with other participants on the fact that they, as language learners, need to possess certain abilities to succeed, and this evokes interest in the learning of the language. In the same vein, when referring to socio-cognitive theories, learners are exposed to an environment that makes their learning experience meaningful for most stakeholders and themselves. Hence, the more relevant the subject is, the more learnable it becomes.

Finally, identity and agency are crucial factors to understand language learning as a complex process where many factors come into play. Learners seem to have few choices on their own learning as they seem to dictate how they are expected to learn the target language and why they should learn it. In the end, this research might serve as an antecedent to close the existing gaps regarding literature on this topic. Future research should be conducted to raise awareness on the fact that educational and language policies in general have implications on language learning that can be demonstrated through studies grounded on SLA theories.

Generalizability

This case study cannot generate theoretical insights beyond the case in question; the population was limited to five sample groups of curriculum stakeholders composed of five participants, and no similar literature has been found for comparison; nonetheless, it may serve as a starting point for future research on the topic. However, the results support existing theory regarding the external factors that influence language learning as a complex system.