

RELIGACIÓN

R E V I S T A

The impact of Classical Education techniques, drilling and teacher-led discovery, on speaking accuracy in 8th-grade students

El impacto de las técnicas de Educación Clásica, drilling y descubrimiento guiado por el profesor, en la precisión oral de los alumnos de 8vo. curso

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the effectiveness of Classical Education in the teaching-learning process of English in a private institution in Cuenca. The primary objective of this action research piece is to analyze the learning progress of the students in teacher-centered lessons in which drilling, and teacher-led discovery techniques were used. The research employs a qualitative approach given that it is the report of an action research study carried out in two cycles in the context in which the researcher is currently working. After implementing a diagnostic, a need was encountered and the previously mentioned techniques (i.e. drilling and teacher-led discovery) were implemented to see whether or not they could be useful. Data were collected by combining data collection tools such as semi-structured observation, rubrics, diagnostic tests, and summative assessment. Through the implementation of two classical education-derived techniques mentioned before, it was found that 73.68% of students successfully addressed challenges in conjugating the simple present tense affirmatively in speaking exercises, with 39.47% demonstrating proficiency in negative conjugations during freer oral practice.

Keywords: Classical Education; english teaching; speaking accuracy; drilling; teacher-led discovery.

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<http://doi.org/10.46652/rgn.v9i39.1140>

ISSN 2477-9083

Vol. 9 No. 39 enero-marzo, 2024, e2401140

Quito, Ecuador

Enviado: septiembre 21, 2023

Aceptado: noviembre 26, 2023

Publicado: diciembre 12, 2023

Publicación Continua



RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la efectividad de la Educación Clásica en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés en una institución privada de la ciudad Cuenca. El objetivo principal de esta de investigación-acción es analizar el progreso de aprendizaje de los estudiantes en lecciones centradas en el profesor en las que se utilizaron técnicas de repetición y descubrimiento guiado por el profesor. La investigación utiliza un enfoque cualitativo, dado que es el informe de un estudio de investigación-acción llevado a cabo en dos ciclos en el contexto en el que la investigadora está trabajando actualmente. Después de implementar un diagnóstico, se encontró una necesidad y se implementaron las técnicas mencionadas anteriormente (i.e. repetición y descubrimiento guiado por el profesor) para determinar si podrían ser útiles o no. La información se recopiló combinando herramientas de recolección de datos como observación semi-estructurada, rúbricas, pruebas diagnósticas y evaluación sumativa. A través de la implementación de las dos técnicas derivadas de la educación clásica mencionadas anteriormente, se descubrió que el 73.68% de los estudiantes abordaron con éxito los desafíos en la conjugación del tiempo presente simple de manera afirmativa en ejercicios de expresión oral, con un 39.47% demostrando competencia en las conjugaciones negativas durante la práctica oral más libre.

Palabras clave: Educación Clásica; enseñanza de inglés; precisión en la expresión oral, repetición, descubrimiento guiado por el profesor.

Introduction

English Language Teaching has grown increasingly indispensable since the end of the twentieth century, paralleling the ascendancy of English as a global lingua franca—a language facilitating communication among individuals who lack a common native language (Harmer, *The practice of English Language Teaching*, 2007). That said, awareness on the importance of learning this essential language has heightened, given its relevance in various domains such as business, education, travel, and cultural interactions. Across the globe, English is taught for a myriad of purposes, from primary school to university. However, upon reaching university studies, students often discover that their proficiency in English falls short of the requirements (Harmer, 2007).

English language teaching in the Ecuadorian context

The trend discussed before, is not an alienated to the Ecuadorian English language teaching context, where the Ministry of Education recommends a total of three hours per week for English classes in levels up to tenth grade and certain specialties in public institutions. For technical baccalaureate programs, this allocation decreases to two hours per week (Brown, 2023). This significantly impacts language acquisition in the country, contributing to its standing as one of the lowest in English Language proficiency, not only in Latin America but globally (Education First, 2023). Recognizing this challenge underscores the paramount importance of English Language Teaching in Ecuador for fostering improvement and development within the nation. In the pursuit of effective techniques, methods, and approaches for English language teaching, one cannot disregard the profound influence of classical education. It plays an integral role in shaping pedagogical strategies that contribute to the comprehensive and enduring development of language proficiency and empowers them to love their own cultures (Negley, 2021).

Classical Education

Classical Education is an approach influenced by the culture and philosophy of ancient Greece, aiming to educate students as virtuous citizens with strong critical thinking skills (Ortiz, 2023). This approach aims to cultivate virtuous individuals by nurturing their critical thinking skills through the exploration of great books and liberal arts. It extends beyond mere scientific facts and dates, delving into the realms of ideas, values, morals, and ethics.

Classical education comprises three distinct stages, collectively referred to as the ‘Trivium’ – a sequential cycle that guides the educational journey (McCoy, 2011). This refers to the teaching of the first three arts: grammar, logic, and rhetoric that are emphasized according to the students’ ages. The initial stage of Grammar is designed to establish a foundation for subsequent development. This is achieved through methods such as memorization, repetition, singing, and chanting, as well as direct instruction, reading, and discussion (Perrin, 2004). This stage holds paramount importance in the overall process of educating a child within the classical education approach. Its primary focus is on early ages, specifically from 5 to 11, capitalizing on the heightened capacity of young children for memorization. The aim is to harness the information acquired during this stage in the later phases of logic and rhetoric. In the logic stage, typically spanning ages 11 to 14, students are not only encouraged to engage in arguments with their peers and teachers but are also guided not only on the art of argumentation but also on instilling the skills to argue effectively (Perrin, 2004). In this stage, students apply the knowledge gained in the previous grammar stage to participate in reasoning and argumentation. They are instructed in the skill of posing progressively insightful questions to seek the truth and practice evaluating the premises, theses, and conclusions presented by others.

During the rhetoric stage, students are coached to speak eloquently and persuasively. They become more interested in creative thinking and expressive communication (Perrin, 2004). Equipped with the foundations laid in earlier stages, students develop the confidence to effectively communicate, persuade, engage in public speaking, comprehend complex concepts, and proficiently defend their arguments.

Since antiquity, classical education has prioritized the study of languages (The Classical Classroom, n.d.). Therefore, classical Education and English Language Teaching are inherently intertwined. The trivium, a key component of classical education, is designed not only to enable students to learn and think effectively but also to foster the ability to fluently communicate in other languages, including English.

The use of Drills and Teacher-led Discovery

Several techniques employed in classical education, such as lecturing, discussions, and teacher-led discoveries, align with effective practices in English teaching. Oral drilling methods, including singing, recitation, and spelling bees, contribute to language acquisition. There are noticeable cases such as the one presented by Basuki (Basuki, 2018) which emphasizes the importance of drilling into the memory retention of new items in students. Drilling has been proven to be effective in teaching English to Young Learners (Hidayat et al., 2022) The Celta trainee book (Thornbury & Watkins, 2007) encourages teachers to use teacher-led discoveries and a variety of drilling to teach the language. Teacher-led discovery is demonstrated not only to enhance academic achievement but also students' motivation (Cotterell, 2021) Furthermore, fostering reasoning skills, encouraging memorization, and emphasizing pronunciation is not only prevalent in English instruction but are also advocated for in second language (L2) classrooms.

However, no study has conclusively demonstrated the extent to which classical education aids students in language acquisition. The objective of this study is to ascertain the degree to which classical education contributes to the development of English speaking, with a specific focus on accuracy in terms of verb conjugations in the present simple in positive and negative structures.

Methodology

The current investigation constitutes action research conducted at Unidad Educativa Bilingüe Interamericana, a private bilingual school located in the center of Cuenca- Ecuador. A total of thirty-eight students from eighth grade were selected for this study, nineteen girls and nineteen boys between eleven and twelve years of age. All the students were given an initial language evaluation where they obtained an A1 level of English. To obtain data, different techniques were used, including observations, and applying tests and rubrics before and after the implementation of the action research cycles. What was implemented to address the diagnosed problem were two distinct techniques rooted in the Classical Education Model: drilling and teacher-led discovery. Each technique was implemented in two action research cycles. The purpose of this study was to address the following research questions:

Research Questions:

- What is the overall impact of implementing the Classical Education-derived techniques: drilling and teacher-led discovery on students' ability to overcome challenges in conjugating the simple present tense in its affirmative and negative forms during speaking exercises?
- What is the effect of teacher-led discovery and drilling on students' proficiency in positive conjugations of the simple present and employing negative conjugations with the correct auxiliary and verb form during freer practices?

- Which of the two Classical Education-derived techniques: drilling and teacher-led discovery can be more beneficial to use in a context where this model is implemented?

Results

To analyze the data obtained after the implementation of the two aforementioned techniques that belong to the Trivium Method in the Classical Education Model, each of the stages was described so as to have a better understanding of the qualitative information collected. What is more, the process through which the current study was carried out, can serve as a starting point for future research in which the Classical Model is the main component.

First Cycle

Identification of the problem

This study started with a language diagnostic evaluation taken at the beginning of the school year. It consisted of five parts: Grammar and Vocabulary, Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking. The grammar and vocabulary section had 50 multiple-choice questions to test the students from simple grammar structures to more complex ones, as well as vocabulary choice in context. During the reading part, students had to answer true or false questions and activities aimed at finding specific information in the context of school supplies and subjects. The listening part had two questions, the first was listening for specific information in which students had to complete a form with different people's names, ages, and favorite activities to do. The second question looked for detailed understanding, in which students needed to answer what the speakers' attitude toward certain situations was. During the writing part of the test, students were asked to reply to an email, answering some questions given in the task. Lastly, the speaking part was divided into two sections, during the first one, students needed to answer some questions with personal information, while in the second, they needed to analyze a situation in pairs, looking at some pictures and describing other people's facts.

After grading the diagnostic test, it was shown that students could decently work on reading and listening skills. However, the three other sections exhibited poor development. The multiple-choice grammar part indicated that students could not identify when to use the present or past form of the verbs as well as how to conjugate them in the third person. Regarding vocabulary, they showed poor abilities of word choice. As a result of the low level of grammar and vocabulary, productive skills were affected in accuracy. Students could communicate their ideas with incorrect tenses and words. The test revealed that students demonstrated language comprehension, as they were able to understand the questions asked and answer them. However, they faced challenges related to accuracy, particularly in the use of simple tenses. The diagnostic test gave a result of A1 level of English in all the students.

Corrective action

In response to this identified issue, it was decided to apply a drilling technique to focus on positive conjugations of the simple present tense and teacher-led discovery for negative forms. Both techniques are part of the classical education model and aim to improve the grammar and vocabulary of the students and as a result, the development of productive skills, giving a special emphasis on speaking accuracy. The techniques previously mentioned were used for this stage due to their proven effectiveness in English language instruction, as highlighted by Dennis (Dennis, 2015). Throughout the week, students participated in eight hours of English as a Foreign Language classes. Of these, four hours were dedicated to a drilling technique with a particular focus on constructing positive simple present sentences. The remaining four hours were employed on a teacher-led discovery technique, emphasizing the formation of negative sentence structures.

The lessons were divided in three stages according to the trivium. Throughout the grammar part, in the lessons using drilling, the teacher explained the rules of simple present conjugation and had students orally repeat the changes in the third person to aid students memorizing positive conjugations and tackling fossilized errors that had become rooted in their language acquisition. During the logic part of the lessons, students worked on drilling writing exercises to strengthen the knowledge previously acquired regarding positive sentences. Lastly, in the rhetoric stage, the students were asked to work collaboratively, asking, and answering questions provided by the teacher. During this freer practice, a rubric was used to monitor whether there was improvement or not in the accuracy of speaking.

In the classes that used teacher-led discovery, during the grammar part the teacher used a situational framework to immerse students in the correct conjugation in context using example negative sentences in the first, second, and third person.

Throughout the logic stage, students were provided with a worksheet with the sentences previously used in the situation to lead students to reason on negative forms. Worksheets designed with Concept Checking Questions were used to guide students to correctly use auxiliaries that are part of the simple present negative.

Observation and Data Analysis of the First Cycle

During the diagnostic test, the totality of students got an A1 level of English in all the skills. To tackle the problem, a combination of drilling and teacher-led discovery techniques were used during a month, having eight hours of classes a week. After analyzing the data collected with the rubric during the freer speaking practice, it was observed that twenty-one students demonstrated improvement in speaking accuracy using the simple present tense in its positive form. However, in the negative form, only seven students could successfully use auxiliaries to speak fluently. The rest of them encountered difficulties in correctly conjugating verbs in positive and negative sentences while speaking.

Critical Reflection and results obtained in the First Cycle

It was observed that 55.26% of the students exhibited progress in their speaking accuracy using the simple present tense in its positive form, whereas 18.48% showed progress using the simple present tense in its negative form.

Second Cycle

Identification

Based on the previously obtained information, it was decided to repeat the AR cycle in order to determine an improvement in the same students, as stated by Rainey (Rainey, 2006). However, 44.74% continued to struggle with tenses and conjugations in freer speaking activities, both in positive and negative contexts. Issues included the misuse of past tense forms for facts and habits, as well as errors in conjugating third-person verbs.

Corrective Action

In addressing the persistent issues, it was decided to continue employing a combination of drilling and teacher-led discovery techniques for an additional month. The same activities as the first cycle were applied during the grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages. Both one and the other, finished with a similar activity during the rhetoric part, where students engaged in open discussions within small groups, while the teacher used a rubric to assess any observed improvements.

Observation and Data Analysis -Second Cycle

During the freer speaking activity, the teacher used a rubric to determine whether there was an improvement in accuracy or not. After collecting and analyzing data it was noticed that twenty-eight students had corrected their conjugations in positive sentences during their speaking. However, only fifteen of them could successfully use the correct auxiliary when referring to negative forms.

Critical reflection – Second cycle

It was evidenced that the use of correct conjugations in positive sentences had a better degree of improvement than the use of auxiliaries in negative forms. Out of thirty-eight students, 73.68% mastered positive statements, However, only 39.47% could successfully conjugate both positive and negative statements.

Final Results

After applying two cycles of action research using the drilling and teacher-led discovery techniques for two months, it could be observed that there was 26.32% of students did not overcome their initial difficulties presented in the diagnostic test. Significant improvement was shown during the first cycle in positive statements, where the drilling technique was used. Additionally, twenty-one students, representing 55.26 %, could accurately communicate during the freer speaking practice. Nonetheless, only 18.48% could accurately use negative forms during freer speaking practice where the teacher-led technique was applied. During the second cycle, there was an improvement of 18.42% in positive statements while speaking freely. While 23.68% of the students could accurately use negative conjugations when communicating orally.

After implementing two techniques derived from the classical education method consistently throughout two action research cycles, the outcomes revealed that a total of 73.68% of students were able to overcome challenges related to conjugating the simple present tense in its affirmative form during unrestricted speaking exercises, following the application of the drilling technique. A 39.47% demonstrated proficiency in employing negative conjugations with the correct auxiliary and verb form during freer oral practice.

Discussion

Upon analyzing these data, it can be concluded that the drilling technique proved to be significantly more effective in improving the speaking for accuracy skill when compared to the teacher-led discovery in the same teaching setting. Both techniques that belong to the Classical Education Model, being applied during the same amount of time to the same number of students showed different results, having a 73.68% improvement in the topic that used drilling. While only 39.47% could succeed in the topic that used teacher-led discovery. Therefore, both techniques demonstrated effectiveness in developing speaking accuracy but up to different extents. This demonstrates that a more effective way to tackle fossilized errors is through repetition, as teacher-led discovery did not seem to have the same impact on memorization in students' brains when developing freer speaking.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Suggestions for Further Research

The study demonstrated that the drilling technique led to a significant improvement in students' accuracy in using conjugations in positive sentences, while the teacher-led discovery technique showed limited effectiveness in improving students' accuracy in using negative forms. The findings suggest that a focused approach, such as drilling, can be more beneficial for enhancing specific language skills, particularly in the context of positive sentence construction.

The limitations of the study include the relatively small sample size and the short duration of the intervention. Additionally, the study focused solely on the simple present tense, limiting the generalizability of the results to other grammatical structures. Future research could explore the effectiveness of different instructional techniques across various tenses and linguistic features to provide a more comprehensive understanding of language learning strategies.

Based on the results, future experiments could investigate the effectiveness of combining drilling and teacher-led discovery techniques to address the challenges associated with negative sentence structures. Furthermore, exploring the long-term retention of the acquired language skills and the transferability of these skills to real-world communication contexts would be valuable for understanding the practical implications of the instructional methods.

The study's limitations underscore the need for further research to validate the findings across diverse learner populations and linguistic contexts. Future studies could also consider incorporating qualitative measures, such as learner perceptions and attitudes, to gain a more holistic understanding of the impact of instructional techniques on language acquisition. Additionally, investigating the potential influence of individual learner characteristics, such as language proficiency and learning styles, on the effectiveness of different instructional methods would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of language learning strategies.

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Statement

Conflict of interest

I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Funding

No financial assistance from parties outside this article.

Notes

This article is not the product of previous research.