

Ideas for Improving English Instruction in Costa Rica

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Note:

My initial hypothesis, before going to Costa Rica, was that the methods of English education in Costa Rica would be more beneficial to students if they were adapted from their traditional forms, which are successful in the United States and Europe, to function more smoothly with the cultural values of Costa Rica. After finishing my research in Costa Rica, my hypothesis was proven true and has remained essentially the same, but my research has led me to believe that the cause of the problem with English education is not what I had suspected. As a result, a few new factors became important for my project, and the focus of my research changed slightly. The most important factor that I had not thought about before going to Costa Rica was the negative effect of the government on both public and private education. Another important factor is that along with teaching students English language, they need to understand from the beginning of their education, why learning English is important, and how they can use it.

Introduction: Costa Rican Culture

Costa Rica is a country which prides itself in its diversity, progressive attitude, and high level of education. Costa Rica is diverse biologically, culturally and ethnically and from centuries of adaptation to its diversity, Costa Rica has become one of the most accepting, peaceful nations on earth. Costa Rica has survived and been made stronger by invasions, wars, economic tragedies, and unpredicted influxes of immigrants—all of the things that typically destroy nations (Helmuth, 59-68). Costa Rica has survived because its people have always strived for better education, and have continually embraced and adapted to changes, allowing society to learn from challenges, instead of being destroyed by them. Costa Ricans take pride in their ability to adapt themselves, and their democratic government to use all challenges the country faces, from education to social programs, to better the lives of everyone (Wallerstein, 97-128).

The Government and Education

Because of the high value Costa Ricans place on education, the government makes it a priority that every Costa Rican citizen has the right to a free, quality education and has an equal chance to make the most of that education. The Costa Rican people and government have

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revolutionary ideas for education, and a surprisingly effective application of those ideas, considering the lack of education in the nations which surround Costa Rica. The idea of an equal and quality education is very progressive and supportive to Costa Rica's economic prosperity; however, there are still a few minor kinks to work out in the public education system, especially pertaining to English education.

I learned, in interviews with Andrey, a teacher at both public and private schools, Carlos, and Elliette, who have a son in school and are familiar with both public and private education systems, that the government gives public schools very specific requirements to follow. The government tells schools exactly what vocabulary and grammar they should teach, what materials (books and practice exercises) they may use to teach, and how long a specific topic must be taught. The strict standards and the thorough checks that follow are good, because they help the government make sure that every child gets a quality education, but sometimes they also subtract from the quality of education. The governments' standards and checks add to the stress of time limits, and take away the teachers' ability to use their own judgment to determine the best way to teach specific classes (Villalobos, Andrey).

Andrey said that it is discouraging that in his English classes he cannot teach in a way that uses the interests and abilities of the students to enhance the benefit they receive from their education. Also, he cannot customize the way he teaches to consider the cultural norms that those particular students are familiar with, nor change the speed at which he is covering material when a class needs to spend more time on a specific subject in order to learn it well.

The government requires that English be taught using specific standardized lesson plans. Teachers are restricted to only teaching the vocabulary, grammar, and topics that the government allocates specifically for each time period in the school year. So, for example, if in week three,

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teachers need to cover clothing and body parts, they cannot spend time in week four continuing to practice that material. There is no time to practice or review week three's topics, even if students still have not become comfortable using their new knowledge, or have not practiced it enough to remember it after a few days, because places and jobs have to be covered in week four.

Standardized Tests

It is important that all topics be covered in the time limits the government sets, because the government checks that the quality standards it set are followed by giving standardized tests to all students. The results of these tests are important for the students' academic future, as well as the reputation of the school. It is good that the government tries to make sure that all students across the country are being given equal educations, and that all schools are teaching students the things that they should learn before they graduate. In many subjects, such as math, the standardized tests give the government an accurate idea of how well students are being educated, and where improvement is needed. In English education, however, standardized, written tests are not a good representation of what students have really learned, and much less how they can apply it, or if they will remember it. Because English is a language, and language is primarily used for communication, in order to accurately assess English achievement, it needs to be tested *based on Costa Rican cultural standards* for effective communication, including *all* forms, not only written and formal, but also spoken and conversational forms.

When examining the statistical results of the standardized government tests, it may appear as if all students are capable of at least an intermediate level of communication in English by the time that they are in high school. When, in reality however, most students may only be

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capable of, at best, the most basic conversation. Standardized tests in English misrepresent the levels of student achievement because of a few factors:

1. Students memorize vocabulary and sentence structures quickly, in the few months before each test, but then forget it after taking the test.
2. Students may know how to fill in the blanks, write a list of vocabulary, or match an English word to its Spanish translation, but they do not know how to hold a conversation.
3. Students may recognize a large number of written words on tests, but they have trouble recognizing the same words when spoken.
4. Students know and write many correct grammar structures on tests (typical sentence patterns that they practiced in school, such as, “where is the door?” or “where is the bathroom?”), but they do not know how to create their own sentences, combining vocabulary with correct grammar.
5. Although students may have a large vocabulary, the words they know do not have much real significance for them. Students view vocabulary and sentence patterns more as logic puzzles than real language.

These factors make it difficult for students to feel comfortable using English to communicate with others, outside of the classroom. Without practice, the things they learn in school are forgotten within a few months of learning them (Villalobos, Minor).

As a result of these factors, it is very possible that a student may score very highly on the English section of a standardized test, but in a month or two he/she will not recall much of the information, or be able or comfortable using it in a conversation. Because English is a language—a form of communication, the way it is assessed needs to take into account the cultural norms for effective communication in the culture where it is taught and examine how

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students communicate in English in comparison to their native language. English should be assessed in depth, including assessment of the most culturally valued aspects of communication, such as oral comprehension, conversation skills, creative writing (Wallerstein, 100, 208). Tests would also have to test the English that students learned in prior years, along with the new information. This would give the government a more accurate idea of how well public schools are preparing their students to use English in their careers, and the increasingly international business world. With this more accurate evaluation, the government could then continue adapting its requirements for how English is taught, according to the areas where it sees the need for better instruction from the test results. With continual work on improving English education, by analyzing test results for weak areas in teaching, and then improving standards, materials, and teachers' training, the public education system could achieve its goals-- giving students the confidence that they need in spoken English to continue learning the language after graduation and to use it at work. Students will only continue to learn and use English if they feel, from the way they were educated and assessed, that they are capable of speaking English, while still adhering to the deeply ingrained standards that their culture sets for good communication.

Costa Rica's Cultural View of Communication

Communication and the way it is viewed in different cultures is extremely complex topic and almost impossible to fully explain. All of the differences between the infinite degrees of communication we are subconsciously trained to analyze in American culture and how they differ from those of Costa Rican culture could constitute an entire series of books, and still would not be fully explained. However, the factors that need to be paid the most attention to while teaching English is the higher degree of importance, compared with American culture, that Costa Ricans place on things like making a good impression and unique personal expression

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(Wallerstein, 100; Helmuth, 59) . Also important, is the fact that in collectivist cultures, like in Costa Rica, the way that one communicates is very important to others' perception of him or her; sometimes it is more important than factors such as his/her credentials, appearance, or reputation (Hall, 17, 31; Porter, 146).

Perhaps the most important “unspoken rule” for good communication in Costa Rica is “*quedando bien*,” or making a good impression. There are many factors necessary for making a good impression during a conversation. First, every conversation must fully hold the interest of both parties, and not make either the least bit uncomfortable. To hold interest, it is important that the individual speaking show, in his or her own unique form of expression, passion and emotion. Expression of one's individual personality is valued highly. To Costa Ricans, this is a large part of what makes conversation such a pleasurable and popular pastime. Passion and emotion in conversation can be used to express one's personality in countless ways: by the varying intonation or emphasis places on specific parts of sentences, by enthusiastic body language and facial expressions, or by the **essential** affirming movements and words the listener uses to make sure the speaker knows that he or she is interested, among many others.

In cultures like one in Costa Rica, where interpersonal relationships are of the utmost importance, and have been historically needed for survival, people are very sensitive to even the smallest “hints” people give in conversation, probably much more sensitive than people from individualistic cultures (Quigley). These “hints” include everything from eye movement to speed of response and speaking volume. To Costa Ricans, these things are subconsciously processed, and are important indicators of what kind of person they are speaking to.

Costa Ricans have developed a keen sensitivity to the small details in communication, which indicate peoples' personal reactions, along with habits and instincts which provide them

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with a basis for how to make good impressions. Because of their sensitivity, if a conversation is in some way uncomfortable or awkward, Costa Ricans will do everything in their power to fix it, without letting the other person sense the awkwardness. However, if the awkwardness continues, Costa Ricans will try to end the conversation as quickly as possible. Because students rarely feel that they learned in public school how to have a comfortable conversation and avoid awkwardness in English, the way the government requires that English be taught causes many difficulties.

The governments' requirements for English education are based on an education system that is successful in individualistic cultures (Freeman). The system, focused on systematic memorization and repetition, works in individualistic cultures, because in those cultures more value is placed on individual achievement and logic than on communication, collective achievement and individual expression (Hall).

Changes in Requirements for Teaching

In order to encourage students to practice their English and want to learn it, the government would need to require teachers to spend more time and place more importance on aspects of language such as conversation, oral comprehension, pronunciation, and creative expression. These aspects of language are important for students learning English to focus on, because it is those aspects that are most valued by Costa Rican culture. The confidence students have in their ability to express themselves in English will be based on standards they learned from the time they were born for communication in Spanish. In other words, if students do not feel that they learned how to communicate in English "effectively," based on **their** cultural standards (regardless whether they are capable of speaking correctly at all times), they will not

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risk making a bad impression in order to practice their English. In effect, they will not continue to learn it or remember it.

To correct this problem, public school needs to give students a chance to practice conversations in English, until they are comfortable conversing, even though they may still have errors in grammar and vocabulary. Also, public schools should include other important aspects of Costa Rican culture in the way English is taught, using activities which, for example, encourage creative individual expression (Forte and Pangle; Helmuth, 99).

Special Schools in Costa Rica

Numerous private schools in Costa Rica have been successful in adapting English teaching methods to culture and their adaptations are working tremendously well. While in Costa Rica I met a few people who had been educated in those private schools. Carlos, a twenty-year-old man who spoke English very confidently and almost without error, told me that he had gone to a private school which used many new ideas in the way classes were taught. In English, he said, the focus was on conversation. A normal class consisted of a short lesson on a grammatical pattern, then a long period of time in which students conversed casually in English, with several teachers and other students, using all the English they had learned in the past, along with the new grammar and vocabulary that they just learned. Many times, he said, English-speaking volunteers came to his school and spent the entire day conversing individually with students, and using English to do activities. Some of the activities that contributed to English education, done with and without volunteers, were things such as plays, role plays of people who use English at work, artistic projects using new vocabulary, watching and discussing English language movies and music or listening to stories read in English, along with many other things.

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Carlos said that as a result of the way he was educated in English, that even though he knew he still made grammatical errors, he felt almost as comfortable speaking English as he did speaking Spanish (Barbolla, Carlos). He said that his friends, who went to public schools, even though they knew a lot of grammar and vocabulary, did not feel like they could really express themselves when speaking English. To them, English words are only translations, and hold no real meaning or emotional context. When they speak English, they feel as if their words are empty, and the conversation is not fulfilling, nor does it leave a good impression or produce a thorough understanding of what was discussed. To them, conversation in English seems awkward; it lacks emotion and true individual expression. Carlos said that he does not feel this way about English, because the way it was taught in his school made the language “come alive,” becoming part of his culture and way of communicating, instead of being some foreign, logical sequence without meaning (Vasquez, Luis). Carlos and other confident English speakers who I interviewed also told me that the important part of education in English, for them, was not necessarily that they learned to speak perfectly in school.

A twenty-three year old tour guide, named Josuay, told me that when he graduated from his private high school, he still spoke very poor English, because English was only taught for an hour each day. Nevertheless, he spoke it with the confidence that he was capable of making an equally good impression when speaking English as when speaking Spanish. He told me that the confidence that his private school education gave him provided the motivation he needed to keep practicing and learning English after school. In his five years of practice after high school, he learned to speak English nearly perfectly, and got a good paying job translating and giving tours to English speakers (Garcia, Josuay). Josuay also told me that an important part of his education

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and what motivated him to learn English was the information he learned in school about how he could use English to get a good job.

Education about How to Use English

In Josuay's private school, English classes used situations one might encounter in an English-speaking career as a topic for many class activities. For example, the teacher might have explained the need for translators and English speaking representatives in marketing departments of businesses, and then tell the students to make up a skit based on a situation a Costa Rican representative might encounter when visiting an English speaking country. Many public school students who I interviewed said that they liked English classes, but did not know why it was so important that they learn English, or if they could use it outside of school. The public schools they went to did not inform them about the job opportunities that speaking English provides enough to motivate them to learn it.

A twenty-seven year old woman, named Maricia told me that she wishes that she had known how important English was when she was in school, and how many opportunities it could have opened up for herself and her family, to improve their quality of life. She said that she had always liked English classes in school, but as she got older she gradually lost interest in them, as her financial responsibility to her family became more pressing. If she had know that learning to speak English could have helped her solve her families financial problems, she would have followed the dreams she had when she was little of learning to speak fluent English.

Unfortunately though, she said that her public school did not educate students about real possibilities for English-speaking careers and since she did not live in a tourist area, she had no idea of the opportunities.

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When I asked her about her opinions of the government regulations of public education, she said that changing government standards could incredibly improve the overall quality of education, but in order to guarantee that all students receive an equal chance to benefit from their education, schools also need to teach students how they can use what they learn (Hernan, Marcia).

Conclusion

Change needs to start with government standards for teaching and testing. Standards need to be changed, so that they work with culture, using Costa Rican cultural values of communication and expression, to enhance English education. As government standards change, teachers' educations about how to teach English and tell students about career opportunities, along with the materials required by the government for English classes also need to adapt. Changing the English education system will be a long and complicated process, but private schools are good indicators that successful English education is possible, and that adapting teaching methods to culture is a good way to solve at least the majority of the problems. The only problems that changing government standards cannot solve are the financial ones, which are the primary reason that government standards have not already changed. If the government is going to require that public schools reduce class sizes, to make one on one conversation possible, then the government needs to hire and pay more teachers, and build bigger school buildings. If the government were to require creative activities to accompany English instruction, they would need to pay for and supply schools with the needed materials (Villalobos, Andrey; Fonseca, Carlos, E.; Montoya, Eliette).

Even though this financial problem is a large obstacle on the road to improving English instruction, improvements can start with the small, inexpensive things, like focusing on practice

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of conversation in class instead of repetitive grammar drills, and then, as more funds are available, work up to the quality of education the some private schools have. Over years of gradual reforms, and reallocation of funds, when possible, public education in English can improve. Each level of improvement will create, with time, the resources needed for the next, as students use their English to create a more prosperous economy, better quality of life, increased internal industry in Costa Rica, as an effect, make more money available for funding education in English, and all other subjects. The improvements in education will continue infinitely, building on each other, creating not only economic advantages for Costa Rica, but also advantages for the world as a whole, through better cultural understanding and communication.

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