

## Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to Adolescents in the State of Mexico, Challenges and Strategies

### Enseñanza del Inglés como Segunda Lengua (ESL) en Adolescentes en el Estado de México, Retos y Estrategias

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#### Abstract:

Teaching ESL to adolescents involves several challenges for the teacher. The objective of this study is to identify the main challenges an ESL teacher faces, and recommend effective strategies to face them. A diagnosis was made in secondary and high school students in the State of Mexico, the students were characterized, and the current teaching program and recommendations were suggested and applied. It was found that beginning students are susceptible to get distracted and not following school rules, practices that make teaching difficult. Students with prior knowledge, and from higher levels, are more focused on learning the language, but both levels need to exercise their long-term memory. The eclectic approach is recommended for beginning students, and the communicative approach, for advanced students. It is recommended that teachers carry out diagnoses to characterize the students and based on these update their methods and materials; group management skills, and use lesson planning and log books for better teaching practice in English.

#### Keywords:

*Teenagers, eclectic approach, communicative approach*

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#### Resumen:

La enseñanza del ESL a adolescentes implica una variedad de desafíos para el maestro. El objetivo de este estudio es identificar los principales retos del docente de ESL y recomendar las estrategias efectivas para enfrentarlos. Se realizó un diagnóstico a estudiantes de la escuela secundaria y preparatoria en el Estado de México, se caracterizó a los estudiantes, al programa de enseñanza actual, se sugirieron y aplicaron recomendaciones. Se encontró que estudiantes principiantes, son susceptibles a distraerse y a no seguir reglas escolares, prácticas que dificultan la enseñanza. Los estudiantes con conocimientos previos, y de niveles superiores, están más enfocados para aprender la lengua, pero ambos niveles, necesitan ejercitar su memoria a largo plazo. El enfoque ecléctico se recomienda para estudiantes principiantes, y el enfoque comunicativo, para estudiantes avanzados. Se recomienda que los maestros realicen diagnósticos para caracterizar a los estudiantes y en base a estos actualizar sus métodos y materiales; habilidades de manejo de grupo, y utilizar las planeaciones didácticas y libros de registro para una mejor práctica docente en Inglés.

#### Palabras Clave:

*Adolescentes, enfoque ecléctico, enfoque comunicativo*

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## INTRODUCTION

The teachers that have given lessons to adolescents can affirm that it is a challenging job. There are classes where everything seems perfect and the teacher ends their day happy, and there are also memorable days, unfortunately not many, because of the opposite reasons: teenage students became difficult to handle and the lesson plan the teacher has done was impossible to follow. As Lesiak (2015) claims, teenage learners are thought to be the most disobedient in behavior and most discouraged to learn.

In order to face the challenge of teaching teenagers, teachers need to take into account the characteristics that make teenagers a special group to teach. As marked by Maier (2017), a lot of crucial changes occur in the teenage years between 13 and 19. They shift from a carefree childhood to the more intricate adult world. This is a time of physical, emotional, and moral development.

Lesiak (2015) and Klein, Padow, and Romeo (2010) mention another major characteristic that is socialization, adolescents start to socialize with their peers rather than their family. It does not mean that the family is less important for teenagers. They are trying to be more independent and define who they are. Bishop and Inderbitzen (1995) underscore that peer groups serve many important functions through adolescence, providing a temporary reference point for a developing sense of identity.

Maier (2017) postulates that emotional changes are key factors in characteristics of adolescents; adolescence is when teenagers are going through a so-called “emotional storm”. Parents and teachers may observe aggressive behaviors and some discipline problems. Curiosity and willingness to experiment rise in adolescents, they might be: insubordinate, reach for forbidden substances, such as cigarettes and alcohol, they can also get into unwanted pregnancy or crime troubles. It is important for their parents and teachers to be attentive to react briskly.

On the other hand, as Lesiak (2015) writes, teenagers’ way of thinking and reasoning undergo some transformations. They begin to comprehend abstract things, develop their language skills, as well as verbalization, which permits for communicating more extensively. By Piaget (1950), adolescents can consider situations logically, taking into account their cause and effect concepts and use symbols through the means of broad imagination.

The previous information was taken into account while teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to teenagers, in a private school of the State of Mexico, and make this research aiming to identify the main challenges teachers face and recommend some effective strategies, skills, and methods they can use to deal with these difficulties. The hypothesis is that the identified strategies, skills, and approaches applied are effective to give ESL lessons to teenagers of secondary and high school.

## METHODOLOGY

*The scope of this paper was defined based on Ramos (2020), as an exploratory, descriptive and explicative investigation.*

*The experience of teaching ESL was developed in a private education institution of the State of Mexico, where adolescent students are classified by levels of language proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Therefore, there are groups of students from an elementary level (level A) to an advanced level (level C1) for middle and high school. This means that the students in a class have a similar level of language proficiency. However, those who have no interest in learning the language (a small number), do not reach the expected level of knowledge are left behind, at least for one academic year (two semesters), in the first level (level A of the CEFR).*

*This study was divided into three stages. First, a diagnostic was made, per group at the beginning of each semester consisting in a test, for middle and high school, it permitted classify students, their interest in learning English, the methods, practices or activities they liked or disliked the most, besides the ones used already through the course books which were revised in content and methodologies (program).*

*Second, extensive research, selection, and analysis of bibliographic material were obtained to identify the main problems that an ESL teacher of teenagers deals with. In addition to this, the experience giving classes per se was used to get additional information through a daily logbook to record discipline and progress during sessions.*

*Third, once the students were described and the difficulties were identified, a pursuit of related papers was conducted to determine effective strategies teachers can use to face these challenges and a set of theoretical approaches, strategies, and skills which were proved to be followed in the English courses (suggested/applied program).*

*Finally, after the classification of students, approaches analyzed, and suggested strategies, skills, and methods, results and conclusions were obtained.*

## RESULTS

There are several challenges for the ESL teacher while instructing teenagers. These challenges are similar in students of secondary and high school, but still, there are minimal differences between them.

### *Characteristics of the ESL students*

For secondary students, in basic levels (A1 and A2), can be numbered: lack of empathy to follow the teacher’s instructions, thus the teacher must dedicate time and skills to manage the group and meet the planned objectives for the class. Also, there

are some pupils with very low interest and motivation towards learning this new language. It is particularly difficult to teach those students who are not very cooperative to learn. Generally, they tend to be in constant conflict with the teacher, show behavior that does not help to the good development of the lessons, and the teacher must use his time to look after discipline inside the classroom and also to teach. On the other hand, in higher levels (B1 and ahead), the problems of discipline diminish, the motivation towards English increases, students get prepared for the Preliminary English Test (PET) certification or higher certifications. In both types of students, basic and higher levels, most of them have a short attention span.

Related to high school students, in basic levels (A1 and A2), their behavior is notoriously less restless than those in secondary school, however, they are more distracted especially using their smartphones or any other devices and giving their attention to different things from the class. There are also students with low motivation to learn the language, in addition, fewer classes per week because of their program, which demands to the instructor an effective way to teach ESL in less time. In higher levels (B1 and above), some students get ready for certifications, mostly those who have been taking previous classes, in the same or different school. Those who are recently incorporated into the system do not have the interest to get any certification. Here, the attention span continues to be a problem, especially at the basic levels.

*In an ESL classroom there are several learning styles, from field-independent style, field-dependent style (Brown 2001, Lesiak 2015), left and right –brain functioning (Brown 2000), ambiguity tolerance style (Brown, 2000), to students with a visual, auditory and kinesthetic styles.*

*Even if Leziak (2015:256) recommends that the speaking tasks should last at least a half of the lecture time, when teaching in a classroom this can be possible in students with a level B1 and upward, however it is found that less time is necessary because there are other aspects of the language to learn and practice, and teenagers with a level lower than B1 found it boring.*

*The idiosyncrasy and culture towards learning a foreign language play an important role, especially when teaching adolescents since Mexican culture is characterized by taking things with a sense of humor until the burlesque. It affects students, mostly from inferior grades, they make fun of an exaggerated, excellent and bad, pronunciation. So they avoid participating in speaking practices to do not be embarrassed for their pronunciation.*

*Characteristics of the ESL program (during diagnosis)*

*In secondary school, the ESL program is acceptable to teach adolescents. Related to books, for levels A1 and A2, they have a variety of skills included; speaking, writing, grammar, and listening comprehension, just they need to be updated to recent information that young people like and feel more attracted to read and work on. The method used to teach English is mostly*

*leaded and guided by the book content and it has a communicative approach.*

*For level B2, the book is appropriate to meet the objectives planned for this group. The approach used is communicative.*

*Concerning to environment in the classes at all levels, school protocols are present, but those are more to discipline students, for healthy learning and make them feel safe. The description of the program in secondary school during diagnosis is in Chart 1.*

*Chart 1. Characteristics of the ESL program in secondary school.*

English proficiency (according to the CEFR)	Teaching period	Coursebook (audio and video materials included)	Strategies, skills, and approaches found during diagnosis
Preliminary (level A1)	2 years: 2016-2017 2017-2018	Prepare! Level 1: Kosta et al (2015). Student's book.  Capel, A. and Chapman C. (2015). Workbook.  Davies K, et al (2015) Teacher's book.	Communicative approach, all skills, fitted for new adolescent audiences. It needs to update some content to current facts and characters.  School regulations (for conduct).
Access (level A2)	2 years: 2017-2018 2018-2019	Prepare! Level 2: Kosta et al (2015). Student's book.  Holcombe G. and Capel A. (2015). Workbook.  Heyderman E. and Capel A. (2015) Teacher's book.	Communicative approach, all skills, fitted for new adolescent audiences. It needs to update some content to current facts and characters.  School regulations (for conduct).
Communicator (level B2)	1 year: 2018-2019	Complete First Certificate, 2 <sup>nd</sup> edition:  Brook-Hart G. (2014). Student's Book.  Brook-Hart G. (2014). Workbook.  Brook-Hart G. (2014). Teacher's book.	Communicative approach, all skills, contents and characters are updated.  School regulations (for conduct).

In high school, the ESL program is acceptable to teach adolescents even though is shorter than the secondary school program. Related to books, level A1, has a variety of skills included; speaking, writing, grammar, and listening comprehension. They are appropriate and updated to nowadays information. About the method used to teach English, it is

mostly led and guided by the book content and it has a communicative approach.

For level A2, the book is not suitable to meet the objectives planned for this group, students are averse to use the contents because they are out of fashion about topics they are interested in. The approach used is communicative.

Concerning to environment in the classes, all levels, school protocols are present, but those are more to discipline students, for healthy learning, and make them feel safe. The description of the program in high school during diagnosis is in Chart 2.

Chart 2. Characteristics of the ESL classes in high school

English proficiency (according to the CEFR)	Teaching period	Coursebook (audio and video materials included)	Strategies, skills, and approaches found during diagnosis
Preliminary (level A1)	2 semesters: 2016-2017 2017-2018	Real life Elementary: Hobbs M, and Keddle J.S. (2015). Student's book.  Foody L., et al (2015) workbook.  Williams M. (2015). Teacher's Handbook.	Communicative approach, all skills, contents and characters are updated and fitted for adolescent audiences.  School regulations (for conduct).
Access (level A2)	1 semester: 2018-2019	Touchstone 1:  McCarthy M, et al (2015). Student's book.  McCarthy M, et al (2015). Workbook.  McCarthy M, et al (2015). Teacher's edition.	Communicative approach, all skills, contents and characters need to be updated.  School regulations (for conduct).

*Characteristics of the ESL suggested/followed program (after diagnosis)*

Based on the previous diagnosis, the suggested/followed program for secondary school is, for levels A1 and A2, an eclectic method. It means all approaches are included, formal and informal, because of the variety of learning styles present in a classroom, and just the communicative approach for level B2 and superiors. Books are workable but not the precise materials mostly for A1 and A2 levels, explained in Chart 1, except for level B2 in this case.

In high school, the suggested/followed program is, for both levels A1 and A2, an eclectic approach. Books are workable just for A1 not for A2. The time for the course is short and suitable materials are needed.

From levels A2 and inferior, the eclectic approach is applied, for secondary and high school, because its flexibility (it includes a direct method, grammar-based, translation, and others) permits to the teacher work with broad materials and activities so none experts students can feel confident in those practices and enjoy them.

For levels B2 and above, for secondary and high school, because of their gained skills, the communicative approach is applied and they can meet their goals communicating fluently and getting certifications in the English language.

Concerning to classes environment, at all levels of secondary and high school, school protocols are not enough and assertive communication is necessary to engage students creating a comfortable atmosphere and build trust to study without worried about their performance more than their learning. The teacher log book is a great key to record facts during sessions and a great reminder to teachers for topics, skills, and activities to take into account when developing the course. Also, lesson planning helps the teacher have a better dominium in contents, in advance, when teaching is happening.

After the strategies, skills and approaches applied, with the same book materials, and materials added by the teachers (including in this study), the concentration of the students improves, they seem to focus on their learning, not in their grades, they feel included and more comfortable during classes.

The description of the suggested/followed program in secondary and high school is in Chart 3.

Chart 3. Characteristics of the suggested/followed ESL program in secondary and high school.

Secondary school		High school	
English proficiency (according to the CEFR)	Strategies, skills, and approaches applied after the diagnosis	English proficiency (according to the CEFR)	Strategies, skills, and approaches applied after the diagnosis
Preliminary (level A1)	An eclectic approach focused on developing communication skills.  Planning lessons (weekly). It permitted to make adjustments.  Classroom management skills (assertive communication) and school regulations.  Teacher log book.	Preliminary (level A1)	An eclectic approach focused on developing communication skills.  Planning lessons (weekly). It permitted to make adjustments.  Classroom management skills (assertive communication) and school regulations.  Teacher log book.

Access (level A2)	An eclectic approach focused on developing communication skills.  Planning lessons (weekly). It permitted to make adjustments.  Classroom management skills (assertive communication) and school regulations.  Teacher log book.	Access (level A2)	Eclectic approach, focused on an eclectic approach focused on developing communication skills.  Planning lessons (weekly). It permitted to make adjustments.  Classroom management skills (assertive communication) and school regulations.  Teacher log book.
Communicator (level B2)	Communicative approach, mainly focused on preparing students for the First Certificate of English (FCE).  Planning lessons (weekly). It permitted to make adjustments.  Classroom management skills (assertive communication) and school regulations.  Teacher log book.		

## CONCLUSIONS

- A diagnostic is a good tool to know ESL students and to reach the program objectives, also helps teachers to identify the suitable approach for students.
- Teenagers like to learn through modern resources; books, video-audio materials, and use electronic devices then they feel part of the program and with confidence to learn.
- Most students from basic levels get distracted easily, so teachers need to use assertive communication to engage them in the class.
- Teachers need to motivate students to practice English freely, specifically their speaking skills, avoiding judgment and jokes during the sessions. It is known when the teacher gives confidence to pupils to speak freely, they use or try to use all their vocabulary and feel more confident to practice, use, and learn English.
- Teachers, out of pedagogic fields, require training in educational techniques, assertive communication, and different skills to better the way they teach and involve students and avoid using unnecessary school protocols.
- ESL program board at schools needs to let teachers have the flexibility to use different supplies, far from books, to include new approaches, activities, and practices in their classes to improve students' performance.
- ESL program board and teachers need to review constantly, at least once a year, school resources, methods,

books, special practices, so they can guarantee quality in teaching and consider all types of audiences.

- Lesson planning and teacher log books help to give order, focus, and quality in ESL classes.
- The eclectic approach is indicated for new English learners and the communicative approach is indicated for skilled students. After this recommendation, a new diagnosis is suggested to see and measure properly the effects in all areas of the students learning.
- The appropriate method, books, and materials for an ESL class, constant training of the teacher in assertive communication, the mix of school rules and assertive communication, the use of lesson planning, and teacher log books help students to stay focus on their learning.

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