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Departamento de Lenguas

Upper-Intermediate Students' Perceptions on the Factors that Have Influenced Their Learning

TESIS

QUE PARA OBTENER EL GRADO DE MAESTRIA EN LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA A LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLES

PRESENTA

Susana Vanegas Urióstegui

Guanajuato, Guanajuato

Directora de tesis: Dra. Martha Lengeling

Dedicatoria

Todo en esta vida tiene un plazo y un tiempo y los tiempos de Dios son perfectos. Hace dos años decidí emprender el proyecto de estudiar una maestría. Definitivamente no fue una decisión fácil por todo lo que esto implicaría pero fue un gran acierto tanto para mi vida profesional como para mi desarrollo como ser humano.

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Prólogo

El presente es un estudio de caso cualitativo que se llevó a cabo en el Campus Irapuato del *Tecnológico de Monterrey*. En él se examinan las percepciones que un grupo de alumnos de preparatoria cursando un nivel de inglés intermedio-avanzado (B2) tienen sobre los factores que han influido en su aprendizaje del idioma inglés.

La conceptualización del proyecto se basó en el interés por descubrir las opiniones que los alumnos tienen del aprendizaje del idioma después de tantos años de estudio. Por lo que las herramientas empleadas para la recopilación de datos fueron entrevistas personalizadas, un cuestionario y un diario colectivo que se utilizó durante el semestre en curso.

Tomando en cuenta que los participantes son 16 adolescentes, entre los 16 y 18 años, que han adquirido un nivel de inglés con el cual se pueden comunicar casi perfectamente y que han desarrollado las cuatro habilidades básicas del idioma (leer, escuchar, hablar, escribir), es importante que como maestros sepamos cuales son las estrategias que en opinión de los alumnos han sido clave en el desarrollo del inglés, y que es lo que ellos desean y esperan de una clase de inglés en este nivel.

Es un estudio en donde se analizan las opiniones de los alumnos en el cual se hace evidente la falta de correspondencia entre lo que los alumnos quieren aprender y quieren desarrollar con el idioma, lo que el maestro lleva a cabo y lo que la institución establece en su plan de estudios.

Table of Contents

Chapter I

Introduction of the Study

1.1 Introduction

This data-driven ethnographic case study examines the factors that have influenced sixteen upper-intermediate students' English learning in a private high school in Central Mexico. The research explores the students' motivation to learn the language; their perceptions of the strategies that they have used and developed in order to learn the language and to be able to achieve their current level of performance. Furthermore, it delves into the opinions and insights the students have concerning the language itself and about becoming bilingual individuals. It is a qualitative research study that attempts to give voice to English learners through the use of interviews, journals and a questionnaire.

In this chapter, I will provide a description of the situation that motivated the research, then I will illustrate the background and context of the study; in addition, I will identify the gaps in the body of knowledge and state the purpose of the study as well as its potential contributions to the field. I will finish by giving a description of the content of the thesis.

1.2 Description of the Situation

In the institution where the study has been carried out, I am often assigned intermediate and advanced groups; I frequently deal with upper-intermediate students who have studied the language for a long time and I am faced with the fact that they sometimes seem to be stagnated in their progress and bored within their English classes. Moreover, it is a

common comment among teachers of the institution that for students, English is not as important as other mainstream subjects that they are currently taking and that because of this, students do not make the same effort in their English classes as in math or science or other subjects. In this study, I wanted to find out some of the reasons behind this apparent lack of motivation and the lack of progress that, in mine and other teachers' opinions, students were experiencing.

I also wanted to find out more about who my students were and what they were interested in as individuals. I have observed that classes in this institution tend to be teacher-centered and institution-centered and students' opinions, interests and goals sometimes seem to be overlooked and not taken into consideration when planning the content of the classes. Teachers often focus on meeting objectives and are frequently pressured with deadlines; thus, we do not always take the time to get to know our students and use what they already know, do and bring to class to our advantage.

1.3 Background and Context of the Study

As English is considered an international language, a large number of people are interested in learning it and a great number of educational institutions have included it in their programs and have designed or adopted syllabi in order to foster the development of the language in their students. Some of these syllabi do not take into consideration the learners' preferences or needs. Therefore, they sometimes fail in their attempt to interest learners and, as a result, there is a mismatch between what institutions are offering learners and what learners want to accomplish with the language.

This study was carried out in the city of Irapuato in a private institution of middle and higher education whose core values are to form principled individuals with a humanistic vision who are also internationally competent. Therefore, the institution places a great emphasis on the teaching of languages, being English the most widely taught; however, it is not always fulfilled due to the fact that students' interests are sometimes overlooked, at least in the campus where the study was carried out. The name of the institution is *Tecnológico de Monterrey*, which has 31 campuses around Mexico and more than 80,000 students around the country. Moreover, the university is currently ranked in the 206th position worldwide and the 7th in Latin America, according the QS annual World University Rankings, (which is an annual publication of university rankings).

Campus Irapuato opened its door in 1975. It is one of the smallest campus among all *Tec de Monterrey* campi; its high school has around 480 students and offers two different programs, the multicultural and the bicultural one. Its university only offers the first two years in the business and engineering program; therefore, after students have completed the first four semesters of their programs they have to move to larger campuses. Campus Irapuato is, in fact, considered as a feeder of larger campuses.

1.4 Identification of Gaps in this Body of Knowledge

Several authors and researchers have written about what motivates learners to undergo the often long and tedious process of second language acquisition; nevertheless there are not enough studies that focus on what happens when students are motivated to learn but the language classes fail to provide them with what they are interested in learning and doing with the language. This research takes into consideration who the students are as

individuals, what they do and what their goals are. It also looks at learners' motivation as the main factor behind students' progress.

There have not been many studies related to learners' perceptions of their own progress and on the strategies that they have used and consider relevant to their learning (Ames & Archer, 1988; Chamot, 2004). In addition, this study reports on language learning strategies that are not commonly mentioned in the literature.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, it is generally assumed that language input is restricted to the language classroom and it is also limited (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Ellis, 2008). In this study, learners reveal that they are surrounded by English input and discuss the effect that it has had on their learning.

1.5 Research Question

The research question that has guided this research is:

> What are some of the factors that may influence upper-intermediate high-school students' English learning in a private educational institution in Central Mexico?

1.6 Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of the study is to explore the different factors that may have influenced the linguistic development of English of high-school upper-intermediate students. It also aims at discovering the students' perceptions of the language, what

motivates them to learn it and the language learning strategies they have used to achieve their current level of competence.

The study involved sixteen third and fifth semester high-school students who were at the time taking an upper-intermediate English class in the bicultural program of *Tecnológico de Monterrey Campus Irapuato*. All of them had a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score above 520 points and were classified in B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL). According to CEFRL, they are independent users of the language who are able to understand complex text on concrete and abstract topics. Furthermore, they can manage interaction in the language in a fluent and spontaneous way. In addition, they can produce clear text on a wide range of subjects (Council of Europe, 2001).

The participants were interviewed about their perceptions of their English development; the English language, the strategies that they use to further develop the language and how they see their English classes. They also wrote journal entries about the same topics and responded to a questionnaire.

1.7 Potential Contribution of the Study

The study contributes to an understanding of what upper-intermediate students consider relevant to their English learning and sheds light onto the strategies used by them. It further reveals how students regard English and their motivation to learn it. In addition, students reflect on the importance that the language has for their future.

As previously mentioned, most institutions adopt syllabi that do not always pay attention to the students' interests. This research reminds us of the importance that our students have

and encourages teachers to take advantage of what students already know about the language; what they do in their daily lives that can foster learning and what they bring to the class.

1.8 Content of Thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters, which are the structure of the thesis and are described as follows:

In Chapter I, I have described this study, its purpose, aims and objectives, as well as its potential contributions in the area.

In Chapter II, there will be an analysis and a discussion of the literature relevant to this research. Some of the topics reviewed and explained thoroughly are motivation, language learning strategies, language input and output, cognitive and social factors and issues of culture.

In Chapter III, I will illustrate the methodology followed to carry out this research; I will describe more in depth the context in which it took place; the participants involved; the data collection techniques; the data procedures and data analysis followed; the data coding, and the ethical considerations.

In Chapter IV, data excerpts taken from interviews and journal entries from participants will be analyzed and interpreted. The data analysis chapter provides insights into the

factors that play an important role in the participants' language learning and a deep discussion of them.

In Chapter V, I will show the conclusions that have been drawn from the analysis of data and theory, the key findings of the research, the pedagogical implications, the recommendations for future research and the limitations of the study.

Chapter II

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I provided a general overview about this research project. In this chapter, I will present the analysis and discussion of literature relevant to my research such as:

- The current situation of EFL in Mexico
- Motivation
- Language learning strategies
- Language input and output
- Cognitive factors
- Sources of L2 knowledge
- Social factors
- Culture

As this study took place in Central Mexico, I would like to begin by explaining the current situation of the country in what comes to English teaching and learning.

2.2 The Current Situation of EFL in Mexico

In Mexico, English is considered the most essential second language and as such, it has been given great importance and resources in our educational system. English has been taught in lower and upper-secondary schools and private elementary schools for decades. This means that learners usually spend from six and up to fourteen years studying the language. Nevertheless, the outcome has not been favorable, especially in public schools, and according to Davis (2009), private education serves only 10% of the Mexican

population. In this private educational system, English is generally taught from kinder to university. All the participants in this research have studied in private schools; thus, they have studied the language for more than nine years.

Davis (2009) refers to a study, which involved 5000 students who had just entered nine higher education institutions in Mexico City (six public and three private). The results showed that most of the students at the two most prestigious, private institutions had parents with a degree whereas most of the students at the two least prestigious, public institutions had parents with less than upper-secondary education. There seems to be a strong connection between the educational level of students' parents and the educational outcomes of their offspring; however, this cannot be generalized.

In the study, a placement English test was applied to all the participants and the ones that did better were the students who attended the most expensive private institutions. This could mean that in Mexico, in education, there are important differences depending on the socio-economic status of the population. In a family, with a high socio-economic status, most of the times there are well-educated people with fewer children than in a low socio-economic one. Fewer children usually mean more attention to each of them. In addition, well-educated parents are normally more involved in their children's education; families with a higher income normally spend more money and time on their children's education. That is probably why private education is usually considered better than public education.

This means that my participants might belong to a context that could be considered idyllic to succeed in language learning. They have attended bilingual elementary schools, and have traveled abroad. Some of them have even lived abroad to perfect the language and some come from bilingual families. In fact, it could be said that they have already succeeded in acquiring the necessary skills to carry out a conversation in English, or understand a lecture in the language to mention only a few aspects. What is interesting is

that in spite of being able to do a lot with the language, they still think that they need to keep working on developing their English skills. Their motivation to learn the language is high; however, there must be some circumstances that are affecting them because according to some of the English teachers, this motivation is not reflected in their classes. Something happens in class that seems to be deterring them from achieving their learning goals.

In what follows, I will explain some of the factors that can foster foreign language learning and, as mentioned in the introduction, were taken into consideration for this research as the theory that frames it.

2.3 Motivation as a Relevant Learning Factor

As the aim of my research is to examine the factors that may influence my students' learning, motivation undoubtedly comes as one of the most important ones because it might be the invisible force that is pushing my students towards accomplishing their learning goals. Motivation has been described by Dörnyei (2005) as the "driving force that sustains the long and often tedious learning process" (p.65). Therefore, motivated learners are able to attain a working knowledge of an L2 in spite of their language aptitude. However, "even for the most successful learners, learning a language is a long and often arduous process in which motivation fluctuates over time and in response to events" (Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013, p. 90). Therefore, as Dörnyei (2010) points out, the brightest learner without sufficient motivation is unlikely to achieve any actual useful language. It can then be said that in order to acquire a language and perfect it, there must be a desire that sets you in motion even when life situations might affect the learning experience. In this section, I will discuss the different types of motivation, language motivation research and the L2 motivational self-system.

2.3.1 Language Learning Motivation

It seems that most researchers believe motivation is crucial in students' learning. As a result, there have been several studies carried out about L2 motivation since the 1950s through the work of Gardner and Lambert (1972) to the most recent approaches. As Dörnyei (1998) points out:

> Motivation has been widely accepted by both teachers and researchers as one of the key factors that influences the rate and success of second/foreign language (L2) learning. (p.117)

For more than six decades, motivation has been recognized as an important internal cause of variability in language learning success. As it is expected, these reviews vary in their emphases because understanding what motivates learners to begin and maintain a lengthy process of mastering a language involves different perspectives. Dörnyei (2005) argues well that the problem does not lie in the lack of theories to explain motivation but rather in the abundance of them. Unfortunately, the long history of language learning motivation has not entirely brought an end to the existing confusion that there seems to be surrounding it, and as Dörnyei (2003) accurately states, the subject remains uneven and inconsistent.

2.3.2 The Socio-Educational Model

I will begin by examining the socio-educational model developed by Gardner and Lambert (1972) in which a motivation construct was centered on language attitudinal variables. For Gardner and Lambert, the key component was the integrative motive which involves a desire to interact and even become a member of the L2 community while an instrumental orientation referred to "the practical value and advantages of learning a new language" (p. 132). Therefore, it was thought that there were only two main reasons to speak the

language, either because we like it and its speakers or because we think it will be useful for us. Even though these two dimensions have been attributed to the work of Gardner, he does not usually discuss the nature and impact of instrumental motivation. Rather, Gardner's (2001) main interest is the interpersonal/emotional aspect of motivation that he calls 'integrativeness' and describes as follows:

> Integrativeness reflects a genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community. At one level, this implies an openness to, and respect for other cultural groups and ways of life. In the extreme, this might involve complete identification with the community (and possibly even withdrawal from one's original group), but more commonly it might well involve integration within both communities. (p. 5)

In spite of the acknowledgment of the breakthrough that the model made in motivation research, it has been subject to criticism. Most of this criticism revolves around the concept of integrative motivation and its definition. Dörnyei (2003), for instance, suggests that the notion of integrative motivation has no parallel in mainstream motivation psychology. In addition, it can create confusion. For instance, Clement and Kruidenier (1983) consider that the desire to travel could be considered instrumental by some but interpreted as integrative by others. Furthermore, reasons as having friends who speak English, or knowing more about English art could easily be classified as either instrumental or integrative depending on the intention or understanding. Shaw (1981) claims that in places where English is learned as a foreign language, as it is the case in this research, the integrative motivation plays a minor role. Tollefson (1991) offers further criticism regarding the importance given to the integrative motivation concept by arguing that it presented a serious threat to individual's identities because "it implies that successful learners are those who wish to

adopt a new identity and relinquish their own" (p. 23). Moreover, Pennycook (1995) observes:

> … we cannot reduce questions of language to such social psychological notions as instrumental and integrative motivation, but must account for the extent to which language is embedded in social, economic and political struggles. (p. 41)

A further criticism I would add deals with the educational part in the name of the model. A number of authors have pointed out the model's limitations, but they have not remarked that there is not much education in the model. This might be due to the fact that Gardner was a psychologist and a statistician rather than a language teacher. From my point of view, the socio-educational model relates more to sociology or other fields than to education and neglects the classroom situation, EFL contexts or other teaching environments. In my context, for instance, I think that students are interested in the L2 culture but the instrumental construct is stronger. They see English as an opportunity for a better future.

2.3.3 The Self-Determination Theory

In spite of the criticism that socio-educational model has received, language learning motivation researchers have called for expanding and rectifying it rather than degrading or eliminating it. In the 1990s L2 motivation research grew. Researchers started exploring different motivational dimensions and there was a boom in L2 motivation studies. The self-determination theory is one of the most influential theories that arose at the time.

This theory was developed by Deci, Connell and Ryan (1989) and stated that "to be self-determining means to experience a sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's own

actions" (p. 580). The theory describes two kinds of motivations: intrinsic and extrinsic. The former relates to behavior performed for its own sake to experience the satisfaction of doing a particular activity. The second one involves carrying out an activity as a means to an end. That is, to receive external reward. According to Deci, Connell and Ryan (1989), the self-determination theory provides language teachers with an interesting view of motivation by setting a different agenda. Instead of focusing on how people can motivate others, it highlights "how people can create the conditions within which others can motivate themselves" (p.580).

Vallerand (1997) made a classification of these two types of motivation into different categories. Intrinsic motivation (IM) was classified in three categories. IM-Knowledge is the pleasure of knowing new things. In other words, students can be motivated to learn a language because it is something new and different. IM-Accomplishment refers to the pleasure of accomplishing goals. Students can be motivated to get a specific grade in the semester. And IM-Stimulation -the pleasure sensed when doing the task. This can especially be true if the task is a game or involves doing something that students like.

Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, was classified in three categories. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), "external regulation refers to actions that individuals pursue and that are determined by sources that are external to the individual" (p. 236). If learning is aimed at attaining an external incentive, and the incentive is removed, the activity of learning will pause. Introjected regulation, on the other hand, refers to activities that are performed due to some external pressure. For example, a person may want to learn the language because he feels ashamed of not knowing it or because their parents want them to learn it. This could be the case of some of the students. Finally, identified regulation is driven by personally relevant reasons. An individual might be interested in learning the language because he/she wants to achieve a valued goal which depending on the kind of goal can

also be considered instrumental motivation. Noels (2001) demonstrated that teachers could enhance intrinsic motivation by allowing more autonomy to learners.

2.3.4 The L2 Motivational Self-System

In 2005, Dörnyei proposed a new motivation construct called the 'L2 Motivational Self-System', which builds upon the foundations laid by Gardner and "broadens the scope of the theory to make it applicable in diverse language learning environments" (Dörnyei, 2010, p. 75). In his research, Dörnyei (2005) administered a survey to teenage learners of five different languages. The survey was prepared with the objective of measuring attitudinal/motivational dimensions such as direct contact with L2 speakers; cultural interest (i.e. the appreciation of cultural products associated with the particular L2 and conveyed by the media like films, TV programs; magazines and pop music); vitality of L2 community, milieu (i.e. the general perception of the importance of foreign languages in the learners' school context and in friends' and parents' views) and linguistic self-confidence. The dimensions considered in the above mentioned survey could be directly applied in my context because learners usually enjoy L2 media such as films, TV shows, and music; furthermore, in Mexico, there is a general acceptance of the importance of learning English even though it has not been taken seriously in most educational contexts as a subject at school.

Dörnyei (2005) explains that this motivational self-system represents an individual's ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming. In other words, these possible selves are representations of our future states. Two of these possible selves are relevant from a motivational point of view: the students' ideal self and their ought self. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) argue that the first one represents the attributes that they would like to possess; for example, to learn English for the sake of professional progress. The second one represents those attributes that we believe

we should have, which may seem like desires or wishes; for example, to study in order not to fail an exam or not to disappoint someone. Motivation involves the desire that people have to reduce the discrepancy between their actual and ideal/ought selves. In my context, students are frequently told of the importance that English will have in their professional and personal lives. In addition, their parents have sent them to bilingual private schools because they want them to learn English. For them, learning English is a 'must'; therefore, being bilingual is probably part of their ideal self and their ought self.

In addition to the ideal self and the ought self, the L2 Motivational Self-System includes a third component: the learning situation in which the mastery of the L2 occurs. Therefore, this new approach involves two future self-guides associated with imagined experience and a third component, which is linked to the learning experience (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). The L2 motivational self-system builds on Gardner's idea of instrumental motivation, but it also includes an integrative orientation.

Dörnyei (2014) offers a list of prerequisites for the model to work. It is included because I am positive that some of them will be present in my students.

- The learner has a desired self-image. For motivation to take place, learners should have that desired self-image well designed. The better the self-image is imprinted in our minds, the higher the motivation will be.

- The future self is sufficiently different from the current self. If there is almost no difference in the future and current self, there is no need to make an effort. They are quite done with what they want to become. This prerequisite is interesting for the sake of my research because I would assume that at this level, students could be satisfied with what they are able to do with the language.

- The future self-image is elaborate and vivid. Our future self-image should be highly detailed to evoke the necessary motivational response.

16

- The future self-image is perceived as plausible. Learners should feel it is possible to become that future self. If they see it as something that is unlikely to happen, they will not do what it takes.

- The future self-image is not perceived as comfortably certain to reach. Learners must not think that the future self will happen automatically or without effort. This is probably why the general perception of my colleagues is that students seem unmotivated. As they already have an acceptable command of the language, they sometimes do not make the effort to improve.

- The future self-image is in harmony. This future self should be congruent with other parts of the individual self-concept.

- The future self-image is accompanied by relevant and effective procedural strategies. Here is where instruction is more important. Hopefully, instruction will provide learners with those strategies that will help them accomplish their future self; otherwise, learners will have to develop their own strategies to succeed.

- The future self-image is regularly activated in the learner's working self-concept. Otherwise, other interests might interfere and attention could be deviated. This could be particularly true for teenagers that frequently change their minds.

- A counteracting feared possible self offsets the desired future self-image. Learners can achieve maximal motivational force if the learner has a vivid image about the consequences of failing.

(Dörnyei, 2014)

I believe my students are a good example of this motivational self-system because they seem to be extremely goal oriented and in their contexts, speaking English is a must; nevertheless, motivation sometimes fails. This might occur because some of these conditions are not always being met.

From examining L2 motivation theory, and from my own observations as a teacher and a learner of foreign languages, I observe that learners require convincing reasons to commit to language learning goals; learners who take an intrinsic interest will stay motivated; and learners who feel that their effort is leading to a satisfactory progress will be motivated to continue learning.

Motivation is undoubtedly a factor that influences someone to learn. When someone is motivated, he or she will probably adopt action that could help him or her develop the language. In the following section, I will examine language learning strategies and the research that has taken place around them.

2.4 Language Learning Strategies

As my research is focused on my learners and their perceptions of what has impacted their acquisition of English, language learning strategies (LLS) comes as one of the main topics to take into consideration because it is related to the specific action that students carry out to enhance their learning.

LLS are among the main factors that may help determine how students learn a foreign language. A foreign language is studied in a community where it is not the main language for daily interaction and where input might be restricted to just the language classroom (Ellis, 2008). This is the case of my students; they are learning English in an environment where most of the interactions occur in Spanish; therefore, their opportunities to engage in interaction using English might be limited to the EFL classroom.

LLS are usually defined as conscious steps and behaviors that the learner uses to enhance acquisition. In other words, they are important contributors to language learning. Oxford (1993) defines learning strategies as:

Specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability. (p. 18)

Students who have reached a level in which they are able to communicate using the L2 and who have developed varied L2 skills must have used different strategies throughout their English learning history. These strategies have proved useful and provide important information about who students are and what are their learning preferences.

In my teaching experience, I have seen that teachers sometimes want their students to do what worked for them as learners or what they consider useful without letting students find out what works best for them. Other times, I have witnessed how students sometimes just make use of different strategies to survive in the classroom while performing a task. They just want to please the teacher in what they believe the teacher wants without even considering what they want to accomplish with the task.

A strategy can be considered useful if it relates well to the L2 task at hand: if it fits the students' learning style to some degree and is employed effectively. Style refers to "being visual, auditory, or hands-on; being more abstract and intuitive versus being more concrete and thinking step-by-step; being more global versus more detail-oriented; being more impulsive versus being more reflective; being more extroverted versus being more introvert" (Cohen, 2003, p. 280). Oxford (2003) argues well that if students are not encouraged or forced by the teacher or the task to use a certain set of strategies, their choice usually reflects their basic learning styles. Having been English learners for some years, my students must have developed some LLS that have helped them acquire their current

level of competence in the language. It would be interesting to find out if their choice for a particular strategy is a conscious one or something they just do without noticing.

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), there are some characteristics that good L2 learners possess. These characteristics help them acquire the language. For instance, Rubin (1975) suggests that good L2 learners are willing and accurate guessers; have a strong initiative to communicate using the L2; are often outgoing; are prepared to make mistakes and learn from them; focus on form by looking for patterns and analyzing them; take advantage of all practice opportunities; monitor what they and others say; and pay attention to meaning. However, I would wonder if we could ever dare to make that distinction of considering someone a 'good' language learner and why we would make it.

All the behaviors mentioned by Rubin (1975) can help students enhance their L2 learning. All these behaviors can easily be observable and teachers might be able to distinguish whether a student possesses these characteristics or not; however, there might be a lot more characteristics than the listed above that learners might have and that help them acquire the language as well. As my students have reached an upper-intermediate level, they might possess some of the characteristics mentioned here, but they might also have developed different ones.

2.4.1 Identification and Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Throughout the history of LLS research, there have been several classifications (O'Malley et al.,1985; Ellis, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1992). The main difference lies in the research methods used to identify them. Classification criteria can be important and according to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), linguists do not often implement new findings from general learning theory. The most frequent classifications in foreign language

literature are from the authors enlisted above. Some of these classifications are briefly summarized in Table 1.

Authors	Strategies Classification
O'Malley et al. (1985)	Metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective
Oxford (1990)	Direct strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation. Indirect strategies: metacognitive, affective, social
Stern (1992)	Management and planning strategies, cognitive, communication-experimental, interpersonal and affective

Table 1. Language Learning Strategies

These classifications might vary according to the degree of involvement of single learning strategies. Most classifications fail to provide a detailed categorization of single strategies and just mention some examples from groups of strategies. As my research attempts to explore the LLS used by participants more deeply, it would be interesting to have a clearer classification of single language learning strategies.

LLS seem to be a determinant factor for language learning because they are common behaviors that successful L2 learners have; hence, their appearance as one of the themes that frame my research. Motivation and language learning strategies seem to have a major impact in someone' learning; however, learning takes place if students have been exposed to enough input. In the following section, I will discuss the importance of input more in depth.

2.5 Language Input that Leads to Language Learning

I have discussed two important factors that come into play when there is a desire to learn a language: motivation and language learning strategies. However, in order for learning to

occur it is necessary to focus on the learners' social and linguistic environments. In this section, I will discuss the role that language input has in the development of the language.

I will begin by defining interlanguage. According to Ellis (2008), this term refers to the linguistic system that L2 learners construct that draws on the learner's L1 and what they already know about the target language. According to Hedge (2005) "the interlanguage system passes through a number of stages until it eventually approximates to the rules of the target language or until it stabilizes, or fossilizes" (p.11). The interlanguage system is different from L1 and L2; thus, it is a unique linguistic system. Seville Troike (2006) named interlanguage as 'transfer', which means a transition of existing knowledge from L1 to L2. In addition, she identifies two types of transfer: positive and negative transfer. The former occurs when an L1 structure is used in an L2 utterance and its use is appropriate. For example, most of the pluralization rules in Spanish could be applied correctly in English. Negative transfer, on the other hand, occurs when the application of the L1 structure in the L2 utterance is considered an error, for instance, the word order of adjectives and nouns or the rules of irregular plurals.

There is no doubt that learners need to be exposed to L2 input as a condition for learning to take place. Krashen (1982) developed the input hypothesis that states that the accessibility of comprehensible input is a necessary condition for language learning to take place provided that the learner pays enough attention to it. As my students are learning the language in a community where it is not spoken, the access to this required input might be limited. Ellis (2008) states that in an EFL context, L2 has no major role in society and is learnt in the classroom setting. In ESL contexts, on the other hand, learners can have interactions using the target language. These interactions can be considered a source of language input which EFL students apparently lack. Nevertheless, students must be receiving enough input to foster language learning.

According to Ellis (1997), regarding the issue of input, there are three main views: the behaviorist, the mentalist and the interactionist view. Each of these views has a different emphasis when explaining SLA. The behaviorist view treats language learning as something that is determined by the environment and controlled by the stimuli learners are exposed to. The mentalist view emphasizes the importance of the learner's 'black box' (p. 44), which refers to the belief that our brain is equipped to learn a language and that just by receiving minimal exposure to input, acquisition will be prompted. The interactionist view recognizes the importance of both input and internal processing. Learning occurs as a result of the interaction between the linguistic environment and the learner's internal mechanisms (Ellis, 1997). As the behaviorist view has been discredited, for the purpose of this research, the mentalist and the interactionist views will be more fully studied.

Long (1983) developed the interaction hypothesis that emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input, but unlike Krashen's hypothesis, claims that it is more effective when it is modified through the negotiation of meaning. When students have the opportunity to interact, they occasionally receive negative evidence. This negative evidence occurs when the interlocutor does not understand and when trying to do so, they may model the correct L2 forms. This allows learners to obtain important input that may help them develop aspects that they had not fully mastered. When this negotiation of meaning occurs, learners have more time to process the input, and this might help them acquire new L2 forms.

2.5.1 Input-Acquisition Relationship

In an EFL classroom which is believed to be students' primary contact with the target language, it is important to examine the kind of input that students are exposed to and see

what this input tells us in regard to the easy/difficult enigma. In other words, it is important to study the relationship that classroom input has on structures that are acquired earlier and the ones that are acquired later. In this study, this is important because as mentioned in the introduction, what motivated me to carry it out is that upper-intermediate and advanced students seemed to be stagnated in their progress. Classroom input might be the reason why students reach a level and it is hard for them to move on.

In a study carried out by Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001), corpus of instructional talk to L2 learners was examined in order to compare it with the acquisition evidence of the forms. They found that key input factors might be the cause why some constructions are harder to learn than others. In SLA literature, this issue of what makes a language form more difficult has been approached from different perspectives. Collis et al. (2009), explains that there are four broad approaches to examine the issue:

> a focus on learner behavior (the acquisition perspective); b) a focus on language characteristics (the linguistic perspective); c) a focus on teacher explanations and rules (the pedagogical perspective); and d) a focus on the interaction between learners and language input (the psycholinguistic perspective). (p. 337)

The acquisition perspective states that in order to claim whether a structure is easy or difficult, it is necessary to see if it is acquired early or late; therefore, a structure is difficult if it takes time to be mastered or if it takes time to emerge (Collins, 2004). What this approach lacks is an explanation of why it might happen.

In the linguistic perspective, language is the point of departure for determining difficulty. There are three main approaches to identify easy versus difficult structures. They are

24

"L1/L2 contrast, markedness, and structural (linguistic) complexity" (Collins et al., 2009, p. 338). In the first one, a method that is often use is the comparison of a structure between L1 and L2. In general, similar structures in both languages are acquired more easily while structures that do not exist in L2 are harder to develop.

The concept of markedness refers to "dichotomous or hierarchical relations between linguistic elements (Collins et al., 2009, p. 338). According to Collins et al. (1994), "a marked feature may be interpreted as a way of signaling an aspect of language that is not common across the languages of the world" (p. 338). The overall assumption tends to be that marked structures are more difficult than unmarked structures.

The third approach focuses on language only. For example "the wh-question as object of a preposition, which involves seven transformations, is more complex than the simple past tense in English, which involves just one" (p. 339). Simple structures that require fewer transformations are easier to acquire.

In the pedagogical perspective, there is a focus on the description teachers give of a particular rule. Here the difficulty lies in the complexity of the explanation given. Several researchers offer a list of the factors that may influence the difficulty of a rule. For example, Hulstijn (1995) explains that the complexity of a rule may depend on the number of exceptions there are. English is known for having an exception to each rule. Swan (2001) affirms that the difficulty depends on how arbitrary the rules appears to learners. In my experience, I have observed that for some students, some rules just do not make sense, and this makes them hard to acquire. For example: some irregular plurals or the causatives in English.

Housen et al. (2005) state that the difficulty depends on how much metalanguage is needed to explain the rule. It is my belief that we, as teachers, should be careful when including metalanguage in our explanations. We should consider different factors such as the students' level and age. However, every teacher has their own set of beliefs and it is hard to change someone's mind. In addition, Hulstijn (1995) explains that it depends on how often "vague terms and soft metaphors such as perspective of the speaker/hearer are used to describe subtle differences between competing forms in constructions such as tense-aspect or voice" (p. 379). Therefore, many of the structures that students will acquire depend on the way they are explained. This is an important factor to take into consideration in this research because it seems that classes are strongly geared towards grammar.

In regard to the above explained, it is important to take into consideration how much teachers know about the language. Bloor (1986) assessed the metalinguistic knowledge of 63 pre-service English teachers by using a questionnaire aimed "to give students the opportunity to display their familiarity with grammatical terms and concepts and related linguistic issues" (p. 158). His findings reveal that the only grammatical terms successfully identified by all students were verb and noun. In Bloor's (1986) words, "participants demonstrated fairly widespread ignorance" (p. 159).

This makes me wonder about teachers' knowledge of the subject that they are teaching; especially, if the class has a strong focus on grammar. Wray (1993) carried out a study similar to Bloor's and found that teachers achieved only a mean success rate of 30% identifying adverbs, 23% for pronouns, and less than 10% for prepositions. When reflecting on this findings, the authors recognize that there seems to be important gaps in student-teachers' knowledge about grammar. There are also misconceptions about language, and a

lack of a metalanguage for analyzing language use. Therefore, if students' acquisition of a particular structure depends on how it is taught and explained, it is important to consider how much teachers actually know about the structures they are teaching and how they teach them.

The psycholinguistic perspective takes into account the interaction between learners and language input. Goldschneider and Dekeyser (2001) explain that this interaction is described in terms of the nature and extent of learners' experience with language input that determines learners' success in L2 learning. Ellis (2006) describes language learners as "intuitive statisticians, weighing the likelihoods of interpretations and predicting which constructions are likely in the current context" (p.1) and language acquisition as "contingency learning, that is the gathering of information about the relative frequencies of form-function mappings" (p.1). This implies that learners' knowledge of structures emerges from their experience with the language. In other words, what learners do is make generalizations based on what they perceive in the language around them. Hence, the importance that language input has on learning the language.

Based on this last perspective, what makes some language structure easy or difficult is the actual learner's access to grammar forms in the input. DeKeyser (2005) identified factors that might define why language learners do not always acquire certain language forms even though the structures are available in the input. One important factor is the unreliability and ambiguity of form-function problems. For example, the suffix 's' in English marks plural, third-person singular, possessive, and contraction of the verb to be. Another crucial factor that might determine if a particular structure will be learned is "the form's saliency" (Collins, 2004, p. 341). In other words, its overall perceptibility or how learners interact with the input they receive.

It is necessary to take into consideration this 'form's saliency' because it might explain why for some upper-intermediate or advanced students it is hard to acquire advanced forms of the language. They might be able to communicate fluently and accurately but their speech tends to remain quite 'simple'. The explanation might be that student lack the required input to acquire these forms and use them in spontaneous speech. This means that some structures might rarely be used in the EFL classroom, which is the main source of input for learners.

In a study carried out by Collins (2004), forty hours of aural instructional input was collected and analyzed in order to explain why students acquired the progressive far earlier than the regular past. They found that opportunities to learn the progressive form far outweighed the opportunities to learn regular past. In addition to the lack of input, another consideration should be that students do not hear the final sound in the past tense of regular verbs. This is an important factor to bear in mind due to the fact that the context of this research is an EFL classroom in which students do not always have access to enough input to enhance their learning.

2.5.2 Authentic Language Input

The use of authentic language input (ALI) in EFL has a long history. I will begin this section by defining it. Gilmore (2007) defined ALI as "the language carrying a real message that is created by a real speaker or writer for a real audience" (p. 100). In addition, Taylor (1994) considered ALI any material in English that was not produced for teaching the language. Therefore, ALI can come from various sources of audio-visual mass media technologies such as news, movies, songs, soap operas, etc. Thus, even though my students

28

are in an EFL context and, as mentioned before, input might be limited, ALI is still available through various audiovisual technologies.

There have been many studies conducted around the integration of audiovisual programs that provide ALI (Gilmore, 2007; Martinez, 2002; Schön, et al., 2008). These studies highlight the pedagogical value of audiovisual materials to teach a language. Authentic materials can expose learners to the target language. In addition, they offer a way of contextualizing language learning that goes beyond the language presented by the text and the teacher. I would add that these materials are not just valuable to teach the language but to learn it autonomously.

I believe this authentic language input is considerably important in EFL contexts because it can provide learners the amount of input required to learn the language. Furthermore, it presents opportunities to analyze the language used in more real contexts.

2.6 The Role of Output

Up to now, I have focused on input and interaction and their influence on L2 acquisition. I am now going to concentrate on the role of output in interlanguage development. In his input hypothesis, Krashen (1982) argues that learners speak as a result of acquisition; however, he fails to mention that learners' speech can be the cause of acquisition. Most language learning researchers agree that in order to increase fluency, output is necessary. Swain's (1995) output hypothesis claims that output not only increases efficiency in using the language but it actually helps the development of the interlanguage system.

There are different ways suggested by Swain (1995) in which learners can learn from their own output. It can serve as consciousness-raiser helping students notice gaps in their

29

interlanguages. Output is also helpful in testing hypotheses that learners may have about certain rules or words. Learners can also identify problems in their output and discuss ways in which they could be modified. Therefore, producing the target language may push learners to become aware of gaps and problems in their L2 system; it gives them the opportunities to reflect and analyze these problems and it allows them to experiment with new structures and forms.

Regarding the role of output in L2 development, Ellis and He (1999) have researched how output helps in the development of vocabulary acquisition. The study shows the benefits of pushing students to produce second language output at least to acquire vocabulary. Other studies have been carried out in an attempt to see if 'pushed output' helps in the development of grammar; however, the results remain elusive. The question I would raise is how much output is considered necessary for acquisition to occur. Having been a teacher in the institution where the study was carried out, I have noticed that students do not always have enough opportunities to produce the language orally during classes. This might be limiting their chances of acquiring a better command of the language.

2.7 Cognitive Factors

As language is an aspect of human cognition, it is then important to consider cognitive factors in this research. As cognition is understood as knowledge, the main question related to it is how people come to know elements of L2. In other words, what processes help students learn the language.

Firstly, I will begin by explaining the types of knowledge that L2 learners have about the language. Learners acquire some specific knowledge about the structure of L2 in an explicit way; they are aware of what is being learned. They also learn aspects of the

language implicitly. In addition, they must have a certain amount of formulaic knowledge specific to L2 and knowledge transferred from L1. On top of all this, they may also have some misconceptions about aspects of L2 structure (DeKeyser & Juffs, 2005). In my students' case, as they have studied the language for a long period of time, they have explicitly been taught grammar rules and are perfectly able to recite the uses of a specific structure. Moreover, after having had exposure to the language for so many years, they have also acquired implicit knowledge of the language. In other words, there are aspects of the language that perhaps nobody has taught them, and still they know it. Furthermore, there is still a certain amount of their knowledge that is inaccurate.

2.7.1 Sources of L2 Knowledge

Nowadays, there is some agreement that first language has a strong influence on L2 development (Carroll, 2001). Learners are expected to show different effects of the L1 in different parts of the L2 at different stages of their L2 development, as mentioned in section 2.5 in reference to interlanguage. L1 influence can either be positive or negative. When both languages present similar characteristics, it might be beneficial because it allows students to make associations that will aid the development of linguistic structures.

On the other hand, different language patterns might have the opposite effect, interfering in the acquisition process. In the case of my students, I believe Spanish influences the acquisition of English in both positive and negative way. For example, some of the pluralization rules are similar in both languages; however, there are some phonemes in English that do not exist in Spanish and are difficult acquire. It would be interesting to know what the students' perception is about these issues. I would like to know whether they consider that some of their L2 knowledge come from the L1 influence or not, or how much they rely on their Spanish knowledge to understand L1.

In addition of L1 contribution to L2 development, learners memorize pieces of L2. Formulaic utterances (chunks) are another source of L2 knowledge (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Ellis (2002) suggests that one of the reasons why SLA takes so long is that learners have to gather a large amount of chunks. Myles, Mitchell and Hopper (1999) have shown interest in the role of chunks in the creative construction of essential rules. They state that learners who use chunks efficiently develop rule-based systems along with these formulas. On the other hand, learners who cannot pick up and use chunks apparently get stuck at a basic level.

The instruction of metalinguistic rules and the awareness of linguistic structure lead to explicit knowledge; however, mere explicit knowledge is not necessarily useful for communication. Explicit knowledge can become more useful and easy to access through practice (Schmidt, 2001). To answer the questions of how and how much learners draw on their explicit knowledge for actual communication, Krashen (1982) states that unless they know the rules well, care to apply them and have enough time, they will not be able to do so. These conditions are rarely met; therefore, the explicit knowledge that results from explicit learning seems irrelevant. However, there were some studies that found positive relationships between explicit knowledge and use (DeKeyser, 2003; Pica, 1983). It is important to note that the access of explicit knowledge to be used in real communication is a matter of degree, not of yes or no. Explicit knowledge can be automatized, but we need to consider that automatization takes a long time and depends on individual traits.

2.8 Individual Differences

Learners acquire language at a different speed. No matter if they have all shared the same language experiences and received the same amount of input. We are all different and have individual traits that come into play when learning a language. Some of these traits are

predictors of success. This might be the case of aptitude; nevertheless, there has been little research done in this area and there is no conclusive evidence. When you have been involved in the EFL world for some years, you come across learners that acquire the language more rapidly and others that seem to struggle a little more with it. This might be due to certain aptitude for learning languages or other factors.

Age is another factor that has been studied largely in EFL. Regarding this factor, there is a hypothesis that states that there is a period during which language acquisition is easy and native-speaker ability can be achieved. Beyond this age, acquisition can be difficult and is typically incomplete (Birdsong & Molis, 2001). The critical period hypothesis was grounded in research about people who had lost their linguistic capabilities as a result of an accident. The people who were under the age of puberty were able to regain their linguistic faculties completely; on the other hand, the older ones were unable to do it (Ellis, 2008). All the participants involved in the study began their English learning experience at a young age. Therefore, age is probably a factor that has helped them acquire the language.

There is evidence that claims that L2 adult learners never achieve native-speaker competence in either grammar or pronunciation. According to Ellis (2008), there are studies of immigrants that have arrived to the US before puberty and have achieved higher levels of grammatical proficiency than the ones who arrived after puberty. The capacity to achieve full competence declines gradually and becomes complete by about the age of sixteen. This means that there might be some differences in the way we acquire our first and second languages. This critical period may have some effect on my students. Even though they have all begun studying English before puberty, they are all above sixteen years old and they have not acquired native-like proficiency yet.

As I am dealing with factors that have influenced my students' L2 learning and learning relates to knowledge, cognitive factors were then fundamental in this research. In what

follows, I will discuss the importance of social factors in the acquisition of a second language.

2.9 Social Factors Influence on Language Development

There seems to be an undeniable connection between social factors and language learning. In this section, I will discuss the value of the social context and the role it plays in language learning.

An important factor that comes into play when learning a second language is the social background in which learners are involved. Pishghadam (2011) states that the impact of the context on learning a language is substantial because the learning environments will enable individuals to learn how to develop as integrated learners. He highlights the importance of having access to cultural capital and social capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital exists in three forms, embodied state (dispositions of body and mind), objectified state (cultural goods such as books, computers, dictionaries, Internet) and institutionalized state (academic qualifications and degrees). On the other hand, social capital is defined by Bourdieu (1986) as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 248). In other words, it is important to have access to material, personal and educational resources that will allow learners to acquire the language in a more holistic way. All these resources add something that might be valuable in the acquisition process. According to Bourdieu (1986), "language competence cannot be understood apart from social class" (p. 250).

It is commonly assumed that academic success and failure depends on natural aptitudes; however, Bourdieu (ibid.) proposed the ideas of cultural and social capital to break with this assumption. According to him, academic achievement does not depend on only mental

abilities; the types of capital that learners bring to education can also contribute. Different social classes have different amount of social and cultural capital. It can then be said that learners who have more cultural goods and have access to a wider social network of friends and institutions can guarantee more success in education. This is linked to the context where the research takes place and the participants because of the access that they have to social and cultural capital that allows them to have more contact with the language in one way or another. There has been some research done in this area and it suggests that there is a link between cultural and social capital and academic success (Bassani, 2006, Merenluoto, 2009). Kumaravadivelu (2006) has also used Bourdieu's ideas to show the relationship between power, language, identity and social capital.

Social context surrounds the language learners in many different forms. This might take the form of the number of close friends, presence of parents at home, the number of siblings, extracurricular activities, church attendance, parents' knowledge of children's friends, parent's employment and involvement in education to name a few. These social contexts might provide learners with the necessary input for their academic achievement. As Pishghadam (2011) states, learners who have more cultural goods and have access to a large social network of friends and institutions can guarantee more success in education. This is something important to consider because of the context where my research takes place. Most of these learners have both cultural and social capital. Some of them have parents and siblings that speak the language and who are interested in providing them with the tools to achieve academic success. They have traveled abroad and have friends and relatives who live abroad and with whom they can practice the language; they have access to Internet and other commodities that allow them to access information whenever they need it.

2.10 Social Class

One important aspect that has been examined in the field of language learning is the relationship between social class and level of achievement in language learning. According to Clemente (2007), English learners may have different degrees of interest to learn English depending on their cultural and social background. Arikan (2011) explains that students with higher socio-economic status demonstrate higher academic achievement. This may also be true in language learning.

Gholami (2012) states that it is believed that social context influences attitude and motivation. As mentioned above, the context also provides learning opportunities, which have an impact on learning outcomes. For instance, most of the learners in my group have traveled abroad and are aware of the importance of learning a second language. They have also had the opportunity to begin learning the language at a young age because their parents can afford to pay for expensive private schools, which as mentioned in section 2.2 have been proved to be more successful in the teaching of English. As Gholami (2012) points out, there are two possible learning opportunities, formal and informal ones. These are influenced by the social context. For example, my students have received formal bilingual education, which undoubtedly has had an impact on their language proficiency. In addition, they have lived informal experiences; such as traveling abroad and interacting with exchange student that might have also influenced their language acquisition. All these opportunities are related to what Pishghadam (2011) explains about having cultural and social capital in section 2.9.

2.11 Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) has its origins in the documents of Vygotsky and it is stated "that human mental functioning is fundamentally a mediated process organized by cultural

artifacts, activities and concepts" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007, p. 197). Humans use existing cultural artifacts to create new ones that permit them to regulate their biological and behavioral activity. The primary means of mediation are language use, organization and structure. In other words, by participating in cultural and linguistic settings, developmental processes are created. Some of these settings are family life, schools, sports activities and work places. Once again, the importance of the individual's social context is highlighted in what comes to learning. In the SCT, it is argued that the most important forms of human cognitive activity develop through interactions within these social environments (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Therefore, and as mentioned above, the interactions that the participants have had either at school or at home must have been fundamental in their English development.

2.12 The Issue of Culture

Foreign language learning involves several components like grammatical competence, communicative competence, and language proficiency to name only a few. It also involves involvement in another culture and knowing about customs and beliefs of another country. That is the reason why I included the issue of culture as an important theme in this literature review.

Language can be seen as a carrier of culture. One cannot understand language without culture or culture without language. Brown (1994) describes this relationship as follows: "A language is a part of a culture and culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p. 165). In other words, culture and language are inseparable. When it comes to language learning, it could be said that language learning is culture learning. Gao (2006) states that there should be awareness among language teachers of the place of cultural studies in foreign language classroom. Language teachers should attempt to

enhance students' cultural awareness and as a consequence, students' communication can improve. Wang (2008) also argues that "foreign language teaching is foreign culture teaching, and foreign language teachers are foreign culture teachers" (p. 4).

The term 'culture', according to Williams (1983), is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (p. 87). The author suggests three definitions. In the first one, culture is used to refer to "a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" (p. 90). If we, for example, refer to the cultural development of Western Europe, we would mention the great philosophers, artist and poets. The second one refers to "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group" (p. 90). With this definition, if we were discussing the same development of Western Europe, we would mention holidays, sports, religion and festivals. In the third definition, culture refers to 'signifying practices'. This definition allows us to speak of soap opera, pop music and comics. This last definition is also referred to as text.

Kramsh (1993) argues that the teaching of culture in ELT should include the teaching of cultural knowledge, cultural values, cultural behavior, and cultural skills. The author states that in order for students to understand a foreign culture, it is important to create associations between the target foreign culture and the learners' own. In order to do this, it is necessary that learners interact with native speakers or with text. This will require them to construct their own meanings, instead of just receiving a transfer of information about people and their culture by teachers. In addition, introducing students to the target culture could be a motivating experience.

According to Straub (1999), when dealing with teaching culture, teachers should raise students' awareness of their own culture and the target culture. It is definitely not an easy

task to teach culture. Learners do not only need to be aware of language; they need to be taught how language is used in everyday interaction (pragmatic awareness).

Pragmatics has been defined in various ways. For the purpose of this paper I will use the definition offered by Crystal (1997) that states that pragmatics is "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (p. 301). In other words, pragmatics is defined as the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context. Pragmatics is divided into two components: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983).

Pragmalinguistics refers to the resources used to convey communicative acts. These resources can include strategies such as directness and indirectness, routines and linguistic forms to intensify or soften communicative acts (Kasper & Rose, 1999). Sociopragmatics is described by Leech (1983) as "the sociological interface of pragmatics" (p. 10). It refers to the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of the communicative action. As Leech (1983) points out, sociopragmatics is about proper social behavior.

These two components of pragmatics are difficult to deal with in the classroom. It is not the same to teach about grammar or vocabulary, but it is something completely different to teach how to behave properly. That is why it is important for teachers to raise students' awareness so they can make the choice of acting in certain ways.

2.13 Classroom Practices

So far, I have discussed attitudinal and behavioral factors such as language learning strategies and motivation. I have also paid attention to the learners' social and linguistic environments as well as their cognitive factors. In this section, I will now focus on the classroom practices in which students are immersed.

First and foremost, the institution encourages the use of technology in the classroom and cooperative learning as the principal learning approach, but there are still some teachers who do not feel comfortable using technology and who feel that while students work cooperatively they may 'lose' control of the group. What ends up happening is that classes usually involve a teacher in front of the group, students facing the teacher, sitting in rows and a power point presentation as a lesson plan guiding the class. In addition, some English teachers still rely heavily on the textbook, which is basically a guide that includes strategies for the Cambridge exams.

In *Tecnológico de Monterrey*, the English syllabus has been designed in the central offices in Monterrey and it is expected to be followed in all the campuses. It is in a digital platform that can be accessed by any language teacher. However, I have found that just a few teachers know about this syllabus and they just follow the content of the textbook as their syllabus. In Campus Irapuato, the textbook that is used is Gateway (Sayer, 2012).

The syllabus has a general objective, specific objective, themes, subthemes, suggested activities and assessment instruments to develop each theme. For instance, in the first half of the semester, the general theme is 'Global Issues' whose specific objective is that students will use appropriate linguistic structures to discuss topics related to global issues and concerns. The subthemes are poverty and famine, water and food and effect of humanity on nature. Each of the subthemes have suggested learning activities such as

40

researching information on websites, giving oral presentations, reading articles, watching videos, writing letters, etc. and suggested evidence to include in electronic portfolios such as an audio recording, a composition, a digital presentation, etc. In the syllabus, there is also a section dedicated to the presentation of Cambridge evaluations and it is specified the number of hours that should be spent on this preparation. When students finish high school, they are supposed to take a Cambridge evaluation. I believe this syllabus fails to take account of learners' views of the value of task types.

In practice, most teachers do not follow the above mentioned syllabus and just focus on developing strategies to prepare students for the Cambridge evaluation. As a result, students seem to be bored and unmotivated. According to Biggs (1995), "it is assessment which drives institutional learning" (p. 5). This phenomenon is known as the backwash effect of assessment. As Boud (1995) laments:

> Despite the good intentions of staff, assessment tasks are set which encourage a narrow, instrumental approach to learning that emphasizes the reproduction of what is presented at the expense of critical thinking, deep understanding and independent activity. (p. 104)

In addition to the backwash effect of assessment, it seems to me that we as teachers are just focusing on two main dimensions of the teaching: the what (content) and the how (methodology), but are forgetting to consider the who (students). As Littlejohn (2010) suggests:

> how far are we, in mainstream language teaching, guilty of thinking in largely asocial terms about our own discipline? How far are we led by models (whether of syllabus or of acquisition theory) that ignore the substantial social, human element in teaching and learning? (p 3).

Allwright (1996) also points out that classrooms are social places, and language is inextricably linked to our own social identity. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration who our students are and what they bring into the class. There seems to be a significant gap between what teachers teach and what learners learn or want to learn. Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh (2004) found in their research a significant discrepancy between learners' favorite tasks and the teachers' perceptions of these tasks. Moreover, if learners do not consider that an activity is worth doing, they are unlikely to benefit from it.

Slimani (2001) affirms that the outcomes of language lessons seem to be implicitly or explicitly negotiated by the interaction that occurs in the language classroom. This means that no matter what the syllabus dictates, there is always some kind of negotiation taking place in the classroom between teachers and students. "Learning outcomes are thus idiosyncratic, shaped by the interplay of the personal learning agendas of participants as they unfold in the classroom" (Littlejohn, 2010, p. 4). In my professional practice, I have observed how this negotiation exists and how it works. Fortunately for students, as teachers and students get to know each other better, they reach agreements that take place even when teachers or students are not totally aware of them. However, most of the time there is pressure from the institution to execute the syllabus as it is indicated.

Allwright (1984) demonstrates that students have their own perceptions of what goes on in a classroom. When they are asked about the class, most of them give different versions because of different perceptual filters that each person has. They learn different things from the same experience. According to Brumfint (1991), teachers tend to do a day-to-day guessing to find out where students are and what they need and in order to find out if they have learned, there is some kind of assessment. These guesswork and assessment often result in a frustrating inefficiency in classes that just do not work. It would be a richer experience if we, as teachers, took into consideration students' perceptions.

42

As mentioned earlier, the main gap here is that the institution and the teachers are not paying attention to who the students are, and what they want and need. We need to consider that we are living in an era where information is easily available and anything you want to learn is a couple of clicks away. Everyone can learn practically anything on the Internet. Therefore, teachers have to become more interested in their students if they want to get to them. Students have to find something in their classes that is worth learning to be able to maintain motivation

2.14 Summary

This chapter has presented a theoretical discussion of concepts and notions relevant to the research context for this project such as the current situation of EFL in Mexico, motivation, language learning strategies, input, output, cognitive factors, social factors, social class, sociocultural theory, culture and classroom practices. The next chapter presents the methodological approach to the data collection an analysis that was employed in the research.

Chapter III

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, I explained the key concepts in the literature that were considered relevant to this research. The following chapter describes in a broader way the methodology used to carry it out; the context in which the research took place; the participants involved; the data collection techniques used; the data procedures; the data coding and the ethical considerations.

The research question that guided this study is the following:

> What are some of the factors that may influence upper-intermediate high-school students' English learning in a private educational institution in Central Mexico?

3.2 Setting

The project was carried out in *Tecnológico de Monterrey*, which is one of the most prestigious, private institutions in our country. Campus Irapuato opened its doors in 1975 with just the high school section. It currently has secondary school, high school and the first four semesters in their business and engineering programs at the university section. It is the most expensive educational institution in the city.

As mentioned in the introduction, in my research, I focused just on one of the upper-intermediate groups of the bicultural high school. In this section, the institution has about

480 students and according to the program, students have to take a foreign language class during the six semesters of high school. The principal language is English and students are classified in the different levels according to a TOEFL test or a Cambridge placement test that are applied at the beginning of the course. If a student obtains more than 550 points in the TOEFL test or B2 in the Cambridge one, he/she can start taking French classes. At the end of each semester a Cambridge mock test is taken again in order to see the progress that students have made. Students take six hours a week of English classes divided in four days of one and half hour each. Each group has at least two and up to thirty students, twenty being the average number of students per class. The group I chose for my research has sixteen upper-intermediate students. To be placed in this level, students had to have at least 520 in their TOEFL exam.

3.3 Qualitative Research

Having worked in this institution for more than three years, I wanted to find out some of the reasons behind students' apparent lack of progress and lack of motivation; therefore, I decided to carry out this project. In research, there are two basic paradigms to follow: quantitative and qualitative. The former involves the generation of data that can be measured and subjected to a rigorous analysis due to its formality, rigidness and objectiveness. The qualitative approach, on the other hand, is more subjective because it is concerned with the assessment of attitudes, opinions and behaviors (Duff, 2006). Holliday (2002) explains that

> Qualitative research is increasing in use in a wide range of academic and professional areas. This type of research methodology has developed from aspects of anthropology and sociology and represents the broad view that to understand human affairs it is insufficient to rely on quantitative surveys and statistics, and it is necessary instead to delve deep into the subjective qualities that govern behavior. (p. 7)

45

As this research deals with students' perceptions and opinions about their English learning experience, I have opted to follow a qualitative approach because it seems to be more suitable to properly answer the research question. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain that:

> Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the word visible. It makes use of field notes, interviews, conversations, recordings, etc. and involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world; therefore, it studies things in their natural settings, and attempts to make sense of it. (p. 2)

In qualitative research, data is collected in natural settings and frequently there are themes and patterns that emerge from it. Qualitative research includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a description and interpretation of the issue that is being studied (Creswell, 2013).

3.4 Case Study Research

In the area of linguistics, case study research has played an important role in projects related to language teaching, language learning and language use. Case study research was chosen as the method of inquiry because it allowed me to capture and describe real-life events and opinions. Accroding to Duff (2012) case studies involve rich contextualization and a deep analysis of data from a small set of participants. Flyvbjerg (2006) explains that a case study is a mode of inquiry that can produce context-dependent knowledge and in the study of human affairs, there appears to exist only context-dependent knowledge. This study and its outcomes are linked to the context where it was carried out. Case studies tend to be much more specific in focus than other kinds of research which involve a larger population. According to Stake (2000), case studies are invaluable in adding to

understanding about a subject. Flyvbjerg (2006) states that studies of the learning process emphasize the importance of this method and as my research is about the factors that have influenced my participants' learning process, I believe it is a suitable method to carry out this study. In addition, some of the results might only apply to this particular context where the study has taken place.

In case studies, the researcher can find out the participants' perceptions and judgements by observing and interviewing them (Yin, 2003). Therefore, a researcher can obtain an in-depth, holistic description and analysis of a social unit (Yin, 2003) that in the particular case of this study is a group of English learners. Furthermore, in case studies, the researcher can use a great variety of data-gathering techniques that allow him/her to arrive at a thick description.

3.5 Participants

As previously mentioned, the participants are sixteen third and fifth semester students of high school who are currently placed in an upper-intermediate English course; third and fifth semester students take English classes together depending on their level. Eleven of them are female and five of them are male. Their ages range from sixteen to eighteen years old. Most of them have studied English since they were in kindergarten and have studied in bilingual elementary and secondary schools. Most of them have traveled to English-speaking countries and had first-hand experience with native speakers of English. Most of them come from an upper socio-economic level. Some of them have also lived (for at least one semester) in English-speaking countries to practice their English. They could be considered fluent speakers of English.

3.6 Data Collection Techniques

As my intention was to fully examine factors that may have an effect on my students' learning, I decided to obtain data from individual interviews, journals, a questionnaire and my observations. In what follows, I explain each of the techniques as well as how they were used to gather data relevant to my research.

3.6.1 Interviews

To begin the data collection, I decided that the most effective way to learn more from the participants was to interview them individually. As my intention was to find the factors that may have an effect in their learning, the best source of data came directly from my students. Traditionally, an interview is a dialogue that takes place between the researcher and an individual to gather data for further analysis. In order to gain information, the researcher asks questions that may be predetermined or not and listens to the participants' responses. An interview is a process that involves preparation, transcription, response to the interviewee and analysis (Lengeling, 2010).

The most common type of interview is carried out face-to-face by synchronous communication in time and place. This kind of interview allows the researcher to observe social cues (voice, intonation, body language, etc.) that otherwise would be impossible (Grey, 2004). In addition, it facilitates reaction to the interviewee's responses and follow up ideas or look in more detail the feelings that are present during the interview. Face-to face interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured.

For the purpose of my research, I used semi-structured interviews. In this kind of interview, the questions are planned ahead of time; however, there is flexibility in their composition and if during the interview something interesting comes up, the researcher can

ask a little bit further in relation to it (Grey, 2004). When I was carrying out the interviews, I planned to dismiss the class some minutes earlier and interview each of my students on different days after classes. I prepared what I wanted to ask them ahead of time (See Appendix I), but as the interviews progressed new questions were added while some others were dropped. Sixteen interviews were carried out at the end of each lesson in the classroom, which was a good idea because it was free of distractions; however, there were times when students were in a hurry because they had another class. The interviews were recorded in electronic devises and stored by date. They lasted in average from eight to fifteen minutes each. They were also transcribed into word documents (See Appendix II).

I also carried out a group interview with some of the English teachers of the institution. The purpose of this interview was to confirm information that they had previously said in different meetings and to know their perceptions on certain themes related to my research. The focus of this research is on students; however, I was interested in finding out some of the teachers' opinions in regard to students and their practices. According Madriz (2000), this technique is "a collectivistic rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants' attitudes, experiences, and beliefs" (p.836). The advantage of a focus group is that it "allows researchers to observe a large amount of interaction on a specific topic of interest in a limited amount of time" (Suter, 2000, p. 6).

3.6.2 Questionnaire

After conducting the first interviews, I started noticing some recurrent themes and some similarities in students' responses. I decided to carry out an on-line questionnaire to confirm some of the information I was receiving during the interviews. I prepared the questionnaire in SurveyMonkey.com and shared it with the group in a Facebook group that we had during the semester. Munn and Drever (1999) describe questionnaires as a written

list of questions which is given to people in order to collect information and opinions about a particular subject. It was a 10 question on-line questionnaire made with the mere intention of confirming information that was coming up during the interviews (See Appendix III).

3.6.3 Participant Observation

Observation is a data collection technique that attempts to look at events while they occur in their natural settings (Flick, 2006). In observation, a researcher can look at daily behavior and interaction in an effort to gather information. During this semester, I observed my students carefully and took notes in a journal. I became aware of the tasks that they enjoyed the most and how engaged they could become because I took into consideration their opinions and interests.

According to Creswell (2013), participant observation takes place when the researcher is involved in the lives of people that he/she is studying, keeping a professional distance to allow proper observation and recording of data. Being involved with the participants everyday made me a participant observer and this proximity allowed me to gain insight and data relevant to my research. My observations were registered as reflections in my personal journal (See Appendix IV).

3.6.4 Journal

Throughout my research, I had a notebook with me where I wrote information from interviews, classes, ideas, reflections and thoughts. Writing journals has been a common practice in ELT research (Bailey, 1991).   In addition to my personal journal, I also asked the participants to reflect about specific events and moments that happened in class in a shared journal. This has shed some light onto how they perceived the events and how

helpful some strategies were for them. They also wrote about specific questions I asked them related to the research (See Appendix V).

3.7 Data Procedures and Analysis

After the data had been gathered, all the interviews were transcribed into word files. Once transcriptions were ready, the process of analysis began. Goertz and LeCompte (1984) suggest an inductive approach to analyze data in qualitative research. During the analysis, issues "emerge from the data itself, out of process of inductive reasoning" (p. 170). The researcher reviews raw data in an attempt to find units of meaning. Lincoln and Guba (2000) define units of meaning as having two attributes:

1. Aimed at some understanding or some action that the inquirer needs to have or to take,

2. The smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself, that is, it must be interpretable in the absence of any additional information other that a broad understanding of the context in which the inquiry is carried out. (p. 345)

Once the units of meaning started to emerge, they were selected. I compared all units and tried to group them in different categories. For example, I put together all the units in which students talk about what they do in order to further develop the language and then I made a subcategory depending on the similarities or differences of their actions or opinions. All units of meaning were typed in a word table in order to have all the information better organized and at a glance (included in Appendix VI). Once it was organized, I began the difficult and at times overwhelming process of interpreting the participants' voices.

51

3.8 Data Coding

Having gathered data, the next step was to code it. Data coding is a process in which data is categorized to facilitate later referencing in the document. In an attempt to make things simpler, I decided to code II all the individual interviews and give them the corresponding number depending on the date when the interview was carried out. The journal entries were coded as J and I just assigned a number to each of them. Finally, the group interview was coded as GI. Below, there is a table with the data collected for this research.

CODE	TECHNIQUE	DATE	SOURCE
II1	Individual interview	17/08/15	Alejandra
II2	Individual interview	18/8/15	Francia
II3	Individual interview	19/8/15	Vanessa
II4	Individual interview	20/8/15	Arely
II5	Individual interview	24/8/15	Geraldine
II6	Individual interview	25/8/15	Julio Cesar
II7	Individual interview	26/8/15	Venecia
II8	Individual interview	31/8/15	Ana Patricia
II9	Individual interview	1/9/15	Roberto
II10	Individual interview	2/9/15	Santiago
II11	Individual interview	3/9/15	Dario
II12	Individual interview	7/9/15	Renata
II13	Individual interview	8/9/15	Yeny
II14	Individual interview	9/9/15	Lola
II15	Individual interview	10/9/15	Pete
II16	Individual interview	11/9/15	Carlota
J1	Journal entry	10/10/15	Pete
J2	Journal entry	10/10/15	Roberto
J3	Journal entry	10/10/15	Vanessa
J4	Journal entry	10/10/15	Geraldine
J5	Journal entry	10/10/15	Carlota
J6	Journal entry	10/10/15	Venecia

J7	Journal entry	10/10/15	Yeni
J8	Journal entry	10/10/15	Ana Patricia
J9	Journal entry	10/10/15	Roberto
J15	Journal entry	13/10/15	Pete & Dario
J16	Journal entry	13/10/15	Venecia
J17	Journal entry	13/10/15	Geraldine
GI1	Group Interview	9-/11/15	Teachers
PJ1	Personal journal	10/8/15	Me
PJ2	Personal journal	13/8/15	Me
PJ3	Personal journal	17/8/15	Me
PJ4	Personal journal	31/8/15	Me
PJ5	Personal journal	11/9/15	Me
PJ6	Personal journal	13/10/15	Me
PJ7	Personal journal	10/11/15	Me

Table 2. Data Coding

3.9 Ethics

Being the English teacher of the group of participants involved in the study could be seen as problematic in regard to ethical issues. Therefore, from the beginning and in each interview, I explained to my participants my research topic and how important it was to get honest responses from them. I also asked them if they wanted to be part of the project. The names of the participants were changed in order to ensure privacy. The language director in the institution was informed about this research and signed a letter of informed consent (See Appendix VII).

3.10 Summary

In this chapter, I described the research paradigm, the methodology, and the data gathering techniques used to carry out this project along with a description of the context where it

took place and the participants. In Chapter IV, I will present data excerpts taken from interviews and journal entries as well as an analysis of them.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the methodology used to carry out this research as well as the data gathering techniques and data procedures. This chapter will present some data excerpts taken from interviews and journal entries from participants along with an analysis and an interpretation of them. In the interviews, the participants were asked different questions about their perceptions of the English language, the importance English has for them and the actions they take in order to improve. In their answers, participants revealed how they see English in their context, what they do in order to enhance their language learning outside the classroom, and what they think of the classes that are given in the institution. During this chapter, I will examine personal accounts from interviews and journal entries. This chapter is divided along the most important themes that came up in the data.

After transcribing, reading and rereading the data, there were some tendencies that started to emerge. As the motivation for this project was to see what was behind students' apparent lack of motivation or interest, I will begin analyzing some of the factors that might be contributing to this.

4.2 Students' Perceptions of Their Classes

During the interviews, students were asked about how they felt in their classes and how much they had learned there. It is important to remember that these participants have taken English classes most of their lives; therefore, it was important to acknowledge their

opinions in regard to the English classes they have. The first thing that caught my attention was that apparently, most of them seem to agree that English classes in the institution are heavily geared towards grammar. The following quote, in which Pete describes English classes in the institution, comes from an interview:

> *In class, we are always learning the same kind of things. In all the semesters that I have been here, we always see the same things, present, past, future… It is always the same. (II15)*

In this quote, one of the things I observe is that Pete feels that classes tend to be repetitive and that there seems to be a strong focus on grammar. I also think that Pete seems to be bored with the content of the classes. Roberto, during his interview, seems to agree with Pete on the role that grammar has in the classes:

> *At school, we just see grammar. All we learn is very structured and it doesn't sound natural. They teach us the language, but they do not teach us how to use it or how to speak. (II9)*

In Roberto's opinion, classes just revolve around grammar topics and he feels that it is not enough to understand how language is used, nor does he feel grammar can help in developing his speaking skills. In other words, he has learned grammar rules; he has knowledge about the language, but in classes, he has not been taught how to use it or perhaps he needs more opportunities to practice the language in more real situations. In addition, he feels that the knowledge he has acquired in classes is not something he would naturally use. Santiago also discusses the influence of grammar in classes:

> *In classes I can understand how grammar works, teachers just focus on grammar but I would prefer less grammar and more vocabulary and pronunciation. (II10)*

Once again, it is revealed that classes are focused on grammar. In addition, he states that he would rather learn other aspects of the language that perhaps, in his opinion, are neglected during the class. His quote reveals other interests and probably needs he has about the language. The following excerpt comes from Julio Cesar's interview:

> *Grammar is boring but it is necessary, and sometimes it is not necessary…*
> *for example, last semester we learned future perfect continuous and I think*
> *we never use it. I just use it when I do homework but I never use it when I*
> *speak. (II6)*

In this excerpt, we can see how in spite of regarding grammar as something necessary, he considers that not everything they learn is actually useful when it comes to incorporating it in their everyday speech. I would even dare to say that he considers homework as something artificial just created to integrate these structures that, according to him, do not come naturally in everyday speech. This relates to what I wrote in Chapter 2 about how the structure is made salient in class (Collins, 2004). It is difficult for students to acquire a structure when they do not receive enough input in the classroom or when this input seems to be artificial and out of context.

Students point out that classes are metalinguistic and focus on form rather than use or meaning. In addition to talking about grammar, the use of the textbook was also mentioned during some of the interviews. The following quote comes from Geraldine:

> *I don't think we learn from the textbook. We can do so much more than*
> *using the textbook. Textbooks are unnecessary and are expensive. You can*
> *find similar exercises online and it is not necessary to buy the book. Besides,*
> *it is boring and some teachers use it in every class. (II5)*

In this quote, Geraldine sounds tired of having to use the textbook, which she feels is useless. In addition, she seems to believe that there are other tasks that they could do that might be more beneficial or at least cheaper. In the following quote, Ana Patricia explains how classes have helped her.

> *The English class has helped me but I think that the other classes that we have in English also help because we learn vocabulary of math or of science.*

Ana Patricia admits that the English class has helped her reach the level she currently has, but something that has also been beneficial for her has been the other mainstream classes that are taught in English in the institution. These classes could fall into content-based instruction. Krahnke (1987) defines it as "the teaching of content or information in the language being learned with little or no direct or explicit effort to teach the language itself separately from the content being taught" (p. 65).

Through these classes, students are also exposed to the language without being taught about the language. Ana Paula seems to acknowledge that it has been valuable to take these classes in English.

In this section, I included some quotes in which students talked about the situations they live in their English classrooms. The following theme relates to the importance that students attach to learning the language.

4.3 English as an Investment for Their Future

When trying to find an answer to the research question, motivation came up as a strong theme in the data. In their interviews, the students seem not only to like the language but also acknowledge it as an investment for their future. Therefore, motivation seems to be present and is an important factor that has influenced their learning. The following are excerpts taken from journal entries:

> *For us, being able to speak English opens doors for better jobs. It is a big opportunity that we have right now. Not in all schools, English is given such an importance. (J15)*

> *As English is the official language of the whole world, I see English as one of the best investments for the future. English is a necessity when you are looking for a job. It is remarkable how much a salary increases when you are able to speak English. (J16)*

The above excerpts reflect how aware students are about the importance that the English has worldwide and the impact that speaking it could have on their future careers. As a result, participants see English as an investment worth taking. Investment is seen as an extended notion of motivation, but with emphasis on the contextual, social and historical nature of the target language used by learners. According to Norton (2000), "a learner's motivation to speak is mediated by other investments that may conflict with the desire to speak – investments that are intimately connected to the ongoing production of the learners' identities and their desires for the future" (p. 120). Therefore, when a learner invests in acquiring the language, their expectations are a good return in a wide range of symbolic and material resources. This also relates to what Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) explain about the 'Motivational Self-System'. These students see their future selves as bilingual individuals

who are more likely to get a better job and better salary because they speak the language well.

In the following excerpt, this participant also expresses how by speaking the language, the possibilities for a better future in terms of job opportunities are greater.

> *I think that English is the best investment for my future because it is important nowadays to know more than one language to have a good job. I consider this language a useful tool to have more opportunities in the work force but also to travel to other countries. (J17)*

In her journal, Geraldine expresses her opinion of English and how she sees it as an investment; she is an agent who uses or will use English to position herself in a particular context where speaking English is beneficial. In general, it can be considered that students are aware of how lucky they are for having the opportunity to study the language in an institution where it is taken more seriously than in others and they are aware that speaking the language can be translated into getting a better job.

Most of the participants in their interviews and in their journals expressed their interest in continuing improving and developing better proficiency in their use of the language. They all see English as an important tool for their future life. This tells us something about how vivid their bilingual future-selves are imprinted in their minds. During the interviews, the idea of English as important for their professional futures became a recurrent theme, I decided to ask a question in the questionnaire in regard to the main reasons to learn the language just to see if it was generalized.

100% of participants answered that English was important for their future. Nobody choose any of the other alternatives that could have been considered acceptable choices. This tells

us that they are aware of the place that English has worldwide and how invested they are in learning it.

The following excerpts, in which they discuss how English is essential for what they want to accomplish in the future, come from Francia's and Vanessa's interviews.

> *I have the goal of going to study architecture in Milan and maybe I have to learn Italian but English will be basic to communicate with other people and I want to travel and see the different buildings and well… Everything will be in English. (II2)*

> *I think it is very important because in any career it will always be necessary and sometimes obligatory to speak a second language. When I finish high school, I want to have perfect English so I can start with another language and finish my career with three languages. (II3)*

Francia discusses her desire to study abroad and to travel and realizes that in order to be able to successfully do it she needs English even though she is actually planning to study in a country where English is not the official language. She considers English will be necessary not only for academic purposes but also for everyday communication. On the other hand, Vanessa explains how in order to develop professionally, it is not only important but obligatory to master the language. She is also considering to study a third language once she obtains a higher proficiency level in English. What is stimulating is that she wants to achieve that 'perfect level' when she finishes high school. I wonder if she realizes how unlikely this goal is to achieve within that time frame and what 'perfect level' means to her.

In the process of mastering a foreign language, the learner's enthusiasm, and motivation can be determinants of success or failure. In the above excerpts, participants expressed how they see themselves in the future and how English is part of that ideal-self. "An Ideal-self is the representation of all the attributes that a person would like to possess (e.g., hopes, aspirations, desires): If one's ideal self is associated with the mastery of an L2, that is, if the person that we would like to become is proficient in the L2, he/she can be described as having an "integrative" disposition" (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005, p. 617). Seeing English as fundamental for their future and being motivated to learn is undoubtedly one of the most important factors that influence their learning.

The following quote comes from one my personal journal entries, after having carried out some of the interviews.

> *After having interviewed some of my students, I have noticed one thing. It's pretty clear that what we teachers think and what students think is very different. In general, I have noticed that teachers here have the beliefs that students are not interested in learning English; that they care more about the other subjects that they are currently taking than English. However, I have seen that for them English is one of the most important subjects and is one that for them can make a difference and one they know they will keep using in the future. Therefore, I think that maybe the problem is that we are not giving our students the kind of classes they would actually enjoy. (PJ4)*

When I wrote this, I began to notice the strong motivation that students had shown during the interviews and the existing gap between teachers' perception of students' interest in the language and their own opinions.

Through an analysis of the interview transcripts there was another recurring theme, which emerged: the influence of mass media or pop culture in the participants' learning. These terms are used to refer to the "culture that is widely favored or well-liked by many people" (Story, 1998, p. 7). Students have great access to it in movies, TV shows, music, novels, magazines, video games and the Internet and according to what they declare, it has had great influence on their English learning.

4.4 Media Influence in Language Learning

For a language learner, it is not always clear where the learning has come from. In the interviews, participants were asked about how much of what they know of English has come from classes and how much from other sources. In the following excerpts, students talk about the influence that mass media (music, TV, movies, social media) has had on their L2 acquisition process.

Pop culture can provide students with content for their learning. When participants were asked about what they did in order to improve or enhance their English learning, most of them admitted that they did not do anything in particular with the ultimate purpose of learning English; however, a lot of them mentioned that they used mass media as a source for input. The following lines are taken from a journal entry of one of the participants.

> *I am a very auditory person, so listening to music and watching movies or*
> *TV shows has helped me improve. I learn more than in a textbook because I*
> *can hear how American or British people actually speak. And it is different*
> *than what we learn in a regular English class. So when I travel and speak*
> *with Americans, I can understand better to them. (J1)*

This excerpt shows us how this participant uses pop culture as the input he needs to develop sociocultural and pragmatic knowledge that otherwise he would not receive. Kramsh (1993) points out how important it is to learn about cultural behavior and cultural skills and states that in order to do so leaners need to interact with native speakers or with text. Therefore, movies and TV shows can provide learners a glimpse of how language is used in context. It is important for learners to know expressions and new words but also to know in which contexts it is appropriate to use them. According to Straub (1999), learners need to be aware of the language and also they should know how language is used in everyday interaction. In other words, they should develop pragmatic awareness. In his interview, the same participant talks further on the same theme.

> *In movies and TV shows, you can see how the gringos talk in everyday situations and not in a fancy way like we do here in class… very properly… in addition, you can learn a lot of new words and slangs.(I11)*

For Pete, it is important to get socio-cultural knowledge. His excerpt also reflects that he is aware that he is not getting this kind of knowledge in his language classes. Therefore, he relies on other sources of input in order to get it. Television has the power of portraying the lifestyle and culture of some Americans. Therefore, it offers opportunities for learners to become aware of these aspects that are also part of the language. In other words, they should learn about pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. According to Leech (1983), the former refers to strategies such as directness or indirectness that speakers use to convey communicative acts while the later refers to the proper social behavior as mentioned in section 2.12.

The following excerpt comes from a journal entry in which participants were asked to write about the influence that mass media has had on their learning.

64

I prefer to watch movies or series in English because when they are translated it sounds fake and in the original language, which is English, sounds better. I listen to the actors speak and pay attention to their pronunciation. I also learn bad words and common English words that we don't learn at school. (J2)

This entry illustrates how movies and series provide Robert with knowledge that he considers important. In his interview, he mentioned that he does not feel confident about his pronunciation; therefore, this kind of input provides him with what he considers necessary to improve, especially because he pays attention to it. In a classroom setting, due to the objectives of the syllabus and other students' necessities, the needs of particular students might not be well addressed. It is essential for them to be able to rely on other sources of input to obtain what is important for them. As it was mentioned in Chapter 2, authentic materials can provide exposure of the target language to learners; moreover, they offer a way of contextualizing language learning that goes beyond the language that is commonly used in the classroom or that is included in the textbook (Gilmore, 2007).

The two abstracts above also demonstrate students' interest in learning slangs and bad words. In my opinion, it is a valid interest and students should be able to decide for themselves how valuable this knowledge can be to develop their language competence and pragmatics. Students probably feel the need to at least understand them to communicate better; however, it is a topic that is normally censured in classes for obvious reasons. In addition, it is important to take into consideration the role of the teacher and the policies of the institution, which do not allow this kind of vocabulary within the classrooms. Once more, they have to depend in other sources to learn what they are interested in learning.

Other participants also reiterate the use of mass media as way of improving pronunciation and learning vocabulary.

I always listen to music in English and it helps my pronunciation and my fluency get better. Most of the time, I watch series and movies in English and it helps me improve my vocabulary and have a better pronunciation. (J3)

In the above excerpt, the participant explains how mass media has helped her improve in different areas with an emphasis on pronunciation. As nonnative speakers, learners might not feel confident about their pronunciation and this is an area rarely taught in their classes. Therefore, songs, movies and TV shows provide them with constant input that they seem to find beneficial.

As I started noticing a common interest in pronunciation, I carried out the online questionnaire. One of the questions was about areas of interest. Students were able to choose more than one option.
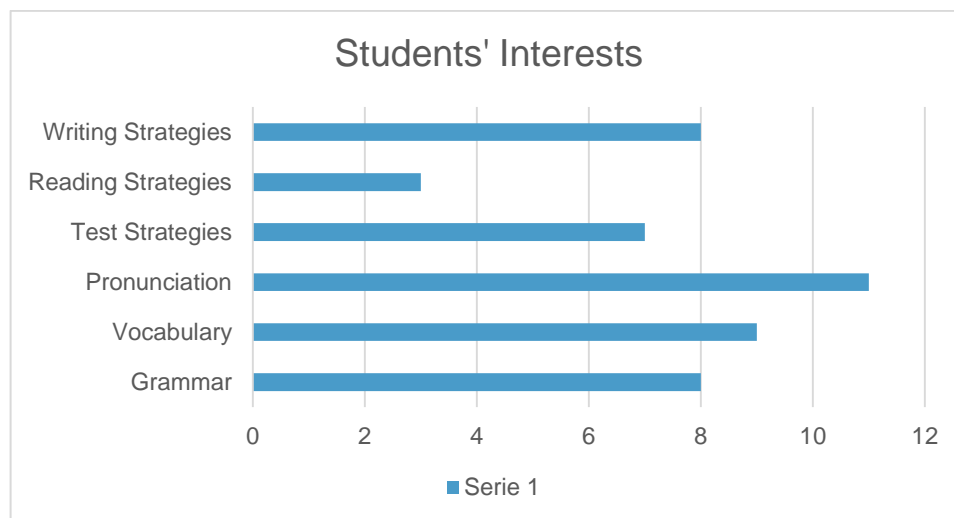
Figure 1. Students' Interests

In the results we can observe how, for the participants, the most important area to develop at this point of their learning is pronunciation. This interest is also reflected in their interviews and journal entries. However, pronunciation is frequently overlooked by English teachers in the institution. The following is an excerpt from a group interview of teachers where they talk about how they deal with pronunciation in their classes within the institution.

When dealing with pronunciation I avoid being 'enchinche y enchinche' correcting them. I think that if I overcorrect them, later they are not going to participate and they are not going to be interested in the class, so I only correct pronunciation when it affects understanding. (GIT1-G)

I think it depends on the level, in an advanced level, you don't have to be telling them how to pronounce… maybe just in basic levels and just a little… otherwise you will become annoying. (GIT1-J)

I only teach them the intonation of questions. (GIT1-A)

I just do it when it is a common error like the pronunciation of irregular verbs in past. If everybody is mispronouncing I then explain them the rules of pronunciation. (GIT1-E)

In the above excerpts, it is clear that for teachers, pronunciation is not one of the most important areas to teach in their classes. Some of them just tend to correct a little when understanding is being affected or they just deal with pronunciation when teaching general rules like regular pasts or intonation of questions; however, our students might be more concerned about it than what we actually perceive. Mass media then plays an important role because it can provide our learners with input that may have some influence on

developing students' pronunciation as long as they pay attention to it. As Krashen (1982) points out in his input hypothesis, input is a necessary condition for language learning provided that the learners pay attention to it.

In addition to cultural awareness and pronunciation, students also see benefits in other areas of their learning. The following excerpt comes from a journal entry:

> *I listen to Rihanna's music and watch "Gossip Girl"* (Savage, 2007) *and I am sure that unconsciously, I am learning too because I am processing information that is useful to improve my English like grammar, spelling, reading, etc. (J4).*

This entry shows how when reflecting upon it, students realize that learning is taking place even though it was not planned. Nevertheless, this participant is aware that what she does as leisure activities may result in language acquisition.

When students were asked about where most of their English knowledge came from, there were different responses. Some of them explained that they considered that 50% came from the English classes they had taken and 50% from things they did every day such as listening to music, watching TV and movies in English or playing video games. Some others stated that the influence of their daily activities had had a greater impact on their learning. They affirmed that 60% or 70% of what they know had come from their daily interaction with mass media while only 40% or 30% had come from their English classes. In the following interview excerpt, Lola describes where her English knowledge has come from.

> *Q: How much of the English you know has come from classes?*
> *A: Pretty much nothing*

Q: Where has it come from?

A: Daily life, music, I listen to music in English. Also TV shows, they are all in English; video games, you have to understand English in order to complete quests... So I would say it comes from daily life. (II14)

In this excerpt, the influence of mass media is evident. For Lola, the activities she does on a daily basis have had a great impact and is aware of the benefits she has enjoyed. What sounds fascinating and at the same time is worrisome is the fact that she considers that her English classes had not had a major role in her English learning. Perhaps the influence of these daily activities is stronger because of the amount of time spent doing them. In the following quote, a participant reiterates how in a large part of their time they are in contact with the language.

Mass media is part of our lifestyle. This means that every day we are in direct contact with it. We spend a big part of our day checking Facebook, listening to music in English, watching series in Netflix and with this phenomenon we are unconsciously learning, too because we are practicing grammar, spelling, reading, etc. I think media is made in way that is interesting for us, young people. They make it funny, easy and entertaining. All we do is read about gossips, watch videos in YouTube, but at the same time we are processing information that is useful to improve our English. (J4)

This excerpt describes how typical teenagers spend their day and it also provides information about why they like to do these activities. Her main interest is to be entertained and to have fun. At the same time, she acknowledges that consciously or unconsciously she is processing that amount of information and it is useful to acquire and improve her knowledge of the language, especially if we take into consideration the amount

of time during which they are in contact with the language. Carlota also wrote about the influence of mass media on her learning.

> *I think it has helped me because when I listen to a lot of English my ear*
> *becomes sensitive and I can understand better and more quickly. (J5)*

Carlota explains how being in contact with the language has helped her in developing her listening skills. Similarly, Yeny states that without this influence she would not have been able to acquire her current level of English.

> *If I had never listened to music in English or watched TV shows in English*
> *or movies and had just had the classes and I went to the United States, I*
> *wouldn't be able to communicate. (II13)*

In this excerpt, Yeni describes how the influence of mass media has been essential for her to communicate. In addition, she reiterates the idea that in English classes they do not learn to communicate. Once more, this excerpt tells us how much students rely on other sources of input to complement what they know about the language.

4.4.1 Mass Media as a Strategy for Learning

In addition to being aware of how much influence mass media has had on their learning, students also recognize that many of the strategies they use to improve are related to it. During the interviews I asked them to describe what they did in order to develop the language. In the following quote, Santiago explains it further.

For me it was watching every movie in English, every single movie. At the beginning I watched them with subtitles because I didn't understand, but then I started watching them without subtitles. (II10)

This is one of the strategies that was frequently mentioned by participants. As discussed in Chapter 2, Oxford (1993) describes language learning strategies as specific actions that are used to improve L2 skills and are important contributors to language learning. Santiago manifests his interest to learn the language by carrying out actions that in his experience have been beneficial for his language learning. Arely also cited a common strategy for her to learn vocabulary:

When there are songs that I like I look at the lyrics and if there are words I don't understand I look for the meaning. (II4)

This was another strategy frequently stated during the interviews to develop vocabulary. In in this excerpt, Arely describes the steps she takes in order to learn the meaning of words. This strategy is useful because, as it was mentioned by students, they listen to the songs they like over and over. Therefore, there is a good chance that this amount of input can become intake. In SLA, it has been frequently claimed that attention to input is necessary to become intake that is available for further mental processing (Schmidt, 2001). During her interview, Alejandra also talked about her language learning strategies.

… What has helped me the most is listening to music and watching series and movies in English with subtitles in English. It has helped in my pronunciation but also in my grammar because I pay attention to the subtitles and I learn new vocabulary. (II1)

71

Alejandra also describes the ways in which she learns new vocabulary and develops grammar. Once again in this excerpt we observe how paying attention to input seems to be essential for it to become intake. These strategies seem to be very useful, especially because it is something that students are interested in; therefore, it is something that they are much more likely to do. In her interview, Renata also gives detail of the strategies she uses.

> *What has helped me is watching movies and series in English, right now I still use subtitles in English but I want to quit the subtitles as soon as possible so I can learn better. (II12)*

One more time, they mention the subtitle-strategy. This time, Renata recognizes that she still needs to read them, but she is making the effort to use English subtitles and has the motivation to get rid of them. Perhaps being able to understand everything that is said without having to read the titles would be sign of progress for her.

In this section, we could see the influence that large amounts of input has had on the participants' knowledge and as mentioned in Chapter 2, it can be confirmed that the learners' social background is an important factor when learning a second language. Pishghadam (2011) highlights the importance of having access to cultural and social capital. In this section, the main emphasis was on cultural capital that according to Bourdieu (1986) exists in embodied state, objectified state and institutionalized state, which are explained in more detailed in Chapter 2. However, the principal focus was just on the first two because, 1) they have a disposition of body and mind; they are ready to learn using the strategies that they like and consider effective and 2) they have access to cultural goods (computers, Internet, TV, phones, tablets) that allow them to receive the necessary input they have needed to develop their language proficiency.

4.4.2 Pop Culture in the Classroom

When students were asked about the kind of activities they like to do during the class, there were different kinds of answers but some of them coincided with the preference of using sitcoms during the lesson.

> *During the class, I would like to have more activities like the one we did with "Friends"* (Kauffman & Crane, 1994). *I liked it because it is fun and I think it is the best way to learn because we are listening to the pronunciation of the native speakers in a natural setting… not in a class. (II1)*

> *I like watching videos… like when we watched the episode of "How I met your mother"* (Bays & Thomas, 2005). *We laughed a lot and then we all talked about similar situations we'd had. I liked it because it was simple and I understood everything. (II8)*

In these excerpts, it can be seen how presenting aspects of students' daily lives in class can be widely accepted. In addition, it provides students with a more natural exposure to English which according to what they have mentioned in interviews and classes they like. Students also seemed to enjoy the lack of formality that is present in sitcoms.

> *I prefer watching these parts of series in class because in the book everything is so formal and everything is related to strategies for the Cambridge exam. I like the series because it is the way people really speak in normal life. (II3)*

73

I don't like to learn very proper vocabulary, so I prefer these expressions we learned from the sitcom in today's class because it is more casual and I… sometimes I understand it better. (II2)

Once again students discuss the importance of having a more 'natural' L2 exposure. TV series and movies seem to bridge the gap between formal and informal English learning which seems to be absent from the course textbook. In addition, it develops meaningful learning which is based on students' daily experiences. This could suggest that teachers should take into account students' interest when designing and selecting teaching materials. As Goodwin (2011) points out, learning tasks should involve "a more holistic approach that pays attention to who the language learners are as cultural beings" (p. 139).

This last quote comes from my personal journal and it relates to what is stated above:

This semester, as I have been trying to conduct my research, I've also been implementing more activities using mainly segments of TV series in class. I think that as I have seen students enjoy these activities, I try to prepare them more often than it the past. What I know now about my students has made me get more involved with them. In general, I've always had a good rapport with my students but with this group, it has been different. I don't know if it is because now I know how much they care and they things they prefer to do. (PJ7)

In the quote, I describe how including the activities that they find enjoyable and beneficial made a difference in the class. As teachers, we should always pay attention to who our students are and what their interests are in order to prepare classes that are not only more appealing to them, but also more favorable for their learning.

4.5 Summary

This chapter has presented excerpts of the data gathered in interviews, questionnaires, and journal entries and has provided an analysis of them. I have illustrated how data describes the perceptions that learners have about their English classes, about the importance the language has in their lives, about the strategies they have used to acquire their current level of competence and about their preferences. In the next chapter, I will present the conclusions that are drawn from the analysis of data and theory.

Chapter V

Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The main objective of this study was to investigate the perceptions that my students had about their English learning and to examine the factors that have had a major influence on their learning progress. I would like to clarify that these findings might be specific to the particular context in which the project was carried out in; therefore, different findings could be expected in different contexts.

In this final chapter, I present the conclusions that come from the analysis of the data and theory, the key findings of the research, followed by a consideration of pedagogical implications mainly for teachers, as well as recommendations for future research. Then, the limitations of the study are assessed and the chapter concludes with a brief summary of the preceding sections.

5.2 Findings

The research question that has guided this research is:

> What are some of the factors that may influence upper-intermediate high-school students' English learning in a private educational institution in Central Mexico?

The study was carried out in the high school of *Tecnológico de Monterrey* Campus Irapuato, in an upper-intermediate group with sixteen third- and fifth-semester students. A

case study was developed in order to collect data by means of different instruments such as face-to-face interviews, group interviews, journal entries, and a questionnaire.

The research has been particularly important for me because it explores in depth the preferences that students have when it comes to learning the language; also it allowed me to get to know them better and thus discover ways in which they got more involved and engaged in the class. I found out the importance of giving them voice and bringing a little piece of their world into the class.

During this research I found that neither the institution not the teachers are paying attention to who the students are, and what they want or need. However, there is a common interest. The institution and the teachers both want students to acquire the language and the students are interested in learning it. Unfortunately, if students' interests are overlooked and not always taken into consideration, what ends up happening is that learners seem unmotivated and uninterested in what is going on in their classes.

We are living in an era where information is easily available and anything you want to learn is a couple of clicks away. You can learn practically anything you want on the Internet. Teachers have to be interested in their students if they want to get across to them. Students have to find something in their classes that is worth learning.

Another finding that came up as a strong theme during the data analysis is the use of what it is known as mass media/pop culture as source of L2 input and as strategies students adopt to enhance or improve their English learning. Almost all the participants described how they use different media to practice the language and learn more about it. The participants, for instance, stated that they watched films and TV shows in English with or without subtitles in the same language and that it helped them learn new expressions, improve their listening abilities and their pronunciation. Furthermore, they affirmed that they listened to

songs in English all the time, learned the lyrics and as a result, they learned new words, their pronunciation improved and their ears became more accustomed to the language. Some of them also mentioned that they played video games and in order to complete quests they had to read instructions in English and while doing it, they also learned new vocabulary. All these are strategies that students constantly use and have helped in their language development. As teachers, it is important to acknowledge them as strategies that work well with teenagers and are useful in learning the language and try to promote them among those who might like these kinds of resources. The use of these strategies also shows the amount of English input that is available to learners and that teachers should take it to their advantage to engage students and promote more input opportunities inside or outside the classroom.

Another finding was how students regard English as an investment for their future and how they are aware of the global importance the language has. During the interviews and in some of their journal entries, students acknowledged and stressed that proficiency in the language may open doors to better working conditions and international opportunities. Therefore, students displayed instrumental motivation that was related to the L2 motivational self-system proposed by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009). The ideal self that my students had of themselves was definitely that of a fluent bilingual person that, in their opinion, is still away from their current self, and this has pushed them to go further with their learning instead of settling down with what they already know about the language and are able to do with it. This finding interestingly contrasted with the belief that most of the English teachers in the institution hold about students because they have always regarded students as unmotivated beings who do not think speaking English may be relevant for their future and who care more about other mainstream subjects, according to what they comment in meetings. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised by this finding.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

I think that it is true that as teachers, we have to fulfill what is being required by the institutions where we work. However, we should not forget that we are dealing with human beings and that we are sharing a space and a purpose together. It is important to take the time to get to know our students and without forgetting the course and syllabus objectives, we should plan classes and tasks that are relevant for their lives. The implication here is the challenge that this poses to teachers. Our workload sometimes makes us work in 'automatic pilot'; we should not forget that teaching is, after all, a human experience.

In addition, it is usually presumed that in EFL contexts language input is restricted and sometimes limited to the English classroom; however, what could be drawn from the data is that a huge amount of L2 input is available to students in this context and as it is constant and sometimes repetitive (in the case of songs or movies previously seen). Therefore, it probably leads to intake and learning.

Ellis (2008) affirms that in an EFL context L2 has no major role in society and is learnt in the classroom setting; students, according to Ellis (ibid.), lack input opportunities. However, one of the main findings in my research shows that learners are in constant contact with the language and they have plenty of input opportunities. Furthermore, according to the learners' perceptions, this kind of input has been advantageous in their learning process.

In Chapter 2, I mentioned Long's (1983) interaction hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input and the negotiation of meaning. Perhaps, when students interact with this kind of input, they do not always obtain the negative evidence

that Long (ibid.) describes in his hypothesis; however, there is still some kind of interaction and negotiation of meaning. For example, when students are watching a movie or a TV show and they listen to an utterance, they first understand part of what was said and then they read the subtitles to confirm if what they had understood was correct or they may confirm with what the context and the scene tells them. Moreover, when they are trying to understand the lyrics of a song, they sometimes make predictions of what a word or a phrase might mean and later, they confirm their guesses when they have the opportunity to look at the lyrics. Perhaps, this kind of interaction also leads to learning.

Another implication might be related to learning strategies. Oxford (2003) affirms that if students are not encouraged or forced by the teacher or the task to use a certain set of strategies, their choice usually reflects their basic learning style. In my research, students described behaviors and activities that they carry out in their daily lives that turned out to be helpful in learning the language. These activities perhaps reflect their basic learning styles and understanding it might be beneficial to foster their learning.

Hsiao and Oxford (2002) have classified language learning strategies into seven major categories, which are described in the literature review chapter. However, the strategies described by the participants do not easily fall into any of them. Perhaps it would be necessary to add more categories to Hsiao's and Oxford's (ibid.) classification.

5.4 Limitation of the Study

One of the limitations in this research has been the number of participants involved. It would have been interesting to include other upper-intermediate groups within the same institution and even look for culturally different participants whose opinions could have provided a wider range of factors to look into.

This project was further limited by the time constraints. It took me some time to decide the kind of research I wanted to carry out and the due dates for the data gathering restrained the possibilities. Furthermore, it was not always easy to find the time to interview the participants. I also think that a second interview would have provided more valuable information to develop the themes more in depth.

The research findings of this study might have been restrained by the limitations of the instruments. The lack of experience in carrying out interviews somehow affected my first interviews. I would suggest interviewing each participant at least two times; especially after the first interviews are transcribed and the analysis begins to throw the first results. A second interview might be helpful to explore the themes that came up during the first interviews.

5. 5 Recommendation for Future Research

In my opinion, it would be interesting to carry out a similar research with students from a different context, perhaps a public high school and/or with students who have not achieved the same level of proficiency in a similar amount of time in order to know the differences in their opinions and in their attitudes towards the language. A change of context might unravel different findings and a study to lower proficiency levels can serve us as a way of comparison.

As the present study could be considered limited due to the small number of participants, it could be valuable to duplicate the research with more students in the same and in different levels.

5.6 Summary

In this chapter, I presented the conclusions that were drawn from the analysis of data and theory and the key findings of my research. I also discussed the pedagogical implications as well as the recommendations for future research and the limitations of the study. This case study discovered the potential impact of pop culture as a pedagogic device to learn English and the connection of the EFL environment with the students' individual contexts. The findings of this research open the door to more possible research in the impact that pop culture has on language learning in order to expand the ideas and findings I have presented. Furthermore, it opens the door to a deep exploration of students' instrumental motivation.

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Appendix I

Sample Interview Question

How long have you been studying English?

How satisfied are you with your current level of English

How important do you think English is?

Among the subjects you are currently taking, how would you rank English in terms of importance?

In addition to the class, what else do you do to improve?

What activities do you prefer doing in class?

What do you think of the classes you receive in the institution?

Where do you think most of your English learning has come from?

Selected Excerpts from Transcriptions

Ana Patricia

31/08/2015

T-How long have you been studying English?

AP- Like all my life… since kindergarten

T: Were you in bilingual schools?

AP – yes

T- How satisfied are you with your current level of English?

AP – I am… como se dice satisfecha?...

T: satisfied

AP: Satisfied because I have an average level… it's not low and neither high.

T: Are you satisfied like… this is enough for me or…

AP: No, I would like speaking fluently

T: In terms of skills… listening, reading, speaking and writing… which do you think is your strongest?

AP: I think writing because when I speak I … tardo mas en como acordarme de las palabras and when I write I more like… faster.

T: Do you think it is because you have more time to think… to organize your ideas?

AP: Yes

T: Which of these skills is your weakest?

AP: Maybe speaking because of the same thing. I need more time to organize the grammar.

T: Do you think English is important?

AP: Yes, very important because it opens doors to you in the world… like in the working aspect or knowing people, cultures.

T: You are taking an average of 7 or 8 subjects this semester, right?

AP: Yes

T: How would you rank English in order of importance for you?

AP: mmm Maybe in the first place because many of the subjects I will not use again and English is for all my life.

T: Do you think that every semester you progress a little or have you ever felt stuck?

AP: I think every semester I progress a little, every class there is something new.

T: What do you do, in addition to the class, to continue improving?

AP: Yes, I watch series, read articles in internet, watching videos

T: Do you do that in English?

AP: Yes

T: When you are watching series, are you aware of the language in the sense that for example if you listen to something that you didn't know, do you look for the translation or if the translation, the titles do not match what they are saying, are you like aware of those things?

AP: Yes… many times… not always, but many times I am

T: How do you feel in the class

AP: Comfortable, it is easy and it is not tough

T: What kind of activities do you prefer doing?

AP: mmmm watching videos… like when we watched the episode of friends and we were doing exercises related to it.

T: In general, how would you like the class to be?

AP: mmm I would like to use the book less because I think that …. Bueno si lo entiendo y hago los ejercicios pero como que no se me queda. Como que hay otras actividades que son más beneficiosas. Pero entiendo que es parte del programa.

T: Thanks a lot Ana Paula.

AP: Bye teacher.

Arely

20/8/15

T: Hi Aracely, how long have you been taking English classes?

A: Since I was …. (long pause) 4 years.

T: So you were in kinder… were you in a bilingual school?

A: yes

T: In kinder, elementary school and secondary school… just bilingual schools.

A: yes

T: so when you got into high school, and you took the test or the TOEFL in which level were you placed?

A: in the fourth

T: and in all these years taking English, when do you think you have made the most progress?

A: In the first semester, and in the third semester, I think that I … when I was in sixth level I progress a lot.

T: Who was your teacher back then?

A: Jayne

T: did you use a textbook? In that level?

A: No

T: No? so you did activities in class, but didn't use a textbook?

A: yes, activities like… for the project… like papers… like activities… I don't know

T: worksheets?

A: yes

T: Of the four basic skills of English, reading, listening, writing, speaking which do you think you have more developed?

A: the grammatic way and the writing

T: Why

A: because in this aspect I am… I don't know… mmm… maybe… since… when I was… in primaria…. I

T: Do you prefer to speak in Spanish?

A: Yes

96

T: Ok

T: Porqué crees que la gramática y la escritura?

A: Porque se me facilita más. Como que yo soy muy… perfeccionista en cuanto a escribir y todo eso y los acentos y todo eso.

T: Y ahora en cual de estas areas tienes mayor dificultad?

A: speaking

T: Porqué crees que sea?

A: Porqué soy muy tímida y necesito agarrar confianza

T: O tu crees que esto de ser perfeccionista afecte un poco el que tu quieras hablar de manera perfecta?

A: si

T: Y eso te detiene un poco

A: si, bueno cuando yo tenía clases particulares de ingles y con la maestra que tenía pues me agarro mucha confianza y si me pude soltar

Dario

3/9/15

T: How do you feel about your English level?

D: Estoy muy arriba de lo que debería estar.

T: ¿Te sientes en un nivel mas arriba de lo que deberías?

D: aha

T: Porque?

D: No se… es que o sea… si se como… lo que se me dificulta es hablarlo.

T: ah… este nivel es mas arriba de lo que tu deberías estar

D: aha

T: A ti te gustaría estar en un nivel más abajo.

D: si

T: ¿Por qué crees que estas aquí?

D: no se jajaja pues porque me fue bien en el TOEFL en la secundaria

T: y ¿Por qué te fue bien?

D: le eche ganas jajaja

T: Ya… honestamente

D: Si, le eche ganas en secundaria y aquí pues no le echo ganas.

T: ¿Por qué no le echas ganas?

D: Pues si le echas ganas al TOEFL pero aquí no me salen los puntos

T: Al TOEFL y a las clase?

D: De repente no, de repente si soy muy flojo y me hace mucha falta hablarlo.

T: Eso es la parte de tu nivel dentro de la escuela pero como te sientes con lo que tu puedes hacer con el idioma?

D: ah bien.

T: Te sientes satisfecho con tu nivel de inglés?

D: mas o menos porque se me dificulta el tener una conversación con alguien.

T: Porqué crees que sea?

D: No se.

T: ¿Qué crees que te ayudaría?

D: platicarlo, hablarlo.

T: Y ¿Por qué no lo haces?

D: Porque no puedo hablarlo.

T: es como un círculo vicioso. ¿Qué tan importante es el inglés en tu futuro?

D: Pues mucho porque te ayuda a desempeñarte mucho… osea si tienes un negocio te ayuda a entender más porque puede ser que llegue alguien y pues tu tienes que hablar y que el otro no sepa hablar en español y el inglés es el básico, es como el estándar de todos.

Vanessa

19/8/15

T: How long ago did you begin learning English?

V: I began learning English when I was in Kindergarden. So it is about… well, since I was in… since I entered to school… I think I was… I am not sure, but I think… basically all my life.

T: And you were in bilingual schools?

V: Yes, since I was little.

T: When you got here, in which level were you placed?

V: I started in level 6.

T: How do you feel with your current level of English?

V: I feel very well… right now I'm kind of confuse because I didn't take English for a year because I was taking French. Well, so I'm kind of forgetting things.

T: Why did you come back to English?

V: It was just because the day they present the TOEFL, I didn't assist so they automatically get me back to English.

T: And how do you feel about it?

V: I feel that is good because I am not very interested in French and I like more English so I found it very interesting and it is really helping me to learn some stuff that I had forgotten.

T: What are your goals for the language?

V: I expect myself to speak like… very good English. I consider myself capable of having a conversation but I want to take it to another level.

T: do you think that you still have a long way to go?

V: I think it is not a long way, but I think I have some small steps that I have to take, so I can improve my level.

T: How important is English for your future?

V: I think it is very important because any career you want to study they always ask for another language and sometimes it is like obligatory the second language and sometimes the third one is like a requirement also. When I finish high school I want to have a perfect English so I can start with another language and finish my career with three languages.

T: To achieve a 'perfect' English or a high proficiency level, what do you think you need to do?

V: I think I have to read more. I normally read a lot in English but sometimes the kind of lectures I read in Spanish and in English are kind of different, I mean the level of comprehension is quite different because I am not capable of understanding some stuff in English like I do in Spanish so I think I have to look for books that are more difficult to understand and with some other words so I can like increase the amount of vocabulary I've got.

T: Of the areas of English: grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking… which do you think you have to develop more?

V: Reading and comprehension

Geraldine

24/8/15

T: How long have you been studying English?

G: Studying English? Since primary but in fifth grade.

T: And in primary school were you in a bilingual school?

G: Yes, in Kipling, but before of that I was in a school with no English.

T: How did you feel when you were in Kipling that is a bilingual school and three hours of the day are in English and you didn't know any English?

G: At first I felt confuse because I didn't know, but I took some classes before school to practice and to learn more.

T: How do you feel with your current level of English?

G: Well I think that is not good when I speak like confuse. I have some mistakes but to write or to understand I think it is good.

T: Are you satisfied with your level?

G: That level I have?

T: yes

G: Yes, I think yes.

T: Do you still want to improve more or you are happy as it is?

G: No, I want to improve more my English.

T: What are your goals?

G: To 'dominar' to dominate English as good as I can.

T: Do you think English will be useful for your future?

G: Yes, because in all jobs or in a company I have to… If I want like a good job I have to talk English so it is important for me.

T: So besides the English class, what do you do in order to improve your level?

G: Now nothing, before I took the classes to understand more.

T: So took like private classes?

G: yes

T: Now you don't do anything? Just the class?

G: yes

T: Do you think that is enough?

G: What means enough?

T: suficiente

G: No, I think no because I have to practice more but I want to improve my English so I will start to take classes I think or practice more.

Appendix III

Questionnaire Results

Figure 1. Uses of English
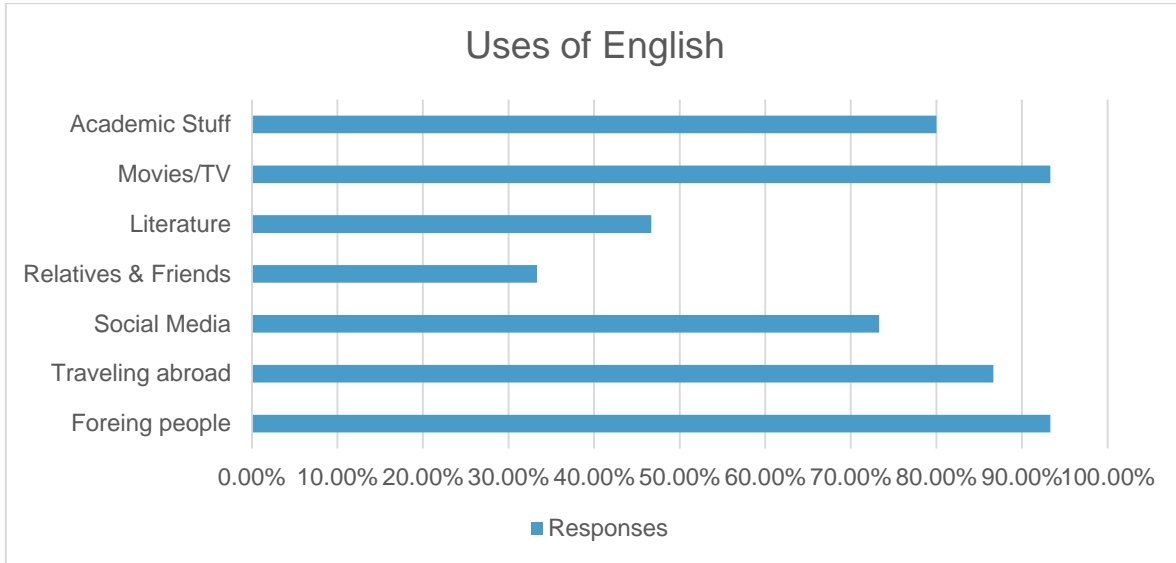
Uses of English

Figure 2. Reasons to Learn English

Reasons to Learn English
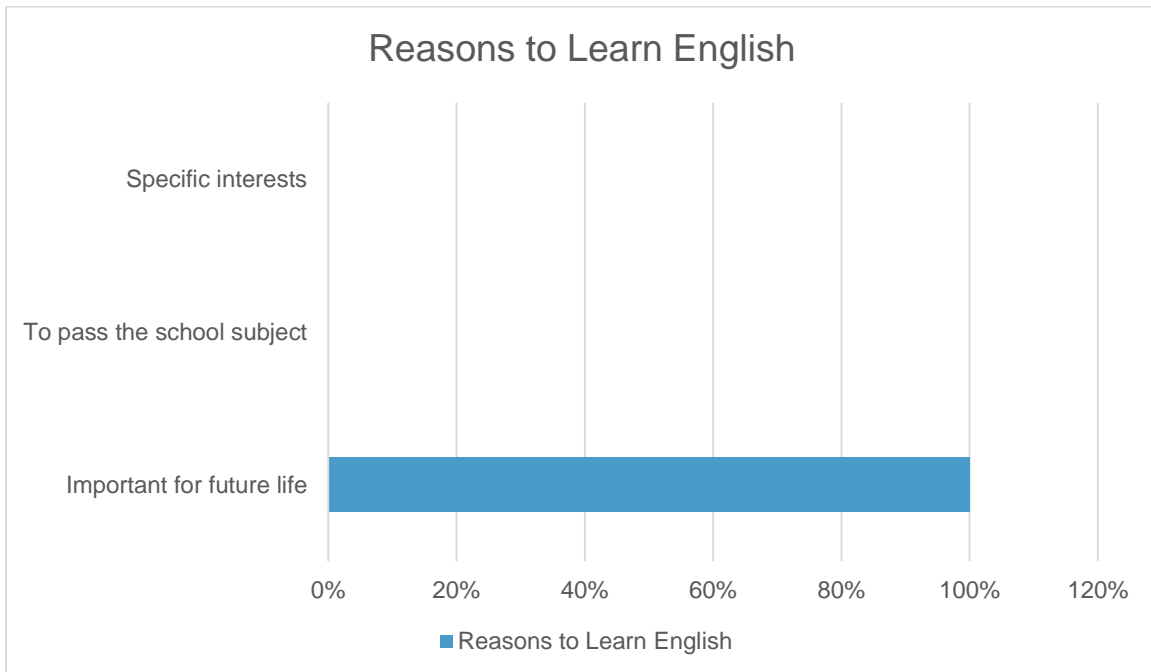
Figure 3. Importance of English
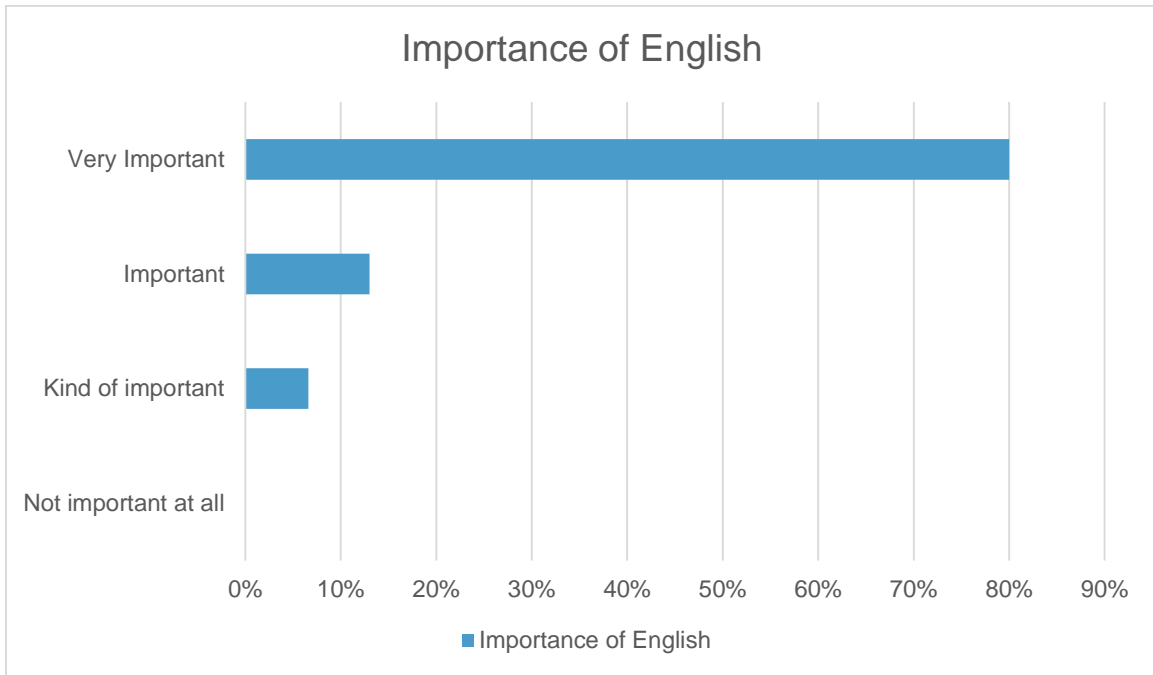
Figure 4. What Students Want to Learn in Class
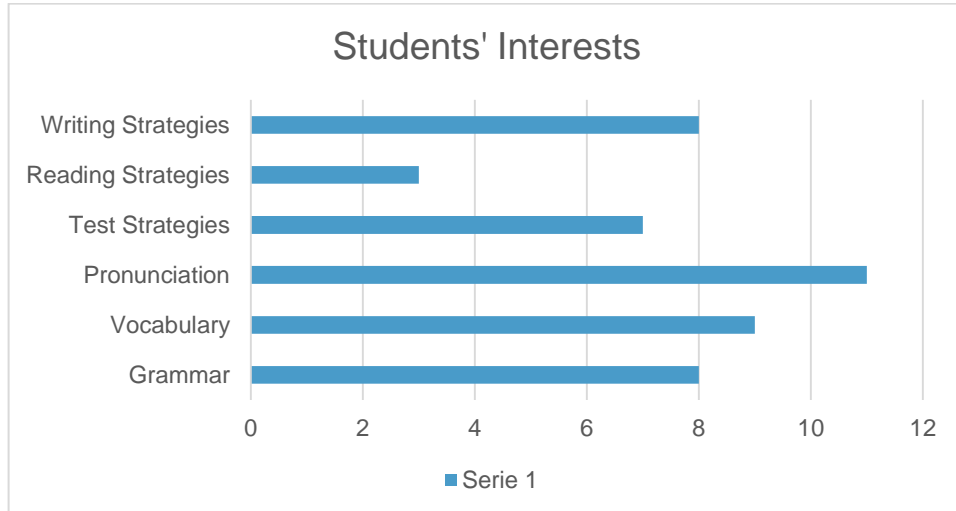
Figure 5. About the Textbook

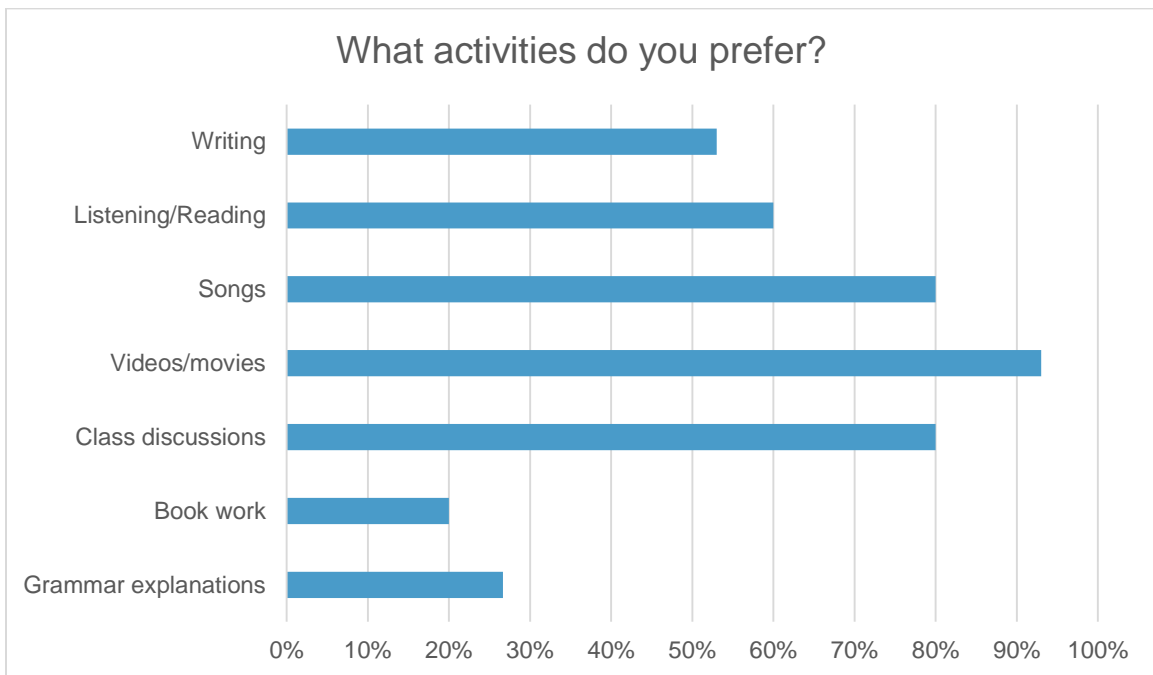## How much do you like using the textbook in class

Category	Percentage
Much	~7%
Pretty much	~13%
Not that much	~60%
Not at all	~3%
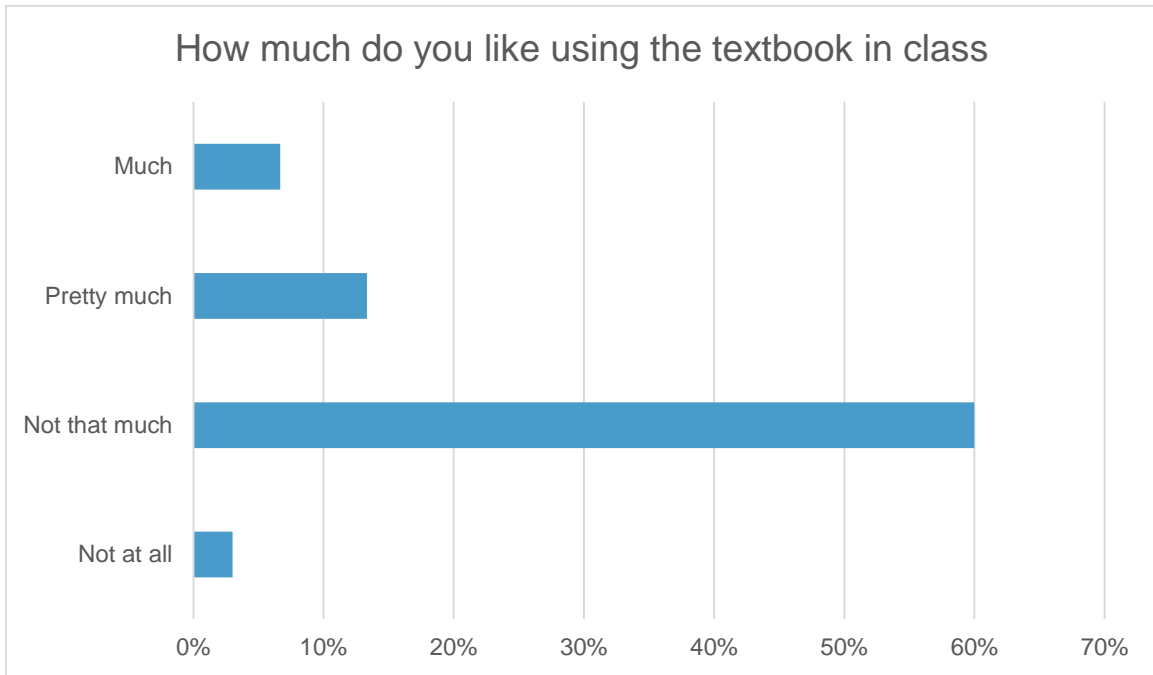
Figure 6. What Students Want to Do in Class

What activities do you prefer?

Activity	Percentage
Writing	~52%
Listening/Reading	~60%
Songs	~79%
Videos/movies	~93%
Class discussions	~79%
Book work	~20%
Grammar explanations	~27%

How I have changed as a teacher

This semester, as I have been trying to do my research, I've also been implementing more activities using mainly TV series in class. I think that I have seen & sts enjoy this activities I try to prepare them a bit more often than in the past. What I & know now about my students has made me get more involved with them. In general, I've always had good rapport with my student but with this group it has been different. I don't know if it is because I know than even Though they seem distracted most of them care and want to improve

13/08/15

I haven't decided yet on my research question, but I was thinking in doing something related to what happens when students hit a plateau. In my opinion, as they progress in the language, there is a moment when they do not notice progress or it's more difficult to see it; therefore, they might feel frostated and unmotivated to keep taking the class. But as it is mandatory they have to continue with the language and obviouly they start having attitude

I've decided to change my research.
I realize now that what I had chosen
was because I didn't have a group, but
now I've just begun an upper intermedia-
te group and although so far their
attitude has been great I'm remem-
bering that at this level students
seem to be fed up with the
language. It's like they already
know the language and most of
them are able to use it well, so
they don't make the extra effort
to take their language to another
level and as they can't start with
French because they are stuck
~~with~~ because of the TOEFL

17/08/15

One of question possible for
the research is
"How do upper intermediate
sts deal with their plateau/
fossilization"
I'm still with the idea of doing
something related to fossilization.
However, I don't know because
what I have noticed so far with
my students is that they are
actually pretty good. I guess they
have fossilized errors but it
might be difficult to detct them.
In addition. I don't want to
carry out a quantitative research.

After having interviewed some of my students I have noticed one thing. It's pretty clear that what we teacher think and what they think is very different.

In general, teacher have the believe that students are not interested in learning English, that they care more about the other subjects than English. However, I have seen that for them English is one of the most important subjects and is the one that they will make a difference and will keep using in the future. Therefor

After transcribing the interviews and reading them, there is one theme in particular that comes strongly in the data. That is the use of pop culture as an strategy to enhance learning. And I hadn't thought much about it, but now that I come to think about it I realize that students are surrounded by the language through the music they listen to and the movies and programs they watch. I think that students are not completely aware of how much they have learned without noticing.

Last week I prepared an activity that I enjoy a lot because students got really engaged. The main reason behind their engagement was that I offered an extra point for the final partial exam but in addition I think they really enyoyed it.

~~I~~ The activity was in trios and its focus was to practice 2nd conditional. In Youtube there is a video with some scenes of the bing bang theory in which they say a 2nd conditional sentence. So I told them they had to write all the 2nd conditional sentences and

For me pop culture has helped me alot in my english improvement because I am a very auditive person, so listening music and watching movies or tv shows I learn more than in a text book because I can hear how americans or british people actually speak in a no-formal way as we do in a regular english class so when I travel or speak with americans I can understand better to them.

Pop culture like music, movies and social media have influenced my progress of English a lot because I always listen to music in English and that helps my pronunciation and fluidity get better, most of the time I watch series and movies in English without subtitles and that helps improve my vocabulary and have a better pronunciation, social media is always bringing me information such as articles in English and that helps me improve my grammar and comprehension.

Pop culture has a good impact in learning and improving another language like English because without even knowing you are learning and it's not boring because it is interesting to you.

Pop culture are the ideas, knowledge, opinions that the major part of the society have. The pop culture is able to talk about a tedious topic in a easy way. For example: in a documental lasting 30 minutes you can talk about the hundred years war.

I think that pop culture have been influencing our english progress through the media (TV, music, movies, facebook, etc), because these mass media are part of our lifestyle. This means that every day we're in directly contact with it. We waste part of our day cheking facebook, listening Riananna's music, watching gossip girl and this phenomenon unconsiciously we are learning, too. Because we're practicing grammor, spelling, reading, etc.

The pop culture purpose is to achieve that young saiety shows interest in subjects that concerns to everybody. So it makes more funnier, easier through the information gossip, videos on youtube, documentaries, reports, etc. But at the same time we're processing the information that is useful to improve our english in grammor, written, etc.

• Bibliography: mosable.com /category /pop-culture/.

J4

113

For us being able to speak english open us a door for better jobs, it is a big opportunity that we have right now. Also when we travel is eassier for us to comunicate with other people around the world because english is a universal languge and almost everyone understands it.

English is one of the best investments for the future. All this due to the fact that is the oficial language of the whole world. If you travel to any place you communicate in English. Doesn't matter if they speak another language. Everybody ~~also~~ speaks
↑
Nowadays
english. It is a necessity. When you are looking for a job you realize that in every place they ask for that language. It s remmarkable how much a salary increaces when you are able to speak English. It is an investment that will give you a lot in a future.

We think that English is the best investment for our future, because it is important nowdays to know more than one language to have a good ~~job~~. English as a subjects helps us to develop our english improvements.
We consider this language as a useful tool to have more opportunities in the works force, also to travel to another country.
English the best investment we can make in our life as a students ~~e~~ to our future, for that reason we need to work to achieve it.

I think pop culture has influenced in my progress of English really hard, because a teens daily life is just about interact with music in different languages not Justin Spanish, TV. That includes programs the ones are not always in Spanish, movies the ones from my point view sound better in English than translated and social media that is connected with all the world and Spanish is not the only language in the world.

It is interesting how we (from my point of view and decisions) sometimes prefer movies or series in English because the translation sounds fake or false and in the original language, which is English, sounds definitely better. Interacting daily with these cases is how pop culture has helped me with my English, and I have learned a bit more of pronunciation and stuff like bad words or common English words the ones I do not learn at school.

In these times the pop culture is something common, or maybe normal for all people, and even more for young people, this help us and makes our life easier than before, now days we have all the information we need in the internet media only with one "click" thanks to this we can improve more our English idiom, we can watch movies, tv shows, cartoons, songs, with subtitles to know how it is writting or what it is from some words we don't know. An other thing that help us to improve is listen to music, and we can search the lyrics to know what is about the song if we do not understand it.

In these times the pop culture is normal for the young people. It makes ~~more~~ ~~easy~~ ~~our~~ ~~our~~ ~~life~~ our life easier than before, now days we have all the information we need with one "click";

Thanks to this we can improve more our English idéom, we can watch movies, series, tv shows, with subtitles to know how is writing or spelling some words, we can lisent to music, and we can search the lyrics to know what is about the song if we do not understand.

In these times the pop culture is something common, or maybe normal for all people, and even more for young people, this helpsus and makes our life easier than before, now days we have all the information we need in the internet media with only one "click".

Units of Meaning Table

For me it was watching every movie in English, every single movie. At the beginning I watched them with subtitles because I didn't understand, but then I started watching them without subtitles.	Listening to music was the best way to learn the language. You won't believe me but I actually learn more playing video games on line and listening to all the American people talking, I even recognize the accents they have than what I learn in class.	I was an exchange student for a year and it was the most influential thing for my current level.
for grammar school, but everything else from videogames. Things such as slangs, vocabulary and pronunciation... video games.	From movies I learned pronunciation and vocabulary and in classes I could understand how grammar works.	The movies help you to listen to the pronunciation and at school, they focus on the grammar. In class, I prefer less grammar and more pronunciation, vocabulary.
English is useful to communicate with almost everyone.	It is going to be useful because I plan to have a job in the US, so I will need to speak fluent English	I think reading is what has helped me develop the language the most and understand more.
I watch movies and TV series with English subtitles and I think that has helped me a lot. I don't use subtitles in Spanish anymore.	The English class has helped me but I think that the other classes that we have in English also help because we learn vocabulary of math or of science	What I like is playing online games in English because English is like the universal language. I play with people from the classroom for example, but I also play with people I don't know and it is all in English.
Almost all the English I know has come from outside the class.	I think that from all the English I know 60% is grammar, writing that we learn in class and the other 40% is the things I hear listening to music or movies. At school we learn the basics and outside school we learn real English.	I think 70% percent of the English I know comes from outside the class because we learn to express ourselves like other people and not just like grammar structures... like really express ourselves and what we think. And at school everything is very structured and it doesn't sound natural.
If I had never listened to music in English or watched TV shows in English or movies and had just had the classes and I went to the United States, I wouldn't be able to communicate. In classes, they teach us the language but they don't teach us how to use it or how to talk.	We will have more job opportunities if we speak the language well.	I want to learn it. It is not just a requirement.
I don't like when teachers give us long lists of vocabulary. I remember when a teacher gave us a list of British vocabulary that was very difficult and I think British English is not that necessary.	A teacher once made a reading activity for the final exam and he said it was a 6th grade activity from elementary school but it was like 6th grade of university. But in class we never did anything like that. We couldn't understand anything.	I learn a lot in Internet when I see videos or movies in English. I think that is the way I have learned the most.

Appendix VII

Letter of Informed Consent

Universidad de Guanajuato

A QUIEN CORRESPONDA
PRESENTE.

Por la presente me permito presentar a usted a SUSANA VANEGAS URIOSTEGUI, estudiante de la Maestría en Lingüística Aplicada a la Enseñanza del Inglés, en la División de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades de la Universidad de Guanajuato, quien actualmente cursa la materia de "Estancia Profesional I" bajo mi dirección, en el Departamento de Lenguas. Como parte de las exigencias del curso, los estudiantes deben realizar un proyecto de investigación profesional.

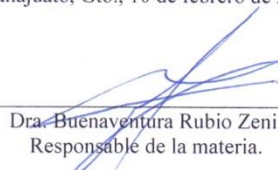Por lo anterior, ruego a usted darle las facilidades para realizar algunas de las siguientes actividades:

- aplicar encuestas y/o cuestionarios, a alumnos y/o a maestros,
- entrevistar a estudiantes, maestros y/o a algunos miembros del personal de la Institución
- filmar clases

Cabe señalar que estas actividades tienen como único fin, el que los estudiantes apliquen en un proyecto de investigación, los conocimientos adquiridos durante el curso en las diferentes materias. Los datos recabados serán tratados con suma discreción y respetando los principios de ética que exige cualquier investigación de tipo cualitativo y en ningún momento serán utilizados con fines ajenos a los del proyecto mismo.
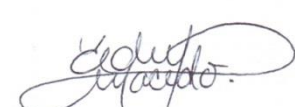
Agradeciendo de antemano su apoyo a nuestros estudiantes, aprovecho la ocasión para saludarle cordialmente.

ATENTAMENTE.
"LA VERDAD OS HARÁ LIBRES"
Guanajuato, Gto., 10 de febrero de 2015.

Dra. Buenaventura Rubio Zenil
Responsable de la materia.

V°. B°. Dra. Arasema Mora Pablo
Coordinadora de la Maestría en Lingüística
Aplicada a la Enseñanza del Inglés

Dirección de Idiomas.
Preparatoria y Profesional.
Tec de Monterrey Campus Irapuato.