The Relevance of UDL in English Language Beginners

Kendall Barboza Jiménez, Keylin Saborio Barrantes

Abstract - **As teachers considering teaching English learners beginners a challenge and the lack of studies regarding the implementation of UDL principles in EFL classrooms, this paper aims at fostering teachers and educational institutions to implement the UDL principles in the English teaching classrooms by providing a relationship among the English beginners learners' proficiency level, the Krashen's input hypothesis in second language learning, and the relevance of the UDL principles in enhancing the language learning process of English beginning learners. In the same line, the background of English beginners' proficiency level, an introduction to UDL principles, and a synthesis of the implementation of UDL principles in EFL lessons to enhance beginning learners' learning process are portrayed in this research paper as a solution to the gap found in the English teaching/learning in Costa Rica, where UDL principles may not be being applied in order to have learners exposed to comprehensible input and English language.**

Keywords - beginners, English as a foreign language, input, motivation, universal design for learning.

Resumen - Debido a que las personas docentes consideran la enseñanza del inglés a estudiantes principiantes un reto y la falta de estudios sobre la implementación de los principios del DUA en las aulas de EFL, este artículo busca alentar a las personas docentes e instituciones educativas a implementar los principios del DUA en las aulas de inglés al proveer una relación entre el nivel de competencia de las personas estudiantes principiantes de inglés, la hipótesis de Krashen sobre el input en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua y la relevancia de los principios del DUA en el mejoramiento del proceso de aprendizaje de idiomas de las personas principiantes.

En la misma línea, los antecedentes del nivel de competencia de las personas estudiantes principiantes de inglés, una introducción a los principios del DUA y una síntesis de la implementación de los principios del DUA en las clases de EFL para mejorar el proceso de aprendizaje de las personas principiantes del inglés son representados en este artículo de investigación como una solución a la brecha encontrada en la enseñanza/aprendizaje del inglés en Costa Rica donde es posible que los principios del DUA no se estén aplicando para mantener a las personas estudiantes expuestas al *comprehensible input* y el idioma inglés.

Palabras Clave - principiantes, inglés como lengua extranjera, input, motivación, diseño universal para el aprendizaje.

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to beginners is a challenge since the English as a foreign language (EFL) learning process starts due to learners being approached and introduced to the target language without having any notion of the language. The major challenge to beginners is speaking English because there is no linguistic competence in the learners that may help them understand simple instructions and explanations. As Quesada Pacheco, et al. (2023) [1] mentioned, even though every modality is ruled by the same program, only night high schools, rural high schools, CINDEA, IPEC, CONED, or virtual high schools had the lowest performance due to the limited time of learners' exposure to the target language and classwork. This highlights the importance of having students surrounded by the target language during the English classes where teachers play an essential role for learners to develop their linguistic knowledge while providing comprehensible input and authentic tasks.

As a result of different issues occurring in the learning process, a new approach to enrich the inclusivity in the classrooms and to diminish learning barriers emerged. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) brings three key principles to consider when designing and planning classes where learners' obstacles can be minimized in their learning process. UDL allows teachers to have students engaged, to bring multiple means of content and ideas representation, and to encourage students to choose how they could express their knowledge (Couros & Novak, 2019) [2]. In EFL, the integration of inclusivity,

which UDL states, is important to explore the language, and to reinforce and develop new linguistic skills. This occurs due to learners acting as social agents during the classroom and interacting from their different perceptions and ways of thinking.

The non-existence of a variety of effective strategies or techniques that support the UDL principles to facilitate the language learning in beginner learners makes it complicated for teachers to avoid the use of the mother tongue during the classes. In classroom interchanges where students are exposed to authentic oral language, an interrelation of academic and social requirements occurs; hence, teachers have to foster the language accessibility for the development of tasks. In other words, it is a requirement that teachers bring opportunities based on the UDL guidelines for learners to practice and experiment with the language in order to address communication (Rice Doran, 2015) [3]. Furthermore, the lack of opportunities to create English environments is due to not considering learners' circumstances–learning styles, multiple intelligences, identity, and learners' reality. All these factors may influence language learning, and teachers are not concerned about these implications. Rao and Torres (2016) [4] stated that UDL helps teachers to bring support to their language learners while they can consider learners' different ways of getting engaged and motivated to learn the target language. This portrays a gap where the principles are underestimated, and it can be perceived in the English Language Teaching. Moreover, while gathering information for this research paper, the researchers noticed a lack of studies regarding UDL in the EFL classrooms. UDL, thus, may enhance the input learning, task-carrying, and motivation development in English language learning beginners.

II. IMPORTANCE OF COMPREHENDING ENGLISH BEGINNER'S REALITY

A. *Beginners' Proficiency Level*

Regarding the management of a learner's proficiency level, it is vital to comprehend the reality of English beginners inside the classroom. At first, the curriculum limitations within the educational system refer to what learners are asked to accomplish in comparison to what learners can accomplish. According to the Ministerio de Educación Pública [MEP] (2016) [5], "Reaching A2 concluding the second cycle and B1 at the end of diversified education is a goal that the curriculum is expecting learners to achieve" (p. 5). However, Sevilla (2017) [6] stated that reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary skills are usually the ones teachers are limited to teach. This makes the teacher adapt the tasks

and the curriculum in a low proficiency level for learners to accomplish the corresponding goals of the curriculum; as a consequence, it minimizes learners' opportunities to learn English progressively. On the other hand, the affectation of the proficiency level for the physical environment and the exposure to English may be currently present in English beginners' reality. The space in which learners perform the tasks is important because it is necessary for them to have a comfortable and secure environment. It may help learners to feel free and have the necessary resources to develop their English skills. Likewise, starting to learn a new language implies being exposed to the target language as long as it is possible. Al Zouvi (2018) [7] in his studies stated that the English exposure involves learners in the English language and improves levels of proficiency. Nevertheless, in most high schools, the English exposure is limited or may not be present. As Rodriguez and Roux (2012) [8] affirmed, the mother tongue is used in most English classes instead of the target language. Due to the lack of exposure to English in the EFL context, learners may be restricted in the development of their English skills when they are beginners in the language. In summary, the combinations of curricular limitations, and the lack of exposure hinders the appropriate development of beginners' proficiency level.

B. *Second Language Learning*

Furthermore, learning about second language learning gives a profound insight of English beginners' language learning process. One of the relevant hypotheses regarding second language learning is the input hypothesis, where Krashen (1981) [9] remarked the importance of having learners exposed to comprehensible input and extra-linguistic knowledge. Indeed, Krashen brings other five hypotheses that are intrinsically related to the input learning and production of output, which are the acquisition-learning, natural order, monitor, input, and affective filter. These hypotheses portray how input is processed and how other factors (affective filter) affect the delivery of output, which permits teachers to understand the language learning process of beginning learners. On the other hand, assessing learners' attitude towards the English learning process and identifying learners' types of motivation might help teachers understand beginners' proficiency level. First, it is important to recognize the definition of attitude and motivation. According to Goméz Torres and Molina Márquez (2021) [10], attitude is the impulse learners have toward language learning. It means that learners with attitude may achieve the goal of learning a target language, but motivation is the desire of learning the language in order to satisfy a goal. Moreover, Goméz

Torres and Molina Márquez (2021) [10] explained the four types of motivation: Intrinsic motivation; learning the language for joyful purposes, extrinsic motivation; learning the language as a demand, integrative motivation; learning the language to communicate and be part of a community, and instrumental motivation; learning the language to reach personal goals. Therefore, knowing about second language learning, attitude, and motivation drives teachers in the understanding of beginning learners' proficiency level so that they can plan and execute lessons accordingly to learners' needs and backgrounds.

III. RELEVANCE OF UNDERSTANDING UDL PRINCIPLES

A. Multiple Ways of Engaging

UDL is a teaching approach that promotes inclusivity in the classrooms. UDL provides three remarkable principles: multiple ways of engaging, multiple ways of representation, and multiple ways of acting and expressing. These principles allow teachers to consider learners' needs when planning their lessons. In the case of the first principle, engaging students in multiple ways may foster active learning, activate learners' schemata, and enhance motivation through the use of different techniques. Wellington Rollins (2019) [11] visualized engagement as a drive to empower learners in the creation of their own learning while presenting engagement for listening, reading, observing, and consuming, but he considered empowerment as the opportunity for speaking, writing, interacting, and creating. Namely learners need to listen first in order to start creating their learning. However, learners' engagement might depend on the objective or goals that learners have towards language learning. In other words, active learning in the class environment may happen if learners are engaged by an objective and empowered with opportunities to create their own learning. Furthermore, to promote active learning and motivation towards language learning and to activate learners' schemata, teachers should consider different techniques that engage and empower learners. Hiver, et al. (2021) [12] mentioned that many techniques that promote engagement in the learning environment are closely related to technology where gamification is the means of learning. A variety of techniques used to engage beginning learners could involve technology, for students of the 21st century are interested in the use of technology, and instead of having technology in the classroom as a disadvantage, teachers should use it as a tool to promote significant learning and input.

B. Multiple Ways of Representing Information

Acknowledging learning styles in the classroom, considering learners' multiple intelligences, and emphasizing the importance of didactic resources are fundamental aspects to bring multiple ways to represent information to learners. The learning process requires an extreme contribution from the teacher and the learner. Because teachers are surrounded by different personalities and realities, it is necessary to acknowledge learners' styles to achieve a meaningful integration and contextualization of knowledge. Zuñiga and Alvarado (2023) [13] stated that implementing different ways of learning considering learners' styles makes learners feel comfortable and included in the learning process, noticing that teachers pay attention to their needs. By doing this, English beginners start learning the new language without feeling frustrated during the process because they will have the chance to learn in the way that is easier for them. The way in which multiple intelligences play an important role in learners' learning process is another aspect to consider. As stated by More the one, the Multiple Intelligences Theory refers to eight different intelligences of which people are cognitively capable. Those intelligences are composed of visual-spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical, and naturalistic (Armstrong, 2009) [14]. Knowing that contemplating learning styles and multiple intelligences when planning creates an effective and inclusive educational environment, teachers would recognize learners' ways to perform tasks. In the same line, when building inclusive and effective classes, it is vital to consider different didactic resources as tools for teachers to provide meaningful and inclusive classes. The use of interactive resources may motivate learners while they are learning a foreign language. Additionally, they would notice that learning a foreign language can be developed by using different methods according to their learning styles (Cruz Rondón & Velasco Vera, 2016) [15]. It is of no consequence what types of materials teachers use –online, handmade, bought– to implement in the classroom; the key focus is how teachers would apply those tools to be inclusive and effective in their English class.

C. Multiple Ways of Acting and Expressing

Part of teaching a new language in a classroom is to understand how the learners process input to act and express in multiple ways.

Differentiated instruction reflexes on learning opportunities while learners are developing their skills before having received the content of new ideas (Tomlinson, 2001) [16]. Likewise, UDL reflects on

learners' autonomy in deciding on the moment that they start performing a task. Even though they share this goal, differentiated classrooms focus on the product of the learners' reflection and what they could do (Tomlinson, 2001) [16]. Compared to UDL, UDL considers the process of learning before reaching a goal because its focus is on what students do or had to do to accomplish a better proficiency level, considering abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and realities of each of the beginning learners.

One of the strategies to follow this UDL principle considering its focus on the learners' process is scaffolding. The idea of scaffolding is mainly to teach learners how to learn and apply what they learned, and it is necessary to break into small pieces the tasks in a considerable way to help learners at the beginning (Novak, 2016) [17]. Introducing the different tasks to the learners in a simpler and more understandable way without overloading the learners with much information since the beginning would permit them to perform the next tasks more easily. Novak (2016) [17] proved that reading requires the background knowledge of the learner first. Then, it demands making assumptions about the reading, the learners' thinking, and the teachers' monitoring of the process. This is a clear example of the development of tasks in which learners get involved in every step with the reading, allowing them to better understand the context. Given this, it is likely that learners can acquire enough knowledge and strategies to produce in English and accomplish their goals.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF IMPLEMENTING UDL FOR ENGLISH BEGINNER LEARNERS

A. Input Learning in Multiple Ways

In order for beginning learners to build their linguistic competence, the implementation of UDL provides agile and enhanced input learning, task carrying, and motivation development in EFL classrooms. The use of UDL allows learners to acquire input in multiple ways in order to build their linguistic competence. Nevertheless, the input should be i+1 as Krashen (1981) [9] stated; learners should be exposed to extra linguistic knowledge and complex input where they can use their own learned input. In the same line, the use of teaching resources is another important aspect when having learners exposed to the target language. Moreover, teaching resources should teach learners how to learn and take them to use the target language outside the classroom (Howard & Major, 2004) [18]. Online teaching resources are a useful tool for teachers and learners. Online teaching resources introduce learners to using the target language inside and outside the classroom while applying the blended learning technique. Lopez Morales and Barboza Jimenez (2024) [19] explained that the use of blended learning allows learners to acquire input because learners do not

feel frustrated on finishing the assignment and could work at their own pace. Therefore, not only do teachers have to expose learners to complex input during the classes but also provide didactic resources that permit learners to be immersed in the target language.

In addition, it is essential that teachers learn about providing feedback according to the UDL framework. Feedback should be flexible in learners choosing the type of feedback they want –verbal or written– and at the same time, give options where learners can make use of the feedback provided (Novak 2016) [17]. This may create rapport towards learners and teachers while the teacher praises learners for working hard. However, there are some critics regarding the implementation of the UDL framework in the curriculum. Many argue that UDL requires more resources, for example time and training, which leads to a lack of acknowledgement regarding the UDL principles. Scott (2018) [20] detailed that teachers considered UDL as a new concept and, consequently, they were not trained in their preparation process. Sadly, many institutions have few teachers trained in implementing UDL in their lesson plans or curricula.

B. UDL in Task Development

The implementation of UDL provides a useful development of the tasks. UDL allows flexibility to English beginners to perform tasks. Instead of receiving guidance from the teacher all the time to create a product, UDL provides the option to the learners of choosing how they want to work to achieve the objective. Rao and Torres (2016) [4] documented that "UDL guidelines highlight ways in which students can be offered choices and options that engage and give them opportunities to practice component skills as they progress toward mastery" (p. 461). In this case, English beginners may build their knowledge based on their experience and their own way to learn. To illustrate, learners can watch and analyze some images and develop an idea by performing it in a short recording to learn new vocabulary. Then, after recording the video, they would analyze aspects to improve to start doing a writing task (Rao & Torres, 2016) [4]. Thus, it enables learners to evaluate their one process while developing the tasks. Afterwards, beginners would recognize strengths and aspects to improve. The support of scaffolding for beginners in the UDL framework is essential to promote integration and inclusion in the classroom. As the author mentioned, "all students should have the opportunity to complete difficult tasks. The art of teaching is making those tasks reachable" (Novak, 2016, p. 62) [17]. By using scaffolding, neither do students feel excluded nor do they feel frustrated when not comprehending a task or content. UDL allows learners to build new ideas by giving opinions in order to increase their knowledge.

Furthermore, students should feel recognized and taken into account while they are being monitored by their teacher and on their own because the focus will be on the English beginner's process and not on the product.

However, dealing with large groups is a demand in order to be inclusive in the classroom because it is difficult for teachers to identify the needs of each learner. As claimed by Zuñiga and Alvarado (2023) [13], it is important that teachers provide the content individually where learners may be able to acquire knowledge effectively from the first stage of the class. In different words, teachers need to find a way to identify those learners' needs and give feedback individually to help beginners to improve their proficiency level. Because teachers cannot help learners due to having many students in a single class, it is challenging to be able to consider learning styles and multiple intelligences for optimal language learning.

C.   UDL in Motivation Development

As English beginners are building their language knowledge, motivation plays an important role. UDL empowers motivation development in the learning process. The implementation of UDL makes teachers encourage learners to develop the tasks. Being inclusive within the classroom, learners might build their self-confidence and begin to use the language for communication or other purposes. Language being approachable drives learners to develop language skills in their growing and learning process and, in addition, to reinforce social skills and integration in an environment which the learner is surrounded by (Rice Doran, 2015) [3]. Additionally, as claimed by Krashen (1981) [9], learning for study purposes, new opportunities, or exploring the culture of that language are possible goals defined for specific motivation (i.e. instrumental, integrative, intrinsic). That is, through the principles of UDL, teachers promote motivation to use the language by recognizing the learners' goals. Subsequently, it is important to create a space in which learners can interact as social agents within the language as fostering autonomy through the guidance of establishing their own goals and the developing of their own strategies to perform the tasks. The author agrees when she writes "the UDL Guidelines remind teachers to provide options for recruiting interest and note the importance of optimizing individual choice and autonomy" (Novak, 2016, p. 45) [17]. This would allow flexibility and integrity during the English beginners' learning process.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The effect of UDL on EFL beginner learners has brought relevant elements on input learning by providing comprehensible input in multiple ways of representation, task-carrying in giving flexible instructions where learners can act and express in diverse ways, and motivation development while teachers can consider learners' learning styles and motivation type to provide different ways of engagement. Indeed, UDL shows effective results when teaching EFL beginners where their linguistic competence starts building while having them exposed to the target language and improving their attitude and motivation. UDL allows teachers to understand learners' background to build inclusive and interactive learning environments when planning their classes.

Furthermore, it is essential that teachers consider learners' multiple intelligences, learning styles, and proficiency levels to plan lessons according to beginning learners' needs. Teachers should also learn about providing feedback as UDL requires so that beginners can understand if they are doing good or are needing some adjustments. Beginning learners can also learn how to correct their mistakes according to the feedback provided. Nevertheless, teachers should not forget the importance of building rapport with learners and scaffold their learning process. As engagement and motivation are important in the teaching and learning process, teachers should guarantee an optimal learning environment.

As a recommendation for teachers who are teaching English beginning learners, implementing UDL principles in their plannings is important. Developing the pre-teaching stages are helpful for students even though it is time consuming for teachers; however, it helps learners get involved and engaged in the class. It also activates beginners' prior knowledge (learned input) to start building new knowledge. The use of online teaching resources can function as a means of motivation development and input representation nowadays, so creating games, activities, and tasks where beginners can use the input being learned, and creating materials to expose beginners to complex input will provide benefits in beginners' proficiency level. On the other hand, as a result of the lack of studies regarding UDL principles on teaching English beginning learners, the researchers encourage English teachers, institutions, and educators in general to study and do research about UDL which may help educational institutions to start training teachers on this framework. To face large groups, teachers could implement different strategies such as rapport building inside and outside the classroom to know students' situations and preferences. In addition, teachers could take into account students' written opinions about what the teacher should improve in the class and plan each week with different materials and resources to identify which are the most useful to allow inclusivity in beginners.

Applying the UDL principles in English teaching is a need that every educational system should fulfill in order to enhance the learning process of beginner learners. Trained teachers in UDL improve the proficiency level

of their learners, specifically beginners who are the most affected when learning a new language. Indeed, UDL brings inclusivity to the EFL classrooms where learners will be able to feel comfortable and motivated while they are growing in the target language. Inclusivity, at the same time, produces self-esteem in beginning learners so that they could improve their linguistic skills regardless of the goal or motivation beginners have towards the language. Therefore, it is important to implement UDL principles in teaching EFL beginners to facilitate their learning process.

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