

Beyond Skills Development

Ada Haiman, M.A.

Associate Professor
English Department
College of General Studies
University of Puerto Rico
Río Piedras Campus
ahaiman@prw.net

SUMARIO

Este artículo postula que todos los cursos de inglés como segundo idioma en la Universidad de Puerto Rico deben ser cursos de contenido académico porque la práctica de ubicar estudiantes rezagados en cursos de destrezas perpetúa las desigualdades sociales. El contenido académico puede integrarse a los cursos de primer nivel mediante la redacción de ensayos y flexibilidad curricular. El artículo muestra, a través de los testimonios de los estudiantes, que el contenido académico no tiene que esperar hasta alcanzar la proficiencia lingüística: se pueden desarrollar complementariamente. Por otra parte, se hace énfasis en la importancia del elemento afectivo en la experiencia educativa. A pesar de que los estudiantes terminaron el semestre con problemas gramaticales y, por lo tanto, deja sobre el tapete el asunto de cuándo y cómo enseñar la gramática, el estudio sí confirma que es más beneficioso partir de un marco de integración de gramática y contenido que de uno prescriptivo.

Palabras clave: servicio comunitario, conciencia social, voz estudiantil, seguimiento, estratificación social, educación superior

ABSTRACT

This article argues that all English as a Second Language (ESL) courses at the University of Puerto Rico should be content courses because class inequalities are perpetuated by tracking low proficiency students

into skills based courses. By combining essay writing with activities specially tailored to group interests (self-selected reading, community service, field trip) content and skills were integrated into the lowest proficiency level course. By foregrounding student voices in this report, I claim that academic content does not have to be delayed until students have control over vocabulary and structure; content and skills can be developed in tandem. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of affect in strengthening the educational experience. Although students completed the semester with grammatical problems, thereby leaving on the table the question of when and how to teach grammar, their voices do indicate that it is more profitable to insert grammar into a content based frame than the traditional prescriptive based treatments.

Key words: community service, social awareness, student voices, tracking, class stratification, higher education

In June of 1999, members of the General Studies English Department at the College of General Studies (CGS), University of Puerto Rico (UPR) embarked on a study of our English as a Second Language (ESL) classes (Haiman & Lockwood, 1999; 2003). We faced the problem of how to offer a university level academic English course to low proficiency students. The objective of the study was to see if English language skills and academic content could be integrated and mutually strengthened through essay writing. Incoming UPR freshmen scoring 450 or less on the English part of the College Entrance Examination Board Achievement Test (ESLAT) are placed in a pre-basic English course focusing on skills development, i.e. grammar, sentence/paragraph writing, reading and speaking. In their second year of required English, these students continue on the non-academic track and enter a conversational ESL course in the College of Humanities. Therefore, the lower proficiency students — approximately one third of incoming freshmen — never take academic content courses in English. Furthermore, these lower ESLAT scores correlate with class provenance, i.e. private school graduates average 87 points higher on the ESLAT than

public school graduates (Maldonado, 2001). In other words, their placement in the lower tracks perpetuates societal class stratification through unequal educational treatment. This argument is also developed in the work on educating working class children by Finn (1999) and Willis (1997; n.d.). It was our intention to address this situation.

Most professors on our staff feel that without basic skills students cannot do academic work in English. A minority feels differently: skills can be developed in tandem with academic work through the sustained and coherent written discussion of a topic, i.e. essay writing. For many of these lower proficiency students, this would be their first opportunity to integrate all language skills through meaningful writing. The process writing approach is explained in detail through the analysis of one case in "English for interpreting the world: The experience of a course for first generation university freshmen" (Haiman & Lockwood, 2003). In this report, I want to foreground my students' testimony on how essay writing moved them beyond prescriptive linguistic concerns with correction to focus upon meaningful use of English as a means to acquire and construct knowledge.

From June 1999 to May 2000, two groups of incoming freshmen placed in English 3003-04: "Pre Basic Skills in English," were given a course with a strong writing component. These students were in the Special Academic Services Program (PSAE), a support program for first generation university students (i.e. their parents were not university graduates). We wanted to show that, contrary to majority belief, these students could write beyond the simple sentence or paragraph that was the prescribed content for the course. The official curriculum implies that they are not ready for content courses because basic skills are prerequisites for conceptual development. In this study skills and content are seen as concomitant and mutually strengthening components. Moreover, we wanted to show that essay writing, in addition to aiding conceptual development, led to empowerment that results from critical thinking and self-awareness. The course offered was designed to improve their English language proficiency as well as offer them ideas to live through (Schumacher, 1973). This report

not only emphasizes students' ability to do and benefit from academic content in English, moreover, it provides their own assessment of the treatment.

Writing was the axis of this course. It was through writing that students would integrate the readings and discussions. The process writing approach allowed students to attend to their ideas first and grammar later. In this way, they developed an awareness of criteria for good writing and metacognitive knowledge which would help them monitor their own academic progress. As one student stated in his self-assessment essay¹:

My first essay was on what I preferred to be. In this essay I started to develop my ideas, though I started repeating the same words in various paragraphs and without any focus. Yet, after three drafts I developed my essay better with notable improvement in the writing and in the organization of ideas. This made me very happy because for the first time in twelve years studying English I felt I had made some progress.

This student realizes the redundancy in his early essay led nowhere. The process of rewriting and refining, guided by the teacher's comments, made him cognizant of how to evaluate and improve his work. By understanding what works and what does not, the connection between content and form becomes important and productive.

Another student, having pursued her writings to assess progress, found the writing to have been an important factor in her development.

I progressed the most in the area of writing. As I reviewed the essay I wrote in the summer, I realized how poor the writing was then. Those essays had no logic and less acceptable structure and focus. The content of the essays lacked depth of thought and meaning. No wonder I received a "D" grade during the summer of 1999. On the other hand, as I now go over all my work over the semester, I see a big improvement in the deficiencies I had in the summer. The structure of the essays now have an introduction, body, conclusion, transitions and focus.

What makes me most happy is my improvement in the meaning and focus of my essays because it is elemental to project logic and critique of one topic or another.

This student focuses on logic, thought and meaning. The D grade is a fact, not a failure; it is an indication of how far she has come in her ability to express her ideas. She has developed criteria with which to evaluate her own work and thereby monitor her own progress. She is making the transition from high school to college where she is responsible for her own improvement.

The idea of leaving grammar for last until ideas have developed is very controversial and creates much debate at faculty meetings. But the students who have had grammar based instruction for most of their school careers appreciate the new focus on ideas.

I think that in this semester we developed more in class in the analysis of ideas I learned to read and locate the main idea before developing in writing or vocabulary. I think it's better this way because when you are going to write something in English without really being able to understand or explain, first you must know what it's about and later develop how to say it in English.

The writing and reading are interdependent. She takes extra time on reading comprehension, focusing on and discriminating important ideas because she wants to have something intelligent to say in her essay. The skills are learned in the service of the idea they want to articulate, not the other way around.

The self-assessment is not only an exercise in awareness; it also reveals what topics and activities most meaningfully strengthened their educational experience. It helped to assess if an affective connection was being made with the ideas, i.e. if they were being transformed by course content.

In their self-assessment essays written at the end of the first semester (December, 1999), students discussed a variety of ideas that impressed them and led them to think beyond the classroom.

I can say that this reading [this essay is about the arrest of Rosa Parks (King, 1993)] and its idea was what most caught my attention in the summer. It taught me how to fight for my values, respect myself as a human being, have dignity and never give up if I know I am right. The message the reading brings was the most important I learned thanks to the summer experience... in the summer I learned a lot about messages or ideas to improve social relations like respect and dignity.

Going beyond the self to look at society is a fundamental part of becoming educated. The UPR mission includes within its goals developing an informed and committed citizenry. This student has advanced in this direction. If the English class is not to be divorced from social reality, content must be given the same importance as skills. An example of their evolving view of themselves as social beings is the following student's statement on the importance of education.

The topic of education was the one which most impressed me because I discovered the real importance of being well educated. In addition, I am conscious that a good education will give me the tools to be a socially productive person, a person with the ability to contribute beneficial ideas to construct the society we so desire.

In the first weeks of class students usually see English as important only to meet narrow, economic advancement ends, but by the end of the semester they see themselves as more than their professions.

In relation to ideas I have acquired and analyzed during the summer and the semester, they were closely related. All the readings had a common thread which focused on our actions and development in this society and the world. We also discussed the values which negatively affect our lives and how we ignore them as we go about our lives without caring. The readings, besides presenting problems, also gave alternative solutions and made us think for a moment about what we are doing in relation to the problem. The alternatives are examples of thousands of things we can do to improve life in general.

The idea of doing something in relation to a problem was developed throughout the course, but came to fruition with the reading of *Seven Wonders* (Ryan, 1999), a book on environmental issues. This book was chosen by the students on a trip to a bookstore designed to give them input into the curriculum. At the bookstore they browsed, discussed and finally selected a book by consensus. Their choice proved to be a great success in terms of interest, enthusiasm and novel ideas.

Besides all that I have learned, the most important thing is not only English but the values and awareness about the world and its problems. During all this time, the reading and essays we have discussed in class have been on topics that express the importance of human beings and their environments. Besides learning English we have seen places related with what we are studying. We went to the bookstore to pick a book and it really turned out very interesting. We studied about Thai food and we went to the Royal Thai Restaurant.²

Another student adds,

The book *Seven Wonders* has been a magnificent contribution because who would have analyzed the damage that air conditioners do to the environment?... Well, I understand that the most important thing was the evidence on the ecological damage provoked by certain things because it is very troubling.

This disquiet is what leads to reflection, which in turn leads to seeing beyond obvious conditioned responses.

No lie, everything I learned influenced me a lot because I learned to see things from the inside, to relate things and analyze them. The readings and poems have transformed me into a more solid thinking being, my actions are really not the same and my notable improvement is both physical and spiritual.

The analysis leads to a change in ideas that affects their perception of the world:

I can also say I didn't see the great damage we are doing to the Earth with the supposed technological advances. At

this moment I can say that my vision of the world is much broader and more realistic.

This change in perception, this questioning of the much touted value of technology, strengthens the relationship between thought, action and social responsibility empowering them to action.

I feel the right to opine on the world, I think that people badly need to go deeper into the meaning of correct action since the world has talent but humans destroy; there is no emphasis on sustainable development that has the purpose of making the world better, educated, responsible, and constructive.

The reading, discussions and writing about the book *Seven Wonders* became an experience of thoughtful change, a process as important as the product. They did not only learn some facts about ecological damage and repair; moreover, their consciousness was raised and habitual behaviors began to give way to a more informed and responsible way of living.

In the case of environmental pollution, I realized that most of the things we do damage the environment. But what made the book *Seven Wonders* fruitful was the fact that it more than just presents a social problem, it gives simple and accessible alternatives to prevent a self destruction camouflaged as sustainable world progress. I have really applied the techniques of the book to my lifestyle. Before, I would leave the light on in my room and the fan too... Now I am conscious of where I dispose of the garbage and I am washing some things by hand. In synthesis, I am modifying my actions in society after a process of understanding.

These comments show the English course does not have to be limited to English language development; it can be a content course that speaks to students as future citizens and workers who will have to use their intelligence to participate in the improvement and construction of their families, communities, nation and world.

Students' voices revealed many topics they had not given serious thought to: racism, equality, ecology, the broad purposes of education, creativity in children, among many others. The curriculum was designed with enough flexibility to add activities of special interest to the students. The selection of *Seven Wonders* was one such activity; another was the extension of a unit on creativity in children.

In one class discussion, I was surprised that many students revealed an aversion to children. The readings and discussions in the unit on creativity made them reflect upon this dislike, become aware of it, and remedy it if they considered it a negative,

...in one area I did change my way of thinking, in my treatment of children. I really had great difficulty tolerating the conduct of a child. I did not understand why they asked so many questions, their bad behavior and I couldn't appreciate their creativity. But, after having read "Creativity in Children" [Kaufman and Ray, 1993] and "Our Children are not Things" [Thurman, 1994], I understood that everything a child does is normal for the age. What they need to foment their intelligence is attention and affection. Now I also understand why there are no longer any children, because they want to be adults before their time. They want to do adult things to get attention. From now on there is no question I will not answer. I will pay attention and I'll teach them when they are doing something wrong. I'll never scream at them and hit them even less. I'll just teach them as I wish someone had taught me.

Another commented,

This English class is special because there are times when I think it is not an English class but a class on the things that happen in our society, something like that, because the readings we do are about the things that happen in our society and in our homes, like "Creativity In Children." This reading is about how parents are responsible for the maximum or minimum creativity of their children. In these readings I learned a lot: how to treat my children when I have them, how to answer their questions without

lies, the toys that are good for their intellectual development and how good it is to have them read at an early age.

One student went home and observed a young cousin to confirm what was being discussed in class.

In the English 3003 course I learned many things about life, education, the environment and children. The topics which most impressed me were pollution, which was discussed the last month of class, and children which was discussed in October. The unit on children was vital for my life because it was like a training for us on how we should raise our children if God blesses us with them. Everything the professor said about children and their education is true because what was being discussed disquieted me and I decided to observe my 2 year and 7 month year old nephew to see if what the readings said was true.

His initiative to confirm what was being discussed through personal observation led me to design a community service component for the second semester of this year long course. To strengthen these new attitudes and insights, they would read to and observe children at a local public school. This recreational reading project fit into the second semester curriculum focus on short story. Reading aloud also strengthened oral production skills. Students would visit the school in pairs: one would read a storybook aloud to the children in grades K-3, while the other one observed and recorded observations in light of the first semester's discussions on creativity. They would switch roles on subsequent visits, so each would have the opportunity to both record and perform. Again, in keeping with broader CGS objectives, the focus of this exercise was not just on English language skills but on ideas and the construction of knowledge through the integration of reading, discussion and experience.

At the end of the community service, students gave an oral report and handed in a written essay on the experience. There was a dual objective in the design of this experience: to put newly acquired ideas into action and to create an affective connection with the ideas through interaction with the children. The under-

lying assumption is that the affective connection would make these ideas in action endure and resonate in their future interactions with children—their own and others’; a move from a self centered view of the world to a sense of being a part of a larger whole. Education should lead to such change and language courses are not the exception.

Really, before I couldn’t care less about the world and I only thought about myself and what I wanted to achieve and how to achieve it. I didn’t care a bit about what happened around me. I had no awareness of what was happening. I lived in my own world, alone. Once I began at the university everything changed. Here I learned that to change the world you must begin by changing yourself. I have learned that with just one person changing we begin to save the world.

An additional indicator of change is when others perceive it too. A student who had come to the office on various occasions to “complain” that she was changing (she could no longer watch TV with her sisters because she saw so much more with her newly acquired critical eye that she was kicked out of the room because of her many comments),

It is not only in English [that I have progressed] but also as a thinking person because as time passes I see things from a point of view very different than before. Not only I have noticed, but also the people around me notice. I know this because my sister told me that Mom had said that I have changed a lot in my behavior and in my way of thinking, and that I would never be the same person.

The self-assessment tapped into change in an effort to evaluate the establishment of an affective connection, i.e. the owning of the ideas, not only an understanding of them.

The rationale underlying this study is that grammar is at the service of ideas. Therefore, students were given time to understand and organize their ideas, i.e. time to have something important to say (content), before focusing on how to say it (form). Grammar then becomes a means to an end, not an end in itself. Academic content and process writing served this

purpose well. Unfortunately, successful conceptual development was not matched by syntactic development. Although students were engaged by the course content and ended the year writing better structured and more comprehensible essays, they did not develop syntactically to the extent that their essays would be fully comprehensible to native speakers of English with no knowledge of Spanish. There was still much lexical and syntactic interference from Spanish.

Essay writing did have an important role to play in the development of ideas and the integration of language skills. As the quotes above show, through the process of writing and rewriting, they revisited the readings and class notes, reflected more deeply on the issues, and used the English language to construct and express their new ideas. The weakness in syntactic development must surely be addressed. It is evident that the course needs a stronger grammar component, yet the writing did show progressive English language development through meaningful use of vocabulary and structures. It may be that all cannot be done in one year and a second year of integrated content, writing, and skills development is needed. What this study shows is that academic content does not have to be delayed until the students have full control over vocabulary and structure. The English class can and should be a content course even at the pre-basic skills level. Tracking students into skills based courses unfortunately offers less than the full educational challenge and thereby poorly serves them.

REFERENCES

- Finn, P. (1999). *Literacy with an attitude: Educating working class children in their own best interest*. Albany: SUNY University Press.
- Haiman, A. & M. Lockwood. (1999). *Waiting on ideas*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras.
- Haiman, A. & M. Lockwood. (2003). English for interpreting the world: The experience of a course for first generation university freshmen. *Pedagogía*, 37, 76-88.

- Kaufman, G. D. & M. Ray. (1993). *The creative spirit*. New York: Penguin.
- King, M.L. Jr. (1993). Stride towards freedom. In Rogers and Rogers (Eds.), *Patterns and themes: A basic English reader 3/e*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Maldonado, N. I. (2001, February 23). The teaching of English in Puerto Rico: One hundred years of degrees of bilingualism, UPR President's address at the *First English Forum: English at UPR: Is it Time for a Paradigm Shift?* University of Puerto Rico, Humacao Campus.
- Ryan, J. C. (1999). *Seven wonders: Everyday things for a healthier planet*. U California Press.
- Schumacher, E. F. (1973). *Small is beautiful: Economics as if people mattered*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Thurman, H. (1994). From *Our children are not things*. In Woods and Liddel (Eds.), *I hear a symphony*. New York: Doubleday.
- Willis, P. E. (1997). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Hants, England, Ashgate.

NOTES

- ¹ The self assessment essays were given in Spanish in order not to have the English language interfere with the expression of their personal feelings about the learning experience. The purpose of this essay was not to use English but to reflect upon the educational experience. Of the 13 students for whom I have self-assessments, I have used quotes from 11 of them; only 2 did not transcend student centered and prescriptive language concerns in their responses. The translations are mine.
- ² One chapter in *Seven Wonders* discussed Thai food as easily cultivated, healthy food. It broadened into a discussion of diversity and how dining out was a socio-cultural activity not just a way to supply a basic need. This in contradistinction to their idea that Burger King was a restaurant. So, we organized a night of dining at a local restaurant. For many it was the first time dining out and the first taste of non-Puerto Rican, non-fast food.