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CHANGES IN PERCEPTION TOWARD LEARNING ENGLISH CLASSROOM INVESTIGATION PROJECT

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Abstract

First-year university students at University of Puerto Rico-Humacao that scored less than 450 on the English portion of the College Entrance Examination Board test appear to enter the Basic English classroom with the perception that learning English is a best difficult and at worst threatening. A classroom investigation project was initiated to determine if this negative perception of learning English change id participants were engaged in activities within a classroom environment that used their prior knowledge as a basis for learning. 25 Basic English students participated in a 2-week innovative course divided into one unit of Science and one unit of Humanities. The results were based on the analysis of data gathered form interviews and self-assessment questionnaires.

Sumario

Los estudiantes de primer año de la Universidad de Puerto Rico en Humacao que obtuvieron menos de 450 en la parte de Inglés de la prueba de College Board, entran al curso de Inglés Básico con la percepción de que el curso es difícil y retante. Se inició un proyecto de investigación para determinar si esta percepción negativa sobre el aprendizaje en inglés cambiaba si los participantes se envolvían en actividades en el salón de clases donde se utilizaran sus conocimientos previos como una base para el aprendizaje. Veinticinco estudiantes del curso de Inglés Básico participaron en un curso innovador de dos semanas que se dividió en una unidad de Ciencias y una unidad de Humanidades. Los resultados se basaron en el análisis de la información obtenida en entrevistas y cuestionarios.

Information gathered from Basic English, first year university students at University of Puerto Rico-Humacao (UPR-H) from 1996-2001, demonstrates that students appear to view the English classroom as a place to learn new skills and concepts that are disconnected from the knowledge that they have already acquired. In responses to self-assessment questionnaires, students are shown to have developed the perception that learning English skills is at best difficult and at worst threatening. This perception may be affecting the learning process in a negative manner.

Purpose

The purpose of the investigation was to determine if the perception of UPR-H first year university students with different English language communication abilities changed in a classroom environment that focused on their prior knowledge as a basis for

learning. The students prior knowledge was also used to enhance the students English language communication skills.

Justification

Many first year university students at UPR-H have developed the perception that learning English skills is difficult. This perception has resulted in academic barriers such as deficient reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, and emotional barriers such as viewing the English classroom as a threatening learning environment.

The perception that students have that learning English is difficult interferes with the learning process. An innovative approach is needed in order to enable these students to make significant advances in their ability to communicate in English.

Perspective

The investigation took into consideration the theories of Carl Rogers, Shirley Grundy, and David Ausubel. According to Carl Rogers (1982), students who are allowed to explore their feelings and design their own strategy for learning will meet with greater academic success in the classroom. Shirley Grundy (1987) states that students also need to be active participants in the learning process. Grundy (1987) believes that students who see the meaningfulness of classroom activities are more likely to become engaged in the classroom environment.

Ausubel (1980) considers the students' prior knowledge as a type of scaffold on which to build new knowledge. This theory is consistent with an approach that uses what students already know and applies this knowledge to enhance the learning of a new language. The above theories formed the basis of designing an innovative methodology that was used to enhance the learning process within the Basic English classroom.

Investigation Questions

1. Why do UPR-H first year university students enrolled in Basic English classes have the negative perception that learning English is difficult?
2. How can a professor use university students' prior knowledge in the core subject areas of Science and Humanities to change students' perceptions toward using English as a form of communication?

Hypothesis

By using students' prior knowledge in the core subject areas of Science and Humanities as a basis for teaching Basic English skills, students' perceptions toward communicating in English will be positively reflected.

Methodology

The classroom investigation project focused on an action research model within a nondirective teaching methodology. UPR-H first year university students currently enrolled in Basic English were asked to complete self-assessment questionnaires and

agreed to participate in an interview. The data collected from the investigation was used to determine if the methodology set forth in the project merits further investigation.

Design

The investigation followed an action research model. The participants collaborated in a participatory style of research in which observation, reflection, planning, and action were used in a continuous cycle to enhance the teaching/learning experience.

The classroom methodology followed a nondirective teaching model in which the students expressed their feelings, developed insight, made decisions, and developed positive actions toward a given situation.

Participants

The participants were 25, UPR-H, first year university students that were currently enrolled in Basic English and that scored less than 450 on the English portion of the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB).

Data Collection

The data was collected using pre/post self-assessment questionnaires and interviews. (See Appendix)

Procedure

Participants were selected from UPR-H, INGL 3201-04 Basic English class. They were administered a self-assessment questionnaire. The participants then engaged in a 2-week project divided into two thematic units: Unit 1-Science/PR flora and fauna, Unit 2: Humanities/PR Constitution. After the 2-week period, participants were administered a post self-assessment questionnaire and an exit interview.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed according to the guide questions used in the self-assessment questionnaires and interviews.

Findings

Pre self-assessment questionnaire – 84% of the participants had some degree of fear of communicating in English; 68% perceived the English classroom as a place to learn concepts and skills that are disconnected from the knowledge that they have acquired in other subject areas; 72% ranked conversation as the most important English skill that they wanted to improve; 68% ranked conversation as their poorest English skill. Grammar skills ranked the lowest, 32%, in terms of whether or not a 2-week program would help them improve in this area.

- Pre interview – 88% of the participants believed that English was difficult to learn and that the learning environment was threatening; 92% noted that the professor played a significant role in the English as role models; 80% believed that conversational and reading comprehension skills were more of a priority than grammar and writing skills when learning a language.

- Post self-assessment questionnaire – 96% of the participants believe they have overcome their fear of communicating in English; 96% had the perception that the prior knowledge they have acquired in other subject area is relevant to their understanding of English skills; 88% rated their conversational skills as being improved as a direct result of the classroom methodology; 64% rated grammar skills as being improved.
- Post interview – 96% stated that they are slowly overcoming their fears of communicating in English; 96% acknowledged that English is easier to learn if they already have the concept acquired from another subject and transfer this knowledge to communicating in English; 100% believed that the professor played an important role in the success of the students by allowing students to actively participate; 84% believed that conversational, reading comprehension, and writing skills were more of a priority than grammar; 96% attributed their success in the English language to being allowed to actively participate in the learning process.

IV. Conclusions

A. Summary

Students' perceptions change in a positive manner if they are given the opportunity to explore and participate actively in the teaching/learning process. According to Carl Rogers (1982), students who are permitted to explore their feelings and design their own strategies for learning will have greater success in an academic classroom.

Professors of today need to understand that students want to learn in an active environment that responds to their specific needs. Carl Rogers believes that the learning environment needs to be significant and meaningful to the students.

Students are more positive toward an English classroom environment when they are permitted to engage in reflection and self-discovery. This is consistent with the theory of Shirley Grundy (1987) in which she states that a classroom should empower students and lead them toward independence and eventual emancipation.

The prior knowledge and experiences that students bring into the English classroom may be used to enhance the learning process by applying this knowledge to new ideas. Ausubel (1980) states that students learn best if they use a type of conceptual scaffold on which to build new knowledge.

Students view the role of the professor as significant in terms of providing an English language model yet view himself or herself as being active participants in their own learning (Rogers).

Implications

This investigation should be seen as just a small part of a larger investigation project that could be carried out to further identify the needs of the students and that should attempt to meet those needs with innovative classroom projects.

Recommendations

Investigate if the results of how students use their prior knowledge to enhance their communication skills in English merits a revision of the Basic English curriculum at the university level.

Investigate the professor's role as an English language model and how it may affect the learning process.

Select a group of Basic English students that scored less than 450 on the English portion of the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) and compare them with a group of Basic English students that scored more than 450 on the English portion of the CEEB.

Permit the students in a subsequent study to choose their own topic of investigation.

Conduct a follow-up assessment with the participants and compare their perceptions toward communicating in English over x amount of time.

References

Grundy, S. (1987). *Curriculum: Product or Praxis*. Lewes: The Falmer Press.

Joyce, B., Weil, M., and Calhoun, E. (2000). *Models of teaching* (6th ed.). MA: Allyn and Bacon Publications.

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Pre-Interview Questions

Date _____

1. Describe your best experience in the last English class you took.
2. In what ways do you believe the professor helped you in English class?
3. Describe your worst or most negative experience in English class.
4. What activities could have helped make this negative experience better?

5. Describe what you personally consider is your greatest obstacle to learning English.

6. Describe the ideal English classroom that you wish you could be enrolled in.

Exit Interview Questions

Date _____

1. Describe your best experience during this two-week period.

2. In what ways do you believe the professor helped you in English class?

3. Describe the activity that you liked the least.

4. How were you able to use your prior knowledge to communicate in English?

5. What do you attribute your success to in being able to communicate in English?

6. Why would you prefer, or not prefer, to engage in this type of classroom program for an entire semester?