

TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED ENGLISH COMPETENCY PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO RÍO PIEDRAS CAMPUS*

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Introduction

At present, at least one-third of the student body graduating yearly from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus, can be described as having limited English proficiency. Within the context of this campus, *limited English proficiency* is best defined operationally as placing below 5 on the Humanities English Placement Test. This test is required of most of the students who took basic English during freshman year as a guide to placement into their second and generally final year of English at the University. An immediate consequence of scoring 1 to 4 on this test is that students are not able to take academic courses in English in literature, linguistics, or speech communication within the Humanities English Department, where most students generally take their 2nd-year English courses. These academic courses require that a student place level 5. Unfortunately, the special courses into which students who score below level 5 are placed, although suited to their levels, cannot bring those who score levels 1, 2 and 3 up to level 5 in two semesters. These students graduate, therefore, with limited English proficiency.

To address this situation, a special ad hoc committee from the Colleges of General Studies and Humanities has been working to pool resources in order to create an intensive English learning experience geared towards developing English competency. This

experience is a step towards insuring that students who graduate from the Río Piedras campus will have attained sufficient mastery of English to be able to use it as an academic tool during their undergraduate studies, as well as successfully compete in the post-graduate business or academic world, insofar as English proficiency is required.

A preliminary pilot study was designed to target a pool of incoming freshmen who most needed help, as evidenced by their low English scores on the College Board. This project, currently at its half-way mark, is being funded by the Presidency of the University of Puerto Rico.

Study Design

The two-year pilot study covering the 1997-98 and 1998-99 academic years, known by its Spanish acronym, PICI (Programa Integrado de Competencias en Inglés) was designed to use available resources as much as possible. The basic design involves students' taking twice as much English as is normally required.

A group of freshmen with low-level English skills takes the reading-and-writing-focused basic English course normally taken during freshman year. In addition, these students take the conversational English course they would normally take during their sophomore year on alternate days. During the second year of the project the same pattern is repeated: this same group of students takes an English course whose principal focus is reading and writing, and on alternate days, a conversational English course. At the end of two years these students will have taken 24 credits of English. This group constitutes the experimental group.

The English progress of this group is compared to the progress of a matched group of students who take the normal English requirements, which are 6 credits of Basic English during freshman year, and another 6 credits of English after freshman year, for a total of 12 credits of English. This group constitutes the control group.

In May of 1997, letters of invitation were sent out to all incoming freshmen who obtained less than 440 on the English-as-a-Second-Language Test (ESLAT) of the College Board, but who scored at least 490 on the Spanish test of the College Board. The

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English score placed them in the lowest level of Basic English (INGL 3003-4). Those students who responded to the letter by coming to a meeting were explained the program. If they were interested in participating, they were administered the Humanities English Placement Test. Those who placed above Level 1 were not accepted.

A group of 68 incoming freshmen (Aug. 97) that met our criteria was chosen. Each student was assigned to one of the five experimental sections of the Basic English course they would normally take during their freshman year (INGL 3003-04). In addition, they were placed in one of five experimental sections of Conversational English Level 1 (INGL 3031-32), the course they would normally take during their second year, on alternating days. Each professor from General Studies was paired with a particular professor from Humanities so that both had basically the same group of students. The few exceptions were due to students' scheduling problems. For example, a student might have the General Studies class on Mondays and Wednesdays, the Humanities class on Tuesdays and Thursdays, plus lab on Fridays. Thus, each student received seven class-hours a week of English.

Half-way through the second semester, after a fruitful meeting with the Vice-President of the University, we were able to use some of our leftover funds to hire two university students who were native speakers of English for the purpose of leading informal conversational groups of two to five students. These groups met two half-hours a week. Unfortunately not all the students went regularly to their conversational groups; but for those that did, this increased their exposure to English to eight hours a week.

There were six English professors involved in the first year (1997-98) of the PICI project, three from General Studies and three from Humanities. Two out of the three from each college had two experimental PICI sections each, while the third professor from each college had one. These constituted five experimental sections in each college.

The six professors working in the project also had one regular section each of INGL 3003-3 (General Studies) or INGL 3031-2 (Humanities). These six sections (three from General Studies and three from Humanities) constituted our control groups. The General Studies group represented students beginning their university

English, while the Humanities group represented students completing their university English requirements. The students in both control groups had an average of four class-hours of English per week (three hours of class plus an hour of lab). They received basically the same type of English instruction in either INGL 3003-4 or INGL 3031-2 as the students in the experimental group.

Evaluation procedures

Internal evaluative procedures for the purpose of assigning grades were similar to those normally used, for both experimental and control groups. Additional instruments of different types were also administered as external quantitative measurements of English proficiency, for the purpose of evaluating the success of the program. Different types of tests are being used because, due to the complex nature of language, there is no one perfect test as yet. The tests are:

- 1- The Institutional *PreTOEFL*: This test was purchased from the Educational Testing Service, which also produces the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), a highly reputable standardized test used world wide. The PreTOEFL is a version of the TOEFL which discriminates better among lower-level students. It tests listening comprehension, reading comprehension and grammatical structures.
- 2- The *SPEAK*: The Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit, also produced and sold by the Educational Testing Service, is a semi-direct (not face-to-face) test of speaking proficiency. The student audio-tapes require a variety of linguistic functions such as narrating, persuading, explaining, giving opinions, etc.
- 3- The *HEPT*: The previously mentioned Humanities English Placement Test consists of a dictation of a paragraph in English, administered through earphones in the lab. The students hear phrases, clauses, or sentences of increasing length and complexity which they write down. In a dictation test of a foreign language, a student does not merely copy down what is actually said, but writes what he or she thinks is said. To do this requires complex phonological, morphological, and syntactic processing which is reflected in the number of

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lines correct. This in turn indicates a certain level of development in the student's non-native language. Dictation tests, therefore, can be valid indicators of gross non-native linguistic proficiency.

In addition to the above quantitative measures, a questionnaire was distributed to the PICI students containing open-ended questions as to their feelings about the program, both in terms of their own progress and in terms of their opinions about different aspects of the program.

Preliminary results and discussion

At this moment we can provide preliminary results with regard to the HEPT data obtained after the first year and half-way mark of the PICI project. The HEPT which the experimental (PICI) group took for the purpose of selection of subjects in June, 1997 was used as the pretest. The one-year mark posttest was taken by this group in the general administration for freshmen in April, 1998. Sufficient time had elapsed to remove any practice effect. The experimental group was compared to the three sections of the control Humanities students. The pretest HEPT of these second-year (and beyond) students was taken in April of their respective freshman year, which placed them in the Level 1 sections of Conversational English. A posttest was administered in the lab in April, 1998.

A statistical analysis of the results indicate that the PICI students *as a group* far surpassed the control group in gross English proficiency as measured by the HEPT.¹ What is the difference between the two groups due to? The following variables are considered:

- 1- *Type of instruction:* Although the basic books and materials used were the same for each section of a particular class (the General Studies class or the Humanities class), whether control or experimental, no attempt was made to make uniform the manner in which the professors presented the material. The individual style of each professor was respected, and a professor could introduce any type of supplementary material of his or her choosing. While professors differed from each other, they generally taught their experimental and control groups in a similar fashion.

Thus, type of instruction did not differentiate the experimental and control groups.

- 2- *Total number of class-hours of English:* Essentially, both experimental and control groups had received the same total number of class-hours of English (six credits of basic English plus six credits of conversational English). The experimental group did have eight additional hours in small conversation groups during the last two months of the PICI program during 1997-98. As mentioned above, many students did not go regularly, some did not go at all, and others did not get along well with one of the group leaders. While these conversation groups may have been a significant factor for at least a few of the students, they do not account for the progress of the PICI group as a whole. In any case, these extra hours are off-set by an extra lab that the control group had. The total number of class-hours, being similar, cannot account for the difference found between the groups.
- 3- *Attitude and motivation:* It must be considered that perhaps the PICI students had a greater desire to make progress, as they had voluntarily signed up for the program and were made to feel special. However, the consensus of opinion among the professors was that the PICI students as a group did not behave in any way that indicated greater motivation or more positive attitude. The PICI students, being freshmen, were actually more immature than their control counterparts. As a whole, they did not participate more in class than the control group, nor were they more responsible in terms of turning in assignments on time, studying harder for tests, etc. We found a similar range of motivation within both groups: both control group and experimental group had some students who evidenced more motivation than their classmates, and vice versa.
- 4- *Intensity of exposure to English:* While both control and experimental groups had completed essentially the same two courses, the experimental group did this in one academic year, whereas the control group took the two courses over a two-year span (and in many cases, students took their second-year English course in their third or fourth year). In sum, the PICI group was

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exposed to seven hours a week of English over a period of one academic year, while the control group was exposed to four hours a week over a period of two academic years. This unequal intensity of exposure is a variable that is constant in the difference between the two groups.

Not all PICI students progressed at the same rate, and some remained Level 1. These individual differences require further study. Insofar as class participation is concerned, it has been assumed by teachers and often hypothesized by researchers that active oral participation in class is essential to progress in a second language. I would like to note what seems to be counterevidence to this hypothesis, much to my surprise. It was not the case in my particular PICI classes that the students who were always eager to speak progressed further in English (as measured by the HEPT) than those quiet students who hardly ever spoke in class. On the contrary, some of the most quiet students progressed far more on the HEPT than those who always had something to say.

One of my quiet students who told me frankly that she had signed up only because her mother had insisted, and that she resented having to speak to me in English, was one of the ones who actually moved up to Level 4. She was as surprised as I was at her progress, as evidenced not only by the HEPT, but by her new-found ability to talk to the tourists who had asked her for help on the bus!

Conclusion

The results discussed above indicate that the experimental (PICI) group as a whole made dramatic progress in those linguistic abilities the HEPT assesses as compared to the control group. The variable which was consistently different between the groups was the intensity of exposure to English: it seems the more English exposure within a certain amount of time the better. The same amount of exposure drawn out over twice the time period does not produce the same results.

Further research is necessary to explore individual differences, such as why some of the PICI students did not move up in level while others did, and how it was that some quiet students seemed to make more progress on the HEPT than their talkative classmates. It should be noted, however, that no students attained Level 5. This

was what was expected in designing the program, and was why two consecutive years of intensive English were planned. We believe there are no quick fixes to second-language development. We are eagerly awaiting the outcome of the second year.

* Please contact the author for details about statistical procedures, analyses, and results.