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BASIC ENGLISH UPR-B: IS IT TIME FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT?

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ABSTRACT

A ONE-SEMESTER STUDY involving two basic English experimental groups and two basic English control groups of the University of Puerto Rico at Bayamón was focused on how students, in two experimental groups, responded to a theme-based course throughout a full semester in which the teaching of grammar was practically non-existent, reading and writing were the core of the course, and grammar modules were independently assigned. The control groups worked with the traditional Basic English course offered at UPR-B. A survey collecting data on demographics, learning styles, and learning strategies was conducted.

Key words: learning strategies, English as a second language, investigation

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INTRODUCTION:

PROFESSORS TEACHING ENGLISH encounter students in their classes who exhibit different levels of proficiency. Many questions arise when it comes to meeting the demands of the course and when professors try to fulfill the needs students have. In the following question, Spolsky summarizes the concerns of many educators teaching English: "Who learns how much of what language under what conditions?" This question leads professionals in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) to reflect and generate other questions based on factors that impede students from demonstrating progress and reaching levels of achievement commensurate with the goals of each particular course.

Students who are enrolled in Basic English 3101 - 3102 score from 451 to 580 on the English sub-test of the College Entrance Examination Board. These scores have been considered "acceptable" for this level and students have to compete to satisfactorily meet the challenges of the course. At committee and faculty meetings, professors teaching this course continually bring up discussion concerning the struggle students encounter with the learning of English. Many of the basic English students are not fluent at all in the language and evidence difficulty understanding it; as a consequence, it becomes harder for them to understand the texts and assignments studied in and out of the class. Therefore, part of the motivation to undertake the responsibility of this research was to look into several aspects of how

the course was originally designed and what revision it needs to undergo to strengthen, evaluate, fine-tune, polish, change, and adapt its content to the immediate needs of the student population.

This research report will explore and discuss the findings of a one-semester study involving two basic English experimental groups and two basic English control groups at the University of Puerto Rico at Bayamón (UPR-B). The study focused on how students in the two experimental groups responded to a theme-oriented basic English course throughout the semester where the teaching of grammar was virtually non-existent, reading and writing were the core of the course, and grammar modules were independently assigned. The student's response to the theme-oriented courses was compared to the response of students in two control groups. The control groups were engaged in the traditional basic English course outlined offered at UPR-B. Two professors from the English Department at UPR-B coordinated and carried out the study. This research was conducted with basic English 3101 students during the fall semester of the 2001 - 2002 academic year.

METHODOLOGY

a) **Problem:** Students who are enrolled in the basic English course have been struggling to improve their English language skills in reading and writing. Once they exit their first year of college and enter their second, they encounter a level of English for which they are not prepared. The new level requires them to have levels of proficiency in reading and writing skills that are not addressed with the same intensity at the basic level. Students cannot cope with the majority of the demands required, and professors struggle to make up for what they have missed. For years this issue has been addressed at faculty meetings and there is a commitment to making significant changes at the basic level that will contribute to students' success and help them with the transition from one level to the other.

b) **Goals:** This research proposed to carry out a study with two experimental groups and two control groups. The two control groups worked on the traditional course as it was outlined and approved by the English Department at UPR-B. The two experimental groups worked on a theme-oriented course in which grammar was not the main focus of the class and lessons and modules prepared by the professors were tried out.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The questions that guided this study were:

- a) How do students in the two control groups perform academically when compared to the academic performance of the two experimental groups?
- b) What significant differences exist between the two experimental groups and the two control groups?

RESEARCH PLAN:

In order to accomplish the research goals, the two professors who undertook the responsibility of carrying out the study, developed curriculum, gathered and analyzed data, wrote and presented a report to the faculty at a Basic English 3101 - 3102 Committee meeting, and made final recommendations for change and improvement.

For years, faculty teaching Basic English 3101 - 3102 to Educational Services students have been very successful with the outcome of their courses. They were consulted concerning the methodology and materials they used on a daily basis. The enriching conversations held with these colleagues served as a springboard to try out the methodology they were using with the experimental groups.

Prior to the beginning of the semester, the two research professors met and discussed the goals of the experimental groups and selected the groups to participate in the study. A theme was selected and a tentative course outline and a syllabus were written and submitted for the approval of the Department Chair.

On a weekly basis, material prepared by the two professors was tried out with the experimental groups. Both professors met frequently to discuss the outcomes and observations of the lessons. New material for upcoming lessons was prepared, discussed, and shared. Both professors incorporated various teaching techniques such as cooperative learning, class discussions, multi-genres, journal writing, writing, reading, reader responses, oral presentations, grammar modules, mini-lessons in grammar, portfolio assessment, and technology usage, among others. A pre/post test was administered to both experimental and control groups, as well as a survey which revealed information concerning students' learning strategies and demographics.

Reid administered a self-reporting questionnaire in which the learners' rated their own performance. This questionnaire was analyzed and the sample questions included were carefully studied. As a result, a questionnaire was designed and later validated by a group of three professors. The instrument included quantitative and qualitative questions. The recommendations made by the professors were included and the instrument was administered to 104 students.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS:

Data resulting from the administration of pre/post tests, a student survey, students' assessment and evaluation, and the curriculum development try-outs were gathered. All were analyzed and reported using descriptive statistics. Qualitative analysis was also used to make sense of the non-quantifiable data collected. These data analyses were crucial to answering the research questions guiding the study.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

- a) The study was limited to the participation of two professors and four groups.
- b) The results and recommendations were solely the interpretation of the findings of the two professors conducting the study.

Participants:

Prof. Rose M. Hernández	Dr. Juan J. Rodríguez
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control Group - 27 Participants 10 Male 17 Female • Experimental Group - 19 Participants 11 Male 8 Female 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control Group - 28 Participants 10 Male 18 Female • Experimental Group - 30 Participants 14 Male 16 Female

• Total Number of Participants

Control Group 1	27
Control Group 2	28
Experimental Group 1	19
Experimental Group 2	30
Total	104

Where did our students come from?

- n 35 from Bayamón = 34% of the participants
- n 69 from surrounding areas = 66% of the participants

What were their age groups?

- Less than 18 n 22 = 21%
- 18-20 n 79 = 76%
- More than 20 n 3 = 3%

Where did they graduate from?

- Public Schools n 65 = 63%
- Private Schools n 39 = 37%

What was their academic performance like?

H.S. GPA	English GPA
4.00 - 3.50 n 51 = 49%	A n 41 = 39%
3.49 - 2.50 n 48 = 46%	B n 48 = 46%
2.49 - 1.60 n 5 = 5%	C n 15 = 15%

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Simple descriptive statistics were used to present the summary of findings. These findings are a result of the data collected and solely represent the interpretations of the two professors who carried out the research.

1. What did the participants have to say about their second language

STUDENTS INDICATE THEY...		
<u>Can speak it</u> n 12 = 12%	<u>Can speak it with difficulty</u> n 76 = 73%	<u>Cannot speak it</u> n 14 = 15 %
<u>Can understand it</u> n 31 = 30%	<u>Can understand it with difficulty</u> n 69 = 66%	<u>Cannot understand it</u> n 4 = 4%
<u>Can read it</u> n 41 = 39%	<u>Can read it with difficulty</u> n 60 = 58%	<u>Cannot read it</u> n 41 = 3%
<u>Can write it</u> n 23 = 22%	<u>Can write it with difficulty</u> n 74 = 71%	<u>Cannot write it</u> n 7 = 7%

The data gathered revealed that a minimal average of the participants have difficulty with their second language. The majority of the participants have some or no difficulty with their second language. All basic English students are non-native speakers of the language. From these results we can infer that the majority of the participants have some level of mastery in the four language arts. However, the data are also indicative of the fact that English is indeed a difficult language for non-native users.

2. How did students indicate they learned the second language effectively? (According to their self-rate)

- Students indicate they learn the second language effectively ...*
- n 93 = 89% step by step, or sequentially, beginning by analyzing facts and proceeding to ideas
- n 11 = 11% in context, holistically, intuitively
- n 32 = 31% individually, they prefer to set their own goals, respond to a sequential, linear, step-by-step presentation of materials

- n 81 = 78% through concrete experience and interaction with other people
- n 83 = 80% when they have the time to consider options before responding
- n 21 = 20% when they are able to respond immediately and take risks
- n 12 = 12% when they are able to perceive abstractly and process actively
- n 29 = 28% when they are able to perceive concretely and process reflectively
- n 8 = 8% when they are able to perceive abstractly and process reflectively
- n 55 = 52% when they are able to perceive concretely and process actively
- n 31 = 30% through the ear (listening)
- n 36 = 35% through the eyes (seeing)
- n 1 = 1% through touch (hands-on)
- n 20 = 19% through concrete complete body experience (whole-body movement)
- n 14 = 13% through touch and whole body movement
- n 2 = 2% did not answer the variable dealing with the senses
- n 30 = 29% when variables such as temperature, sound, light, food, mobility, time, and classroom/study arrangement are considered
- n 73 = 70% when such variables as group, individual, pair and team work, or level of teacher authority are considered
- n 79 = 76% through concrete experience, contact with the outside world , and relationships with others
- n 25 = 24% individual, independent situations that are more involved with ideas and concepts
- n 37 = 36% from reports of observable facts and happenings; they prefer physical, sense-based input
- n 67 = 64% from meaningful experiences and relationships with others
- n 26 = 25% from impersonal circumstances and logical sequences
- n 78 = 75% from personalized circumstances and social values
- n 75 = 72% by reflection, analysis, and processes that involve closure
- n 29 = 28% through negotiation, feeling, and inductive processes that postpone closure
- n 63 = 61% when opportunities for experiment and risk, as well as interaction, are present
- n 41 = 39% when they are in less flexible, less risky, more structured situations
- n 48 = 46% when they tend toward visual, analytic, reflective, and self-reliant learning
- n 56 = 54% when they tend toward auditory, global/relational, impulsive, interactive learning

The data here reveals that students learn a second language effectively if their needs are met within the learning environment. Students also indicate they have various ways of learning according to their own personal learning styles.

The following questions included in the survey were open-ended. The answers that emerged as a result of the analysis were categorized. Those answers which seemed to be popular and mostly repeated were included in the summary.

3. What do students do to learn new vocabulary?

- They use the dictionary.
- They read and write the words many times.
- They read articles, newspapers, and other reading material.

4. What do students do to learn new material?

- They study, read, and look for additional information.
- They watch TV.
- They attend the university.

5. How do students remember things more effectively?

- Memorizing
- Associating
- Using visuals

6. How do students use their mental processes for learning?

- By thinking and analyzing
- By reading several times
- By repeating

7. How do students compensate for missing knowledge when learning?

- By asking someone
- By practicing

8. How do students organize and evaluate their learning?

- Summarizing and outlining
- Keeping track of their grades

9. How do students manage their emotions?

- Analyzing the situation and staying calm
- Keeping control

10. How do students learn with others?

- By listening, interacting, and sharing
- By exchanging ideas

The data presented is representative of the way students seemed to agree in having their own way of learning and using strategies to cope with the

learning process under different circumstances.

11. Why do students want to learn English?

- n 71 = 68% They are interested in the language.
- n 10 = 10% They are interested in the culture.
- n 61 = 59% They have relatives or friends who speak the language .
- n 58 = 56% They are required to take a few courses to graduate.
- n 97 = 93% They need it for their future career.
- n 46 = 44% They need it to understand radio and television programs.
- n 57 = 55% They need it for travel.

12. Other reasons given by the students...

- It is an advantage to know two languages.
- It is a global language.
- You need to know it in order to progress.
- It is necessary in order to get a job.

The data here points out that students have different purposes for learning a second language. The majority are aware of the importance of learning English. The one answer mentioned the most by the participants is the role the second language has in their future.

A grades analysis was performed with the data provided by the students. Their high school grade-point average in English and the grade they received during their first semester of basic English were compared. The following is a representation of the analysis:

STUDENTS' GRADES ANALYSIS

Professor Rose Hernández:

Experimental Group (26 Participants)	Grade in Basic English 1
GRADE IN TWELFTH GRADE	
A n 6 = 23%	A n 1 = 1%
B n 11 = 22%	B n 3 = 12%
C n 2 = 8%	C n 7 = 27%
	D n 6 = 23%
	F n 6 = 23%
	W n 2 = 2%
	I n 1 = 3%

Control Group (32 Participants) GRADE IN TWELFTH GRADE			Grade in Basic English 1		
A	n 13	= 41%	A	n 14	= 44%
B	n 13	= 41%	B	n 4	= 13%
C	n 4	= 12%	C	n 4	= 13%
Unknown	n 2	= 6%	D	n 2	= 6%
			F	n 4	= 13%
			W	n 4	= 13%

Dr. Juan J. Rodríguez

Experimental Group (30 Participants) GRADE IN TWELFTH GRADE			Grade in Basic English 1		
A	n 8	= 27%	A	n 9	= 30%
B	n 14	= 47%	B	n 10	= 33%
C	n 5	= 16%	C	n 5	= 17%
Unknown	n 3	= 10%	D	n 2	= 7%
			F	n 1	= 3%
			W	n 3	= 10%

Control Group (30 Participants) GRADE IN TWELFTH GRADE			Grade in Basic English 1		
A	n 14	= 47%	A	n 6	= 20%
B	n 11	= 37%	B	n 12	= 40%
C	n 3	= 10%	C	n 9	= 30%
Unknown	n 2	= 6%	D	n 1	= 3%
			F	n 1	= 3%
			W	n 1	= 3%

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

a) How do students in the two control groups perform academically when compared to the academic performance of the two experimental groups?

As can be noticed, students in the experimental group did fairly well when compared to their counterparts in the control groups. The percentages represented by the F's were, in the majority of the cases, students who stopped attending class. However, in the experimental groups, both professors were able to perceive students' growth through their portfolio evaluation.

b) What significant differences exist among the two experimental groups and the two control groups?

When a close look is taken at the data collected, there are no significant differences other than students being challenged with various approaches and academic materials. This made a difference when it came to the observations that the professors made throughout the various stages of the learning process. Both professors concluded that students participating in the experimental groups seemed to enjoy the class more than those in the control groups. Several factors can be attributed to this, such as: a flexible thematic unit designed for an entire semester; varied methods of assessment; individual face-to-face portfolio conferences with students; and the multiple opportunities given to read, write, and give oral presentations.

IMPLICATIONS

After having analyzed the data, it was clear that a paradigm shift is needed. Students entering UPR's Basic English 3101 course lack many skills and have a desire to learn and improve those they possess. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the following:

1. Continue revising the course requirements and the curriculum to which students are exposed,
2. Enrich the basic English curriculum with learning topics students can relate to. Eisner (2003/2004) states that the curriculum needs to consist of problems that permit judgment; therefore, the course content tried out in this research provided opportunities for students to judge and be critical about the theme developed throughout the semester,
3. Take into consideration all the students' learning styles. They do not all learn the same way and their needs should be addressed accordingly,
4. Take into consideration students' learning strategies. Some students have to cope with the lack of skills for learning their second language and have developed their own strategies to survive,
5. Include a variety of assessment strategies to provide opportunities where students can demonstrate that they have strengths and weaknesses and are always willing to improve, and
6. Create an environment in which teaching-learning practice develops theory.

CONCLUSION

Students participating in this study understood integrated curriculum as a way to connect subjects to real life experiences (theme-oriented). The theme developed with the students was "Overcoming Barriers." In his book, Froese indicates that a thematic approach consists of strategies that integrate knowledge from many disciplines. The professors who carried out the

study focused on holistic education and its emphasis on connections as a context for integrated curriculum. Students in the experimental groups were reading and writing naturally with a purpose, for communication and pleasure.

There was a concern about grammar usage and forcing it into the thematic unit in an unnatural way (mini-lessons & modules). Students were motivated to write creatively and use the university's Writing Lab to get tutorial help with their assignments.

Assessment took on a more diverse flavor; different assessment techniques were used. The traditional pencil and paper tests were practically nonexistent. All the students were involved in teamwork and given ample opportunities to experience the importance of collaboration.

Is it time to look at the changes that have been brought about a paradigm shift? Is it time to embrace a new paradigm? Is it time to shift a curriculum that embraces learning as socially constructed, and that allows students to make use of their multiple ways of learning? The research data and the results speak for themselves. It is in the hands of professors teaching students at this level to make the necessary adjustments and changes in curriculum and methodological practices. After all, curriculum is LIFE! As such, professors should take into consideration the new trends that advent and make the learning experiences of all learners ones in which progress, achievement, and challenge interrelate and produce significant changes. Both professors enjoyed this journey and welcome new faculty to join them in their next venture.

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